

Hegel's Circles: Self-Surprise in the Subjective Logic

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Abstract

Hegel's *Science of Logic* tracks the self-contained and self-generated development of what Hegel calls the concept. My question is: can the concept in the *Logic* surprise itself? I argue that the answer to that question is yes—the concept can surprise itself when it rediscovers itself in a place it did not expect to be. I first clarify the kind of perspective that the *Logic* asks us as readers to occupy and its difference from the perspective inside the 'opposition' of consciousness. I then provide an example of the concept's self-surprise, namely, the transition from subjective to realized purpose in the *Subjective Logic*. I conclude by drawing out some implications of self-surprise for Hegel's method in the *Logic* and in the subsequent *Realphilosophie*.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

In his essay entitled 'Circles', Emerson makes the relatively uncontroversial observation that 'life is a series of surprises. We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of to-morrow, when we are building up our being' (Emerson 1981: 181). This sounds true enough of life, which is usually at the mercy of the unexpected and which often surprises us, pleasantly or unpleasantly, leading us to draw a new circle, to begin a new stage. But is it true of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which is also circular, a circle of circles that commence where the previous has concluded?¹ Although many readers will surely be surprised, probably even bewildered by much of it, there are several reasons to suspect that the *Science of Logic* is (unlike life) not going to be full of surprises. Surprise is usually understood to arise in an encounter with something external, sensuous, contingent. It would thus appear to be the case that surprise can find no conceptual home in Hegel's *Logic*.

First, the *Logic* leaves no gap between subject and object, hence the space needed for being surprised. According to Hegel, the *Logic* is an exercise in ‘pure thinking’, or thinking about thinking, thinking thinking thinking. Here thinking is subject and object—thinking is investigating itself. In the Subjective Logic, which will be my focus, Hegel goes on to characterize this thinking, both in its capacity as the subject performing the investigation and in its capacity as its own object of investigation, as the concept (*der Begriff*). It would be reasonable to assume that surprises are due to that which is unfamiliar, that which we do not expect, that which has the power to catch us off guard. But if the concept is faced only with its concept, in other words, if thinking is thinking only of thinking, its object could not be any more familiar to itself, since it is nothing other than itself.

Second, the *Logic* deals in ‘pure’ thinking, so thinking that is not confined to sensible material, since Hegel is concerned with an activity that could be embodied in a vast variety of ways. Hegel famously describes its subject matter as a realm of shadows, ‘the world of simple essentialities, freed of all sensuous concretion’ (*SL*: 21.42).² It is important to tread carefully here. For one, Hegel insists that thinking is only real when materially manifest, though the *Logic* is tracking the thought determinations necessary for the realization of the concept in general, leaving its material manifestations unspecified. For another, Hegel does not want us to assume that the *Logic*’s subject matter are a priori concepts or categories in the Kantian sense of the term, an issue to which I will later return. Nonetheless, Hegel’s indifference to the concrete embodiments of thinking, to the ways in which thinking becomes materially manifest and hence sensuously available, suggests another reason for thinking that surprises will be foreclosed. We tend to be surprised by what we encounter in experience, whether when observing the waving of the boughs in the storm or when enjoying a state of perfect exhilaration, to cite two Emersonian examples. And in the *Logic* neither outer nor inner experiences play a role.³

Third, the *Logic* concerns the necessary progression of thinking, and not its contingent twists and turns. Although Hegel is well aware that thinking in its multifarious manifestations will be subject to contingencies, these are not supposed to be relevant to the *Logic*. What the *Logic* does is track the necessary development of the concept in the process of its realization, more precisely its realization not as nature and spirit, but as concept. This requires disregarding whatever is contingent in this process, while explicitly acknowledging that some aspects of this process will, as a matter of necessity, be contingent. Irrespective of how we end up drawing this line, it could sound strange to describe that which is necessary as *surprising*. It might be surprising to someone who is not privy to the necessity of a development, who lacks insight into it or fails to grasp it. But it would not be as a matter of fact surprising. And given that the concept itself is not confined to ‘finite cognition’, it could not be surprised by its own necessary development. Or could it?

In what follows I suggest that the concept can be surprised by its own development, even though the surprises in store for it seem on the face of it to differ from those Emerson had in mind. Despite the fact that thinking does not encounter anything external, sensuous, or contingent within the context of the *Logic*, thinking surprises itself. I am calling such a self-contained and self-generated surprise *self-surprise*. The notion of surprising oneself (like that of deceiving oneself) could sound paradoxical, if it is taken to imply that one does so deliberately, hence anticipating the very thing that is supposed to be unanticipated. This is not what I mean by self-surprise. I am talking about being surprised by something internal to one's own constitution, rather than by something that comes one's way, whether a phenomenon in nature or a passing mood or pleasure.

This notion of self-surprise can be made a bit more intuitive through an example. I would not have expected that I could overcome my fear of public speaking, given my instinctual resistance to it, until my job required me to deliver lectures to large audiences on a regular basis. I am surprised by myself, even though I did not set out to surprise myself. What surprises me is already a part of me, latently present as a capacity, but its development is nonetheless a revelation, an unexpected self-discovery. This seems like a pretty straightforward case. What I am suggesting is that the concept's process of development can be characterized in similar terms. At least some junctures in the *Logic* are genuinely unanticipated, even from the perspective of the concept itself, during its prospective unfolding.⁴ This makes the development presented in the *Logic* also a kind of learning process, though it does not track the learning of a finite knower, whose cognitive limits are not those of the concept.

One might expect that there is going to be a difference between how things appear during the process of the concept's unfolding and how they appear when this process is retrospectively reconstructed. In other words, one could think that some transitions are surprising the first time around, so to speak, but not so in hindsight. This would be analogous to two attitudes that a person adopts to her own personal development. Various stages of her life will surprise her while she is living them, even if they will not strike her as having been surprising once they are in the past.

Unfortunately, this distinction does not suit the *Logic*. For one, Hegel is very clear that there are no shortcuts to the conclusion of the *Logic*, that one has to submit to its process in order to be in a position to appreciate its result:

To meet the subjective need and the impatience that comes with not knowing, one may well provide an overview of the *whole in advance* – by means of a division for reflection that, in the matter of finite cognition, gives the particular of the universal as *already there*, to be waited for as the science progresses. Yet this affords nothing more than a picture or representation (*SL*: 12.252).

A table of contents is at best such a picture or representation, ‘compilations of an external reflection which has already gone through the whole of the exposition, therefore knows the sequence of its moments in advance and anticipates them before they are brought on by the matter at issue itself’ (*SL*: 21.39), while the matter at issue is a self-discovery the concept can only make by performing this process itself.⁵ For another, there is an important sense in which the concept is surprised, not by what it encounters the first time around, but by what it has encountered before, akin to the uncanny. The way I will go on to put it is that the concept is surprised to find itself in a place it did not expect to be, because it has, so to speak, forgotten the breadth of its own manifestations. The concept’s self-discovery turns out to be a self-rediscovery, hence a circular return to its starting point.

My motivations for posing this unorthodox question to the *Logic* are twofold. On the one hand, I want to show that thinking about surprises in the *Logic* can illuminate the structure of its developmental process and hence of Hegel’s method more broadly. In particular, I hope to foreground those features of the process in the *Logic* that bear on his method in other parts of his system, in which materially manifest and sensuously available forms of thinking are his focus. On the other hand, I want to attempt to capture what has in my own case been a transformative experience of reading the *Science of Logic*, assuming the perspective it is inviting its reader to occupy, and performing the activity whose structure it delineates. It is occupying this perspective and performing this activity that puts one in contact with the concept and makes one open to surprise, namely, to the concept’s surprising self-rediscovery. As will hopefully become more plausible in due course, I want to suggest that cultivating such an openness to surprise is one part of Hegel’s aim in writing this text in the way in which he does.

I proceed in the following order: (1) I will begin by defining the perspective of the concept that Hegel takes to be central to the project in the *Logic*, as well as explain what is required of a reader to come to occupy this perspective; (2) I will outline the concept’s process of self-realization and reconstruct one juncture that illustrates self-surprise as I understand it, namely, the transition from subjective purpose to realized purpose in the chapter on teleology; (3) I will draw some implications for Hegel’s circular method, both in the *Science of Logic* and in the subsequent philosophical sciences in which concrete manifestations of thinking are at issue.

I. Perspectives

My first task is to explore the perspective that Hegel identifies with ‘the concept’. In fact, I will suggest that the concept is in a certain respect (namely, qua subject) best

understood as a perspective.⁶ As I mentioned, Hegel's subject matter in the *Logic* is initially identified as thinking thinking thinking, a subject matter that requires that we think of thinking as both subject and object. Preliminarily, we can say in the bluntest possible terms that that thinking qua object refers to reality taken as a whole, regarded as a totality, and that thinking qua subject refers to reality's own reflexive perspective on itself.⁷ As Hegel makes clear in the Introduction, rising to this perspective will be one of the *Logic*'s greatest hurdles, one reason that the *Logic* is so arduous to read.

There are two features of the relevant perspective that make it especially forbidding. For one, it requires that we abandon assumptions about the relationship between subject and object, even 'liberate' ourselves from their opposition. In particular, Hegel is suggesting that the epistemological question of how a conscious subject can come to know an object distinct from itself will lead us far astray.⁸ This is going to be a hurdle to anyone who (like myself) seeks to interpret the process that unfolds in the *Logic* as nevertheless a learning process. For another, it requires that we not prioritize the human standpoint. Hegel is claiming that the perspective of the concept is not anthropocentric, because it is neutral with respect to nature and spirit. As Hegel puts it:

The concept is not to be considered here as the act of the self-conscious understanding, not as *subjective understanding*, but as the concept in and for itself which constitutes *a stage of nature* as well as of *spirit*. Life, or organic nature, is the stage of nature where the concept comes on the scene, but as a blind concept that does not comprehend itself, that is, is not thought; only as self-aware and as thought does it belong to spirit. Its logical form, however, is independent of such shapes, whether unspiritual or spiritual. This is a point which was already duly adumbrated in the Introduction, and one that one must be clear about *before* undertaking the *Logic*, not when one is already in it. (*SL*: 12.20)

This raises the question about what it takes for a reader of the *Logic*, presumably a human conscious subject, to consider things from the concept's point of view. What is being asked of me and why should I believe that I can do it?

Thankfully Hegel wrote an Introduction 'to make more intuitable [...] the standpoint [*Gesichtspunkt*] from which this science ought to be considered' (*SL*: 21.27). This standpoint needs to be made intuitable precisely because it seems to violate the strictures of common sense, and hence go against most intuitions a reader is likely to bring to the table. In this context Hegel's target is in particular a picture of the relationship that 'thought' bears to 'object' invited by the formulation 'objective thinking'. According to this picture, 'the material of knowledge is present in and for itself as a ready-made world outside thinking; and thinking is by

itself empty, that it comes to this material as a form from outside, fills itself with it, and only then gains a content, thereby becoming real knowledge' (*SL*: 21.28). He takes this picture to be so deeply engrained in what we are inclined to find intuitive that it shows up in various contexts in which the topic of logic is usually investigated.

One such context is formal logic, a discipline that examines the rules of thought in abstraction from any content. Hegel makes it quite clear that his *Logic* is not to be confused with or reduced to a formal logic, partly because the rules of thought are therein treated as scattered 'dead bones', lacking in organic unity, and partly because they are 'considered with a total disregard for metaphysical significance' (*SL*: 21.32). Hegel points out that the method of formal logic has a lot in common with the empirical sciences, since it takes logical rules to be given and in need only of classification, not of derivation or justification. They are taken to be merely formal as well as merely subjective, forms that conscious subjects bring to bear in their cognizing activity, rather than forms exhibited by objects themselves. In this way formal logic could also be described also beholden to a picture of a ready-made world to which thinking is external.

The more significant context is Kant's transcendental logic, which comes perilously close to Hegel's own project. Hegel draws such frequent comparisons to Kant that it has led to the general impression that he is engaging in an adjusted version of the same enterprise. For example, Pippin has recently argued that Hegel's *Logic* has as its topic the a priori concepts or categories necessary for objective thinking, which he glosses as 'thought of objects'.⁹ This is to read Hegel as providing his version of a transcendental logic. According to such a reading, Hegel seeks to investigate the necessary requirements for thoughts to be objective, namely, to employ concepts that make it possible for a subject to think of an object. The main departure from Kant would be Hegel's rejection of the thing-in-itself as a spectre that threatens to invalidate the cognition that Kant's transcendental logic seeks to redeem.

But Hegel is highly critical of Kant's approach to the question of logic, much more than such Kantian readings are willing to concede.¹⁰ As Hegel states, Kant's critical philosophy 'gave logical determinations an essentially subjective significance out of fear of the object' (*SL*: 21.35). Hegel's point is not simply that Kant's logical determinations are subjective because it is possible that they do not pertain to the thing-in-itself, but that Kant's very framing of transcendental logic remains embedded within what Hegel calls the 'opposition of consciousness', irrespective of the thing-in-itself. To think that the question of logic is the question of which concepts are necessary in order for a subject to think of an object is to reiterate this opposition. And as Hegel states in no uncertain terms, '[p]ure science presupposes the liberation from the opposition of consciousness' (*SL*: 21.33).

There are at least two senses of 'consciousness' that I want to be able to hold apart. According to a relatively innocuous characterization, consciousness just refers to an individual conscious subject who is awake, aware, capable of grasping something. It is the sense Hegel has in mind when he writes for example in his philosophy of history that world history is progress in the *consciousness* of freedom. It is progress in consciousness because the lessons of world history are the sorts of things which individual knowers can come to grasp. These lessons are refracted through the prism of consciousness, namely, of conscious subjects. This would likewise hold for the *Science of Logic*, which was presumably written with the aim of being read and understood. I do not think that Hegel is making the bizarre, perhaps even mystical suggestion that the *Science of Logic* should seek to liberate itself from consciousness in this sense. If it did, there would not be anyone left to read it, and it would be reduced to reading itself.

Hegel also has a technical characterization of consciousness, according to which it does not refer to a conscious individual subject as such, but to a particularly limiting point of view. According to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, consciousness is that which 'simultaneously distinguishes itself from something, and at the same time relates itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists for consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this relating, or of the being of something for a consciousness, is knowing' (*PbG*: ¶182). Although Hegel is inheriting a definition of consciousness dominant at his time,¹¹ he associates it explicitly with a widespread view—the core of common sense—about the relation between subjects and objects. Consciousness in this sense is marked by an 'opposition' because it presupposes a fundamental difference between subjects and objects, casting thoughts as the 'subjective I's' possession, something I as a conscious thinking subject have that allows me to establish contact with objects other than thoughts by thinking them. This picture is so compelling that it is exceedingly difficult to abandon, even briefly, let alone long enough to read the *Science of Logic* to its end. Even those who believe themselves to have overcome it are likely to remain under its influence.

It is Hegel's contention that the opposition of consciousness pervades Kant's critical project, visible in the fact that the transcendental logic concerns the categories necessary for cognizing objects. From Hegel's point of view, this framing question already saddles Kant's investigation with consciousness's opposition. Moreover, in asking whether a concept is a priori or empirical, Kant is in effect conceiving of all concepts, including the categories, as subjective means for representing objects. The very distinction between a priori and empirical concepts presupposes a subjective interpretation of concepts, because it concerns the question of how a concept (understood as a representation) was developed, whether on the basis of experience or not. Although I cannot fully defend this here, I hold that Hegel in the *Logic* does not want to take this distinction on board.

Given that Hegel's subject matter is often described in terms of a priori concepts, even though a set different from Kant's own categories, I suspect the extent to which Hegel is challenging the very framework within which Kant's transcendental logic is articulated is rarely fully acknowledged. As Hegel succinctly puts it, 'Logic has nothing to do with a thought about something which stands outside by itself as the base of thought' (*SL*: 21.34). In other words, the thoughts that are the topic of the *Logic* are not thoughts about anything other than thinking itself. This statement already indicates quite decisively that Hegel's *Logic* is not going to be transcendental in Kant's sense.¹²

According to an alternative interpretation, which I favour, the *Logic* is concerned with objective thinking in a very different sense. Objective thinking refers to thinking *in* objects (in contrast to thinking *of* objects), thinking objectively manifest or expressed, whether in natural or spiritual entities.¹³ Hegel attempts to capture this by distinguishing two different senses of object, *Ding* and *Sache*. In the Preface to the second edition he writes, 'By thus introducing content into logical consideration, it is not the things [*die Dinge*], but what is rather called *the fact* [*die Sache*], the *concept* of the things, that becomes the subject matter' (*SL*: 21.17). To frame Hegel's subject matter in this way is to consider the relation of thought and object without invoking an opposition. It is to capture Hegel's continued references to 'subjective' and 'objective' within the *Logic* without assuming that this is supposed to be a principally epistemic relation between subjects and objects of knowledge.

His idea is that objects are manifestations or expressions of thought if they successfully embody what they are, the universality and particularity to which they belong. *They are thought*, even if they are not themselves thinking, and even if they are not the objects of anyone's thinking. Hegel calls this manifest or expressed thought a thing's concept:

But if the truth of the matter is as was already stated and is otherwise generally admitted, that the nature, the specific essence, that which is truly permanent and substantial in the manifold and accidentality of appearance and fleeting externalization, is the concept of the thing, the universal which is present in it just as there is present in each human being, although universally unique, a specific principle that makes him human (or in each individual animal a specific principle that makes it animal). (*SL*: 21.15)

Objective thought is moreover not simply the sum total of concepts belonging to things. Rather, when Hegel speaks of the concept, he means objectivity as such, thought as the principle of reality taken as a whole. This makes the object of the *Logic* the 'realm of truth unveiled' (*SL*: 21.34).

I indicated that the concept must also be understood under a subjective guise, as the subject that is thinking thinking, namely, *itself*, and that under this guise the concept is best understood as a perspective.¹⁴ It is here that we enter the domain of the Subjective Logic. At the point from which the Subjective Logic begins, we are shifting from considering the concept as essentially objective to considering the concept as in essence a subject, although these are simply two different ways of characterizing the same matter, since the concept is both. Once it becomes addressed explicitly as subject, the concept is disclosed as the 'I':

The concept, when it has progressed to a concrete existence which is itself free, is none other than the 'I' or pure self-consciousness. True, I have concepts, that is, determinate concepts; but the 'I' is the pure concept itself, the concept that has come into determinate existence. It is fair to suppose, therefore, when we think of the fundamental determinations which constitute the nature of the 'I', that we are referring to something familiar, that is, a commonplace of ordinary thinking. But the 'I' is in the first place purely self-referring unity, and is this not immediately but by abstracting from all determinateness and content and withdrawing into the freedom of unrestricted equality with itself. (*SL*: 12.17)

This oft-cited passage is rich in clues. First, it indicates that there is a difference between the plurality of determinate concepts, which an I can be said to *have*, and the concept, which the I as I is. Second, it notes that this I should be something familiar to me as a conscious individual subject, a commonplace of ordinary thinking, expressed in the pronoun I use to refer to myself. Third, it also warns against confusing the I that is the concept with an individual I. The relevant I just is the 'purely self-referring unity', expressed in the statement 'I am I'. Fourth, it also identifies this pure I as the product of abstraction and withdrawal from all individuating features.¹⁵

This passage should give us a better sense of the perspective that the reader of the *Logic* is being asked to assume. Hegel thinks that, through an act of abstraction, I can rise above the opposition of consciousness and tap into the concept, that my view can come to coincide with *its* view. All I need to do is to withdraw into the thinking that I am doing and think this thinking. Though this abstracted standpoint required by the *Science of Logic* may be difficult to occupy, it is not unavailable to me. But here the common-sensical picture can get in the way. Hegel's description suggests that he is recommending a highly self-contained activity, the pinnacle of self-reflection, since its object is the very thing it is doing. If you are still operating within the opposition of consciousness, you might imagine a consciousness turned

inward, concerned exclusively with *its own thoughts*, at the expense of other things that might be of interest to it, such as objects other than its own thoughts.

But to accept Hegel's project is to see that a withdrawal into the I that is the concept cannot be a case either of self-absorption or of narcissistic projection. By thinking thinking, I am at the very same time and as a matter of fact exploring the logical contours of reality, the forms of thinking manifest in both nature and spirit. The project of the *Logic* is, in short, to delineate the concept's inner determinations that are necessary for it to gain an objective expression or manifestation. This provides an answer to the question, not what structure an object would have to possess in order to be an object *of* thought for or by a self-conscious subject (which would be a Kantian question), but how thinking must be structured in order for it to be real, namely, objectively manifest.

II. Purposes

While such isomorphism between the thinking that I as the reader am doing and the thinking expressed in reality pervades the *Logic*, it is not always to an equal extent in view. According to Hegel, the concept's awareness of itself as concept, which takes place in the Subjective Logic, comes with a seeming loss of objectivity. We are now dealing with the pure I, which Hegel calls an empty abstraction. And yet an I is only real when manifest or expressed, when it is a singular I, *this* I. The task of the Subjective Logic is hence to track the concept's process of realization, roughly speaking, its movement from universality to singularity, which is another way of saying the structure in virtue of which it becomes embodied in concrete items.

Here are two descriptions Hegel gives of this task:

[This third book of the *Logic* is devoted to] the demonstration of how the concept forms within and from itself the reality that has vanished in it. It is conceded in other words, that this cognition that does not go past the concept, purely as concept, is still incomplete, that it has only arrived at abstract truth. But its incompleteness does not lie in its lack of that alleged reality as would be given in feeling and intuition, but in the fact that the concept has yet to give to itself its own reality, one that is generated out of itself. (*SL*: 12.24)

The derivation of the real from the concept, if "derivation" is what we want to call it, consists at first essentially in this, that the concept in its formal abstraction reveals itself to be incomplete and through a dialectic immanently grounded in it passes over into reality: it passes over into it, however, as into

something which it generates out of itself, not as if it were falling back again onto a ready-made reality which it finds opposite it, or as if it were taking refuge, because it sought for something but found none, into something that has already been proven to be the unessential element of appearance. (*SL*: 12.25)

The need for objectivity here is the requirement of an initially inner principle, a mere potential, to break out into the open, to make a worldly appearance. The key is going to be to grasp the concept's realization as self-generated, rather than the product of an engagement with a 'ready-made reality which it finds opposite it'. Hegel famously compares this generation of the real out of the concept to the ontological proof of God's existence.

Although he maintains that the *Logic* has shed this conception of a ready-made world replete with disparate objects, the subjective concept does initially relate to an 'other', namely, to a world interpreted as made up of stuff standing in reserve, external resources or brute material to be shaped by it, awaiting its employment. In the course of Hegel's chapter on Objectivity, it becomes increasingly clear that this relatively impoverished conception of objectivity is giving way to another. The relevant transitions will exhibit the following pattern: (a) the subjective concept needs something other than itself in order to realize itself objectively, only (b) to realize that what it took to be other is, if interpreted correctly, already itself, hence (c) leading to an improved grasp of its own objectivity. I will suggest that this pattern constitutes a learning process in which the concept surprises itself. While I suspect that the same pattern will be visible at various junctures, my principal example, to which I now turn, is the transition from external to internal purposiveness, specifically that from subjective to realized purpose.

This transition takes place in the chapter on teleology, which Hegel claims has proven to be the truth of mechanism. He begins the chapter by considering two questions. First: can teleology and mechanism be evaluated side by side as two alternative frameworks for capturing reality as a whole? He notes that doing so would involve once again taking a picture of the world for granted, without 'examining the concept of mechanical cause and that of purpose to see which possesses truth in and for itself' (*SL*: 12.154). His argument, here in highly abbreviated form, is that teleology, specifically its concept of a purpose, is better suited to capturing what the concept is once we accept that the concept is that which is striving to realize itself, to make its interiority externally manifest. According to Hegel, 'purpose is the concept itself in its concrete existence'. This makes mechanism simply a lower stage of truth, not a genuine alternative to teleology. In other words, while the world contains mechanical (and chemical) processes, the world as such could not be a mechanism, nor is it possible that its parts are exhausted by such structures.

Second: does talk of purpose only make sense in contexts in which an intelligence is involved? It might seem as if purposiveness presupposes the capacity for representation. For example, a paper-cutter was made by someone who thought of the paper-cutter with the function of cutting paper in mind, a thought that precedes the paper cutter's eventual existence. This would make human subjects capable of bringing about purposes, but it would imply that natural objects, including human beings as natural creatures, could not have a purpose unless an 'extra-mundane intelligence' is presupposed. This is an allusion to Kant's argument in the Introduction to his third Critique.

In what follows, Hegel wants to debunk this line of thought, because it stops short at the notion of an external purpose. According to this line, the concept in its objectivity would turn out to be an artefact, constructed by an intelligence external to it. He does this by showing that no purpose could ever count as genuinely accomplished if the concept of purpose is exclusively external, which would mean that a purpose is always imposed upon something other than itself. Hegel's conclusion is that external purposiveness presupposes internal purposiveness, which gives internal purposes priority in capturing the concept's objective manifestation.

He begins with the concept of a subjective purpose, where subjective just means a purpose considered as an inner striving to realize itself, the 'impulse to its realization' (*JL*: 12.162), not necessarily anything conceived by a human subject or another kind of self-conscious being. For example, a cat might have the subjective purpose of entering the house through the back door. Hegel notes that a purpose would not be identifiable as a purpose, unless something is undertaken to accomplish it. So, a cat would need to be, say, scratching the back door in order to display that it has the purpose of entering the house. This effort on the cat's part can be interpreted as illustrating a process by which a subjective purpose breaks out into the open in order to realize itself objectively. For Hegel, a subjective purpose would not be recognizable as purposive, if it remained merely inner in the sense of merely subjective. It only shows itself to be a purpose in its expression.

This brings Hegel to the second step in his argument, which is that a subjective purpose requires a means for its own accomplishment, something other than itself that can be put to its own use. This means is initially conceived as a tool, a mechanical or chemical object without a purpose of its own. As Hegel puts it, a purpose is striving to posit itself, to make itself objective through its own effort. But in order to do this, it also takes something for granted, namely, the mechanically and chemically ordered world. This relation to an 'other' makes the purpose finite:

it has the shape of a presupposition, and from this side its finitude consists in having before it an objective, mechanical and

chemical world to which its activity is directed as to something already there; its self-determining activity is in its identity thus immediately external to itself, reflection into itself just as much as reflection outwards. To this extent purpose still has a truly extra-mundane concrete existence – to the extent, namely, that this objectivity standard opposed to it, just as the latter, as a mechanical and chemical whole still not determined and not pervaded by purpose, stands on its side opposed to it. (*SL*: 12.161)

The process of realizing a purpose is thus a process of imbuing something that has no purpose with a purpose, putting it to my purpose's use. If I have the purpose of writing a book, I will attempt to realize it by making use of things other than my purpose (my computer, reference material, etc.), which assist in its realization. Without them, my purpose would remain a 'mere impulse or striving'. I am actively pursuing my end of writing a book only when I sit down at my computer and start doing research or typing its content. What makes these tools conducive to the realization of a purpose is that they are essentially malleable, that they exhibit no power of resistance, that they are utterly penetrable.

The problem is that I would never be able to realize my purpose, if everything other than my purpose were merely a means for its realization, malleable stuff standing reserve. A realized purpose is an embodied purpose, while means are mere tools that remain external to the purpose, distinguishable from it. They contribute to its accomplishment by being 'used up' in the process, even when they get incorporated into the final result:

A house, a clock, may appear as purposes with respect to the instruments employed in their production; but the stones, the crossbeams, or the wheels, the axles, and the rest that makes up the actuality of the purpose, fulfill this purpose only through the pressure which they suffer, through the chemical processes to which they are exposed with air, light, and water, and from which they shield the human being; through their friction and so on. They fulfill their vocation, therefore, only through being used up and worn out, and only by virtue of their negation do they correspond to what they are supposed to be. (*SL*: 12.169)

According to Hegel, the relation between an external purpose and its objective accomplishment remains strained, falling short of the relation of manifestation characteristic of the concept.

This leads Hegel to draw two conclusions: one, the concept itself must be an internal (rather than an external) purpose, and two, it could not be the case that all concrete purposes are external. In other words, reality could not be an artefact created by an extra-mundane intelligence, nor could all purposive objects within it be artefacts created by some intelligence or other. What Hegel takes himself to have shown is that the very idea of a realized purpose requires that of an internal purpose. If the world were composed only of purposeless stuff that can be employed for the accomplishment of a subjective purpose by being used up in the process, then a subjective purpose could never attain objectivity, because nothing objective would ever count as its true embodiment.

It is worth noting that Hegel's argument does not yet specify in which regions of the world these internal purposes will be found, although it occasions the transition to the idea, which is the unity of the concept and its realization, and more specifically to life as the first version of the idea. What Hegel aims to capture is the thought that living beings are self-organizing unities that pursue purposes of their own, in virtue of which they possess an integrity as objects that manifest thought.¹⁶ This is an important moment in the *Logic* that requires reconceiving of living beings as fundamentally unlike mechanical and chemical objects. They are embodiments of the concept, even concrete selves, and never mere resources to be used up for a purpose external to them. That said, it is not to deny that living beings are sometimes appropriately reshaped into instruments, for example by training horses to pull carriages. It is also not to deny that mechanical and chemical objects can possess a comparable integrity, such as the plough that in Hegel's words 'is more honorable than are immediately the enjoyments which it procures' (*SL*: 12.166).

As Hegel claims at the end of the teleology chapter: 'We have now seen subjectivity, the being-for itself of the concept, pass over into the concept's being-in-itself, into objectivity' (*SL*: 12.172). This process of 'passing over' from subjectivity to objectivity illustrates the structure of self-surprise as I have defined it. What the subjective concept discovers is that it is *already realized* in objectivity so conceived, in the stuff that struck it as merely there for its taking, devoid of any competing purposes. This stuff was never wholly composed of mere resources waiting to be put to the concept's use, for the concept is present in its own resources, in the very thing it initially conceived as external to itself. This means that the concept is surprised by itself because it turns out to be present in a place in which it did not expect to be, namely, on the object-side of the relation. And as we can hopefully see, the concept's self-surprise is not simply a surprising self-discovery, but a self-rediscovery in reality, in the object it initially interpreted as opposed to itself, because it interpreted it as devoid of a self, of the unity of the I.

Let us take a relatively simple example of the concept's self-surprise, a cat on the hunt for a mouse. The cat initially approaches the mouse as a toy with which to play, a tool for its entertainment. In the effort to make use of it, the cat, so to speak, discovers that the mouse does exhibit the power of resistance, that it seeks to escape its grasp, that it embodies its own purpose and is not yielding material for the cat's use. This can serve as a tangible illustration of Hegel's argument from subjective to realized purpose, because it shows what is involved in the concept's learning that it is to be found on both sides of this relation, the subjective (in this case, the cat) and the objective (here, the mouse). Through the cat's effort to realize its purpose, the concept rediscovers itself as already manifest in the mouse. We could, of course, take the reverse perspective and regard the cat as the objective concept and the mouse under its subjective guise. The key here is that neither side of this relation is either subjective or objective in some fixed sense. The concept is rediscovering itself through a practical interaction between two of its many embodiments.

Admittedly, the concept's manifestation as cat or mouse is not yet fully adequate to what it is, since both of these animals are presumably incapable of understanding what their interaction puts on display. As Hegel states in an above-cited passage, organic nature is the concept that is still 'blind' to itself. This is not to deny that the concept is genuinely displayed, only that it is not yet truly comprehended. This way of thinking about the concept's process of self-realization helps clarify the purpose of Hegel's *Logic*, which is addressed to a far narrower audience than those parts of the world in which the concept is being displayed. Potential readers of the *Logic* have a unique function in fulfilling the concept's self-realization by bringing it as objective thought in the sense of *die Sache*, thought in objects, to light. This moment of illumination of that which is on display belongs inside the learning process that Hegel is here presenting.

Here a word of caution is in order. There is a reason that most texts written about Hegel's *Logic* are poor in examples, for any concrete illustration of logical structures can be misleading. The interaction between the cat and the mouse belongs in the context of Hegel's philosophy of nature, which takes the structures delineated in the *Logic* for granted. I do not mean to suggest that the cat's interaction with the mouse is as a matter of fact how the concept comes to learn in time that it is not a mere mechanism, but must be understood as internally purposive. Instead, I am using this interaction to illustrate a development that the *Logic* presents in abstract terms and to show how this development contains a moment of rediscovery that becomes repeated in subsequent contexts. Even though this particular example of learning exceeds the *Logic* because it deals with sensuous embodiments of thinking, and not with thinking thinking only itself, it proceeds according to the methodological principles that the *Logic* presents.

III. Circles

I conclude with a few tentative suggestions for how the concept's surprising self-rediscovery can shed light on puzzling features of Hegel's method. What is primarily puzzling is Hegel's claim that his method is going to combine progress in the concept's self-comprehension with a circular return to the point from which it began. I should note that it is in this context that Hegel comes closest to referring to self-surprise, though even here he does not use the term:

It is in this manner that each step of the advance in the process of further determination while getting away from the indeterminate beginning, is also getting back closer to it; consequently, that what may at first appear to be different, the retrogressive grounding of the beginning and the progressive further determination of it, run into one another and are the same. The method, which thus coils in a circle, cannot however anticipate [*nicht antizipieren*] in a temporal development that the beginning is as such already something derived. (*SL*: 12.251)

As this passage states, it is the method itself that coils in a circle to its own surprise, without being able to anticipate (in advance of its development in time) that its starting point is already its own result. I think that Hegel is here indicating that the question of anticipation is internal to the perspective of the concept—to that of its method—rather than demoting this question to the domain of finite cognition. Although readers of the *Logic* will surely vary in what they can and cannot anticipate, Hegel is instead asking what the concept itself can and cannot anticipate in its actual development, the process of its own unfolding.

It is important to note that Hegel has an idiosyncratic conception of method, which makes the above locutions less mysterious. Method, which is the topic of the *Logic*'s final chapter, is defined as the 'absolutely self-knowing concept', the concept transparent to itself (*SL*: 12.238). Hegel is keen to abandon the conception of method as a mode of knowing that is applied to a subject matter. Method is rather the concept's comprehension of its pervasive presence, which finds its culmination in the knowing of which self-conscious subjects are capable. The reason that the topic of method is left for the end of the text is that, even though the method is exemplified by the *Logic* from start to finish, it needs to be performed in order to be understood. This is the sense in which the table of contents presented in the opening pages will not yet make this development available. This final chapter of the *Logic* also commences the next circle, because it comes to inform what Hegel calls *Realphilosophie*, the philosophies of nature and of spirit.

My first suggestion is that the *Logic's* method is circular in a double respect, for it both articulates and vindicates what Hegel thinks its readers take for granted about the fundamental structure of reality. These are two connotations of circularity for Hegel—to explicate the implicit and to justify a presupposition—which are supposed to be achieved in one and the same process. Although Hegel only hints at this, he suggests that the conception of reality at stake in the *Logic* is one that will become increasingly recognizable, even to those who are reading his text for the first time. This brings the *Logic* closer to common sense under a different description, for the conception of reality that the *Logic* is both exposing and justifying is our background assumption.¹⁷ This leads Hegel to issue his warning that

what is familiar is for that reason not known, and it can even be a source of irritation to have to occupy oneself with the familiar – and what could be more familiar than just those determinations of thought we employ everywhere, and are on our lips in every sentence we utter? (*SL*: 21.12)¹⁸

While the *Logic* demands that one confront what Hegel thinks will be *most* familiar, it is for this very reason unavailable to the seemingly common-sensical perspective and positively baffling to those in its grip. This indicates that the *Logic* must accomplish the task of defamiliarization in order to bring what is familiar into view, which goes a long way toward explaining its alienating effect.

My second suggestion concerns the function of *synthesis* in Hegel's method. According to Hegel, his method can be described as synthetic because its subject matter 'proves to be an other [*ein Unterschiedenes*]' (*SL*: 12.242). Synthesis suggests that the process is one in which the concept progressively expands and then apprehends its own expansion.¹⁹ What the *Logic* illustrates is that the concept can only come to know its self-contained determinations by becoming alien to itself, namely, by becoming submerged in objective form. In this way the concept is perpetually losing itself in reality, forgetting that it is present in it, and thus saddling itself with the task of self-rediscovery. Synthesis is thus the most significant feature of Hegel's method for our purposes, since it indicates that self-surprise is not just possible, but even integral to the *Logic*. It is in virtue of synthesis that the concept is self-surprised, since it is in virtue of synthesis that the concept encounters itself objectively as something that initially appears—but ultimately is not—external to itself. Although this aspect of Hegel's method is already exhibited in the *Logic* at junctures such as the one I have examined, it is especially relevant when dealing with natural and spiritual entities in their specificity, where respect for their alien aspect is appropriate.

My third suggestion bears on the function of *analysis* in Hegel's method as it is practised in the *Logic* and in the *Realphilosophie*. That the method of the *Logic* is also supposed to be analytic is not difficult to see, since it is meant to be an exercise of

thinking thinking thinking, hence an activity of self-analysis. What is less obvious is how this sense of analysis can remain relevant to Hegel's *Realphilosophie* once we abandon the strictures of the *Logic's* formal subject matter. Hegel suggests that we can practise analysis in his sense even when dealing with diverse circumstances, examples, and comparisons, as long as we attend to the concept immanent in them (*SL*: 12.242). It seems to me that such an approach would have to be empirically informed on the part of the situated knower if it is to do the concept's reality justice. We can make sense of empirically informed investigations without reintroducing the limitations associated with finite cognition. For example, the concept qua cat will discover that the concept qua mouse is not just a living being in general, but one with the very specific internal purpose of evading its grasp. This self-investigation undertaken by the concept of its own multifarious manifestations will yield surprises of a different order, beyond the sheer fact that it is manifest wherever it happens to look—surprises at the level of experience.

Let me reiterate that we need to be able to combine two thoughts: that the concept can advance its self-comprehension by developing new resources for understanding its objective manifestations at the level of experience, while simultaneously returning to the point from which it began, rediscovering the simple fact that it is objectively manifest. It is a bit like retrieving a misplaced set of keys, or even better, rereading a paper one wrote long ago. In fact, what the *Logic* demonstrates is that what I am calling the moment of self-surprise is both an instance of learning and at the same time cyclically repetitive, recalling the eternal recurrence of the same. To return to our example, it might be the case that the cat is exploring the internal purposes of mice through its interactions with them, hence advancing the concept's comprehension of its own manifestations in their concrete specificity. But it is also the case that, through the cat's daily hunt, the concept learns in one important respect the very same lesson each time, discovering over and over again that it is indeed pervasive. This would relegate the concept's self-surprise to a routine matter, perhaps a game of hide-and-seek it keeps playing with itself.

After the struggle of making one's way through Hegel's *Logic*, this can sound like a let-down. So, my final suggestion (also the most tentative) is that Hegel's *Logic* is operating on another level best described as aesthetic, because it concerns the reading experience itself. Rather than merely showing self-surprise through its argument, it seems to me that the *Logic* is aiming to instil an attitude of surprise toward the concept's routine self-rediscovery, an attitude that is achieved only by assuming its de-familiarizing perspective and by performing the activity of thinking thinking. I would even go so far as to propose that it is encouraging a practice of staying surprised by that which Hegel thinks is at bottom unsurprising: that thinking is real. This is something that the *Logic* can achieve in and through its readers by refreshing their appreciation for the concept's inexhaustible manifestations.²⁰

I find it telling that Emerson was also invested in the task of cultivating a surprised attitude toward the quotidian.²¹ What he wanted to instil is precisely such an openness to surprise directed at both writing and nature, even in cases in which one has read the text or observed the event before. He writes:

The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right. (1981: 29)

He is thereby channelling two themes from Hegel's *Logic*: that it is possible to be surprised by that which is not unfamiliar, and that the effect is a sense of isomorphism between a phenomenon like the waving of the boughs in the storm and the thinking that I am doing when I am thinking in accordance with the concept. Maybe the surprises of interest to Emerson were not so different from those the *Science of Logic* also holds in store—surprises to be found in familiar places.²²

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Notes

¹ Susan Blow, a Hegelian of the St. Louis school, also notes a similarity between the 'circular or rhythmic movements' of Hegel's method and Emerson's interest in circles as fundamental structures (Blow 1894: 71–72).

² Abbreviation used:

SL = Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Surprises are integral to Hegel's concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as I understand it. The negative moment of experience, its capacity to disappoint or frustrate, can be characterized as its power to surprise. But this experiential notion of surprise cannot be relevant to the *Logic*, since its perspective is supposed to be fundamentally different from that of the *Phenomenology*.

⁴ I am not implying that other junctures are unsurprising. It has even been suggested to me that there could hardly be a more surprising transition than the very first, from Being to its opposite. There are reasons to suspect that self-surprise is so integral to Hegel's method that every major juncture will exhibit some version of it.

⁵ Hegel's exercise in thinking thinking thinking resembles Descartes's cogito: in both cases the conclusion of the argument becomes available only through an activity's actual performance. I owe this comparison to Francey Russell.

⁶ There are two relevant senses of perspective. According to the first sense, a perspective is a guise under which the concept is being examined, i.e. the specific thought determination *with respect to which* it is being considered. Such perspectives pervade the *Logic* from start to finish. According to the second sense, a perspective is associated with the subjective aspect of the concept, the activity of the I, which only becomes explicit in the Subjective Logic. When I refer to the concept as a perspective, I mean it in the second sense.

⁷ The following is intended to be a 'metaphysical' reading of Hegel's *Logic*, even though it is one that takes seriously the question of how reality taken as a whole is supposed to become available to a reader. This is what I hope to address by foregrounding the significance of perspective, since the perspective at issue is both the perspective of reality itself and a perspective to which a reader can rise.

⁸ I follow James Kreines (2015) in his insistence that the *Logic* rejects an 'epistemology-first' approach. As is well-known, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has the task of initiating a reader into the standpoint of science by surpassing epistemic questions that Hegel thinks have their root in a subject-object opposition.

⁹ See for example Pippin: 'Hegel regularly calls the concepts he discusses 'categories', and that at least suggests that he thinks that the *Logic*'s categories, while themselves concepts, delimit kinds of concepts and conceptual capacities, and thereby the possible objects of such determinations [...] These categories can be considered rules for the possible empirical or practical specification of any first-order conceptual discrimination, for what sorts of concepts of objects there must be' (2019: 31).

¹⁰ A similar line of criticism of Pippin's reading can be found in two reviews of his book: Horstmann (2019) and Knappik (2020).

¹¹ Hegel's is a version of Reinhold's principle of consciousness.

¹² Karen Ng has presented a different Kantian reading of Hegel's *Logic*, which starts from Kant's third Critique, rather than his first. Her reading has the advantage of accounting for the centrality of life and inner purposiveness in Hegel's conception of the concept. It remains, however, framed in epistemological and anthropocentric terms, arguing that life enters the *Logic* as a necessary condition for self-conscious, human cognitive activities. This makes it appear as if Hegel is providing a transcendental argument that takes human cognition (of objects) as its premise. See Ng (2019) and (2020).

¹³ Although this gloss on 'objective thought' is from the Preface to the second edition, this description is already quite sophisticated. In fact, this relation of manifestation only comes to the fore in the Doctrine of Essence.

¹⁴ I want to reject some connotations of the perceptual metaphor. As Nietzsche put it, an impartial perspective is inconceivable, because we are being asked to imagine an eye that is not turned in any direction. Here we are not supposed to be picturing an outwardly, but an inwardly oriented 'eye'. This perspective is reflexively self-directed.

¹⁵ This passage alludes to Fichte's conception of self-consciousness as a self-positing activity. While I think that such a comparison can be instructive, it is also important to keep in mind that Hegel's *Logic* is not in the service of explaining experience as a system of necessary representations. Unlike Fichte's, Hegel's conception of the I in this context is capacious enough to find a wide range of embodiments, including non-human living organisms.

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that 'living being' does not refer to specifically *natural* organisms. The structures that Hegel is identifying remain neutral between nature and spirit. This means that living beings could just as well be the institutions of an ethical order, which Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* describes as the 'living good'.

¹⁷ Hegel describes 'natural logic', the thinking that is 'unconsciously busy' in us (*SL*: 12.15), as a relation to the world in which this background assumption is effective. It stands in contrast with the perspective of consciousness and its characteristic opposition.

¹⁸ This warning also appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§31).

¹⁹ I owe this formulation to an anonymous referee.

²⁰ The feminist philosopher Maria Lugones has described a similar openness to surprise, namely, 'a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly' (Lugones 1987: 16).

²¹ I owe this reading of Emerson, as well as the passages from his essays I cite, to Kate Stanley (2018).

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