

AUFHEBUNG AND SYNTHESIS: EVOLUTION IN HEGEL AND WHITEHEAD

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Abstract. Starting by contrasting Hegel's and Whitehead's notions of system, this paper shows first that in Hegel, 'system' has a closed character, which allows him to see human reason as shaping the whole of reality. Based on this identity, Hegel then develops the concept of *Aufhebung* (sublation), as the process of lifting up and integrating earlier stages into higher forms within the historical expansion of the absolute Spirit. Whitehead rejects this closure: his open system, grounded in experiential 'actual occasions,' treats the synthesis of the *Aufhebung* not as logical sublation but as the creative concrescence of feelings, allowing for novelty, plurality, and discontinuity.

Keywords: Hegel, Whitehead, *Aufhebung*, System, Metaphysics, Reason, Actual occasions.

I.

One of the similarities between Hegel and Whitehead that has been repeatedly emphasized is their shared endeavor to construct a philosophical system. At first sight, this claim does not raise any doubts, particularly when we see that both thinkers endeavored to build a unitary and well-rounded vision of the world by elevating a philosophical scheme to the level of an absolute interpretive instrument of the world. However, things are more complicated, I think. When we try to see what the meaning of a philosophical 'system' in Hegel is, we notice a very different meaning from the way Whitehead thought of his systematic philosophy.

The fundamental aspect is that, in Hegel, a 'system' is only indirectly a system of reality, unlike in Whitehead. Although both speak about 'system' as a totality, the meaning of this totality differs significantly in their philosophies. In German Idealism, totality is something dependent on human reason, whereas in Whitehead, totality is objective totality, completely independent of human reason and mind. In Hegel, as in German Idealism, generally, starting with Kant's

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philosophy, a system concerns rather human knowledge. For this knowledge, there exist ultimate structures of the human mind that are immutable. These structures, in Kant and German Idealism, are conceived of as building a system. Since human knowledge is systematic in general, philosophy – as an understanding of the whole world – can become a systematic science, too. Only because of this can the object of this science – the world – also be thought of as being systematic.

It was Kant's claim (but Kant took over this view from his predecessors, Leibniz, for example, who was the first to see himself as having a philosophical system Rescher, 1981) that human reason is grounded on *principles* and only such knowledge is genuine, enabling the a priori deduction of other cognitions from those principles. On the other hand, we need to emphasize that *deduction* had, in Kant and, as a consequence, in German Idealism, too, besides its common meaning, also a different one, which Kant unfolds in his transcendental 'deductions.' This kind of deduction allowed him to ground the principles of human reason. However, Kant's contemporaries had difficulties understanding his method because these principles were not something to be discovered in a manner similar to the way Descartes discovered the principle of philosophy, his famous *Cogito*, through simple introspection. In Kant, those principles could be uncovered only through a transcendental approach, i.e., through an analysis of (deductive) science. Kant repeatedly stressed that human culture could attain authentic knowledge, i.e., science, only in mathematics, logic, and Newtonian physics.

This view of Kant significantly influenced the entire direction that German Idealism took thereafter. Several other assumptions were also present within this view. First of all, it was taken for granted what Kant said about the science of logic (as well as about the principles of the Newtonian science of nature and mathematics), namely that no significant steps could be made in the future, i.e., that the main laws of human thought and of nature had been discovered once and for all time. This led Kant further to claim that it was possible to find the fundamental synthetic operations of the human mind acting behind those logical laws, the intellect's categories. Thus, Kant and his age considered the human mind to be limited, and therefore, it could be completely understood with respect to its fundamental operations, which gave rise to those sciences.

Second, Kant introduced the crucial distinction between things in themselves and phenomena, and as a consequence, the claim that our sensibility's main structures can also be known a priori. Again, this idea was adopted by the German Idealists. Although Kant imposed this distinction, the idea of human knowledge as a kind of knowledge dealing only with phenomena hovered in the atmosphere of the whole of modern philosophy; modern philosophers no longer considered it as a correspondence to objective reality but rather as involving a fundamental subjective moment of spontaneous organization of sensations.

Because of the previous assumptions, Kant believed, thirdly, that philosophy, the ultimate knowledge of the human being and the world, could be reached as a

form of *complete* science (*CPR*, BXXIV). He believed that he had uncovered the fundamental principles of this science, and the task of his followers would be to make only minor improvements.

Thus, Kant introduced three ideas that marked his immediate posterity: human thought can be known with regard to its fundamental operations, its categories; things were not real but only phenomena; and human knowledge was a finite activity in which the same fundamental, ultimate structures repeated forever and those structures built a system, i.e., an organic unity, in which each element implied the rest. This system of the principles of human thought built the a priori transcendental structure of the human being.

Apart from these ideas, Kant maintained that human thought had three fundamental objects: God, the world, and the human soul. A specific domain of reflection corresponded to each of these objects. Also, Kant considered that for these domains, the human mind had three corresponding Ideas that organized the whole of subordinated knowledge into conceptual unities. Again, these Ideas were derived only indirectly from a metaphysical introspection. It was Kant's belief that, despite the fact that this metaphysics had not been able in the past to transform into a real science (like logic, mathematics, or physics), it still always expressed the main interests of the human mind, interests regarding which 'human nature cannot be indifferent' (*CPR*, IX), every human being having a fundamental interest in the question of God, of what the world is and the condition of the human soul.

In Kant, a system could work only if it was conceived of as limited. The system of human reason could lead to a system of human knowledge because both these systems were limited and contained a limited number of principles from which, yes, one could deduce a limitless number of consequences due to their association with human sensibility. All possible new knowledge could be only a sort of new phenomenal content that was only a new application of the same extant principles. In this respect, this understanding of the system of knowledge envisaged an end of knowledge, something similar to what scientists felt at the end of the 19th century and before the Einsteinian revolution, when they thought that physics could not discover anything genuinely new but only new applications of the same principles.

Hegel lived and thought in this age, which he believed to be a final stage in history. It is not by accident that his philosophy insisted on the fundamental meaning of history for philosophy: history was seen by him as something complete with respect to its fundamental structures that had actualized heretofore and consequently allowed philosophy to describe them accurately, i.e., scientifically (Hegel, 1996, XXX). We may say that Hegel develops Kant's idea of a transcendental history of human reason, in that he endeavored to show how the history of nature and of the human being could lead to the self-understanding and self-knowledge of the human being and of reason, a self-understanding and self-knowledge that

finally reached the truth in his age and his philosophy, namely a clear knowledge of all those absolute principles pertaining to human reason and which were not known before, because they were lying hidden in false beliefs or within the unconscious nature.

Of course, for Whitehead, none of these views was tenable. Or, at least not in the way Kant and German Idealism formulated them. Indeed, Whitehead took over the premise that the world has a phenomenal character. However, the phenomenon was not something specific only to the human being but to every being, i.e., to all actual occasions. Since 'experience' and 'phenomenality' were extended to the cosmic level, 'synthesis' – a fundamental condition of phenomenality – was also taken over by Whitehead as a fundamental feature of the world or universe, 'concrecence' being a synonym that Whitehead also uses for synthesis (*PR*, 232). Synthesis is, in Kant, the subjective activity that transforms every possible content that the subject receives from without into its subjectively shaped content. However, precisely because of this cosmic phenomenality, in Whitehead, it is no longer possible to speak about a finite character of human knowledge and of ultimate principles of reason or of that knowledge or of some ultimate principles of reality. This is why, in Whitehead, human knowledge can never be seen as a (completed) system in the sense of German Idealism. Whitehead's system is fundamentally an open system, i.e., one that, therefore, cannot even be thought of as a metaphysical system in the traditional way. This system has no real elements in the sense of elements whose contents are given once and for all times. (For example, in German Idealism and Hegel, human reason had the same principles throughout the whole of history: time was linear, space had three dimensions, human categories organized and will always organize human thought, and so forth.) This is not true in Whitehead. Here, all these features are temporary. What is more, the fundamental concept of Whitehead's philosophy is a formal one: the actual occasions are not ultimate 'atoms' of reality, in a concrete sense, i.e., as having some given content once and for all times, but in a formal sense: they are potential centers of feeling, or, as he defines them, 'events' (*CN*, 15). Because of this potential character, such a feeling can take on an infinite number of forms and, therefore, leads to an endless number of concrete entities. This endlessness also includes the possibility of beings existing in a different space-time framework.

One could, indeed, understand Whitehead's system from the perspective of 20th century system theory and axiomatics. In this theory, the system has a formal character, i.e., the axioms, the operations, and the content of it are also formal. The present understanding of system theory differs significantly from the notion of system in German Idealism, as it is not grounded in the metaphysical assumption of an immutable structure of human thought. It is only a methodological scheme that is applied universally.

II.

Hegel's view concerning the philosophical system was made possible by the Kantian view of history as linear development. For Kant and German Idealism, there could be a single system; the whole of reality was a single, unitary system. (On the contrary, for Whitehead, reality is no longer a single system but a myriad of systems, given the fact that each actual occasion sets its own principles and perceives reality in its own way.) Therefore, for the German idealists, history could have a goal: the complete actualization of reason in Kant or the complete actualization of human freedom in Hegel. The whole of nature tended towards this goal in Hegel, who, as we know, reverts to a kind of substantialism, although not independent of the Kantian functionalist view. If in Hegel there is a single nature, this is no longer the case in Whitehead. Hegel assumes the existence of the Newtonian unique space and unique time, as well as of the matter filling them. Nature is then the constant addition of new ontic features to this initial absolute passiveness until nature reaches the level of self-consciousness and freedom in the human being. For Hegel, the concrete manner in which this process takes place is not of interest; what interests him is the description of the logical stages of this process as a constant addition of new, increasingly more complex features to the previous ones. Hegel is a Christian thinker; for him, the new features are real creations of God, and therefore, one cannot comprehend how they come into reality. However, we can understand the logical relationship between one stage and the previous stage as the development of the former from the latter. In this process – called by Hegel *Aufhebung* – the subsequent stage maintains the fundamental logical determinations of the previous one and develops its own additional structures around it. This is why, in Hegel, the concept of *Aufhebung* or sublation essentially has a logical meaning. The whole of the historical cosmic process is a process of the development of logical meanings, having as its goal the logical (in this sense) understanding of reality accomplished in human knowledge. Philosophy is the description of this (onto)logical understanding, where each new step takes over the previous meanings and adds a new sense to them. In German, the latter thus *hebt auf*, i.e., it lifts the previous meanings into a new logical framework. However, in Hegel, human reason and its evolution are not simply human attributes, but they also signify the logical self-development of God, first in nature and then in human history. This is why Hegel's philosophy is an 'absolute idealism.' Absolute, here refers to God and to the logical identity between human reason and God's Reason.

As is well known, Whitehead's atomism is not grounded on the idea of a primal, absolutely passive matter. In Whitehead, everything is alive because it is endowed with the capacity of feeling. Whitehead does not think of evolution mainly as a work of God but as a result of the interactions of the actual occasions,

each of them a 'throb of experience' (*PR* 190), i.e., a feeling center. Because there is no initial stage in the development of the world, in Whitehead, there cannot be a linear evolution either. In other words, reality is not a continuous increase in complexity, which is possible only starting from a single basis, but a transformation that also includes a constant shift in perspective. Whitehead abandons the view that our understanding of reality is based on synthetic a priori principles (in the sense of Kant and Hegel), adopting the view of the science of his time that the axioms of science are nothing else than 'definitions in disguise' (Poincare, 1952, 50), i.e., models we use in our interactions with reality in order to handle this reality the most conveniently. Our choice is not logical but pragmatic: we choose the one that best fits our present interests. Therefore, the 'conceptual feeling' or the selection of a new eternal object is no longer, in Whitehead, a deepening of a unique understanding of reality, a development of a previous line of thought, as in Hegel, but simply a more efficient dealing with reality. It is a pragmatic view of the function of the eternal objects. This is why one can no longer assume that, in Whitehead, the realm of eternal objects is a unitary and systematic whole, as was Hegel's God or Hegel's view concerning the unity of all Concepts under a single Idea. In Whitehead, eternal objects lack unity and are unrelated to each other, much like the medieval Chinese and Western measurement systems, which were distinct despite both of them being general and applicable to many concrete situations.

In a Hegelian view of reality, one moves within the same system, and whatever exists is an expression of the same system. On the contrary, in Whitehead, the dynamics of feelings allow shifts that discontinue the earlier tendency, driving things into a different direction, completely independent of that tendency. Although Hegel was very well aware of discontinuities in history, for him, discontinuities were only apparent, and the historical movement in such apparent discontinuities only increased in momentum.

In this respect, although the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) implied a synthesis, this synthesis had a rather logical character: it meant the addition of a new feature to the bundle of other already actualized features. On the other hand, in Whitehead, synthesis has a different meaning: it is a synthesis of feeling, first, and only then a logical synthesis, too. Here, we do not deal with a 'Cunning of Reason' (Hegel, 1901, 80), i.e., with the force of the Concept that leads the process of configuration of reality. On the contrary, here we deal with an autonomous process of concrescence of feelings, something that could never have been possible for Hegel, for whom reality cannot hold together unless it is held together by the force of the Concept (which corresponds to the Platonic Idea).

Accordingly, we read in Whitehead that 'The function of reason is to promote the art of life.' (*FR*, 4) It is clear: reason does not promote Life; it promotes the *art* of living. What Whitehead wants to emphasize is that we can no longer talk in the

name of Life. We must adopt a much humbler stance, acknowledging that reason is unable to comprehend life, but can only strive to foster the most harmonious experiences of life through an art of living. In this respect, one could understand 'reason' also as corresponding to a universal tendency present in all actual occasions to identify the best balance of feelings in every given situation. One does not have to impose a conceptual view upon what we feel (as was the case with the Kantian categorical imperative), but rather, one has to find the most pleasant (i.e., enjoyable *and* acceptable) way of being. Well-being is the order of the day in Whitehead, so to speak, similarly to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus.

III.

By stating that feeling is the fundamental feature of the world, of the universe, Whitehead also conceives of this universe as heading towards greater complexity or as being oriented toward an increase in the intensity of feeling or the intensity of 'life'. For Whitehead, the universe is not simply a pile of passive matter but the expression of impulses, or, expressed through a Leibnizian term, of appetites, of desires; in Whitehead, every actual occasion is moved by feelings and strives toward a higher intensity of feeling itself. But what is important to highlight is that (positive) 'feeling', although striving toward more, does not know either how that more looks or how to reach it. This is why, usually, when a stage of fatigue occurs on the side of feeling, that feeling or soul is prepared for a new leap and for a new encounter that could increase its intensity; meanwhile, the feeling blindly hopes that the new object will be able to do precisely this.

Whitehead sees cosmic evolution as a playground for these permanent attempts at a higher life. However, the tendency that we find encrypted in the nature of things in Whitehead is not the same as the tendency we find encrypted in the nature of things in Hegel. In the latter's philosophy, that tendency expresses God's goal with the world, expresses an action imposed from outside upon the world, as it were. On the contrary, in Whitehead, this tendency is intimately tied to every actual occasion. In Whitehead, mistakes are painful, and they impress themselves into the cosmic memory of things. In Hegel, there are no mistakes. For Hegel, tragedies are only parts of the higher good, or rather, instruments of the Cunning of Reason to reach the higher good in history. Although the results of the historical process are very similar – i.e., an increase in complexity – as Whitehead acknowledges (however, while speaking of the idealism not of Hegel, but of Bradley), both thinkers' premises are extremely different. Hegel thinks that God controls the ascending motion from without, and God cunningly uses the human passions to reach His goal. In contrast, Whitehead thinks the motion upward is determined by the restlessness of feelings of the actual occasions.

IV.

We may be misled in our understanding of Whitehead's idea of eternal objects if trying to see him as a traditional Platonic thinker. In Plato, Ideas or pure Forms were models for concrete things. They existed independently of the world, and the mundane things were made by the copying of those Ideas by God or the Demiurge. This vision of Plato forms the foundation of Western rational thinking, which holds that logic, order, and law lie at the heart of reality.

Now, Whitehead's use of the term *eternal objects* cannot have this meaning. The most important argument in this respect is that, in Whitehead, concrete things are not a combination of Matter and Form, but of feelings and 'concepts' or eternal objects. Every actual occasion participates through its conceptual pole in the realm of eternal objects. However, this participation is essentially determined by feelings. In Plato and the entire Western pre-modern substantialist tradition, matter was a completely passive entity that received its shape through the ideal Forms. Therefore, matter could not envisage anything by itself. Things developed by being pulled into the framework of an ideal Form, a representation very well expressed by Aristotle's conception of the Unmoved Mover, of a God that moves the whole existent world. However, his moving action was thought of as a kind of attraction that acted upon passive entities somewhat similarly to the way a magnet moves a passive piece of metal.

In contrast, in Whitehead, we deal with actual occasions that are 'throbs of experience'. In other words, they cannot be thought of as passive; they are continuously in motion because their condition of being bundles of feelings hinders them from reaching any rest. They are not attracted or pulled from without towards something; they are pushed from within toward an end. Now, this end, again, is not simply given from without, but conforms to the past of the actual occasions. It emerges, so to speak, from their past experience. It is not so much a pure Form but rather a new state of feeling, a state that is only vaguely anticipated, and therefore, as Whitehead says, 'vacuous' (*FR*, 32), empty. In this respect, Whitehead's dialogue with Hume in *Process and Reality* concerning the idea that one can imagine a new shade of color that one has never seen before is very significant (*PR*, 86–87). This imagining is a symbol for the anticipation of feeling. With it, Whitehead wants to say that, unlike the traditional view of imagination that says that imagination is based only on what someone saw previously and transforms the recorded memories of the past, actual occasions are able to feel and therefore anticipate something completely new, something that is not part of their past experience. This is why they are also attracted by that novelty. And this novelty actually belongs to the realm of eternal objects, which act thus as an 'objective lure' (*PR*, 87).

But what is the condition of such a novelty? As I said earlier, the Platonic view biases us towards understanding the meaning of the expression 'eternal objects' as a law, as the regularity that grounds a class of things sharing a common

feature. Such a meaning does not work in Whitehead, or at least it does not work entirely. Certainly, the realm of eternal objects also contains laws and regularities of this type. But it contains much more, namely all the 'imagined' contents of actual occasions, i.e., contents that usually are not considered laws, regularities, or general features, but as something very individual and personal. Only as such is it possible that they act as a 'lure'. To say it more intuitively: when a person, seen as an actual occasion, dreams of his beloved one, he or she does not dream of any mathematical law or general feature, but of something concrete and individual. His imagination takes over the content of his past experience and projects it before himself, building an object of his attraction in that way. And, strangely enough, such an image of the beloved one must also be considered an eternal object, even though it does not last eternally in the mind of that infatuated person, but only for a while, namely as long as that person is in love with the other person. Of course, the image could be transformed into an eternal object in the usual meaning when it is worked out as a work of art, when the infatuated person is an artist, and he manages to lay down his dream on a canvas and thus share his vision with others and transform this vision into a common cultural and perhaps spiritual treasure. But it is certainly an eternal object in Whitehead's meaning, too, namely as a content that is common to different entities. It is, namely, common as an end or an aim to the whole of the series of actual occasions that make up the being of the dreamer or the infatuated person. In other words, this person is shaped by his daydream in the same way in which, in traditional substantialism, the secondary substance was shaping, from within, the matter of which the primary substance or concrete thing is made.

The realm of eternal objects is thus the totality of all possible ends that actual occasions can ever envisage. Among such eternal objects could be counted whatever we can imagine, be it very concrete or very abstract, be it a personal or a universal content. It is the collection of all the Leibnizian possible worlds, with all their possible concrete images and abstract laws, with the beauty of the eyes of my beloved one and all the possible mathematical truths, with the impulse of moving my hand to scratch my neck and Einstein's theory of relativity.

However, not everything that is thus envisaged also actualizes and transforms into reality. The agent always selects from this pool of eternal objects what suits its experience and expectations concerning what its environment can tolerate. For example, any animal that differentiates between the sun's heat and the shade's coolness will prefer the latter. But not when a dangerous predator is noticed in that shade. In that case, it would prefer to remain in the heat and repress its tendency to go into the shade, thus making a selection. The tendency might be seen as an anticipation of the bundle of feelings making up the actual occasion which that animal is. As such an anticipation, it is related to a content of the realm of eternal objects, a content which, although having an individual aspect, also contains a vast multitude of 'pieces of knowledge' lying behind the concreteness of the impulse's

aim and making it possible: such as the awareness that the spatial distance must be covered through motion or that the tree making that shade has a green leafage. These are certainly general pieces of knowledge that lie behind the individual impulse.

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