On self–determination of the Concept in Hegel’s Idealism

*Thinking Frei Entlassen of the Concept*

Bojana Jovićević

*Introduction*

A coherent account of Hegel’s philosophy must provide an explanation of what it means and why is it that the absolute idea or the concept, that Hegel recognized to be the principle and method of all philosophy – is what it is and thus determines itself, by virtue of freely releasing itself from itself (frei entläßt): and the form of its release is nature. Otherwise, it renders unintelligible how it could ever be said that the concept is anything objective, that it is anything at all.

When Hegel refers to the absolute idea or the concept, he does not refer to a particular idea or a particular concept but to a specific character of thought – by which thought, in thinking an object – thinks itself. So, the absolute idea or the concept is not a form of general concept distinguished by a special content, by a given predicate of “absoluteness”, provided by a special kind of thinking subject in this case – nature; this would be absurd. But it is a self–reflective structure of thought provided by the thought itself; it is what we know by the name of self–consciousness – an idea of thought’s thinking itself, of the “thinking thinking thinking.” (Rödl 3) In other words: the absolute idea differs itself from all other ideas, and is thus determinate – determinacy always implies the relation of difference, negation; something is so–and–so precisely by *not being* this or that – not by a given content, but, on the contrary, by abolishment of all content – absolute idea is absolute precisely because it annihilates (vernichtet) any form of determinacy that would be so given.

So, to put it in a nutshell: when Hegel speaks about the absolute idea, he speaks about an idea of thinking, by which any form of determinacy, of “what is”, or “being” is always already conditioned by the causality of thought, which in thinking what it does, thinks its own determinations. It is the idea that there is no such thing as an immediate being independent of thinking, the idea of the universality of thought or simply *das Allgemeine*. This is why Hegel insists that the absolute idea cannot be determined by any content – not because it lacks any, but precisely because it has its content in lacking any content. This is where the idea of self–determination of the absolute idea comes from. In fact, to think that the absolute idea has any content outside itself, outside its own validity, is to misjudge the very idea of thinking, to naturalize thinking – an idea Hegel gives upon entirely, proclaiming it as incoherent. It is incoherent: if the absolute idea or the concept was verified by any external conditions, then it would be stop being an absolute idea, it would be no thought at all, because thought provides its own ground within its own understanding of itself.

Let us introduce a short illustration from the history of philosophy to pinpoint Hegel’s argument even more strongly. It was Jacobi who was the first one to systematically allege that to think an object as it really is, to think its “being”, always implies an act of abstraction, annihilation from the original unity of the object. To think a red apple is to devoid apple of its redness. Thus, in thinking what it is, by seeking ever greater generalizations to grasp the redness of the red apple, we precisely do not think it as that what it is – a red apple in its singularity. By means of thinking alone, Jacobi inferred, we cannot derive the content of an object, but only a general idea, its general concept. But if this is so, if thought is devoid of any content whatsoever, then it is meaningless, en empty nothingness. Thus, Jacobi further inferred, in thinking what it is, we think nothing – the very notion of thinking – as a purely formal pursuit of general concepts – is self–contradictory, self–undermining. What needs to be done then is to limit the very idea of thinking in its conceptual genesis by external conditions, finitude, nature. Thought cannot ground itself, it cannot be its own principle, because it leads to nothingness and thus undermines its own positivity; therefore, so Jacobi, there is an original and a priori difference between thinking and being inscribed in the very foundation of thinking itself. Thought is always concrete; it is always determined by its content, by “what is” or “being.”

Now, Hegel agreed with Jacobi that thought is not externally bound by any given content and – indeed, in thinking what it does, thought thinks nothing. Or to put it yet in Hegel’s terminology: knowledge we gain by the absolute idea is not knowledge of something, but knowledge of nothing. That is precisely what makes it absolute, limitless. But this does not mean that the absolute idea is empty and devoid of any content. On the contrary, the absolute idea, the concept, gains its determinacy by means of repelling any form of given determination. This nothingness, lack of content, precisely cannot be pure nothingness, in the sense of not–being, but it is “something”, the form of determinacy of the thought itself presented as a negative relation of thought to any given content. It is not nothingness, but nothingness of thought, nothingness that makes thought what it is and is thus its only content – its negativity or simply *Negativität*.

Once again, the absolute idea, the idea of thought thinking nothing, is not an empty idea. Through the negation of any form of determination it thinks itself, its own self–consciousness. In negation of determination it negates the very form of difference of an object towards all other objects, it thus negates the very form of negation – it sublates being. Because it negates the very form of determination and thus the principle by which one thought differs from all other thoughts – its determinacy cannot be measured by the very same criteria it conceptually denies.

Even if we suppose that the absence of any particular content that makes thought what it is results in thought’s own indeterminacy, as Jacobi thought, we cannot solve the problem by simply providing the content outside the determinateness of the thought. There is no source of determinateness outside of thought and even if there was, it would be naïve to think that thought becomes determinate by simply adding to it something common to all un–thought objects. This would be naturalization of thought and this is where Jacobi had failed.

So, in the sense, and this was the whole point of “Jacobi’s excurse” the main question Hegel asks and we shall be asking is in a sense the exact opposite of the one Jacobi formulated. He asks: what is the source of determinateness for a structure of thinking that is imperfect in this respect: that it annihilates (vernichtet) being? But this is the wrong question to pose in the first place. If what makes thought what it is, its “being” is the very idea of giving up all determination, then we cannot determine thinking by simply providing a determinate content it denies. Thinking that thought that denies all determinacy becomes determinate by a very particular content is an incoherent idea, self–undermining. And is the attempt to naturalize thought, as Hegel thought. Conversely, Hegel’s question ad thus our question could be formulated like this: what are the sources of “being” or “what it is” for a structure of thought that it is perfect in this respect: that it produces its own determinacy.

Hegel has to offer a very simple and yet peculiar answer, that we already indicated above: nature. The absolute idea, the concept, the idea of thought’s thinking itself gains its determinacy by freely releasing itself into nature. But this struck us as a rather strange thing to say.

Let us expose the puzzle step by step. We said that the idea of thought having a content, being determinate, the idea of thought differing itself from all other thoughts is – as far as Hegel’s discourse is concerned – an incoherent idea of thinking. It is the idea of the naturalization of thought exemplified in Jacobi’s position. So, when Hegel speaks about the absolute idea determining itself in the form of nature, in its externality, he does not mean that the absolute idea has a content provided by a pre–given special subject we call nature. It cannot be so that the absolute idea, a thought that thinks itself, becomes what it is, by dwelling into a world of “unthought objects”, this would be absurd. The very idea of the self–consciousness of thought excludes any presupposition of the world of objects being an irreducible fact to thought. To think this would be to anchor in the discourse of the naturalization of thought, of the realm of finite thinking. And this cannot be true: thought is limitless and thus not externally bound by anything but itself – it is its own principle and it thus determines itself.

But if this is true, if there is no source of determinateness outside of thought, and thought in thinking what it does, abstracts from everything and grounds its own nature, how come Hegel speaks about the externality of nature, being the form of the determinacy of the absolute idea? Is the nature he speaks of – the nature of thought itself, the nature of its own self–determination? But even if this were the case, if the form of nature, is the form of the externality of thought within itself, and thus an act of release is an act of thought’s own internal self–differentiation, is not Hegel breaking the rules of its own discourse? Why would an absolute thought, a thought completely transparent to itself, think itself in the form of inner difference, why to introduce any form of difference at all? Does not that mean that Hegel addresses nothingness of thought as its determinacy, resulting in the need to introduce difference, thus giving a credit to Jacobi’s criticism?

Let us dwell into Hegel’s peculiar strain of thought even more deeply. If the act of release of the absolute idea into nature does not happen outside of thought, if it is not extralogical, as there is nothing outside of thought, then it has to be innerlogical, it has to be inside thought itself – nature being an internal category of the absolute idea itself. We will present arguments why Hegel rules out this option too, why the idea of the self– determinacy of thought, paradoxically, cannot provide thought with its determinacy or at least has to be thought differently than we presented it above.

If there is no source of determinateness outside of thought, if thought is its own principle and thus in no relation to any form of determinacy, then it cannot be objective. For objectivity of thought can be established only insofar there is some kind of limitation, resistance, what Fichte called *Anstoss*. If there is nothing to limit thought, then it is always in accordance with its own principle and thus self–transparent and true – its principle cannot be falsified. And if it cannot be falsified then it cannot be true, because objectivity of thought presupposes the idea of difference and thus determinacy. Hegel’s argument is in a sense repetion of Jacobi’s: absolute thought, because it abolishes all determination, loses all determination, becomes pure nothingness. That is why thought needs to introduce a form of difference and thus determinacy within itself. Of course, the question is whether this form of difference within an entirely self–transparent structure of thought remains difference at all. What is important for us, at least at this point, is that Hegel rejects of thought’s thinking itself to be necessary, but not a sufficient reason for the determination of self–reflective thought.

Let us reflect anew upon what we said so far. By releasing itself into nature the absolute idea becomes what it is – it determines itself. This does not mean that the absolute idea gains content; an act of externalization of the absolute idea is not an act of its naturalization, but on the contrary, absolute idea is absolute precisely because it denies any given form of determination and posits its own determination, its own “being.” Thus, by providing ground for its own validity only within itself the absolute idea is in this sense its own principle. However, if that what is understood in the absolute idea does not have any ground outside that very understanding of it, then we cannot know whether it is anything objective, anything at all. The secrets of the Egyptians, as Hegel would put it, were also the secrets for the Egyptians itself: for a thought that thinks itself, and is always in accordance with its own principle and thus self–transparent and true nothing can be objective – not even its own categories; for if we itself cannot prove that its principle is false, it cannot prove that it is true either: simply put, we cannot say what it is – because it is not determinate. This is why Hegel insisted that a coherent idea of absolute thought, and thus of philosophy, being the exposition of the absolute thought, of thought’s thinking itself, needs to introduce the form of difference, and thus determinacy within the very idea of self–grounding of thinking. Thus, thinking in thinking what it does, thinks itself, and yet it has to think itself as not being itself, in the form of difference, because otherwise is loses all determinacy.

What we have to understand then is how the absolute idea, thought’s thinking itself, thinks itself in such a way as to limit its own thinking, or else it slips into pure nothingness, how it can produce difference within itself. It is clear that this cannot be done neither outside the determinateness of thought – we do not at any point step out of Hegel’s thought thinking itself and somehow bump into real objects that restrain its thinking – nor exclusively within an entirely self–transparent structure of thought, of its own subjectivity. So, this is the point where the idea of *frei entlassen* comes into the game, the point where our project starts. Interestingly enough, Hegel insisted that the form of nature, form of the determinacy of the absolute idea, is neither form of being – being is always already thought – neither a form of concept, thought; it is the absence of concept, *begriffloser Begriff*. And yet, Hegel asserts with self–confidence: nature limits all philosophy.

Let us see if we can make something out of it. On one hand Hegel emphasized the necessity of the absolute idea to “find itself in everything”, to realize its own principle in all there is. This is what makes philosophical endeavor, a necessary and not arbitrary activity. It is through explication of that what is implicit in every thought and thus in all there is that philosophy differs from all other sciences, what makes it universal. On the other hand, when he speaks of the method of the absolute idea and thus of all philosophy, he equally speaks about the necessity of the absolute idea to freely release itself from itself into nature and to gain knowledge of its own limits. So how come that nature limits that what cannot be limited, how come that the absolute idea does not find itself into nature, but leaves itself behind in nature by freely releasing *itself from itself*? Maybe there is a way to think both assertions in an uncontradictory manner and in accordance with the method of the absolute idea.

Nature, as we have demonstrated so far, is neither the form of being, nor the form of thinking, but in some sense the form of the embodiment of the absence of the absolute idea. This is why it is futile to speak about some rational forms or substances discerning themselves into nature in any positive sense of the word. Of course, it would be equally futile to speak about nature as a mere negative reflection of thought to itself, as thought’s own principle. Thought determines itself, only by not recognizing itself into nature, by the idea of lacking itself. Nature, again, determines itself only by not having any common measure with thought – maybe this is the reason why we encounter categories such as mechanism or life within the discourse of pure logic. However, this does not mean that nature is outside thought, that it bumps into Hegel’s book of logic in the form of immediacy, but it is within the structure of thought which allows for the relation of mutual incongruence between the nature and thought that this is possible in the first place.

In this article we will, by developing the idea of free release, *Entlassen*, demonstrate how it is possible to reconcile, on a conceptual level, the idea of self–grounding nature of thought with the possibility of nature, that “what is” or simply: being.

*Self–determination of reflection: Thinking nothing*

In order to understand properly how and what does it mean that the absolute idea or simply: the concept – determine itself in the form of nature, we first need to understand what do we exactly speak of when we speak about determination of thought in Hegel’s discourse. So far, we have already said, that the absolute idea is not a general idea with some particular content, but, that it is a character of thought by which thought, in thinking what it is, thinks itself. To paraphrase Sebastian Rödl: the absolute knowledge is not knowledge of something, but knowledge of nothing. The absolute idea, an idea that in thinking what it does – *thinks nothing*, as Rödl would put it, is not an empty idea devoid of any content. On the contrary, it signifies a structure of thought, that by abstracting from all immediacy, and thus by demonstrating its “nothingness”, posits its own identity – determines itself. So, a thought “thinking nothing” is not a thought that lacks something, but, on the contrary, a self–sufficient thought, a thought that is a self–positive source of itself and provides its own grounding within itself: a self–reflective thought, or simply – reflection. In other words: reflection –indeed, reduces all being to nothingness, but this nothingness is the nothingness of the reflection itself: it is what reflection is; its own positivity and particular determination. Reflection is, in Hegel's beautiful formulation, the movement from nothingness to nothingness throughout thought determines itself – produces its own “being.”

So, reflection reveals that all immediacy of being is – being thought, mediated or simply “posited” (gesetzt). To paraphrase Bowman: the first thought of pure thinking is not being, but nothing. Insofar as reflection negates being as a whole and its independency with respect to thought, reflection is, in Hegel’s discourse, synonym for thinking in general. Thinking begins, as Hegel would put it, by negation of all immediacy, being – thus with *reflection*. And how does a self–reflective thought determine itself? Not by standing in relation to any exteriority or dispersion, but with regard to itself, through its own capacity of delimiting all there is, to its own unity, negativity – *Negativität*. Nothingness of reflection is not nothing – an empty content, “non–being”, it is the positedness of its own being, of its own form of existence. Precisely in the capacity to be the source of its own determinateness, lies the freedom and autonomy of thought.

So, that a self–reflective thought determines itself means that it grounds its form of existence, its “being” in accordance with its own logical principle, independent of any external criteria, except of that it provides for itself. However, if this is true, if reflection does not have any ground outside the very understanding of its own logical principle, then its principle can never really be verified, but it has to be taken for that what it is. In other words, because of its self–sufficiency and the lack of any external criteria, we could only presuppose it to be always true, *eternal*, in the form of something given, as a simple identity existing for itself, as Hegel would put it. That being so, determinations of reflection (Reflexionbestimmungen) would be no different than that of being – they would be in the same form of immediacy, givenness. In fact, Hegel explicitly emphasizes, that to think thought in the form of some kind of self–posed essence (das Wesen) is the same as to say that it simply is – and thus to posit being. In other words, that reflection determines itself does not mean that is merely transposes the form of given being to being that it is only thought, and the form of determination stays the same. On the contrary, reflection implies a different kind of determination on a conceptual level. It is the idea that any form of determination, be it that of being or thinking, cannot be thought in the form of given with respect to another given. Reflection implies a different type of determination of thought in the conceptual sense; to be determinate is to be thought, but thought determinations themselves are not to be understood as something “fixed” or simply given. To put it differently: reflection challenges the very idea of self–identity of thought; in order for the thought to be identical to itself, it needs to include an element of alterity, difference with regard to itself and in relation to all other elements. In other words, reflection is not, as Jacobi alleged, a simple element within pervasive contradiction between thinking and being, but it is the refutation of the very form of determination of thinking and being as two opposing elements being identical to each other.

The question is then not how being is deduced from an entirely self–transparent structure of thought, but how does thought, superseding all determinacy – even its own – a thought that can be no longer defined in terms of “simple identity”, can be something determinate at all.

*Self–determination of reflection*

To begin with, self–determination of reflection is a three–fold process consisting of three different structural moments also known as positing, external and determining reflection. So, when Hegel speaks about three different types of reflection, he does not mean that they differ either in content or in kind, *genos* – they are but one and the same reflection, but in terms of logical structure and function they fulfill within the process of self–determination. Let us go step by step.

Reflection is the structure of thought by which thought abstracts from any form of immediacy, “being” and makes it a dependent moment of itself, of its own identity. Thus, being is the form of mediation of thought within itself; thought stands in relation to its *own* *being* or as Hegel nicely puts it, thought posits (setzen) its own form of existence: it is a positing reflection. Positing reflection thus determines itself by negating the very form of determinacy of being, by demonstrating that “all being is nothingness.” But, if all being is always already thought, mediated or simply “posited” by the causality of thought itself, does not thought in negating that what it is, being,annihilates itself, its own determinacy? In other words: is the determinacy of positing reflection not a self–undermining act, which ultimately implies its contradiction and emptiness? Positing reflection is contradictory in that it determines itself in the form of lacking any determinacy, in the form of sublatedness, *Aufgehobenheit*.

But we have to be able to resolve this inner contradiction in some positive sense, otherwise the very idea of absolute, self–sufficient thought collapses and we are back to Jacobi’s criticism that pure thought is, by abstracting from all determinacy, even its own, undermines its own grounds. Furthermore, Hegel agreed with Jacobi on this point by alleging that a self–reflective thought in negating itself endlessly loses its identity – it disintegrates. So, we have to somehow stop this endless self–sublation of thought, to stabilize its structure by means of thinking itself.

One way to stabilize it would be to treat is as *insolvable* – as Jacobi did, in the sense of simply saying: well, this self–contradictory idea of thought being and non–being at the same time, this is what thinking is – either take it or leave it. But to do this would mean to act as if the rule of contradiction were the ultimate criteria of thought’s consistency. And this, of course, cannot be pertinent to Hegel’s discourse. Contradiction does not limit thinking anyhow, on the contrary, it is one among many thought–determinations. It is posited and thus can be as well annihilated – by thought itself. We could try the opposite and say that this contradiction is not something absolute, but *relative*, depending of the perspective we see it. We could say, that from the perspective of thinking, this is not a contradiction at all. But, then again, we would end up in Jacobi’s position – simply stating the obvious, that this contradiction is the positive condition of thinking itself. But this is precisely not what thinking is for Hegel, so this too cannot be a satisfactory solution.

So, we cannot neutralize the contradiction and yet cannot move any further by the means of positing reflection itself.

Hegel’s solution is to, paradoxically, re–introduce the form of givenness in the structure of thought itself, to impose an inner limit to thought’s own capacity of negativity, *Negativität*, to relating to itself in all there is, to its self–transparent character. I say paradoxically because it makes no sense to say that a limitless thought needs to limit itself; that a thought which determines itself by eliminating all externality, needs to re–integrate it *internally*, that it needs to “internally differentiate” itself, as Bowman would put it. Hegel implies, or so it seems, that, in order to gain determinacy, a positing reflection, needs to include an element that in some sense *conceptually degrades* its structure: external reflection. Let us express Hegel’s idea even more clearly. External reflection, a thought that determines itself in relation to a particular content, being, which is not something thought, but *given, pre–supposed*, a thought that thus does not possess determinacy on its own – determines positing reflection. To put it in other words: a thought that is not transparent to itself, that does not see itself in all there is, *a blind thought*, is what makes the idea of thought that “sees through everything”, an absolute thought, possible in the first place.

So, we have already demonstrated that the contradiction of positing reflection is pervasive. We cannot remove it by simply pre–supposing it as true. This would be not in accordance with Hegel’s method of philosophy, where no thought is simply given, but it has to be demonstrated, immanently constructed when philosophizing. Or to put it yet differently: it is not a content that distinguishes “weak” thought from the “strong” one, but the thought determinations it leaves unquestioned, undoubted within itself. We cannot also justify it by thinking it from some other “thought perspective”. As long as positing reflection is a thought that thinks itself in all there is – it is *in* every thinking perspective we can possibly think of. So, let us understand how Hegel thinks on this. We cannot resolve the contradiction by appealing to the self–transparency of thought – that thought always knows itself as absolute and true and thus knows no contradiction. The very idea of self–transparency of thought *is* the problem – it causes thought’s indeterminacy. So, in order to think self–determination *weiter* we have to, in some sense, prevent thought from knowing itself completely, to impose some kind of limit, conceptual impasse on its self–knowledge. And this is the idea we’ve already got ourselves familiar with at the beginning: the idea of thought being dependent on that what it is or simply: being. We have renounced it as a mere appearance, but we were wrong. The two thoughts are not exclusive, but jointed and stand in relation of mutual dependence. Hegel goes even a step further and complicates things a little bit more. Although we know that the idea of pre–reflective thought is mere appearance, because thought is not anything given, but a structure through–and–through mediated by thinking itself, and that this appearance is the product of thought itself, it is nevertheless *a necessary appearance*, otherwise thought is nothing at all. It has to be the case that *there is* something presenting itself as immediate for the thought, in order to reveal itself as identical to itself.

Hegel’s solution is then to co–joint, *internalize* the contradiction and present it as a structural moment within structure of self–reflective thought itself. So, what at first seemed to be an element of the contradiction, a thought having no determination on its own, *is* now the part of the solution. Contradiction was never really a contradiction – it seems as Hegel’s “solution” is sophism we’ve already rejected earlier. But Hegel does not deny the contradiction of reflection, in fact he even radicalizes it by laying it out bare as far as possible. This is a tough thought to swallow, so we need to process slowly.

Let us go through the argument once again. Reflection is *determinate* insofar there is an element presenting to itself to be different than itself, an “un–thought” element that *needs* to be transposed to the realm of thought. In order to reveal to itself as identical to itself it first need to stand in relation to something other than itself – if there is nothing to differ from, then reflection itself is nothing at all. And it is *determining* insofar it alone produces its own differences. Contradiction of positing reflection aroused only when we thought of it in terms of “simple identity”, in the sense of something given and differing itself from all other given elements. But the form of determination of reflection *undoes* this contradiction, by demonstrating that the very form of determination is to be thought in terms of *two–fold, dual* process between two mutually limiting elements within the structure of thought itself. Reflection demonstrates that any form of determination is to be thought as itself *internally differentiated* – as the whole of identity and difference within one and the same uniformity of thought.

The first contra–argument is that we cannot really draw a clear conclusion if the self–delimitation of reflection does –indeed result in its determinacy. Reflection gains its determinacy by an element other than itself, or so it *seems*, an element not restrained by thought, call it an “un–thought element”, “being” or Fichte’s *Nicht–Ich*.[[1]](#footnote-1) So, this element is different than reflection. And yet, because it stands in relation of *equality* to it, because it is the product of reflection’s own causality, it is nothing other than the reflection itself. So, we do not really know if the two poles of reflection interact precisely in such a way as to produce determinacy or not. And we *cannot* know this, because, as we’ve already said, the identity of the two elements is not absolute, but relative, they mutually determine each other. And if we cannot draw a clear distinction on their identity, then we cannot really know if they are something at all. Thus, we have to pre–suppose that the determination of reflection is true, to take it as something given.

The second contra–argument, following directly from the first, is that the idea of self–determination of reflection is *incoherent*, because it is not valid by its own criteria. Let us be more precise. Determination of reflection, or so we said, distinguishes itself not by a content, but by a different type of determination: it implies that reflection gains its identity not by simply being what it is, as if it were something given, but by incorporating an element of difference, alterity within itself. But, as we demonstrated, this is what we precisely cannot prove – and have to take as given. So, it follows that self–determination of reflection is an incoherent idea. To put it in Hegel’s discourse: reflection infinitely refers to itself through difference; but the form of its determinacy is already determined, “fixed”.

So, by trying to resolve the contradiction of positing reflection, we have only *radicalized* the contradiction inherent in the very form of determination of reflection. On the one hand, reflection offers a new model how to think thought determination; how to think thought which determines itself in relation to difference, alterity, something other than itself. Reflection, at least nominally, is the idea of *practical thought*, a thought whose relation to externality is inscribed in its very conceptual genesis, so precisely an idea of thought which is not self–sufficient. On the other hand, as we have demonstrated, we cannot, by its own criteria prove its *determinacy* and consequently justify its form of self–determination. This is why Hegel insisted that the determinacy of the absolute idea or the concept cannot be thought in form of reflection. Because if this were so, pure thought, a thought thinking itself, would be very much alike *rhizome* consisting of highly sophisticated but empty thought determinations endlessly constraining each other, with no ground of their own. When Hegel talks about thought not being *subjective*, but *objective* or about an “objective spirit” he has the following in mind: thought needs to be something determinate, otherwise we cannot prove its objectivity – to be identical to itself *is* to be different. And for these very same reasons the form of self–determination of thought *cannot* be that of reflection.

In the end, we could say Jacobi was right, but for the wrong reasons. There is no way to deduce any form of determinacy, “being”, from pure thought determinations. Not because, as Jacobi alleged, the idea of pure thought is self–undermining and the immediate existence is self–evident and thus *true*. Thought is not what it is, simply by standing in relation to itself or something other than itself. In other words: thought does not gain determinacy either by being a “simple identity”, an element differing itself from all other elements, or “identity–in–difference”, an element differing itself *within* itself and thus from all other elements differing from themselves equally as well. It is neither *being* nor *reflection*; it is not a form of duality, but unity. Or simply put: the structure of thought Hegel calls – the Concept.

The Concept releases *itself from itself* in order to gain determinacy. And the form of its release is nature. The act of release implies, or so it seems, a relation of externality, and thus of difference. But Hegel insists that the Concept is a uniform structure. In fact, the act of “free release”, *frei entlassen* is the ultimate act of reconciliation of the Concept with its unity, with its own determination. Let us simply try to understand this thought.

*Self–determination of the Concept: Thinking “Frei entlassen”*

A good way to proceed, is to explain what Hegel exactly meant by the unity of the Concept. As we are yet to *derive* the positive account of the self–determination of the Concept, we are left only with negative definitions. So, the Concept does not determine itself in terms of “simple identity”, as was the case with being. In fact, the concept *is* *not* any such form of thought by which the notion of identity is something given be it in terms of logical determinations or that of experience, being. The Concept *produces* its own determinations and is thus autonomous and free – it is, by its very definition, *free thinking*, thinking where nothing is pre–supposed as given. This is why, to make a short excurse, –when thinking, we can start with anything, any kind of object or principle, as long as we are determined to “think purely” as Hegel puts it, meaning precisely – as long as we do not take any thought determination we produce, while thinking, for granted. Actually, when philosophizing using the method of the Concept, the problem is not how to begin, but how to end it, how to make a cut. Or in other words – how to provide thought thinking itself with determinacy: to say *Es ist so*.

So far, the structure of the Concept looks very much alike to that of reflection; in both cases we speak about a structure of self–sufficient thought; a thought that *is* its own *subjective principle*, thus having no understanding outside itself whatsoever. However, in case of reflection, as we’ve already demonstrated, despite all the complexity of its structure, we could never really prove as long as we are *thinking*, that it is something more than “a complex thought structure” – that it possesses *necessity* and thus determinacy on its own; what is *necessary* – is determinate, it is so–and–so and not otherwise.

Let us be more precise here. Technically, we could, at every point of thinking self–determination of reflection resolves its contradictions of being *determining* and yet *indeterminate* at the same time, by simply saying “this is where the process ends”, *it is so*. But this would not be *a necessary* but an *arbitrary decision* of a thinking subject. In other words: we could say up to this point reflection makes sense, it is meaningful to us, and from this point on, it does not. But this kind of thought would imply that we treat “thinking thinking thinking” as Rödl would put it, as something given, as an object, and determine it in accordance with our own subjective categories. It would mean that we think of thought's self–determination in terms of *external reflection*. But Hegel would not appreciate this. No matter how peculiar this might seem, Hegel’s idea of the Concept implies entirely giving up the relational structure of thought, at any level of thinking. But this is a hard thought to ponder; in fact, it is almost impossible to think. Because thought is essentially determined; she who does not think determinate thought, does not think at all. To put it in other words: in thinking what self–determination of Hegel’s Concept is, I do experience opposition, and place my thought in *relation* to another thought – that of reflection and so on. If my thought would not experience any opposition, I would not think at all; thus, my thoughts are, or so they seem to me, this representation being *necessary*, essentially determined as something given and thus finite. To put it in other words: I cannot think otherwise than in the form of reflection, if I would, my thoughts would be empty, meaningless.

So, to think the determinacy of the Concept by means of the Concept itself does not mean to think how it *differs* from that of reflection; it is not a distinction on the level of content. The task Hegel puts in front of us is much more radical – it demands from us to it in such a way as to renounce the very form of givenness of our thought categories, to give up finite thinking. This is why it is an impossible task for us. Of course, this does not mean that we stop thinking and somehow gain an immediate access to the infinite; the form of thinking Hegel proposes is not that of *intuition* (Anschauung). It is the form of thought by which the Concept, as Jean Hippolyte formulated it, thinks its own *unity*, by sublating the very form of our subjective categories. So, the Concept is the subject, not us. The idea is not as crazy as it sounds, or at least not so crazy not to be already recognized within Hegel’s discourse. This is why many interpreters of Hegel, Horstmann being the paradigmatic example, insist that the subjectivity of the Concept is of different kind than that of finite thinking in general; he goes so far as to claim that it requires from us to be different people, to change our categories of thinking.

* this would be absurd; reflection is the necessary but not sufficient reason of thinking self–determination of the Concept
* unity of the universality, singularity and individuality: The Concept
* such a concept of difference by which the very difference, in the sense of relation is removed, the erase of relational thinking in terms of relation
* the Concept gains determinacy by not being in the Nature
* he reflects upon its own reflection; why: because threat of the loss of determinacy

Let us put this yet in another way. When Hegel speaks about the structure of reflection, he speaks about the form of syllogism or what he calls *der Schluss* – he makes an explicit analogy between the two. Syllogism, in Hegel’s discourse, stands for the idea of the form of deductive reasoning in general; given a universal principle and a singular instance of this principle, we make a valid inference that something is so–and–so. But the very form of this inference is invalid. We pre–suppose the premises as given and think in relation of difference between them. Yet, at the same time, they are not given, because their determinacy is pre–conditioned by a third *extralogical* element, that will unite them, call it reflection or external thinking. The Concept is the *unity* of the universality, singularity and individuality, it is the idea that

so nature is such a difference, which removes the very difference from the thought; why form of nature; there is no Concept in nature, of course, because if there were, this would be reflection

-the concept is so and so, and this is how we should think it

1. Opis Fichtejeve dialektike jaza in nejaza, kratek citat. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)