

THE ABOLITION OF TIME IN HEGEL'S "ABSOLUTE KNOWING" (AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR MARX)

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Abstract: In the history of interpretations of Hegel, how one reads the chapter on "Absolute Knowing" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* determines one's whole perspective. In fact, Marx's only comments on the *Phenomenology* concern this final chapter, taking it as the very "secret" of Hegel's philosophy. But what is the secret hidden within the thicket of this impenetrable prose? My suggestion is that it turns on a very specific meaning of the "abolition of time" that Hegel describes in the very last paragraphs. But the meaning of this idea is not what Marx criticized in his last Manuscript of 1844, that is, it is not simply a form of idealism which abolishes the finitude of man. Rather this relationship to time accepts such finitude, making it the central axis upon which the possibility of freedom turns. In this paper, I will present a reading of "Absolute Knowing" that focuses on the meaning of overcoming time, and connect it to some thoughts on "disposable time" that Marx discusses in the *Grundrisse*.

"Wealth is disposable time."¹

Marx repeatedly cites this phrase in the *Grundrisse* in some of the most crucial passages concerning the transcendence of capitalism. But what does it mean? How are we to take it? First of all, it is a citation from an 1821 anonymous pamphlet that Marx says pushed Ricardo's theory to its radical limit. The pamphlet, entitled "The Source and Remedy of the National Difficulties," states that a nation is truly rich not because of its abundance of material goods, but if "6 instead of 12 hours are worked." Seems clear. But the question is, why is this "wealth"? Isn't this just free time, which we seem to have a lot of already now? Marx sees this coming, and rejects the idea that disposable time is the same as "free time" in capitalism, for free time exists only in antithesis to labor time, and hence, is dependent on it. Disposable time, as wealth, is something qualitatively different. It is a "new measure" of the human being in a non-capitalist world.

Whenever Marx begins to explain the explosive contradiction within the logic of capital to both reduce necessary labor time to a minimum while at the same time requiring such labor time as its basis of value, he can't help but express the idea of a new form of wealth coming from within this con-

tradition, a form of wealth made possible in capitalism, but not actualized therein. This form of wealth involves a new kind of relation to time. Wealth, in this sense, cannot be made sense of if it is taken as an economic category; rather, it seems much closer to something like Aristotle's idea of the good. The wealth of society is its good, that is, its standard for and goal of a good life. Marx's idea of wealth shares something with the *vita contemplativa* in Aristotle, for "the most solid form of wealth is science";² and yet, it is much more modern, including a practical relation to history and action as well. I think to fully understand this, we need to look once more to that old dog, Hegel, and particularly to his notion of the Absolute.

But before I do, there is a telling passage in the *Grundrisse* when Marx reveals some aspects of what he means by this kind of wealth, a passage that is not in the famous "fragment on machines" but much earlier. Reading this, one gets the impression that there is an infinite light about to burst, which Marx can only capture in crude fragments of Hegelian language. He writes,

What is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange; what is it if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature—over the forces of so-called Nature, as well as those of his own nature? What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding of man's creative abilities, without any precondition other than the preceding historical development, which makes the totality of this development—i.e. the development of all human powers as such, not measured by any *previously given* yardstick—an end-in-itself, through which he does not reproduce himself in any specific character, but produces his totality, and does not seek to remain something he has already become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?³

But when will this wealth come? Is it here now? What is the relation between this idea of wealth as the infinite self-development of human potentiality in its totality as an end-in-itself, and the idea of wealth as disposable time? And what is the connection between all of this and the overcoming of capitalism?

There is a phrase I left off in the beginning of this quotation, which says, "In fact, however, if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not," etc. So, on the one hand, this idea of wealth is the content constrained within the bourgeois form, but on the other hand, it is also itself the form of a new kind of content, that content, being communism itself.

My goal is to fill in some of this content of the idea of disposable time as the measure of communism. I take this content not from Marx, but from Hegel, particularly the last section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Absolute Knowing.

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concern this final chapter, taking it as the very “secret” of Hegel’s philosophy. But what is the secret hidden within the thicket of this impenetrable prose? My suggestion is that it turns on a very specific meaning of the “abolition of time” that Hegel describes in the very last paragraphs. But the meaning of this idea is not what Marx criticized in his last Manuscript of 1844, that is, it is not simply a form of idealism which abolishes the finitude of man. Rather this relationship to time accepts such finitude, making it the central axis upon which the possibility of freedom turns. And, it is my suggestion here, that Hegel’s discussion of absolute knowing, science, and the overcoming of a certain relation to time might provide a way of understanding the cryptic comments of Marx in which he identifies wealth as disposable time, wealth as productive power of social individuals, and wealth as science. Perhaps, this kind of wealth is nothing but absolute knowing.

I will now drastically jump to the section on “Absolute Knowing” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, and give a reconstruction of some of the arguments in my own terms, starting halfway through the chapter.

At paragraph 799,⁴ the perspective of Absolute Knowledge, or Science, is taken as both irreducibly singular, as the standpoint of a free individual self-consciousness actively thinking from within its own unique experience, and fully universal, as mediated by universal concepts which transcend their individual source and are free to be shared, appropriated, applied, and rejected by all.⁵ Understanding the singular freedom of the *I* within the universal space of the *We* is the perspective of philosophy. The content of such a perspective is the content of *consciousness*, that is, *experience* and all its distinctions, divisions, and relations. The *I* is the movement of connecting concepts across different contents, it is the form which unifies all these together; hence, in knowing, it knows itself as knowing. In short, the *I* is both the active form of knowledge, as the syllogistic, structure of self-mediation, and the content of knowledge, as the movement of experience.⁶

But the movement of experience is what the *Phenomenology of Spirit* just traversed, so how is science any different from phenomenology? Both are investigations into objectivity, sociality, nature, consciousness, reason, agency, history, morality, and freedom, but the difference is the way in which such ideas are comprehended. No longer are these separate, independent forms that confront the thinking, acting subject as objects to be incorporated or rejected. Rather, the content of science is spirit’s own self-knowledge being made explicit in the shape of knowledge—concepts—known as historically produced by people, yet completely universal and accurate, according to the criteria we have given ourselves to judge their validity. When nothing is taken as a *given* anymore, then “within its otherness, the *I* is at one with itself [daß *Ich* in seinem Anderssein bei sich selbst ist],” and is ready to comprehend its experience anew.⁷

In paragraph 800, Hegel repeats himself, saying that concept of science is

possible when the difference between consciousness and self-consciousness is overcome, when the objects of consciousness are taken as the concepts of self-consciousness. But this general comprehending of objectivity does not become Absolute Knowledge until it is able to give an account of its own development, its own basis in the historically generated institutions of mutual recognition across time. Hence, the temporal development of spirit on its path to knowing itself is also an object of consciousness that must be made into a concept of self-consciousness.⁸

Now in paragraph 801, Hegel writes that as cognitive, self-reflection emerges in history, its first contents are isolated, abstract thoughts, separated from any comprehensive theory of objectivity and itself. But since such reflection is “free” to move and grasp what it may, it is not long before it goes after the concealed truths of religious representation, subjecting them to conceptual examination.⁹ This negative posture toward what is given, as objectivity or substance, is also a positive refashioning by self-conscious individuals of what it means for something to *be* objective, to be valuable or true. Hence, the production of truth by the critical movement of cognition slowly builds a new framework for the understanding of objects, relations and values, which incorporates its own social, historical self-activity into the framework explicitly. If we call this fully transparent and self-aware framework, “the concept,” or “absolute knowledge,” then its genesis in time occurs by means of a piecemeal approach of investigation, judgment, inference, *even though* the framework itself is not piecemeal at all.¹⁰ To non-conceptual consciousness, this picture of the world is given as a whole at once, with later modifications coming as time goes by. This movement of self-discovery of spirit’s own conceptuality within the realm of simple consciousness constitutes *Time*.

Breaking the rhythm of the text, Hegel writes here in the middle of 801: “—*Time is the concept itself that exists there* and is represented to consciousness as empty intuition.”¹¹

To unreflective consciousness, time just exists, it “is there,” as an empty container we fill with our experience. But time *is the concept itself*. What can this mean? Here, Hegel is contrasting two theories of time, one is time conceived conceptually, as the historical, directional movement of self-discovery of spirit’s own conditions of existence, and one is time depicted non-conceptually, from religious ideas of the present time as nothing but the waiting for a future redemption to Kant’s idea of temporality as an “empty intuition” filled with contents of experience. To Hegel, these latter views of time arise when spirit does not yet understand itself, and hence it takes itself to be another object “in” time like anything else, externally compelled to follow time’s direction. For spirit to truly *grasp* [*erfaßt*] time, Hegel writes, it must annul [*tilgt*] it.¹²

As Malabou and Kojève see it, this is not time *as such*, but a particular understanding of time, an understanding which takes the past as given, the

present as empty, and the future as out of our hands.¹³ To annul this understanding of time means to reconceive its *form* of objectivity, to give it the same conceptual shape which self-conscious spirit gave to the rest of its contents, the shape of the *self*. When time is *externally intuited* [*äußere angeschaute*] as Hegel says, it appears as nothing but a medium in which spirit can develop itself while remaining the same, similar to how Kant describes the synthesis of time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Time renders an object identical through synthesizing a unity out of the manifold of appearances. Hence, time does not appear as the determinate movement of people coming-to-awareness of their own freedom to think, act, and rethink themselves according to their concepts, but rather it appears as something *other* than me.

When this concept of time is grasped *as a concept*, or better, as the structure of conceptuality itself, then its intuitive form as external medium for self-development is overcome. As Hegel writes in one of his more speculative sentences of the book:

When the concept grasps itself, it sets aside its Time-form, comprehends this intuiting, and is a comprehended and comprehending intuiting.¹⁴

One way to understand this *aufheben* of the time-form is to see it as an overcoming of the revealed Religion's "waiting" for the absolute. By opening time to the conceptual grasp of spirit, the rigidity of time is loosened. The structure of forgiveness as explained at the end of the *Spirit* chapter elucidates this well. Forgiveness is an inter-subjective activity in the present which releases the deeds of the past into a new interpretation so as to change the conduct of the future. Forgiveness, which we could just as easily replace with conceptualizing, or syllogizing, reconceives the initial intuitive act, and in so doing, is a new form of intuition, a conceptually mediated intuition. This "comprehended and comprehending intuiting," in other words, does not even let the past stay past. If the framework of conceptuality or forgiveness has such absolute power over time, that is because it is, in some sense, beyond time. Concepts are not atemporal or ahistorical, but both temporal and atemporal, both historical and transhistorical. It is precisely the temporality of concepts and deeds that allow them to be reconceived and reevaluated in new times, with new contexts. Specific concepts change, but the form of the concept does not. For even if the form of the concept does shift, it can't help but shift *more of less conceptually*. In another sense, practical norms change, but the structure of normativity does not. Rather, it becomes more or less coherent, explicit, understood.

To the un-fulfilled spiritual community, time appears as fate and destiny; but this is nothing other than the religious representation of *logical necessity*. There is nothing destined about the development of spirit, but, for spirit to become self-aware, there are conditions which must be realized. From this perspective, the perspective of the self-conscious development of rationality, the movement of spirit appears as necessary.¹⁵ This movement of

necessity takes two forms at two different moments. In ancient or religious contexts, when selfless substance is taken as the immediate ground of spirit, then logical necessity appears as the necessity of time required in order for self-consciousness to develop the space of conceptuality from within this immediately given whole. In the context of modernity, when substance is emptied of its given contents, and the ground of spirit is taken as pure inward subjectivity, then logical necessity appears as the necessity of time required to make explicit the self-generated norms already implicit in the actions and relations of spirit.¹⁶

In paragraph 802, Hegel claims that because of this necessity for spirit to find its own normative and conceptual basis within itself, through its historical development, using only its own resources, it can be said along with Kant, but stronger now and for different reasons, that “nothing is *known* that is not in *experience* [*Erfahrung*].”¹⁷ The religious or non-conceptual way of saying this is that the true, the eternal or the holy must be *felt, inwardly revealed, or believed* to be known at all. Hegel is here explicitly equating movement of spirit—experience—with the object of religious consciousness. As opposed to Kant, religion doesn’t come from the limits of reason but from squarely within it. But what is experience? Or, as Pippin would say, what is the *logic of experience*?

Hegel describes this logic in two ways, once from the perspective of the self actively *experiencing*, and once from the perspective of what is *experienced*. Spirit, as the collective name for anything that has *experience*, that, as Brandom would say, “has a history, and not a nature,” relates itself to objects, other subjects, values, relations and structures that appear to be *given*. We phenomenologists now know, from the standpoint of Absolute Knowledge, that all these contents are really the production of spirit throughout history, re-configured, reconceived, and reevaluated according to the normative demands for justification which a reflective community gives itself. *But experience is just this process of making this knowledge explicit*. For Hegel, this process is the logic of experience for an individual, for a collective, for the readers of the *Phenomenology*, and for the development of history itself. What starts as an *object for consciousness*, as did “the absolute” for us in the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, becomes the *subject of self-consciousness*, as it does for us now. This reflective movement of drawing out new consequences and duties both conceptually and practically from the norms that appear to govern one’s relations to others, to objects, and to oneself, constitutes *cognition*, and the task of justifying this practice has been the work of the *Phenomenology*. Summarizing this movement of experience in a way that exactly describes the development of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes:

Spirit is in itself the movement which is cognition—the transformation of that former *in-itself* into *for-itself*, of *substance* into *subject*, of the object of *consciousness* into the object of *self-consciousness*, i.e., into an object

that is just as much sublated, that is, into the *concept*. This transformation is the circle returning back into itself, which presupposes its beginning and reaches its beginning only at the end.¹⁸

In short, spirit is the movement that takes given objects and makes them into free concepts by means of acting subjects, concepts which themselves express this dynamic self-reflective movement.

This explication of spirit's relation to substance through experience was intended to explain the relation between spirit and *time*, and it is only now that Hegel clarifies this. The argument goes as such: the "intuited whole" of substance, the normative order of the world that appears divine and natural, is confronted by the emergence of a self-conscious individuality that is beginning to reflect on the grounds of such a picture. The way in which such reflective self-consciousness does this is by *distinguishing*, differentiating, or discerning elements that were previously seen as harmoniously unified. Here is where it gets complicated. This critical movement of distinguishing, also called the activity of spirit, distinguishes this *form of wholeness* itself from the varied contents which the whole unifies. The form of wholeness, or substance, separate from all its contents, is nothing but the empty intuited concept of time.¹⁹

To "simple self-consciousness," in other words, the whole of reality is split up into time, and within the movement of time comes the contents of existence which spirit learns to distinguish, review, and eventually re-incorporate into its self-definition. But this is still a non-spiritual, external way of "seeing the whole." What Hegel seems to be saying is that as long as Spirit has not fully conceptualized what was previously taken as external objectivity, then it must presuppose the idea of an empty time through which it can fulfill this goal. This *activity* of spirit coming to realize that it is the very content of substance is taken to be an externally imposed *temporal* process as opposed to a *self-determined social* process, and it will have to be understood this way, until its "objective exhibition" is "consummated."²⁰ The movement from selfless substance to self-conscious subject is not determined by the movement of time, but on the contrary, the movement of time is determined by it. This knowledge of the constitution of time by spirit itself cannot be practically achieved and spirit cannot become truly self-conscious until it has conquered the world as *world-spirit*. This means spiritualizing the world, making explicit its self-determined rationality and reciprocally recognized normativity. In other words, this is Science, the kind of cognition which no longer needs the external compulsion of time to drive it onwards to completion, but only the self-determination to endlessly actualize itself in the world.²¹

In conclusion, if such a thing can even be said, the kind of science, or knowledge that constitutes Absolute Knowing seems to me to be close to the kind of knowledge that Marx describes would be the basis of social individuality in a world where the human good is measured by disposable time, that

is, the time in which self-reflective individuals and communities would have nothing else to drive them to *be* but their own will for “knowing” themselves and each other. This social-self knowing in the world occurs through actualizing the essential rational and natural powers which make us who we are. The result would be what Marx says in the *Grundrisse*: the development of “the universality of the individual not as an imaginary concept, but [as] the universality of his real and ideal relations. Hence also the comprehension of his own history as a *process* and the knowledge of nature . . . as his real body. The process of development itself posited and known as the presupposition of the same.”²² If there is a “secret” in Hegel’s “Absolute Knowing,” as Marx remarked in 1844, it is that it provides the absent model for Marx’s own understanding of communism.

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Notes

1. Karl Marx, “Economic Manuscripts of 1857–8” in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 28 (New York: International Publishes, 1986), 324.

2. Marx, “Economic Manuscripts,” 464.

3. Marx, “Economic Manuscripts,” 411–412.

4. All citations of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* come either from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), or from the translation available online by Terry Pinkard, soon to be published by Cambridge; the German is from *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, hg. von W. Bonsiepen u. R. Heede, Bd. 9 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), hereafter cited as PhG followed by paragraph.

5. PhG ¶799: “es ist Ich, das *dieses* und kein anderes *Ich* und das ebenso unmittelbar vermittelt oder aufgehobenes *allgemeines Ich* ist.”

6. PhG ¶799: “It has a *content* that it *distinguishes* from itself, for it is pure negativity, that is, it is the act of self-estrangement; it is *consciousness*. Within its distinctions, this content is itself the I, for it is the movement of itself sublating itself, that is, it is the same pure negativity which is the I [die Bewegung des Sich-selbst-aufhebens, oder dieselbe reine Negativität, die Ich ist].”

7. PhG ¶799.

8. PhG ¶800.

9. PhG ¶801: “Hence, initially it is merely the *abstract moments* which belong to substance’s *self-consciousness*. However, since as pure activities these moments impel themselves forward, self-consciousness enriches itself until it has wrested the entire substance from consciousness and has absorbed into itself the entire structure of the substance’s essentialities.”

10. PhG ¶801: “In the *concept* which knows itself as the concept, the *moments* thereby come on the scene prior to the *fulfilled whole*, whose coming-to-be is the movement of those moments.”

11. PhG ¶801: “Die *Zeit* ist der *Begriff* selbst, der *da ist* und als leere Anschauung sich dem Bewußtsein vorstellt.”

12. PhG ¶801: “deswegen erscheint der Geist notwendig in der *Zeit*, und er erscheint so lange in der *Zeit*, als er nicht seinen reinen Begriff *erfaßt*, das heißt, nicht die *Zeit* tilgt.”

13. See Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005); as well as Alexandre Kojève and Raymond Queneau, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

14. PhG ¶801. As Pinkard puts it: “Since this concept grasps itself, it sublates its temporal form, comprehends the act of intuiting, and is intuition which has been conceptually grasped and is itself intuition which is comprehending.” The German reads as: “indem dieser sich selbst *erfaßt*, hebt er seine *Zeitform* auf, begreift das Anschauen, und ist begriffnes und begreifendes Anschauen.”

15. PhG ¶801: “Time thus appears as the *destiny and necessity* of the spirit that is not yet consummated within itself.”

16. PhG ¶801: “It appears as the necessity to enrich the participation self-consciousness has in consciousness and to set into motion the *immediacy of the in-itself*—the form in which the substance exists within consciousness—or, conversely, if the in-itself is taken as *inwardness*, it is to realize and to reveal what is at first *inward*, that is, to vindicate it for spirit’s certainty of itself.”

17. PhG ¶802: “daß nichts *gewußt* wird was nicht in der *Erfahrung* ist.”

18. PhG ¶802: “Er ist an sich die Bewegung, die das Erkennen ist, die Verwandlung jenes *An-sichs* in das *Für-sich*, der *Substanz* in das *Subjekt*, des Gegenstands des *Bewußtseins* in Gegenstand des *Selbstbewußtseins*, d.h. in ebensowohl aufgehobnen Gegenstand, oder in den *Begriff*.”

19. PhG ¶802: “Insofar as spirit therefore is within itself necessarily this act of distinguishing, its intuited whole faces up against its simple self-consciousness, and since that whole is what is distinguished, it is thus distinguished into its intuited pure concept, into *time*, and into the content, that is, into the *in-itself*.”

20. PhG ¶802: “Substance, as subject, has in it *the initial inward* necessity of exhibiting itself in itself as what it is *in itself as spirit*. The consummated objective exhibition is at the same time merely the reflection of substance, that is, substance becoming the self.”

21. PhG ¶802: “Hence, as long as spirit has not *in itself* brought itself to consummation as the world-spirit, it cannot attain its consummation as *self-conscious* spirit. For that reason, the content of religion expresses what *spirit is* earlier in time than science does, but it is science alone which is spirit’s true knowledge of itself.”

22. Marx, “Economic Manuscripts,” 466.

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