RETHINKING HEGEL’S CONCEPTUAL REALISM

W. CLARK WOLF

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Hegel’s concept of “the concept” (*der Begriff*) stands at the center of his thought, but also at the center of the controversy surrounding the basic meaning of his philosophy. While the main lines of Hegel interpretation have been drawn more clearly in recent decades, Robert Pippin’s suggestion that we lack anything “remotely resembling a consensus about the basic position of Hegelian philosophy” remains, regrettably, true to this day.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nothing shows this more clearly than the contemporary divergence on what Hegel means by “the concept.” Pippin himself help spark a revival of interest in Hegel through his reading of Hegel as a “conceptual scheme idealist,” as a Kant radicalized by denying that the sensibly given makes an independent contribution to knowledge. What Hegel calls “the Notion” (as older translations have *der Begriff*), is here the unified conceptual scheme which is the pre-condition of any empirical knowledge, occupying the same role as the Kantian “I” as the unity of apperception.[[2]](#footnote-2) This reading inspired hope in Hegel’s Kantian credentials and seemed to exonerate Hegel of the bloated metaphysical views that are standardly attributed to him. On the other hand, a rival tendency, arguably the one victorious among scholars, takes “the concept” not as an innocuous semantic or epistemological construct, but as a central component of a full-blooded metaphysics. This family of interpretations can be summarily designated “conceptual realism.”[[3]](#footnote-3) On such a view, Hegel holds that the concept or concepts[[4]](#footnote-4) are not only a product of human minds but also somehow constitutive of reality. Though proponents differ in their conceptions of Hegel’s “concept,” for them Hegel’s *idealism* stems from a conviction about a real metaphysical structure rather than a theory of human thinking. The concept, here, adds to the metaphysical burden of Hegel’s work, rather than relieving it.

Conceptual realist readings have won the day among scholars because they capture more completely Hegel’s enigmatic use of *der Begriff*, which no reader of Hegel can fail to notice. *Prima facie*, Hegel cannot be referring merely to human concepts when he makes remarks like the following:

On contrary, the concept is what is truly first and things are what they are, thanks to the activity of the concept dwelling in them and revealing itself in them [*die Tätigkeit des ihnen innewohnenden und in ihnen sich offenbarenden Begriffs*]. … [T]hought and, more precisely, the concept is the infinite form or the free, creative activity, which is not in need of some stuff on hand outside itself, in order to realize itself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It would not be implausible to see here a connection between Hegel’s *Begriff* and a spiritualized Spinozian “substance,” or, perhaps especially, a Neo-Platonic “One.” While this may not be desirable to those with Kantian philosophical tastes, it would seem perverse to ignore all such tendencies in Hegel’s work. Yet non-traditional readings of Hegel have failed to produce a plausible conception of Hegel’s “concept” that responds to the difficulties raised by such passages. Specifically in reference to passages like the one just quoted, Pippin recently maintains that Hegel’s apparent idea that the concept “realizes” itself, or produces its own “objectivity,” refers merely to Hegel’s conviction of the “inseparability of concept and intuition.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This solution, however correct in its proper context, simply cannot bear the interpretive burden placed on it. Accordingly, Klaus Brinkmann, otherwise an exponent of the non-traditional reading of Hegel, has admitted the presence of a “self-externalization doctrine” in Hegel, a logicized doctrine of creation, as it were, in which “the Concept” plays a quasi-theological role.[[7]](#footnote-7) Though Brinkmann argues that Hegel’s *Science of Logic* can be read innocently of this kind of metaphysics, he leads us to think that Hegel himself depends on this kind of metaphysical solution to hold together “the temporal self-reflection of spirit” and “the eternal content of truth.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, Brinkmann suggests that though a non-traditional interpretation of “the concept” is compatible with portions of Hegel’s thought, the traditional metaphysical conception provides the underlying basis. But this seems to vitiate the interpretive validity of the non-traditional project.

Opponents of “neo-Kantian” readings of Hegel have sometimes implied that the whole project is interpretive wishful thinking, that no one could arrive at a deflationary reading of Hegel except by willfully ignoring the texts.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is far from correct.[[10]](#footnote-10) But it must be admitted that the deflationary reading of “the concept” has not been able to account for seeming obviousness of the realist view. In this essay, I will present a rival to the conceptual realist interpretation of Hegel, which saves the appearance of Hegel’s conceptual realism without accepting its metaphysical burdens. Hegel’s apparent conceptual realism, I will argue, is a consequence of his novel understanding of conceptual form. Though he does not use the term, I argue that Hegel holds a view of *conceptual isomorphism*:[[11]](#footnote-11) Hegel claims that *some* features of what is ordinarily called reality share the *same form* (hence isomorphism) with *some* of what is called thought, or concepts. However, since this “form” that is present both on the side of thought and reality is a merely negative relation—what he calls “determinacy” (*Bestimmtheit*)—, this view rests on a minimal metaphysical conception: conceptuality can be, in some sense, *reduced to* relations of determinacy. Moreover, I show that Hegel develops a *graduated*, not unilateral, conception of the relation of concepts and reality. Hegel’s conception is designed to stress the degree of intelligibility of things, rather than to assert the presence of concepts as special items of ontology.[[12]](#footnote-12) After outlining the basic conceptual realist alternatives, I demonstrate the textual ground for my own view by an interpretation of Hegel’s treatment of “the formal concept” at the heart of Book III of his *Science of Logic*, the Doctrine of the Concept, passages rarely consulted to resolve questions about Hegel’s metaphysics*.*[[13]](#footnote-13) I wish to show that in Hegel’s treatment of the formal or subjective concept, he already lays the ground for a quasi-realistic recognition of concepts in reality. But he does so unmistakably on the basis of a revision of standard notions of conceptual form, rather than as a metaphysical “hypothesis.” A proper understanding of Hegel’s view of conceptual form gives us the means for better interpreting passages that suggest conceptual realism. While I do not seek to defend outright Hegel’s position here, I do hope to show that a metaphysically minimalist interpretation of Hegel’s view of “the concept” is possible that is both textually sensitive and philosophically intelligible (something one cannot take for granted where Hegel is concerned).

**I**

The conceptual realist view responds to a widely accepted feature of Hegel’s “absolute idealism.” Namely, that Hegel proposes that there is a unity, even identity, between subject and object, thought and reality.[[14]](#footnote-14) If this is the case, it seems to follow that there is something “thought-like” both on the side of the subject (which is obvious), and (more incredibly) on the side of objective reality. Accordingly, some interpreters conclude that Hegel’s “concept” satisfies this point of unity between thought and reality. This is how Charles Taylor posed the view in his influential work:

Our basic ontological vision is that the Concept underlies everything as the inner necessity that deploys the world, and that our conceptual knowledge is derivative from this. We are the vehicles whereby this underlying necessity comes to its equally necessary self-consciousness. Hence the concept in our subjective awareness is the instrument of the self-awareness of the Concept as the source and basis of all, as cosmic necessity. But if this is so, then the concept in our minds must on closer examination turn out to function like the Concept at the root of reality.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Taylor takes up a standardly monistic conception of Hegel’s absolute idealism: thought and reality are ultimately one, but this unity is realized “instrumentally” through human minds. The problem of the connection between concept and world is ultimately void, because the world itself is “deployed” by “the Concept.”

It seems to follow ineluctably from a monistic view that human thought comes both logically and temporally second to the conceptual “One.” Though the fruition of the concept depends on human thinkers, its metaphysical origin does not. Despite the fact that the popularity of “spiritualist” readings like Taylor’s has waned in recent decades, this secondary position of human thought remains true of contemporary monistic interpretations of Hegel.[[16]](#footnote-16) Recently, Brady Bowman has put the concept at the center of his account of Hegel’s metaphysics, seeing it as a relational structure of “absolute negativity.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The concept is the infinite ground of reality, against which finite things have merely apparent reality: in themselves they are *nothing*.[[18]](#footnote-18) Bowman is clear that the concept is thoroughly independent of “finite” minds; indeed, the metaphysics of the concept serves primarily as a *critique* of the basic the categories of human thought.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, according to Bowman, Hegel’s use of *der Begriff* is quite at odds with any traditional sense of the term. He writes, “‘Concept’ denotes a *singulare tantum*, the unique ‘entity’ whose various modifications and degrees of manifestation constitute the whole of reality. Thus Hegel is clearly not using the term ‘Concept’ to mean what we ordinarily mean by it…”[[20]](#footnote-20) Bowman stresses the independence of this “Concept” from finite cognizers, though he argues that it becomes fully explicit as concept (more precisely, as “Idea”) through finite cognition. Thus, what he calls Hegel’s “metaphysical idealism” is also a conceptual realism in our broad sense. It is

the position that the whole sphere of categorically constituted, finite objectivity is both *independent* of *finite* cognizers and radically *dependent* on an *infinite* ground that does not itself in turn fall under the categories, but is the activity of which they are the manifestations.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Thus, though the concept, as the “infinite ground” of genuine reality, may become manifest *through* determinate human concepts, it is at first the singular metaphysical ground of all such thinking.

The monistic interpretation is encouraged by the markedly singular usage of Hegel’s *der Begriff,* which is on occasion distinguished from “determinate” or “particular” concepts.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is best motivated by its goal of explaining Hegel’s absolute idealism. On the other hand, another, slightly less ambitious type of conceptual realism has also been attributed to Hegel. On this view, Hegel adopts a realistic stance towards inherent universals or kinds. Things contain, as we may put it, “ontic concepts” as their essential natures: we will call this the essentialist reading of conceptual realism.[[23]](#footnote-23) James Kreines has recently developed such a view, putting conceptual realism, or the “concept thesis,” at the center:

*Concept thesis*: the reasons that explain why things are as they are and do what they do are always found in immanent “concepts” (*Begriffe),* akin to immanent universals or kinds (*Gattungen*).[[24]](#footnote-24)

This view does not attempt to explain absolute idealism by a global conception of the relation of thought and reality, but thanks to the totality of what Kreines calls “reasons in the world.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The essentialist interpretation of conceptual realism plausibly addresses passages, especially from the *Philosophy of Nature*, which present a challenge to deflationary interpretations by what seems to be a direct affirmation of “substantial forms” in things, such as the following:

Now if this negation of the plant’s coming-out-of-itself is to attain *existence* [*Existenz*]in the plant, this means nothing more than that the self-subsistent individuality of the plant, the substantial form which constitutes its concept and is present for itself throughout the whole plant [*die ihren Begriff ausmacht und für sich der ganzen Pflanze beiwohnt*]—the *idea matrix* of the plant, becomes isolated as a separate existence.[[26]](#footnote-26)

It is indeed difficult to avoid the conclusion that Hegel is here reverting to a pre-critical conception of immaterial essences.[[27]](#footnote-27) For doesn’t Hegel explicitly identify the concept with “the substantial form” of a plant and suggest that it is present (*beiwohnt*)within it? Indeed, since this latter tendency seems incompatible with “concept” in any ordinary sense, it may seem best to reinterpret the passages that suggest otherwise, or simply posit a major difference in usage.[[28]](#footnote-28) Once again, concepts as elements of human thought are put in second place.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Thus far, I have intended only to outline the two major strains of conceptual realism in Hegel interpretation; evaluating them on their own merits is beyond my scope here. No doubt both can find plenty of *prima facie* support in Hegel’s texts. My own interpretation will depend not so much on denying the relevance of supporting passages, but on reinterpreting its significance. Before moving on to present an alternative, however, a few fundamental difficulties with the conceptual realist interpretations should be mentioned.

First, while Hegel puts an important distance between his own technical sense of concept or *Begriff* and a more ordinary one, this distance is frequently overemphasized by the realists.[[30]](#footnote-30) Kenneth Westphal, for example, insists that we reserve “concepts” for immanent kinds and “conceptions” for our grasp of them.[[31]](#footnote-31) This removes concepts in the proper sense from our own thought. But Hegel himself by no means makes a distinction along these lines,[[32]](#footnote-32) and given the significance of concepts for him, this would be utter carelessness. Frequently, interpreters seem to assume that Hegel’s critique of *Vorstellungen* (“representations”) applies to any general term or abstract determination.[[33]](#footnote-33) Were this the case, we could perhaps make the distinction along the line drawn by Westphal. But Hegel frequently uses *Begriff* in a familiar sense, and despite some qualification, he insists that the latter is significantly related to his own technical meaning.[[34]](#footnote-34) Most significantly, Hegel consistently preserves the connection between concepts and *thought* that seems to be obscured by the conception of concepts as residing in things apart from all human cognition.[[35]](#footnote-35)

This relates to a second concern with the realist accounts. Since these accounts emphasize the accidental relation of (human) thought to the concept or concepts, they create a gap between thought and the ontic concept *on the side of our thought.* We are left wondering how we (or Hegel, for that matter) “knows” that reality is structured as he claims. Even if we were to grant that Hegel is doing metaphysics untainted by epistemology, this does not make his metaphysics epistemologically invulnerable.[[36]](#footnote-36) Kreines, for example, argues that Hegel’s metaphysics of concepts is vindicated by an “inference to the best explanation,” since, apparently, only ontic concepts adequately account for the rational character of the world.[[37]](#footnote-37) Yet if we have only abductive, inferentialjustification of the existence of ontic concepts, the gap between thought and concepts never closes. This kind of justification may perfectly acceptable for most, but not to an absolute idealist. Namely, Hegel’s view is supposed to result in an *immediate* relation of concept and subject, as he writes near the end of the *Logic*: “…the objectivity of the concept is a *given*, just as immediately present to the subject as the subject immediately knows itself to be the concept determined in and for itself.”[[38]](#footnote-38) But if the existence of concepts is only abductively inferred, such immediacy is out of the question.

The monistic view creates a problem for human thought in a more paradoxical way. On this kind of account, as Taylor suggested, the gap between thought and concept is closed, not so much *by* the thought of human thinkers as *through* their thinking as through a “vehicle,” as something accomplished by the deeper, cosmic “Concept.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The gap between thought and reality is closed by reality itself. However, the problem comes when we attempt to conceive the relation of our own thinking *about* the unity of thought and reality (“the absolute”) *to* this unity itself. In short, our own thinking, *ex hypothesi,* has to be included in the hypothesis. It seems we either have to see our metaphysical theory as itself an instantiation of the reality it seeks to know—but this seems to beg the question of its truth—or to take our own theory as a “meta-thought” about the absolute—but it then seems to be outside its unity.[[40]](#footnote-40) Such difficulties deserve more attention than I can give them here, but they appear to be unavoidable in an account of “thought and reality” that forgets to include its own thinking.

A final issue concerns what Hegel calls the “impotence of nature” (*Ohnmacht der Natur*). He explains: “This is the impotence of nature, that it cannot abide by and exhibit the rigor of the concept and loses itself in a blind manifoldness void of concept.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The relevance of this issue is that Hegel assumes a gap between the concept/concepts and some aspects of what is ordinarily considered reality, namely nature.[[42]](#footnote-42) Hegel, in fact, frequently speaks of natural and historical contingencies (as well as certain methods for their study) as *ohne den Begriff,* “without the concept,” or *begrifflos*, as “concept-less.”[[43]](#footnote-43) If we think of the concept, in Taylor’s terms, as that which “deploys the world,” it is hard to see why this absolute power should somehow be lacking in what it has “deployed.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Likewise, on Kreines’ essentialist account, it is curious why the ontic concepts that are supposed to function as explanatory reasons should fail to fully account for things. It seems destructive of the realistic view of essences to put a distance between the essence and the thing, or to find a defect on the part of the essences themselves.[[45]](#footnote-45) If anything, this would require that we reify the universal natures apart from their instantiations, but this takes away the appealing “Aristotelian” immanence of Kreines’ view of universals and suggests instead a thorough Platonism.[[46]](#footnote-46) An account which places concepts thoroughly on the side of thought has a much easier time here. On this account, a concept, as the product of thought, stands initially apart from external reality, such that it can conform to reality more or less. Here it is easy to see why some part of reality might fail to conform, since the concept itself does not stand in an originative relation to that reality. This kind of account will be pursued in the sequel.

While proponents of the views we have surveyed have recommended to varying degrees the philosophical relevance of their interpretations of Hegel, in my own view, the conceptual realist interpretations present to Hegel deeper philosophical problems than they grant him solutions. In particular, they allow him the right of an ontology without the assurance of its intelligibility. Anyone impressed by Hegel’s polemics against the fancies of Romantic intuition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should be wary of attributing to him any metaphysics of a “beamed in” variety.[[47]](#footnote-47) And while the essentialist reading makes a claim commensurate with contemporary philosophy, it still posits elements of reality that lie outside of direct insight; its acceptance of “occult” causes or reasons remains suspect in its modernity. The irrevocable merit of the Kantian revolution in philosophy was to demand that our claims about reality keep pace with the conditions for our own understanding of them. Despite Hegel’s strong reservations about Kant’s project, he too affirms as absolute “the right of the subject not to recognize that which I lack insight into as rational.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The same should apply to Hegel’s own metaphysics. We cannot allow him, on his own terms, to propose a solution to the problem of the relation of thinking and being that exceeds anything that we can have insight into. Hegel’s ontology must not outrun its intelligibility.

**II**

Before providing my own interpretive solution to Hegel’s apparent conceptual realism, it is important that we see the problem in its proper light. As I will frame the issue, we must not expect Hegel’s theory of the concept to answer worries we may have, for example, about the correctness of empirical representations. Hegel’s “isomorphic” theory of conceptuality, as I will describe it, does not answer the question about how my subjective thoughts can represent an objective world independent from them. Instead, it answers a question more likely to occur in philosophical reflection in contrast to empirical observation.[[49]](#footnote-49) Namely, when is a conceptual mode of thought—in contrast, for example, to quantitative or probabilistic modes of representation—appropriate to understand an object? Or, from the other side, which kind of objects, given some representation or thought of them, are suited to the mode of thinking available to philosophy? In other words, Hegel’s theory of the concept is meant to answer a question about intelligibility rather than ontology. While it would be question-begging, in my view, to assume an isomorphic theory of concept and world in response to anxieties about empirical representational correctness (i.e., “Does the world as we think of it match the world as it is in itself?”), the same will not be true of an isomorphic theory in response to the problem of intelligibility (“For which objects of study are our concepts appropriate?”). The solution to the latter problem is to show that conceptuality has what it needs to make the world intelligible in the best case, rather than to assert a relation between thought and world from “sideways-on.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

What I wish to show is that Hegel provides us with adequacy conditions for genuine conceptuality by making a simple but important revision in the traditional theory of conceptual form; Hegel’s supposed conceptual *realism* obtains whenever these conditions are satisfied. Hegel’s solution is “objective,” rather than viciously subjective, because the conditions of conceptual adequacy are defined in terms of logical content rather than epistemic capacities.[[51]](#footnote-51) But Hegel’s solution is also metaphysically minimal because he demonstrates the intelligible fit of concept and world only by *relaxing* the formal content of both sides in terms of what he calls “negativity.” Inattention to Hegel’s discussion of the formal aspects of the Doctrine of the Concept, in my view, lies behind the some of the mistakes of the realist interpretation. And while there is a copious literature on both Hegel’s metaphysics and his tortuous discussion of logical forms, the issues have not been generally considered together; this is my present aim.

The key to understanding the realist tendencies of Hegel’s theory of conceptual form lie in his notion of “singularity.” When Hegel officially introduces “the concept” in his *Science of Logic*, he tells us that it consists of three overlapping forms (he calls them “moments”): universality, particularity, and singularity.[[52]](#footnote-52) Hegel wants to show that conceptuality as such can only be understood as the unity of these forms; nevertheless, each serves a crucially different role. A cursory exposition of the first two forms must suffice here on our way to understanding the significance of the last. First, conceptual universality (*Allgemeinheit*), for Hegel, is the logical unity of the concept which is the form of thought itself; it is the “whole” or “totality” of genuine conceptuality.[[53]](#footnote-53) Hegel sees all conceptual content (properly so-called)[[54]](#footnote-54) as unified in this logical universality, and any determinate concept will have significance only as it is a member of the universal. Second, conceptual “particularity”[[55]](#footnote-55) (*Besonderheit*) is the conceptual form of distinction, which introduces conceptual content when the totality is “sundered” (*besondert*) into internal differences. A distinction introduces content only by positing predicates in opposition, so the content of both sides of the opposition is thus strictly negative: the meaning of each term is essentially “not the other.”[[56]](#footnote-56) This negative content of the particular is the first appearance of what Hegel calls “determinacy” (*Bestimmheit*),[[57]](#footnote-57) of which we will speak more below. The determinacy brought in by particularity, however, is for Hegel the determinacy *of* the universal: “The universal determines *itself,* and so is itself the particular; the determinate is *its* distinction; it is only distinguished from itself.”[[58]](#footnote-58) The particular, then, introduces determinacy that is generated only by intra-conceptual negative relations.[[59]](#footnote-59)

The first two forms of conceptuality can be treated strictly in terms of the pure subjectivity of thought, without effecting any reconciliation with objective reality.[[60]](#footnote-60) Hegel is nevertheless arguing that the first formal elements of conceptuality give us a minimal content, quite apart from any contribution of the world.[[61]](#footnote-61) This is a reading that a monistic interpretation of the concept may already want to resist, but for now, I must only show that assuming it leads to the more comprehensive interpretation. Hegel speaks of the formal and subjective side of the concept as the standpoint of Kant’s “unity of apperception” and Fichte’s all-powerful ego, and he suggests that only this (in his view) severely subjectivizing power of conceptuality can compensate for, and eventually overcome, the deterministic monism of Spinoza.[[62]](#footnote-62) While Hegel will not want to remain at this subjectivist standpoint, it is crucial on his view that we acknowledge its power. Unless thought is capable of “frictionless spinning in the void,”[[63]](#footnote-63) the significance of its eventual objective “friction” will be missed.

The final form of conceptuality, singularity (*Einzelheit*), is the engine of innovation and objective significance in Hegel’s logical thought.[[64]](#footnote-64) In terms of its bare form, singularity does not differ from particularity: like the particular, the content of the singular is the meeting point of contrary determinations, something purely negative. Singularity differs from particularity, however, in that it is not derived from a distinction in the universal as given: it is negative determinacy without a purely logical origin. We can perhaps best call it “punctual determinacy,” since it takes the form of any point-like meeting of opposing determinations.[[65]](#footnote-65) Hegel conceives this kind of determinate opposition to characterize objects fitting to conceptual form. Many cases of such determinacy will be “individuals” in the typical (e.g., Strawsonian) sense, but not all.[[66]](#footnote-66) Using one of Hegel’s favorite examples, we could mention the way magnetism defined as the site of opposing poles of magnetic force.[[67]](#footnote-67) Magnetism, for Hegel, is not singular because it happens to take up a discrete amount of space, but because it is the meeting point of contrary determinacy.

Hegel ascribes enormous significance to this kind of determinacy, but why? As he sees it, punctual determinacy serves a dual role. On the one hand, this kind of determinacy seems to be discovered “out there” in the world.[[68]](#footnote-68) We find it wherever things are constituted by striking up against a limit that they are capable of resisting. This is one way of conceiving how actual things are “individuated”: we should be capable of discerning singulars because of their positive and negative “charges,” as it were.[[69]](#footnote-69) Co-opting a favorite term of classical empiricism, Hegel suggests that in such conditions things “abstract” themselves; they distinguish themselves as objects by negative relations to others.[[70]](#footnote-70) Since these negative relations are in some way observable, singularity seems to introduce an *a posteriori* element to conceptual content. It is the formal correlate of demonstrative, “deictic” content: “the singular is a *one* which is qualitative, or a *this*.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Thus, singulars can be “external things,” though only as those things are considered formally as negatively determinate. Though there is plenty of difficulty in Hegel’s notion of negativity, its virtue is its liberality: negativity, construed generally as the mutual differing and opposing of things, turns out to be nearly ubiquitous in the world as it is manifest.

On the other hand, Hegel argues that all negative determinacy is (at least implicitly) the determinacy *of* or *within* the concept, as the universal. Punctual determinacy is not the mere collision of corpuscules but ultimately the meeting point of contrary predicates, and thus determinations of the universal. The universal concept is, after all, the “*totality* of all determinations.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Though the singular is not *derived* from the totality, whatever singularity is introduced by punctual determinacy is a formal member of this totality. In other words, determinacy is writ in the language of the concept: inasmuch as conceptual content is defined in terms of negative determinacy, any *ontic* determinacy is intelligible on the concept’s own terms. Thus, any determinacy “encountered” by the concept can be assimilated without loss into conceptual form.[[73]](#footnote-73) As Hegel explains,

the *singularity* that posits itself as determinate does not posit itself in an external distinction but in a distinction of the concept; singularity thus excludes the *universal* from itself, but since this universal is a moment of it, it refers to it just as essentially.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Hegel suggests here a path between the singular and the universal. The singular is a punctual determinacy that is implicitly a distinction (a particular, a sundering) of the universal, but is not posited immediately as such. The possibility of restoration is provided simply because any singular determinacy implicitly shares the form of particularity, which is of a piece with universal form.

Singularity, then, presents Hegel with a task: to reveal the path from the punctual determinacy of any singular to the unity of the conceptual whole, to show it *as* particular, what Hegel describes as the “turning back of the determinate concept into itself.”[[75]](#footnote-75) This is the task begun through Hegel’s treatment of the judgment, and later completed through the syllogism. Hegel thus articulates the *constitutive* significance of these forms for conceptual content: like Kant before and Frege after him, it is first in a judgment that conceptual content appears.[[76]](#footnote-76) By judging an *x* as *F*, we implicitly assimilate the determinacy of *x* to a determination *F*, and the determination is mapped on to some determinacy. Hegel sees this as at once a restoration of the singular to universality and a concretization of the universal: “[the judgment], in bringing the singular back to the *in-itselfness* of its universality, equally determines the universal as something *actual.* These two are one and the same—the positing of singularity in its immanent reflection and of the universal as determinate.”[[77]](#footnote-77) When all goes well in a judgment, an originally singular subject turns out to share the same determinacy of the particular, and therewith is it related to the universal.[[78]](#footnote-78) Hegel’s examples of such instances are evaluative judgments: in saying, for example, that an action is *right* (*recht*)*,*  “right” signals the fittingness of the singular deed with some normative constitution for what an action *should* be: a universal.[[79]](#footnote-79) The same determinacy of the concept is, in the evaluative judgment, reconciled with the determinacy of something singular and actual, which itself exemplifies the proper constitution of the universal. To make such a judgment is thus to place something actual within “the concept” as such.

In this way, singularity stands materially outside yet formally inside of conceptuality. It is materially reconciled with conceptuality—it counts *as* conceptual content—only when some actual judgment can find the singular’s *own* determinacy as at the same time *within* the determinacy of the concept.[[80]](#footnote-80) Hegel alludes to the double role of singularity in the following passage:

The point is instead to take the concept as it is prima facie *supposed* to be determined for itself as concept, with which this distant abstraction of being or even objectivity has nothing to do, and to see whether, in its determinacy solely as the determinacy of the *concept*, it passes over into a form which differs from the determinacy as it belongs to the concept and appears *within it*.[[81]](#footnote-81)

The passage alludes to the role of singularity (though it is not mentioned explicitly here) because it points out how the concept itself can develop a form that seems to differ from itself, yet shows this self-differing to remain a form of the concept itself. This is just the role that singularity plays. Singularity is the ground of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) because it seems to “stand against” (*stehen gegen*) conceptuality *qua* universal and particular.[[82]](#footnote-82) Rather than assuming a conception of objects that is already foreign to conceptuality, Hegel thus defines objectivity in terms of the final moment of conceptual form, such that it is both commensurate with conceptual form and yet held at a distance from given conceptual content. This is because punctual determinacy is intelligible in terms of pure negativity—the standard of conceptual form—while at the same time being a plausible (though still formal) feature of worldly things. Thus, Hegel does not presuppose the conceptual content of any particular singular thing, while pointing out that even the least determinacy of something makes it eligible for conceptuality. In this way, Hegel lays the ground for an account of conceptual form that is genuinely isomorphic with objectivity.

**III**

It is ultimately in virtue of his simplification of conceptual form in terms of negativity, evinced especially in his notion of singularity, that Hegel allows himself a quasi-realistic way of expressing the objective content of conceptuality. This stems from one of the subtle innovations in Hegel’s procedure thus far: namely, his elevation of the notion of *determinacy* (*Bestimmtheit*) (incidentally, a term hardly occurring in Kant) to the aid of a revisionary conception of *determination*.[[83]](#footnote-83) In the German rationalist tradition, a “determination” is a predicate or characteristic (*Merkmale*) of something that excludes its opposite.[[84]](#footnote-84) To be determined in some respect *A* is to exclude not-*A* in a definite way. Thus, to be determined in some respect is to have a positive *quality* or *form, A*.[[85]](#footnote-85) Hegel takes this conception in reverse. Rather than supposing that things first have a positive form, which *then* excludes an opposite, Hegel suggests that opposition itself is the basis of the form.[[86]](#footnote-86) Hegel’s conception reinterprets qualitative determination—both in its ontic and semantic version—in terms of negative determinacy. This is what he draws from his Spinozistic mantra: *omnis determinatio est negatio* (“every determination is a negation”).[[87]](#footnote-87) As Inwood notes, Hegel understands this to mean that “negation is a sufficient condition of determinacy, not only a necessary condition….”[[88]](#footnote-88) Formal and qualitative determinations, then, turn out to be solely a consequence of negative determinacy. The determination of something no longer corresponds to a positive metaphysical simple, but to a limit-point distinguishing it from what it is not. In this sense, things are quite literally *terms* (*horoi*), boundary markers.[[89]](#footnote-89) But this implies that predicative negation is commensurate with the negativity of qualitative form. Both semantic determinations and ontic properties can then be defined in the same way. This amounts to a *relaxation* of the conditions on conceptual “correspondence.” A concept no longer serves as a representation of an independent quality—there is literally “nothing” to represent—but rather “articulates”[[90]](#footnote-90) determinacy.

Determinacy (in its most self-sufficient version, as we will see) thus provides Hegel with a standard of adequacy for conceptual content. One must admit that there is a sense in which this is self-serving: Hegel has given us a revised conception of conceptual form that, according to itself, conforms to something real, namelyontic determinacy. However, despite the fact that Hegel does develop a notion of conceptual form that allows for its own successful correspondence (better: con-formity) with things, he does not suggest, for example, that there are no problems of knowledge because the world is basically how we take it to be. This is the danger of an approach like John McDowell’s in *Mind and World*, which posits the fit between concept and world without specifying the form of its fittingness; we are led to believe the relation of concept to reality were “one size fits all.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Likewise, Pippin’s similar contention that the inseparability of concept and intuition accounts for the relation of concept and reality seems to make the reconciliation between them a matter of course, even “trivial.”[[92]](#footnote-92) Hegel avoids trivializing his own view of the conceptual nature of the world by *gradating* his conception of the intelligible fit between concepts and things. For though Hegel has argued that all genuine determinacy is conceptual, he has not thereby suggested that everything is determinate in the same way, and hence not everything, full stop, is conceptual.[[93]](#footnote-93) In his discussion of purely logical form, Hegel has made room for the encounter with objective conceptuality, but, for all he has told us so far, we could find the world itself a very conceptually unsatisfying place. To account for such a potential “hiatus”[[94]](#footnote-94) between concepts and the world, Hegel introduces what I call *graduated isomorphism*: all determinate form is conceptual form, but external form meets conceptual form on an ascending scale of adequacy. Only when external form is deemed adequate to the concept can the concept be called “idea,” which is “the unity of concept and objectivity, what is true [*das Wahre*] …”[[95]](#footnote-95) Contrary to the prevailing tendency of modern epistemology, Hegel will suggest that the proper objects of knowledge are not the ones we tend to be most worried about, namely, those of the natural world, including ourselves as objects of empirical study. Instead, the realm of adequate conceptual truth concerns the products of the spirit or mind (*Geist*) which coincide with human making and doing. Hegel will show us, however, that no deep ontological posit is needed to explain the conceptuality of things, since this is accounted for by certain forms of negative self-relation.

Graduated isomorphism is a consequence, not of a limitation on the concept, but of the complete “logical freedom”[[96]](#footnote-96) of conceptuality. Hegel tells us that the initially purely subjective concept contains objectivity because it “overreaches” (*übergreift*) its opposite;[[97]](#footnote-97) the concept contains the possibility of both the true and the false. It is the liberality and simplicity of conceptual form that allows it to refuse a greedy assimilation of objects to itself. Thus, though genuine singularity or punctual determinacy should be exhibited as falling within conceptual form in some way, space should be made in addition for a *lack of fit* between objects and pure conceptual form. This is the subject of the somewhat misleadingly titled movements of “mechanism,” “chemism,” and “teleology,” which comprise the section on “objectivity” in the Doctrine of the Concept. Despite their apparent connection to natural-scientific discourse, Hegel makes clear that these are categories pertaining broadly to the determinacy of objects of any kind.[[98]](#footnote-98) We can take them as three overlapping “ways a world might be,” ways in which the totality of objects could be determinate and thus stand in relation to conceptual content. Hegel is not here giving a description of certain features of the world, but accounting for the possible relations between objects and the concept as previously determined. Namely, we must allow for the possibility that the self-distinction of conceptuality creates room for determinacies which are not definitely mediated with the whole.

In Hegel’s terms, we must first allow for “self-subsistent objects” that stand on their own in merely external connection. This is what Hegel calls “mechanism.”[[99]](#footnote-99) According to Hegel, mechanical objects to a certain extent stand opposed to the concept in their lack of immanent determinacy:

Inasmuch as the *concept* is *essentially determined*, the object [sc., *qua* mechanism] has in it the determinacy of a *manifold* which, although complete, is otherwise *indeterminate*, that is, *relationless*, one that constitutes a totality that is likewise not further determined at the outset…”[[100]](#footnote-100)

Consider, for example, the behavior of vehicles in rush-hour traffic. No definite concept adequately tracks this behavior because it is loosely and roughly determined by mutual indifference and strained coordination. One could understand the character of traffic only through quantitative and probabilistic methods because the objects are not given definite form in their relations: “…the *form* that constitutes [the objects’] distinction and combines them in a unity is an external one, indifferent to them….”[[101]](#footnote-101) In contrast to a mutually related determinacy, standing in relation to a larger universal, the determinacy of mechanical objectivity results in “individuals” that stand apart, objects that may or may not relate to each other, and which are thus scarcely mediated with the conceptual whole.

In our terms, Hegel allows for the world to be *minimally isomorphic* with conceptual form in the determinacy of mechanical objectivity. Hegel repeatedly stresses, for example, that merely quantitative relations between things are not as such conceptual (even though *being quantitative* is minimally conceptual).[[102]](#footnote-102) Thus, given this minimal determinacy of mechanical objectivity, it has some conceptual form; however, the entire nature of mechanism is loosed from the rational relations of the concept. Summarizing this and the second, “chemical” form of objectivity, Hegel remarks,

Indeed, the mechanical and the chemical object…do not, according to their various natures, have their concept concretely existing in them *in its own free form*. But they can be something at all true only in so far as they are the union of their concept and reality, of their soul and their body.[[103]](#footnote-103)

When judged against the concept’s “free form”—the form in which it exists in our thinking[[104]](#footnote-104)—the encounter with objects determined mechanically and chemically are clearly lacking. The concept’s *non-existence* in them is thus judged on the concept’s own terms. In these cases “the objective reality is indeed conformable to the concept but has not yet been liberated into the concept, and it does not concretely exist *explicitly as the concept.*”[[105]](#footnote-105) While Hegel does not consider mechanical and chemical objectivity as divorced from conceptuality—they are “conformable” to it—such objectivity does not strictly exhibit the determinacy characteristic of conceptual form.[[106]](#footnote-106)

If the world turned out to be strictly mechanical, then, it would only ever be minimally isomorphic with conceptual form. Something incompletely intelligible may exhibit the determinacy of singularity, but it is not mediated with the particularity and universality of the concept. Hegel’s theory of the concept leaves open this possibility for things to be intelligible in an incomplete way, without supposing that this is a mark either of their ontic superiority (as “things in themselves”) or of human incapacity. Given this potential for worldly inadequacy, it is thus incorrect to say that Hegel thinks of “all reality” as conceptual in a univocal sense.[[107]](#footnote-107) Nevertheless, despite the space he leaves for a hiatus between concept and world, it is only right that he accounts for the possibility of their *maximal isomorphism* as well.

Maximal isomorphism is the possibility that a conceptual determination is transparent to a real determinacy, that the same negative form can be exhibited in both.[[108]](#footnote-108) Hegel himself refers to such isomorphism as occurring through a “translation” (*Übersetzung*) of the concept into reality. The final stage of objectivity in his account, “teleology,” gives the conditions for an object to exhibit conceptual form to such a degree that this translation begins to appear:

The teleological process is the *translation* of the concept that concretely exists as concept [*des distinct als Begriff existierenden Begriffs*] into objectivity; as we see, this translation into a presupposed other is the rejoining of the concept *through itself with itself*. The content of the purpose is now this identity concretely existing in the form of the identical. In every transition the concept maintains itself.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Hegel makes it clear that the concept is itself distinct from objectivity (which is a “presupposed other”) but can nevertheless discover itself in objectivity through its own means (“through itself with itself”). How this is possible can be seen if we again take note of the way in which Hegel has relaxedthe conditions of conformity to concepts.The relaxation, as we noted above, is due to his exclusive use of negative determinacy to give conceptual content: “…the concept has so determined itself in that negativity that its *particularity* is *an external objectivity,* or has determined itself as the simple concrete unity whose externality is its self-determination.”[[110]](#footnote-110) That is, because of the restrictive way Hegel conceives conceptual form, external objectivity can exhibit the same negative self-determination that is the concept’s own moment of particularity, namely distinction. In short, some singulars exhibit particularity by acts of distinguishing themselves from others, in such a way that they prefigure a mediation with the conceptual whole. Namely, products of teleology, for Hegel, show themselves to be constituted strictly by their own negative determinacy. In this way, they mirror the concept itself.

Teleology proper will be best exemplified in the works of human making and doing: in these cases, we do not begin with singularity and approximate a universal, but the universal of our own thought determines some singular actuality. But Hegel’s examples from the *Philosophy of Nature* show how this kind of self-determination is approximated in the behavior of the animal world: the defensive and reproductive capacities of animals, for example, do not simply attach to pre-given kinds, but they create the determinate differences of kinds: “It is only as this self-reproductive being, not as a mere being [*nicht als Seiendes*], that the living creature is and *preserves* itself; it only is, in making itself what it is, and is the antecedent end which is itself only result.”[[111]](#footnote-111) Rather than being determined by a pre-given essence, only an animal that lives through its determining behavior can attain to its kind (*Gattung*). In Hegel’s logical terms, an animal is a moment of punctual determinacy (singularity) that uses a means of distinction (particularity), a contradiction between it and other things, to approach a generic kind (quasi-universality).[[112]](#footnote-112) In other words, the animal acts like a syllogism.[[113]](#footnote-113) In acting as it does, then, the animal “translates” conceptual form, or determinacy, into reality, however naively. This is not yet a complete isomorphism, but Hegel can by rights point to the concept’s realization in the animal because the animal exhibits the determinacy of singularity and particularity, while its own norm-preserving attitude towards itself suggests an implicit (*an sich*) universality.[[114]](#footnote-114) Note that since conceptual form is given strictly as determinacy, the “presence” of the concept in the teleological process requires no occult cause or quality.[[115]](#footnote-115)

The conceptual nature of the teleological process points to the eventuality of maximal isomorphism, the adequate concept, which Hegel calls the *idea* (*die Idee*):

Thus the concept is essentially this: to be distinguished, as an identity existing for itself, from its *implicitly existing* objectivity, and thereby to obtain externality, but in this external totality to be the totality’s self-determining identity. So the concept is now *the idea.*[[116]](#footnote-116)

The idea is thus the content of the “external” world insofar as it is maximally isomorphic to conceptual form. It is not everything; it is everything that *truly* is what it is, or what it is supposed to be. There are, necessarily, two sides to this: the concept as logical and semantic content, constituting a norm graspable as such by human thought, and objectivity as it exhibits the same determinacy that makes up the concept itself. The “idea” is not, then, a reality that would obtain apart from all human knowing. Moreover, Hegel does not suggest that the conceptual character of reality is passively discovered by the subject, but is also articulated through the transformative activity of the subject herself: “…the subject transforms [*verwandelt*] it [viz. the object] into a *conceptual determination*; it is the concept which activates itself in the object, relates itself to itself in it and by thus giving itself reality in the object, finds *truth*.”[[117]](#footnote-117) In finding reality that “corresponds” to the concept, we are not stepping outside conceptuality, but finding satisfaction on the concept’s own terms.

Hence, when Hegel speaks of the concept “giving itself reality,” we do not need to imagine a metaphysical entity externalizing itself at the origin of things. Hegel is simply describing the process of conceptuality being exhibited in and receiving “matter” from the actual world. It is the movement from generic and vacant universals to concepts that are richly exemplified in the form of singular determinacy. Hegel consistently allows that the existence of the external world is “presupposed,”[[118]](#footnote-118) but its conceptual character—namely, *what* things are—is not. For the concept to give itself reality, then, is not a theological creation but the reclaiming of real determinacy as conceptual determinacy. This is not a triviality, for Hegel, because he has shown how the concept can be dissatisfied with the world. To find, in contrast, a case of worldly conformity with the concept is not to make an ontological discovery, but to satisfy the conditions of intelligibility.

**IV**

Let us summarize the basic interpretation given thus far. Hegel’s isomorphic theory of conceptual content states that (1) given the articulation of conceptual form on its own terms as universality, particularity, and singularity; (2) then given a form that characterizes both a moment of conceptuality and a feature of possible objective form (singularity, negativity); (3) then given a gradated standard of the adequacy of objective form to fully articulated conceptual form; (4) there can be local cases of complete conceptual adequacy (maximal isomorphism).[[119]](#footnote-119) Though this interpretation accounts for Hegel’s convictions about the conceptuality of objective things, it does so on a completely different basis than a conceptual realist interpretation would have it. For while the latter would register Hegel’s view of concepts as essentially a metaphysical thesis about non-empirical forms or substrates, the thesis of conceptual isomorphism makes Hegel’s convictions dependent on pre-given conditions of intelligibility that can be objectively satisfied on their own terms. Hegel’s view can be regarded as metaphysically minimal, perhaps even “deflationary,” without being metaphysically innocent. Hegel rests his view of conceptual adequacy only on a conception of negative determinacy, about which he is certainly a “realist,” if it makes sense to say so (realism about negation?).[[120]](#footnote-120) But thanks to the sufficiency of determinacy (both metaphysically and semantically) for the articulation of content,[[121]](#footnote-121) there need be, as it were, nothing “over and above” things nor “under” them (as their “ground”) to account for their determinacy and thus conceptual fittingness. Hegel is not attempting an account of ontology independent of conceptual intelligibility, but a kind of ontology *given* norms of conceptual intelligibility.

The interpretation of Hegel as a “conceptual isomorphist” undercuts the need for a realist reading of Hegel’s *Begriff*, and it provides a hermeneutical key to some of the more bewildering passages in his texts. Though our reading hints at ways of avoiding the monistic interpretation of Hegel altogether,[[122]](#footnote-122) I have not said enough here to defeat that interpretation as a whole; the heart of my contribution comes rather in the way it reinterprets passages that suggest the ontological presence of the concept, used to motivate both styles of conceptual realism. The passages most troubling to the non-traditional readings are those which suggest that the concept is somehow present in things in nature (we will see momentarily how the conceptuality of “spirit” is to be treated):

Magnetism is one of the determinations which inevitably became prominent when the *concept* was suspected in specific natural phenomena, and the idea of a *Philosophy of Nature* was grasped. For the magnet exhibits in simple, naïve fashion the nature of the concept, and the concept moreover in its developed form as syllogism (§ 181).[[123]](#footnote-123)

Hegel clarifies in the immediate context that the “conceptuality” exhibited by magnetism is simply the fact that its only genuine property is the opposition of its poles.[[124]](#footnote-124) As we have seen, mutually-related determinacy is sufficient in Hegel’s view for conceptual intelligibility. Though magnetism is a case of what Hegel calls “chemical” objectivity, since its determinacy is one of mutual relation without self-determination, it is what it is through its negativity, and this for Hegel amounts to a conceptual form. Hegel’s comment here, then, can be taken only as a reference to the way magnetism is special as a phenomenon exhibiting the same kind of relationality that is expected in conceptual thought.

We saw above that Hegel also sometimes suggests an internal discrepancy between concept and thing, something troubling especially to “essentialist” readings. In his discussion of animals, Hegel writes:

In this relationship [namely, instinct], the animal comports itself *as an immediate singular*, and because it can only overcome single determinations of the outer world in all their variety…its self-realization is *not adequate to its concept* and the animal perpetually returns from its satisfaction to a state of need.[[125]](#footnote-125)

Such passages are problematic both to non-traditional readings—since they indeed seem suggest something like an immanent ontic concept—and to conceptual realism—since they point out an internal deficiency in the realization of an ontic concept.[[126]](#footnote-126) The explanation on our reading, however, is simple: Hegel sees animal nature as exhibiting determinacy primarily in the mode of singularity (“as an immediate singular”), with only an indirect realization of universality: its means of particularization (instinct, in this case) do not suffice to give it its properly generic character. This makes the concept appropriate to the animal only partially adequate in such a case. Given a concept of an animal, as worked out in human thought, one discovers a dissatisfaction (expressed by the animal’s own neediness) in the animal’s realization of the concept. It is because a philosophical concept of an animal can be developed at an abstract remove from nature that it can test its adequate realization in the natural world.[[127]](#footnote-127) In this case, it is not that the concept is somehow deficient, but that the natural world is not fully fit to genuine conceptual intelligibility.

However, it would be a mistake to suppose that Hegel’s theory of the concept is primarily poised to show that the *natural* world is isomorphic to conceptual form. Indeed, he suggests the contrary: “It would be unphilosophical to try to show that a form of the concept *exists universally* in nature in the determinacy in which it is as an abstraction.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Though Hegel makes a remarkable allowance for the intelligibility of nature, the whole thrust of his thought tends towards understanding spiritual or cultural reality (*Geist*), especially as the product of history. The essential contribution of Hegel’s theory of the concept is simply out of reach if we follow the dismissive attitude of contemporary analytic metaphysics toward the historical, constructed, or “mind-dependent.”[[129]](#footnote-129) For it is in this domain that the idea of conceptual determinacy being “translated” into reality approaches a non-metaphorical sense. Indeed, the “idea,” as the “*absolute unity of concept and objectivity*,”[[130]](#footnote-130) is perhaps best conceived through Vico’s formula: *verum ipsum factum*, the true is the made*.*[[131]](#footnote-131) Only what is produced *according to conceptual norms* can be judged as a perfect exemplar of the self-same norms.[[132]](#footnote-132) If we take Hegel’s interest in human and historical products in due proportion, we are in position to take a cryptic passage like the following, given at the outset, in a new light:

On contrary, the concept is what is truly first and things are what they are, thanks to the activity of the concept dwelling in them and revealing itself in them [*die Tätigkeit des ihnen innewohnenden und in ihnen sich offenbarenden Begriffs*]. … [T]he thought and, more precisely, the concept is the infinite form or the free, creative activity, which is not need of some stuff on hand outside itself, in order to realize itself.[[133]](#footnote-133)

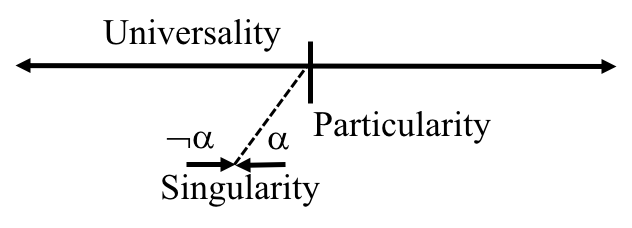
Admittedly, at first sight, one is quite justified in reading such a passage in terms of a cosmic emanation or self-externalization. This is because Hegel’s remarks here are indeed suggestive of the creation of natural things, though in its context, Hegel leaves it ambiguous what kind of “things” he is referring to. But such a passage is best understood when we consider that the genuine concept “exists,” or is maximally isomorphic, only when its realization includes reference to its basis in human thought. It is only in thought, for Hegel, that the universal, the essential element in conceptual form, is genuinely present.[[134]](#footnote-134) But it is only in the realm of spirit that thought as such become actualized.[[135]](#footnote-135) Thus, it is in the products of thinking beings—our laws, art, religion, and philosophy, for example—that the concept is most obviously and quite literally “first,” the normative *sine qua non* for our most valuable artifacts. Such things can be identical to their normative conceptual determinacy, since that determinacy is the determining basis (when all goes well) of their very existence. Much of the determinacy of cultural reality *just is* conceptual determinacy. In some cases, artworks, laws, and especially works of philosophy “are what they are” through a concept determining itself into existence.[[136]](#footnote-136) This means that this part of reality exhibits a privileged form of intelligibility. Maximal isomorphism, in such cases, turns out to be “the identity of thought and being.”[[137]](#footnote-137) I suggest that Hegel’s conceptual isomorophism is only a realism when human concepts themselves are the determinate basis of reality.

In the foregoing, I have attempted to show that the basis for Hegel’s apparent conceptual realism is his revised understanding of the nature of conceptual form. The point of Hegel’s concept of “the concept” is not to offer a “sideways-on” metaphysical theory, especially one that would posit an indemonstrable ground of both thought and reality. Yet Hegel’s concept does suggest what it would mean for the world to be the “shadow of our thinking.”[[138]](#footnote-138) It tells us when it is that things best match the form of conceptuality. While we have seen that the fulfillment of conceptual isomorphism in the world is not ontologically innocent, in that it depends on the world being a certain way, Hegel defines such ontological conditions purely in terms of negative determinacy, a difficult but certainly minimal metaphysical conception. Our interpretation thus suggests that for Hegel nothing “extra” is needed in things to become conceptually intelligible, that therefore everything, in some way, stands under a conceptual norm. Despite this, since conformity to conceptual norms is not guaranteed, such isomorphism is graduated. Purely conceptual thinking is thus importantly restricted in what it can make intelligible.

If my interpretation of Hegel is correct, I have certainly left him (and his readers) with a new set of difficulties, not least those concerning his purely negative theory of conceptual form. It may be that his conception of conceptual form is just as indefensible as is the traditional view of his metaphysics. Hegel may be “wrong.” But any weakness in Hegel lies in his devotion to human thinking, not in an attempt to go beyond it.[[139]](#footnote-139)

*Marquette University*[[140]](#footnote-140)

1. Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See especially ibid., 16–41, 233, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This designation has been taken on by Robert Stern, a leading proponent of the view. See his “Hegel’s Idealism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 161–73. I will be using the term more inclusively here than Stern does, however. On Robert Brandom’s recent adoption of “conceptual realist” terminology, see note 29 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As we will see below, interpretations differ on the significance of the singular and plural references to conceptuality. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline, Part I: Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), § 163 Z2, 238; *Werke* 8, 313. References to Hegel’s *Encyclopedia* texts will be given with reference to paragraph number, followed by Z (*Zusatz*, “addition”) or R (remark) where applicable, and page number. Hegel’s German is cited by volume and page number of the *Werke in zwanzig Bänden,* eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). Translations are frequently modified in minor ways without notice; I note wherever a change is more substantial. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Pippin, “Finite and Absolute Idealism: The Transcendental and the Metaphysical in Hegel,” in *The Transcendental Turn*, eds. Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 162, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Klaus Brinkmann, *Idealism without Limits: Hegel and the Problem of Objectivity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 249–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The textual case against the non-traditional reading is summarized in Stern, “Hegel’s Idealism,” 136–46. A broad summary of the debate can be found in James Kreines, “Hegel’s Metaphysics: Changing the Debate,” *Philosophy Compass* 1/5 (2006): 466–80. Kreines here introduces the “traditional”/”non-traditional” opposition that I have adopted as well, in view of the ambiguities surrounding “metaphysical.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I agree with Brinkmann when he writes that “nobody who reads the second edition Preface and the Introduction to the *Science of Logic* and the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia* can deny that Hegel’s concern there is primarily with categories, the contribution to comprehending things, their objective meaning, their limitations, and their systematic unity in a ‘system of concepts.’” *Idealism without Limits*, 247. In short, the deflationary reading certainly finds compelling evidence in the texts. It has just failed to make sense of a persistent remainder. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brady Bowman, whose work I consider below, has similarly designated the concept as a “homomorphic,” and sometimes “isomorphic,” structure of mind and world. See *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18, 37, 54. However, despite the terminological similarity, my interpretation of the formal connection between mind and world is the near inverse of Bowman’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The term “ontology” takes on a variety of meanings among interpreters of Hegel. Here I am referring to its most common contemporary sense of a theory about what exists. I am not attempting, for example, to dispute the view of Brinkmann (following his teacher Klaus Hartmann) that Hegel offers a non-metaphysical ontology in the sense of a “theory of categories.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Systematic treatments of this portion of the *Logic* are still rare, especially in English-language scholarship. See, however, Richard Dien Winfield, *From Concept to Objectivity: Thinking Through Hegel’s Subjective Logic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), and Rocío Zambrana, *Hegel’s Theory of Intelligibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). A useful overview is found in Paul Redding, “Subjective Logic and the Unity of Thought and Being: Hegel’s Logical Reconstruction of Aristotle’s Speculative Empiricism,” *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus* 12 (2017), “Logic”, eds. Sally Sedgwick and Dina Edmundts, 165–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This expressed in Hegel’s concept of “the idea” (*die Idee*): “The idea is the true *in and for itself, the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity*. Its ideal content is none other than the concept in its determinations. …” Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 213, 282; *Werke* 8, 367. I treat this passage briefly in the closing section of this paper. The most famous formulation of Hegel’s idealism comes from the so-called *Doppelsatz* from his *Philosophy of Right*, “*What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational*.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox and rev. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Preface, 14; *Werke* 7, 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See especially the work of Rolf-Peter Horstmann, for example, his *Wahrheit aus dem Begriff: eine Einführung in Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Hain, 1990), and “What is Hegel’s Legacy and What Should We Do With It?” *European Journal of Philosophy* 7.2 (1999): 275–87. Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 55–79, provides one of the more influential “neo-Spinozist” readings of Hegel’s monism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bowman, *Absolute Negativity*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 37–43, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 213–19; 57-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “But *a* concept is also, first of all, in itself *the* concept, and this concept is only one concept, the substantial foundation…” G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 19; *Werke* 6, 29–30; “The preceding logical determinations, the determinations of being and essence, are not mere determinations of thought, to be sure… But they are (compare §§ 84 and 112) merely *determinate* concepts…” Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 162 R, 235; *Werke* 8, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Compare especially Thomas Wartenburg, “Hegel’s Idealism: The Logic of Conceptuality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 103, where he writes that Hegel “holds that concepts are the most basic objects in reality and the things that there are have reality only insofar as they reflect the structure of these concepts.” Other essentialist readings include Kenneth Westphal, *Hegel’s Epistemological Realism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989); Robert Stern, *Hegel, Kant, and the Structure of the Object* (London: Routledge, 1990); and his “Hegel’s Idealism.” Franz Knappik in “Hegel’s Essentialism. Natural Kinds and the Metaphysics of Explanation in Hegel’s Theory of ‘the Concept,’” *European Journal of Philosophy* 24 (2016), 760–87, attempts to combine the insights of the essentialist emphasis on natural kinds or immanent universals with an overall monistic conception of Hegel’s metaphysics. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. James Kreines, *Reason in the World: Hegel’s Metaphysics and Its Philosophical Appeal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22. Compare Stern: “Hegel insists, however, that universals exist *in re*, and form the essential nature of the individual in which they are exemplified.” *Structure of the Object,* 64. An important passage in corroboration of this view is the following: “[T]he *nature*, the specific *essence*, that which is *permanent* and *substantial* in the manifold and accidentality of appearance and fleeting externalization, is the *concept* of the thing [*Sache*], *the universal which* is *present in it* [das in ihr selbst Allegmeine *ist*]…” Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 16; *Werke* 5, 26. However, just prior, Hegel essentially disallows a realistic interpretation here: “We can, however, dispense with this last claim; inasmuch as it is symmetrical with the preceding one, it says that out thoughts have a reference to the essence [*Sache,* but *Natur* just above: Author’s note] of things; but this is an empty claim, for the essence of things would then be set up as the rule for our concepts, whereas, for us, *that essence can only be the concepts that we have of the things*.” Ibid., emphasis added; *Werke* 5, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Thus, “[T]he world has the structure of thought and, in particular, explanatory thinking. …reality is structured by concepts (*Begriffe*) of explanatory import – in the sense of explanatory kinds or universals.” Kreines, *Reason in the World*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature,* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), § 348 Z, 343, modified; *Werke* 9, 420. Underline added. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The modern precedent for such a position would of course be Leibniz. See especially his “A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances, and of the Union of the Soul and Body” (1695) and “On Nature Itself” (1698) for his argument for the need to re-introduce principles of form in modern mechanistic physics. G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays,* trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Kreines’ own explanation of the continuity of meaning in “concept” is the following, “…[Hegel] calls his universals or kinds ‘concepts’ in part because the central example of the metaphysically absolute form of them is the concept of *concept-users*, or a case in which a concept is ‘for itself.’” *Reason in the World*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Robert Brandom has also recently branded Hegel a conceptual realist, though on the grounds not of universals or kinds, but through relations of modal incompatibility between things (e.g., anything that *cannot* conduct electricity *cannot* be copper). Since natural things in Brandom’s view are invested with modal properties independently of human thought, and since Brandom sees modal incompatibility (his interpretation of Hegelian “determinate negation”) as sufficient for Hegelian conceptuality, it follows that things are “conceptual” apart from any necessary connection to human thought. See his “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy,” *Hegel-Bulletin* 35.1 (2014), 1–15, esp. 5, 11–14. Though I will object below (see note 106) to Brandom’s identification of *de re* conceptuality with all forms of modal incompatibility, Brandom’s version of conceptual realism (which has yet to be worked out fully in print) is not my target under “essentialist” readings. Moreover, if Brandom attributes to Hegel a “phenomenalism” about norms (including modal norms) which he endorses in his own work, then I suspect the realism at issue for him does not depend on any strong notion of the independence of concepts from human thought. See his *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 25, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For the beginnings of a genetic historical account of Hegel’s use of “concept” language, which helps confirm the continuity of his usage with that of his contemporaries, see W. Clark Wolf, “The Weakness of the Law: The Opposition of Concept and Life in Hegel’s Early Ethics,” in ed. Evangelia Sembou, *The Young Hegel and Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 147–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Kenneth Westphal, *Hegel’s Epistemology: A Philosophical Introduction to the* Phenomenology of Spirit (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 55: “Hegel analyzes ‘the concept’ (*der Begriff*) as an ontological structure, like a law of nature rather than a conception, though when we are thinking rightly, ‘the concept’ (in Hegel's ontological sense) is an object of human thought (via the right use of our conceptions).” See also Bowman, *Absolute Negativity*, 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Namely, in the context of the *Phenomenology,* which is Westphal’s concern here,Hegel claims it is indifferent whether we use “concept” to describe our knowledge (*Wissen*) of something, or the object (*Gegenstand*) or essence (*Wesen*) itself. The reason is not because the concept is supposed to be an ontological reality, but because the distinction between knowledge and object falls within consciousness and hence within the concept itself. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 53–54; *Werke* 3, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See, e.g., “What are also called concepts, and, to be sure, determinate concepts, e.g. human being, house, animal, and so forth, are simple determinations and abstract representations [*Vorstellungen*],—abstractions that, taking only the moment of universality from the concept, … are thus not developed in themselves and accordingly abstract precisely from the concept.” Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 164 R, 239; *Werke* 8, 314–15. See Bowman, *Absolute Negativity*, 18, where the concept’s distinction from *Vorstellung* separates it from finite thinking as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Admitting the possibility of confusion concerning his own sense of the concept, Hegel writes, “[H]owever great the distance between the concept of formal logic and the speculative concept, it still turns out, on closer inspection, that the profounder meaning of the concept is by no means as alien to the ordinary use of language as might at first seem to be the case.” *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 160 Z, 234; *Werke* 8, 308. Moreover, despite Hegel’s dispute with *Vorstellungen* as such, he affirms that genuine concepts are attained through a transformation of given representations. See *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 3 R, 30–31; § 20 R, 52; *Werke* 8, 44–45, 63–74, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “This concept is not intuited by the senses, is not represented in imagination; it is only the subject matter, the product and content of *thought*…” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 19; *Werke* 5, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Kreines’ critique of the “epistemology-first” and “semantics-first” orientation to both Kant and Hegel. *Reason in the World*, 13–17, 267–72. I believe Kreines overstates the relative indifference of epistemological or semantic concerns to metaphysics. Much depends here, however, on how one assesses Hegel’s attitude towards Kantian “critique.” For an account arguing that Hegel took on a version of the “critical turn” prior to the *Phenomenology*, indicating his re-engagement with modern epistemology, see William Bristow, *Hegel and the Transformation of Philosophical Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Kreines, *Reason in the World*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Science of Logic*, 733–34; *Werke* 6, 548. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Taylor, *Hegel*, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This is the problem Beiser attributes to Schelling’s conception of absolute knowledge, but it seems just as much to affect Hegel on the monistic reading: if the absolute is supposed to include our knowledge of it, this seems to beg the skeptical question; if it does *not*, it creates a new dualism and its absoluteness is abandoned. See Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 592–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 536; *Werke* 6, 282. See also *Philosophy of Nature*, §§ 250, 314, 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The relevance of the “hiatus” between concept and world (especially nature) in Hegel’s thought is a central theme of Myriam Gerhard’s *Hegel und die logische Frage* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See, e.g., *Science of Logic*, 536, 717; *Werke* 6, 282, 525; *Philosophy of Right,* § 57 R, 70; *Werke* 7, 123; *Philosophy of Nature*, § 273 Z, 86; *Werke* 9, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Beiser indeed suggests that the problem of this kind of irrationality or contingency raises an intractable problem for Hegel, assuming the monistic interpretation. See his *Hegel*, 76–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Collingwood, typically an insightful reader of Hegel, appears to accept this consequence: “Hegel’s view is that the forms of nature fail to get perfectly embodied because of a certain peculiarity in these forms themselves. They are forms of a peculiar kind, which owing to something in their structure cannot be completely realized.” R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Kreines is led to explain the defects in nature vis-à-vis the distinction between type and token: individual tokens can fail to live to their type or “concept.” See Kreines, *Reason in the World*, 98–100. This is unproblematic when we assume that concepts (here, “types”) exist in *thought*, wherein they can function as normative standards as against the “tokens” of the natural world. But since Kreines argues that concepts are ontic forms, he seems compelled to give the type itself a separate existence from its instances. How then can it be strictly immanent? [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. One of Hegel’s central frustrations with Schelling is the latter’s elitist conception of philosophical insight. Remarking wryly on Schelling’s view, he writes, “This unity as form is intellectual intuition, which posits thinking and being as absolutely alike, and as it formally expresses the absolute, it becomes at the same time the expression of its essence. He who has not the power of imagination, whereby he may represent this unity to himself, is deficient in the organ of philosophy.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 1995), 537. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, § 132 R. I owe this quotation and point of emphasis to William Bristow, *Philosophical Critique*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The role of concepts in experience has been the primary locus of the discussion about Hegelian conceptuality in “non-traditional” readings since Pippin’s *Hegel’s Idealism*, but especially due to the inspiration of John McDowell’s *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). A recent example is Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel’s Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), which continues to discuss Hegel’s understanding of conceptual form in terms of its interconnection with “intuition.” While I do not deny the importance of this side of the problem, the one-sided focus on the empirical use of concepts has forgotten the role of concepts in philosophical thinking (where perceptual experience typically plays only an indirect or exemplificatory role). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. On the need for a logically-internal account of the relation of concepts and objects, see Winfield, *Concept to Objectivity,* 59–65. Nuzzo emphasizes that Hegel’s logic is thought without a thinking subject, and thus free from any psychological or metaphysical pre-conditions. However, it seems equally correct and less mysterious to say that Hegel’s logic is *neutral* vis-à-vis thinking subjects, since it pursues the thought-content that any thinking subject depends on (in this, of course, it would hardly differ from a standard “logic”). See Angelica Nuzzo, “Hegel’s Metaphysics: The Absence of a Metaphysical Subject in Hegel’s Logic,” in *Hegel and Metaphysics: On Logic and Ontology in the System,* ed. Allegra de Laurentiis (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 119–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The following treatment is indebted especially to Gerhard, *Hegel und die logische Frage*, 28-38; Koch, “Die Einheit des Begriffs,” in *Evolution des logisches Raumes: Aufsätze zu Hegels Nichtstandard-Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 149–70; and Ionnnis Trisokkas, “The Speculative Logical Theory of Universality,” *The Owl of Minerva* 40.2 (2009), 141–72. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 529; *Werke* 6, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This qualification of genuine conceptuality is enormously important yet cannot be fully explicated here. For, as stated above, Hegel doesn’t take everything we call a concept as a concept. It is worth mentioning that the line here, between conceptual and non-conceptual should be drawn at the same point (wherever *that* is!) as between philosophy and non-philosophy, since Hegel takes it that philosophy as such deals with concepts in the proper sense, in contrast to ordinary empirical representations. See, for example, his claim that “genuinely philosophical thinking, *speculative thinking…*possesses in addition to the shared forms of thinking *its own peculiar forms*, of which the *concept* is the generalone.” *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 9, 37, modified; *Werke* 8, 52. And: “[P]hilosophy is knowing conceptually [*begreifendes Erkennen*],” ibid., § 160 Z, 233; *Werke* 8, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. One must be especially wary of any assimilation here of the English, almost haeccitistic valence of “particularity,” as well as the use of “particulars” to refer to individuals. This confusion plagues Winfield, *Concept to Objectivity*, 74–78. Thanks to Sebastian Rand for his correspondence on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. On the role of negativity in the formation of the concepts of Hegel’s *Logic*, see especially Karin de Boer, *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 54–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 534; *Werke* 6, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., 535, modified; *Werke* 6, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. In the context of his discussion of particularity, Hegel suggests that it is the concepts of the first books of the *Science of Logic* itself that can be taken as purely conceptually derived: “…being, existence, something [namely, categories from the *Doctrine of Being*], or whole and part, and so on, substance and accidents, cause and effect [from the *Doctrine of Essence*], are thought determinations on their own; as determinate *concepts*, however, they are grasped in so far as each is cognized in unity with its others or in opposition to them.” Ibid., 535; *Werke* 6, 282. Hegel’s claim to derive certain metaphysical concepts purely through an operation of “autonomous negation” is discussed classically by Dieter Henrich, “Hegels Grundoperation: Ein Einleitung in die ‘Wissenschaft der Logik,’” in *Der Idealismus und seine Gegenwart*, eds. Ute Guzzoni, Bernhard Rang, and Ludwig Siep (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1976), 208–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Here I differ from those readings of the *Logic* which emphasize that its categories are at once those of thought and “being,” taken as reality (namely, that of Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s* Logic (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006)). Such a reading, in my view, makes it impossible to see the significance of the turn to objectivity at the end of the logic. I follow Karin de Boer, *On Hegel,* 39, in her insistence that the *Logic* itself transcends the opposition of subject and object precisely because its sole content is the concepts of pure thought. Moreover, de Boer rightly points out the danger of taking Hegel’s use of the term “being,” as Houlgate does, to refer to ultimate reality or the world as given. Ibid., 216, n. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. “To reproach the concept as such for being empty is to ignore its absolute determinateness which is conceptual distinction [*Begriffsunterschied*] and the only true content in the element of the concept.” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 538, slightly modified; *Werke* 6, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 511–16; *Werke* 6, 249–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 11, 18, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 546–49; *Werke* 6, 296–301. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See the figure below for a depiction of how the three “moments” of the concept identify the same “space” in three different ways. The particular is a distinction within the universal; the singular *is* the particular (a distinction constituted by contrary determinations), but as posited outside the universal. The recovery of the singular as united to the particular and universal will be the purpose of judgment.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See ibid., 641; *Werke* 6, 424, for the qualification of objects as individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See for example Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 312 R, 163; *Werke* 9, 202–03. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. “The thing itself [*Die Sache selbst*] consists just in this, that its concept, as self-negating unity, negates its universality and *projects itself into the externality of the singularity*.” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 585, modified; *Werke* 6, 348. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. This may be what is behind Hegel’s cryptic “principle” that “All things are in themselves contradictory.” Ibid., 381; *Werke* 6, 74. They are what they are through contrary determinations, resulting in punctual determinacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., 549; *Werke* 6, 300-01 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., 548; *Werke* 6, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., 545; *Werke* 6, 295. This is something that Hegel believes himself to prove rather than merely assert, but for our purposes, we will take it as given. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. As Redding puts the point, in relation to the parallel issue in Kantian epistemology, “Part of Hegel’s answer [sc., to the question of connecting concept to object] involves treating what Kant thought of as a non-conceptual representation, intuition, as conceptual, or, more accurately, as the concept in one of its determinate forms – that of singularity – and as playing a role in a judgement by being copulated with another, different, conceptual determination.” “The Role of Logic,” 289. The point stands whether or not Redding is correct in interpreting Kantian intuitions as non-conceptual, since the question of their determinate logical form still remains. This is something Hegel addressed (at the very least) more directly than did Kant. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 549; *Werke* 6, 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 548; *Werke* 6, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 550; *Werke* 6, 301–02. As Kant put it, “The functions of the understanding can therefore all be found together if one can exhaustively exhibit the functions of unity in judgments.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 206 (A 69/B 96). Frege writes, “As opposed to [Boole], I start out with judgments and their contents, and not from concepts. … I only allow the formation of concepts to proceed from judgments.” Gottlob Frege, “Boole's Logical Calculus and the Concept-script,” in *Posthumous Writings*, trans. Peter Long and Roger White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 16. This is not to suggest, of course, that Hegel thinks judgments alone are sufficient to express conceptual content, which he in fact denies. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 554; *Werke* 6, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., 587; *Werke* 6, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., 585–86; *Werke* 6, 349. This points to the need for a complex account (which cannot be pursued here) of how materially rich concepts like “action” can function as universals in the same way as the concept as such. This is a function of Hegel’s idea that every individual concept shares the form of the whole. Seeibid., 19; *Werke* 6, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. The section on the syllogism, which we will pass over, considers the way particularity as a whole, the set of conceptual *distinctions,* can function as a “middle” between singularity and the universal. In other words, all singulars can be mediated through the whole of determinacy. This leads to the claim that all determinacy is constituted disjunctively: all determinacy is mutually exclusive but internally complete. The importance of this latter is the way it cashes out Hegel’s prior assertion that the concept is all determinacy. On this issue, see Gerhard, *Hegel und die logische Frage*, 101–04. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 193 R, 266; *Werke* 8, 347. Translation modified. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Note that when Hegel refers to “objectivity” it should be taken to mean the character of objects, rather than what is “objective” in the sense of an unbiased account, etc. It is the resistance of singulars to immediate assimilation to conceptual content that qualifies them for being “objective” in Hegel’s sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. For the abstract presentation of the determination/determinacy distinction in the *Science of Logic* see 95-101; *Werke* 6, 131–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. See Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (1757): “Those things (notes and predicates) that are posited in something by determining [it] are DETERMINATIONS. A determination is either positive and affirmative (§ 34, 10), and if true, REALITY, or it is negative (§ 34, 10), and if true NEGATION.” Alexander Baumgarten, *Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant’s Elucidations, Selected Notes, and Related Materials*, trans. and eds. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 107, § 36. On the concept of determination in Kant and the rationalist tradition, see Terje Spalby, *Hegel’s Conception of the Determinate Negation* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 19–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 95; *Werke* 5, 131–32 [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Spalby, *Determinate Negation*, 30–34, plausibly suggests that Kant’ notion of “real opposition” stands at the basis of Hegel’s treatment of negation as the basis of determination. The relevance of this Kantian notion to Hegel is defended at length in Michael Wolff, *Der Begriff des Widerspruchs. Eine Studie zur Dialektik Kants und Hegels*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurt University Press, 2010 [orig. 1981]). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. For an overview of the theme in Spinoza and its reception, see Yitzhak Y. Melamed, “‘Omnis determinatio est negatio’: Determination, Negation, and Self-Negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel,” in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, eds. Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 175–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Michael Inwood, “Determination, Determinacy,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hegel*, eds. Allegra de Laurentiis and Jeffrey Edwards (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Hegel closely associates the Greek *horos* (ὅρος, “term,” related to όριο, “limit” or “boundary”) with conceptual determinacy: “This prophetic talk supposes that it is staying right in the centre and in the depths, looks disdainfully at determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*] (*Horos*), and deliberately holds aloof from Notion and Necessity as products of that reflection which is at home only in the finite.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 6; *Werke* 3, 17. See also *Werke* 18, 532, for the translation of ὅροςwith *Bestimmung****.*** [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. For a contemporary attempt to use the notion of “articulation” as a replacement for representational theories of concepts, see Joseph Rouse*, Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. This is not in itself a critique of McDowell, who does not take his work to establish a positive theory of conceptuality, but to dissolve epistemological anxieties characteristic of modern philosophy. See the Introduction to *Mind and World.* Nevertheless, from the present point of view, McDowell approaches the problem too generally, since the role of conceptual capacities in experience does not exhaust the mind-world relation. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Hegel speaks of “that trivial identity that concept and object are in themselves identical…” Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 193 R, 266–67; *Werke* 8, 347. Since Pippin grounds the conceptuality of our knowledge on something inevitable—the “inseparability of concept and intuition”—his view of conceptual objectivity verges on this kind of triviality. For Hegel, a non-trivial identity between concept and object is one that is *achieved*, or a result. See the final section of this paper for my view about how this could be understood. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Else there would be no room to make remarks such as the following: “…that reality which does not correspond to the concept is mere *appearance*, something subjective, accidental, arbitrary, something which is not the truth.” Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 671; *Werke* 6, 464. Underline added. Bowman has appropriately emphasized that, to whatever extent Hegel takes the Kantian turn away from the objects of special metaphysics as traditionally conceived, he nevertheless does not think of the object of philosophical knowledge in terms of the ordinary things of the empirical world, or even everything considered in empirical science. See Bowman, *Absolute Negativity,* Chapter 4. Bowman’s account, however, since it leaves us only with an underlying metaphysical structure—connected to our knowing, perhaps, but hardly to definite, worldly things—makes very elusive what Hegelian science could study. As I will emphasize below, Hegel’s account of conceptuality prizes instead things genuinely constituted by their logical determinacy, which turn out to be the things of human culture, the “spiritual” world. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. See Gerhard, *Hegel und die logische Frage*, 32, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 671; *Werke* 6, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. The phrase is from Dean Moyar, “Thought and Metaphysics: Hegel’s Reception of Spinoza,” in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, 197–213. See relatedly Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 526; *Werke* 6, 270.  [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. See ibid., 535; *Werke* 6, 281; ibid., 38; *Werke* 5, 56; Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, 52, § 20 R; *Werke* 8, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 631; *Werke* 6, 409. I thus dispute James Kreines’ suggestion that this section primarily concerns modes of explanation, though I do not deny the relevance of explanation for Hegel’s concerns here. See his “Hegel’s Critique of Mechanism and the Philosophical Appeal of the *Logic* Project,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12.1 (2004), 38–74. My account is more in line with Moss, who claims that Hegel’s section on objectivity is “a schematic for the comprehension of objects,” which does not make a direct claim about non-logical objects. See Gregory S. Moss, “Hegel’s Free Mechanism: Resurrecting the Concept,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 53.1 (March 2013), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 631; *Werke* 6, 409 [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid., 632, modified; *Werke* 6, 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid., 633; *Werke* 6, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. It is because of the non-conceptual character of mathematics, at least in its quantitative element, that Hegel disputes the post-Leibnizian attempt to formulate a logical calculus in mathematical symbolism. See ibid., 554; *Werke* 6, 293–94. Hegel extensively criticizes the “*begrifflos*” character of the infinitesimal calculus in Book I of the *Science of Logic*. See ibid., 204–60; *Werke* 5, 279–357. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid., 672; *Werke* 6, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. The reference to the concretely existing concept in this passage should be taken in terms of Hegel’s introductory remarks on the concept: “The concept, when it has progressed to a concrete *existence* [*Existenz*] which is itself free, is nothing other than the ‘I’ or pure self-consciousness.” Ibid., 514; *Werke* 6, 253. See also, “Observation finds this free concept…only in the concept which itself *exists* as concept, i.e. in self-consciousness.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 180; *Werke* 3, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 674; *Werke* 6, 468. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Herein lies a central disagreement between my approach and that of Robert Brandom (see note 29 above), who takes relations of modal incompatibility (his translation of “determinacy”) to be sufficient for Hegelian conceptuality. See his “Some Hegelian Ideas of Note,” 12. On such an account, since anything exhibits modal incompatibilities, conceptuality is to be found everywhere and, plausibly, to the same degree. Of course, this reading already fails to account for Hegel’s specific statements about the “*begrifflos*” character of some things, as discussed above and exhibited in the Hegelian notion of “mechanical” objects. Accordingly, it leaves no room for the graduated isomorphism I recommend, which also relies on discriminating the involvement of singular, particular, and universal “moments” of conceptuality in the constitution of determinacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. See note 93 above. This must be qualified, of course, because when used in a technical sense (deriving from the rationalists), Hegel will indeed say that the concept contains all “reality” (*Realität*), in the sense of affirmative truth. This is a feature of the *Phenomenology* more so than the *Logic*: “Reason is the certainty of consciousness that it is all reality [*alle Realität*]; thus does idealism express its Notion.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 140, § 233; *Werke* 3, 179. In terms of our discussion, we can say that not all objectivity is conceptual, even though objectivity is contained within conceptuality. On the relation of terms like “reality” and “objectivity” see Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 627–29; *Werke* 6, 405–07. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. See, for example, “The idea is, therefore, only in this self-determination of *apprehending itself*; it is in *pure thought*, where difference is not yet *otherness*, but is and remains perfectly transparent [*durchsichtig*] to itself.” Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 736, underline added; *Werke* 6, 550. I hesitate to say here that the determinacies are also “identical,” though that is clearly the trajectory of the progression. See the concluding section of this paper for remarks on how conceptual and real determinacy could in some cases be strictly identical [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid., 664; *Werke* 6, 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ibid., 669; *Werke* 6, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 352, 356; *Werke* 9, 435. See also *Science of Logic*, 717-18; *Werke* 6, 526. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Contrary, it would seem, to the essentialist reading, Hegel does not find rational significance in particular animal kinds. There is one rational genus or kind of animal, shared by all the types: “The other side to this is that the concept, of course, is also brought to bear [*auch sich geltend macht*], but only to a certain degree. There is only one animal type and all the varieties are merely modifications of it. … One must not therefore seek conceptual determinations everywhere, although traces of them are everywhere present.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 368 Z, 418; *Werke* 9, 503–04. Translation modified. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Hegel sees the full “syllogistic” behavior of the animal on display in copulation (*Begattung*), in which, “The genus is therefore present in the individual as the straining against the inadequacy of its single actuality, as the urge to obtain its self-feeling in the other of its genus, and…through this mediation to close [*zusammenzuschließen,* lit. “infer together”] the genus with itself…” Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 369 (3rd ed.), 411; *Werke* 9, 516. In the *Zusatz* following this quotation, the “syllogistic” aspect is made yet more explicit. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. It is significant that Hegel continually speaks of *singularity* in nature rather than *universality. Pace* Kreines, the concept is nature is *not* akin to the presence of universals (in a strict sense)there. See especially the *Philosophy of Nature,* § 374, 440; *Werke* 9, 534.The syllogistic structure of conceptual form allows Hegel to recognize conceptuality without strict universality. Compare a remark from his 1831 lectures on logic: “The animal is something universal, but without realizing it, *it is universal only for the human mind*. The laws of spirit are universal essentialities, and the essentialities of what itself is objective.” *Lectures on Logic*, trans. Clark Butler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16, emphasis added. This shows how Hegel can attribute universality to nature, while assuming that the universal itself is only in the thought that thinks nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. As Christian Martin clarifies, the concept or “internal norm” is only “in” something “*qua* self-referential and self-determining.” See his “Die Idee als Einheit von Begriff und Objektivität,” in *Hegel – 200 Jahre Wissenschaft der Logik*, eds. A. Koch, F. Schick, K. Vieweg, and C. Wirsing (Hamburg: Meiner, 2014), 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 669; *Werke* 6, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid., 696; *Werke* 6, 497. Modified translation [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. See., e.g., “The object, therefore, is indeed presupposed by the idea as *existing in itself* [*an sich seiend*], but as so essentially related to the idea that the latter, certain of itself and of the nothingness of this opposition, arrives at the relation of its concept in this relationship.” Ibid., 699; *Werke* 6, 501. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. I owe the phrasing of “local” conceptual realization to Christian Martin, “Die Idee als Einheit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Here, it may seem that I am on common ground with Bowman, who also argues that the concept is a system of negative relations, or “absolute negativity.” However, as I noted above, Bowman sees the primary reference of the concept as metaphysical reality itself, rather than its first position in thought. It is the primacy of thought, in the present conception, which allows for the absolute negativity of the concept *qua* thought to “overreach” the world and achieve only local isomorphism. For this reason, the concept as itself a “system” of absolute negativity would not identical to the structure of the world, as Bowman claims. See his *Absolute Negativity*, 239–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Since Hegel claims that, in conceptual thinking, form itself becomes the content, it is misleading, as some recent work suggests, that Hegel is arguing for the “dependence” of conceptual form on “sensible content” or merely that “in giving an account of form, we inevitably make assumptions about content.” See, respectively, Sedgwick, *Hegel’s Critique of Kant*, 158–62; Zambrana*, Hegel’s Theory of Intelligibility*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. I cannot develop these hints here, but I will mention them briefly. The monistic reading can be defeated first by a thesis which could show how all holistic unity of “the concept” can be attributed to human thought, namely in the always moving, but internally complete system of philosophy itself; a point made by John McCumber, *The Company of Words: Hegel, Language, and Systematic Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 44–45. Second, the monistic interpretation is threated by the fact that conceptual realization is gradated: there are obvious interruptions in the conceptuality of reality, which suggests that something “else” than the concept (and therewith the idea) exists: hence, no monism. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 312 R, 163; *Werke* 9, 202–03. Modified. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. “Der Magnetismus hat außer der hierdurch gesetzten Bestimmung keine weitere besondere Eigenschaft.” Ibid. (“Magnetism has no further special property apart from the determination posited hereby.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ibid., § 362, 390–91; *Werke* 9, 475. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. See the end of section I above for why this presents a problem for the realist view. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Gerhard suggests that Hegel hereby opens the way to a “*critical* philosophy of nature.” See Gerhard*, Hegel und die logische Frage*, 163–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 312 R, 163; *Werke* 9, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. I mean, in particular, the tendency to deny reality to anything but the most “fundamental” components of the world, or its underlying “structure.” This trend is, however, being resisted by important work in the field. See especially the work of Amie L. Thomasson, “Foundations for a Social Ontology,” *ProtoSociology* 18 (2003): 269–90, and her *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 213, 282; *Werke* 8, 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. This is further developed in the “absolute idea” as “the identity of the theoretical and practical idea.” Ibid., 735; *Werke* 6, 548. Hegel himself does not refer to Vico to make this point, though Vico’s insight is characteristic of modern philosophy since Bacon. I am indebted here to Sebastian Luft’s discussion of the role of the “Vico formula” in the philosophy of culture of Marburg Neo-Kantianism. See his *The Space of Culture: Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Thus, “It is truth in this deeper sense that is at stake if, for example, one is speaking of a *true* state or of a *true* work of art. These objects [*Gegenstände*] are *true* if they are what they *should* be, that is to say, if their reality corresponds to their concept.” *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 213 Z, 284; *Werke* 8, 369. This is the realm that begins with what Hegel calls “objective spirit,” in which the rational will must “realize its concept, freedom, in the externally objective realm, making it a world determinable by the will, so that in it the will is at home with itself, *the concept accordingly completed to the Idea*.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, rev. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), § 484, 217; *Werke* 10, 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic,* § 163 Z2, 238; *Werke* 8, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Namely, for Hegel, the universal is itself the *product* of “thinking over” (*Nachdenken*) something: “When thinking is taken as active in relation to objects, as thinking over something, the universal that is the product of such an activity contains the value of the *basic matter* [*Sache*], the *essential*, the *inner*, the *true*.” Ibid., § 21, 54; *Werke* 8, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. I am again in agreement with Gerhard here, “Only in spirit is the identity of object and concept shown to be complete. In spirit the comprehending and the comprehended cannot be separated from each other; for spirit is, as Hegel writes, the concept ‘which has for its existence the concept itself as the reality corresponding to it.’” Gerhard, *Hegel und die logische Frage*, 161. Gerhard is here commenting on the transition from nature to spirit at Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature,* § 376, 443; *Werke* 9, 537. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. E.g., “…the product [sc., of the purposive process] is *an objectivity which is identical with the concept*, is the realized purpose in which the side of being a means is the reality itself of the purpose.” Hegel, *Science of Logic,* 667, emphasis added; *Werke* 6, 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Contrary to the expectations typical of commentators, this is not, in fact, one Hegel’s preferred expressions, connected as it is to Schelling’s thought. But see his remarks in the *Phenomenology*, 33; *Werke* 3, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. The phrase is McDowell’s from *Mind and World*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. This paper benefitted from the help of friends and colleagues who read and commented on it at various stages, including Peter Burgess, Sebastian Luft, Michael Monahan, Jorge Montiel, Greg Trotter, and Ericka Tucker. I also benefited from discussion with audiences at Ryerson University and Lehigh University (both in 2016), where some of the main ideas of the paper were presented. Thanks to all those who contributed both through criticism and encouragement. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Send correspondence to: [william.c.wolf@marquette.edu](mailto:william.c.wolf@marquette.edu). [↑](#footnote-ref-140)