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Ping Chu Lin

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Hegel's Phenomenology of the Absolute

By

Ping Chu Lin

Dr. Donald Phillip Verene
Adviser

Philosophy Department

Dr. Donald Phillip Verene
Adviser

Dr. Rudolf A. Makkreel
Committee Member

Dr. Lilia Coropceanu
Committee Member

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Ping Chu Lin

Dr. Donald Phillip Verene

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I attempt to answer the question, “How is Hegel’s absolute knowing, absolute?” through expositing what the canons of both western and eastern philosophy take to be absolute knowing. I believe the master key to this question is Hegel’s conception of the true infinity [*das wahrhafte Unendliche*] and I justify this interpretation by examining the views of prominent Hegelian thinkers, Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite, and the concept of Wu Wei from the *Tao Te Ching*.

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Table of Contents

Epigraph.....	p.1
Preface.....	p.2
Kojève's Absolute Knowledge.....	p.5
Hyppolite's Absolute Knowledge.....	p.17
The Taoist's Absolute Knowledge.....	p.32

“We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.
We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.
Therefore just as we take advent of what is,
we should recognize the usefulness of what is not.

-Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter XI

“Should anyone ask for a royal road to Science, there is no more easy-going way than to rely on sound common sense; and for the rest, in order to keep up with the times, and with advances in philosophy, to read reviews of philosophical works, perhaps even to read their prefaces and first paragraphs”

-Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface

Preface

G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* has often been described as a *Bildungsroman*, a novel that narrates the education and cultivation of a central character.¹ I find this to be a particularly fitting depiction because the *Phenomenology* is a narration of the development of self-consciousness. Beginning with sense certainty, the most rudimentary way of approaching the world, Hegel takes naïve consciousness on a journey that ends with the apprehension of absolute knowing [*das absolute Wissen*], the true way of looking at the whole.

He writes in the preface, “The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.”² Everything consciousness discovers at the end of this intellectual narrative has been with consciousness since the beginning. The journey that consciousness embarks on is not one that apprehends divine insight or external knowledge; rather, it is learning to see the whole just as it is through a reexamination of previous experience.

As someone of the eastern tradition, my understanding of what Hegel has to offer is perhaps best depicted by how the Zen Buddhists describe *Satori*, which literally means enlightenment gained through a sudden awakening, that “Before *Satori*, mountains are mountains and valleys are valleys.... After *Satori*, mountains are mountains and valleys are valleys.” I believe absolute knowledge is, at its core, a form of

¹ Verene, *Hegel's Absolute*, 103.

² Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 12.

self-knowledge, and the point of the *Phenomenology* is to remind consciousness of this key notion.

While it is well known that at the end of the *Phenomenology*, consciousness will become mature enough to answer the question that has prompted it to embark on this journey, few have considered the logic behind such achievement. Absolute knowing brings together the stages that consciousness has pushed through in its attempt to unify the two dialectical moments of in-itself and for-itself. It is the final lesson that teaches consciousness to see the whole just as it is. Yet, how does such understanding make Hegel's absolute knowing absolute?

My aim in what follows is to attempt to answer this often overlooked question. I believe the Hegelian absolute is absolute because it fully satisfies the concept of absolute. That is to say, it fulfills both the particular meanings of absolute as being complete, pure, and self-restrained, and the universal signification of absolute as self-determined. It is to be noted that my claim is not centered on how absolute knowing specifically qualifies each of these connotations; but rather, the simultaneous fulfillment of the opposites is that which makes absolute knowing absolute. The key to this understanding of absolute knowing is Hegel's conception of the true infinity [*das wahrhafte Unendliche*]. Its containment of the finite and infinite in one process provides a self-determinate model that reflects the logic that makes absolute knowing possible.

To address this question thoroughly, I shall inspect what the canons of both western and eastern philosophy take to be absolute knowing. For the former, I will exposit the views of two prominent Hegelian thinkers, Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite, on what they take to be Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge. For the

latter, I will draw upon the concept of Wu Wei, the Taoist notion of absolute attained through non-doing, from the *Tao Te Ching*.

The commentaries of Kojève and Hyppolite when they appeared in the 1940s focused attention on Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a work of independent genius that contained an account of the development of consciousness that could be approached on its own and that was more than an early part of Hegel's system to be put aside in front of the later works. Their commentaries still stand today as foundation works for many readers of the *Phenomenology* and provide what may be taken as a basis for standard western interpretations. Thus it is in relation to them that I wish to consider an eastern Taoist approach to the ultimate moment of Hegel's text. Central to my interpretation of absolute knowledge is Hegel's conception of the "true infinity." To exposit the inner logic of this conception I will employ Ernst Cassirer's symbolic formation of his function-concept, which he claims is an abstract formulation of the relation of universal and particular that Hegel is seeking in the *Begriff*.

Chapter 1: Kojève's Absolute Knowledge

In his first lecture, *Philosophy and Wisdom*, from the lecture series on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*³, Alexandre Kojève argues that Hegel's concept of absolute knowledge is absolute because it is a circular concept. To grasp his reasoning it is important first to comprehend how he defines the terms circular and concept. Circular, in this case, marks the fulfillment of two aspects: the representation of an abstract ideal and the concrete existence of such ideal. A circular truth is true because it exists as a truth. On the other hand, what Kojève has in mind for concept is not concept as a general notion, which would be a grasping of ideas in the same manner as if one were to grasp physical substance or material. Rather, he is referring to Hegel's "concrete concept," or *Begriff*, in which the particular is formed in a dialectical, nonabstractive manner and by means of which consciousness can think or know a thing as it actually is.⁴

One way to understand concept as such is to consider how Ernst Cassirer thinks about the propositional function $\Phi(x)$. For Cassirer, a concept is a process defined by seriality, and whose function is to expand and synthesize the particulars into determinate series. This means a concept is not a mere generalization of things in the world. Instead, the significance of the concept must come from the meanings that it develops in and through itself by focusing on the relation between function and content.

The propositional function $\Phi(x)$, for instance, is meaningful because Φ cannot retain its significance without x , nor can x make sense without Φ . Even though Φ and x

³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

⁴ Verene, *Hegel's Absolute*, 102.

are fundamentally different logical types, they are inseparable as $\Phi(x)$. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, Cassirer explains, ““The function holds for the individual values precisely because it “is” no individual value—and on the other hand the individual values “are” only insofar as they stand to one another in the connection expressed by the function.”⁵ Φ as the rule of arrangement requires x as its object; x as content needs Φ to give it order. In and by themselves, Φ and x are meaningless. The former would be an empty principle; the latter would be a blind series. $\Phi(x)$ must be taken as a whole to have meaning.

Begriff, like $\Phi(x)$, preserves the necessary conjunction that ties a concept together. To say what it is, it is important to know what it is not. *Begriff* is not figurative thinking, or *Vorstellung*. That is to say, the Hegelian concept must not be thought of representationally, as if it were a signpost placed in front of material substance. Thinking as such is erroneous because in this way concept ends up being treated as substance. When $\Phi(x)$ is thought of representationally, the principle Φ is then held as the indicative sum for the series x and the relationship between the principle and the series becomes confined to that which is represented. In other words, Φ ceases to be a principle that modifies the particulars, and instead becomes a substance made of the series x .

Representational thinking as such treats $\Phi(x)$ as “an appearance of something.”⁶ This is problematic because if $\Phi(x)$ necessarily requires the sum total of Φ and the sum total of x to have meaning, then $\Phi(x)$ is confined to the significance of its representation. Under this condition, an indicative concept is the sum of its parts, but

⁵ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, 327.

⁶ *Ibid.*

each individual part does not represent the sum. The unequal relationship between the universal and the particular prevents the concept from independently modifying its series to generate greater meaning. In other words, taking $\Phi(x)$ as a representation means $\Phi(x)$ is only its sign.⁷

Understanding concept as function allows one to access the internal relationship of *Begriff*. Hegel has invented a version of the concept that would anticipate what Cassirer found in $\Phi(x)$. Cassirer's functional logic, in turn, offers us a language that makes explicit the relationship between concrete and universal. For Cassirer, concept, as a particular universal, "relates to the object because and insofar as it is the necessary and indispensable presupposition of objectivization itself."⁸ In terms of $\Phi(x)$, this means each instantiation of $\Phi(x)$ is simultaneously a universal representation of the propositional function $\Phi(x)$. It is a duality defined by opposition, each side is only to the extent that both sides are present.

This characterization illuminates the similarity between Hegel's concrete universal and Cassirer's function concept. Akin to $\Phi(x)$, *Begriff* is concrete and conceptual. What Hegel means by concrete is not solidity; rather it is to know one's place in the whole as opposed to be in isolation⁹. *Begriff*, as a concrete universal, implies simultaneously to be a particular in relation to the whole and also carry universal

⁷ The distinction between sign and symbol is that the former corresponds only to one object and has one meaning, while the latter can extend to multiple objects and bear a wealth of meanings. Furthermore, sign can only relate to that which is known, whereas the symbol can point to the unknown through developing a system in and through itself. The periodic table, for example, is symbolic not because the elements constitute all of chemistry, but because the logic between elements elaborate into the scientific system of chemical knowledge.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 317.

⁹ Here, what "one's place" refers to is not simply the knowledge of one's own place, but it also includes the knowledge of any particular's place in the whole.

significance. An analogy of this is the Christian conception of God. If *Vorstellung* is scriptural thinking, that is to say, a kind of thought based upon the use of imagery with intellectual weight, as the shield of the trinity is a diagram that represents the concept of God, then *Begriff* is the way to think concretely about God without the use of imagery. To understand *Begriff* as a concrete universal is to understand God as any particular within the whole and the whole itself.

Looking back at Cassirer's $\Phi(x)$, what the function concept makes explicit is the relationship between concrete and universal. Φ is related to x as a principle that derives meaning from organizing particular x s into a series of variables that it orders and determines. $\Phi(x)$ is a particular universal because it consists of both a particular organized in a specific manner and a universal principle that organizes the particulars. Likewise, the concrete aspect of *Begriff* is inseparable from its universality. A view of the whole is required for the awareness of the particular's place within the whole, yet the acknowledgement of such awareness must first originate from the particular.

Turning back to Kojève, he believes this inherent duality of *Begriff* warrants a circularity that makes absolute knowledge possible. This is implicit in his association of the wise man with absolute knowledge. Kojève writes, "The *real* aspect of the 'circularity' of Wisdom is the 'circular' *existence* of the Wise Man. In the Wise Man's absolute Knowledge, each question is its own answer, but is so only because he goes through the *totality* of questions-answers that forms the entirety of the System."¹⁰ What Kojève submits here is the link between absolute knowledge and the ancient tradition of wisdom as the knowledge of whole things and the whole of things. He believes absolute knowledge should not simply be left as a theory; instead, its core is in line with Philo of

¹⁰ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 94.

Alexandria's definition of wisdom as the knowledge of things human and divine and of the respective causes of them, a definition also given by Varro and Cicero. If wisdom is the knowledge of whole things, then the wise man is he who understands the whole. Here, the whole is understood as an opposition conjoined by an indissoluble gap. To claim x is true is to claim that which is not x is false, each grain of truth always carries a speck of falsehood. Yet, despite their constant attachment, truth and falsehood are always separated by nature. x is not wholly determined by what it is or what it is not; instead, it is the opposition between what it is and what it is not that defines x . Accordingly, Kojève adopts the image of the wise man because if each stage of consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology* corresponds to a distinct human type, then that which corresponds to the stage of absolute knowledge must be the wise man. While he does not offer an exact reasoning for this assignment, the following proof arrives at the same conclusion.

In terms of the different stages of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, the wise man, by knowing the whole, does not get caught in any one stage of consciousness because he understands that it can be superseded by another stage. Unlike the naïve consciousness that struggles in the master and servant dialectic, being locked within an opposition does not deceive the wise man because he knows the way out of oppositions by having seen all oppositions. He does not mistake the finger for the moon and treat particulars as universals.

Now, if wisdom is to have knowledge of the whole, and if knowledge of the whole is to have knowledge of the opposites, and if knowledge of the opposites is to have knowledge of all questions and answers, and if knowledge of all questions and answers is to have absolute knowledge, then the wise man, who achieves wisdom through the

knowledge of the relation of between question and answer, must have absolute knowledge.

It is important to point out that Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge, although it marks the totality of knowledge, does not imply totality as an infinite linear expansion. In other words, the scope of absolute knowledge does not include progression beyond itself; it is not everything and everything-to-come. Instead, what the absolute refers to closely resonates with Hegel's conception of true infinity [*das wahrhafte Unendliche*].

In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel describes this kind of infinite as "the self-sublation of this infinite and of the finite, as a *single* process."¹¹ Unlike its counterpart, bad infinity [*das Schlecht-Unendliche*], an infinite that relies on the finite to fulfill its identity as the opposite of finite, the true infinite determines itself within itself. It is one closed system that encapsulates both the finite and infinite. This is possible because the true infinity sublates itself. Sublation, or *Aufhebung*, means simultaneously to preserve what is negated and to supersede it. That which is sublated is not rendered into nothing. Although it is characterized by negation, sublation is not to discard or annihilate. Instead, what is sublated loses its immediacy but remains interconnected with the whole.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel uses *Aufhebung* to describe how the naïve consciousness matures. Each stage that consciousness overcomes is absorbed into the growth of consciousness and, at the same time, becomes the momentum that lifts it onto the next stage. One way to think about this is how any given human being develops into

¹¹ Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, 137.

adulthood. The person who becomes an adult does not lose his past; instead, he transcends and incorporates it into his maturity as he grows up.

Aufhebung introduces a dialectical mindset that makes the true infinity logically conceivable. To understand what I am, for example, I must describe myself in relation to the whole, for what I am is also composed by what I am not. In this case, what I am not undergoes *Aufhebung*. It is not eliminated; rather, it is absorbed into what I am. And as I realize the interconnectedness between what I am and what I am not, this dialectical relationship brings me towards a larger truth. With this logic in mind, one can now access the true infinity: “finitude is only as a transcending of itself; it therefore contains infinity, the other of itself. Similarly, infinity is only as a transcending of the finite; it therefore essentially contains its other and is, consequently, in its won self the other of itself. The finite is not sublated by the infinite as a power existing outside it; on the contrary, its infinity consists in sublating its own self. This sublating is, therefore, not alteration or otherness as such, not the sublating of a *something*.”¹² The being of each is stated through the other. The finite is finite only as the opposite of the infinite; it contains the infinite within itself. Likewise, the infinite is infinite only as the opposite of finite; it contains the finite within itself. Accordingly, each side thus reflects both its opposite and the opposition it is in. When the finite and the infinite engage in *Aufhebung*, they are not negated by a thing outside of themselves and become something else because both already contain the other within themselves. In other words, the dialectical connection of the infinite and finite does not change through *Aufhebung* because the infinite simultaneously is itself and the finite, and vice versa. One can preserve what is negated because what one is, in this case, is equally comprised

¹² Ibid.: 146.

by what one is not. The infinite and the finite are like two sides of the same coin. Each side holds its particular characteristic and represents the whole coin in general. Neither would be without the other nor could any one side overcome its opposite. A single-sided coin and a coin with identical sides are both duds.

An intellectual analog for the true infinity as indicated above would be Cassirer's $\Phi(x)$. Φ as a universal and x as the particular that is determined by the universal makes $\Phi(x)$ an ever-expanding notion of universality of $\Phi(x)$. It is not limited to linear expansion, which would be a series of different x s modified identically by Φ ; instead, its development can extend in all directions. Every instance of $\Phi(x)$ is a self-determinate version of $\Phi(x)$. Analogously, the true infinity can determine itself because the finite and infinite that it contains within itself are both unique particulars of what it is and an universal representation of what it is and what it is not. An illustrative metaphor of this would be a picture of a man painting a picture of a man painting a picture of a man, and so on. The picture is finite, yet its content expands infinitely. Unlike the bad infinity, the true infinity does not depend upon a thing beyond itself, a *Jenseits*, to complete its identity. It is wholly autonomous and self-determinate.

Absolute knowledge, like true infinity, is self-determination. That is to say, absolute knowledge, as the totality of questions and answers, is not a corpus of information that boundlessly extends in one direction. Its absoluteness is not a property that needs something other than itself to fulfill it. Instead, absolute knowledge is absolute because it can create infinite versions of itself within itself.

How then, does this characteristic include knowledge of all sorts? Akin to the internal construct in the true infinity, the finite as a part of the infinite and the infinite as a part of the finite, every particular knowledge is contained in absolute knowledge

and absolute knowledge is contained in every particular knowledge. Kojève gives a literal account of this relationship, “each part of the circular Knowledge has for its answer the *whole* of this knowledge, which—being circular—is the entirety of all Knowledge.”¹³ The dialogue between question and answer culminates in absolute knowledge, which simultaneously responds to the question at hand and to all possible questions. In other words, when one arrives at absolute knowledge, every answer one gives is both a unique solution and an absolute answer.

Now that we understand what absolute knowledge is, we can see why Kojève establishes a link between absolute knowledge and the wise man—both are models of self-determination. Absolute knowledge, as a true infinity, finds the totality of answer and question within itself. The wise man, as a particular individual who understands the further whole he is a part of, does not require external confirmation for his identity. He knows his relation to the whole.

Given this condition, the remaining concern is what Kojève has in mind when he emphasizes the nature of existence of the wise man. Cassirer’s logic of function concept offers a way to answer this question. The wise man can be seen as a human figure that represents the bond between Φ and x . His wisdom, the knowledge of how the whole is held together, shows how Φ and x are connected; Φ without x would be an empty principle and x without Φ would be a blind series. The wise man understands that there is a necessary “and” that holds the opposites together, and no opposition, regardless of its inclusiveness, is able to rid the gap in between.

Absolute knowledge, in this case, identifies the organizing principle Φ after one has pushed through the various stages of consciousness represented by series of x . Before

¹³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 94.

absolute knowledge, the series of x are aligned in a pattern, but the logic of its alignment remains unknown. After achieving absolute knowledge, one discovers the logic that holds the series together and sees for the first time $\Phi(x)$ as a whole. If we think about this metaphor spatially, $\Phi(x)$ is not a jar like structure with various modifications of x crammed inside. Instead, it would be similar to a Matryoshka doll, where each doll contains a smaller version of itself that contains an even smaller version of itself, and so on. Each particular doll is both a subset and a version of the doll at large. Analogously, the wise man's absolute knowledge is manifested through the awareness of his identity as a man who understands his relation to humankind.

When consciousness discovers the universal Φ for the first time after observing the series x , every x is shed under a new light. What was once treated as a particular now becomes a particular-universal that is self-determinate. Apprehending the relationship between Φ and x brings the function concept into a full circle that begins with the first instantiation of $\Phi(x)$ and ends with $\Phi(x)$ as a universal representation. Likewise, the wise man has a circular existence because he is simultaneously an individual instantiation, a wise *man*, and the universal representation of the bond between wisdom and man, a *wise man*. Without the wise man, no one would know what it is to be wise and wisdom would have no instantiations.

Having mapped out the concept as a concrete universal, or *Begriff*, and established the role of the wise man as the indissoluble bond between wisdom and man, we can now see the rationale behind Kojève's claim, namely that absolute knowledge is absolute because it is a circular concept. A reexamination of Hegel's prefatory remarks makes this particularly evident: "The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must

be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.”¹⁴ Here we see the logic of the true infinity at work through equating the whole with what is in development, that as the finite is only when the finite and the infinite are, the whole is no more than the present particular. Similarly, the absolute is a result that finds its beginning at the end, yet through this discovery, the anticipated result realizes that it is actually a constant becoming. A pictorial example of this is the diagram of a spiral always seems to be a circle. Yet each time it approaches consummation, it loses this potential and becomes a part of a larger circle, and so on.

Kojève’s claim is not one without ground. The circular concept is critical for absolute knowledge to be absolute. But fundamentally, I think, the circularity that is emphasized can be traced back to a sense of self-determination in the wise man’s identity. Although Kojève does not explicitly spell out this point, it is implied through his formulation of the wise man. The wise man does not need external confirmation for his self because he is an individual who understands the further whole of which he is a part. Hegel’s *Begriff* also reflects the same point. The concept, as a concrete universal, is an interconnected particular with universal signification. It is not limited in the direction that it expands; it makes versions of itself through itself with each instantiation also being a total representation.

If one juxtaposes the true infinity with the role of the wise man, the common theme of self-containment surfaces again. The true infinity is possible because the finite is contained in the infinite and the infinite is contained in the finite. The wise man as the absolute bond between wisdom and man is the wisdom of man and a man of wisdom. I

¹⁴ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 12.

am inclined to believe that circularity is a way to manifest self-determination. I have attempted to show this by applying Cassirer's logic of the function concept to Kojève's claim of absolute knowing as circular. In the following chapter I shall trace this emphasis on circularity through its negative, which is the self that relies on an external other, instead of itself, to attain fulfillment. The counterpart of the true infinity, the bad infinity [*das Schlecht-Unendliche*], presents an account of this and makes our understanding of absolute knowing, as knowing the whole of things, into a whole knowledge.

Chapter 2: Hyppolite's Absolute Knowledge

In his conclusion to *The Genesis and Structure of the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Jean Hyppolite explores Hegel's absolute knowledge through Hegel's knowledge of I=I, i.e. the moment that balances the universal and the individual. This formula contains two important distinctions that together give a full account of absolute knowledge. First, I=I serves as an analog for Hegel's prefatory warning against static formalism. Second, I=I reveals the relationship between religion and philosophy, which is the opposition between pictorial thinking, *Vorstellung*, and conceptual thinking, *Begriff*. Through I=I, Hyppolite shows that absolute knowledge is complete self-knowledge.

Returning to our central question: how is Hegel's absolute knowing absolute? Absolute knowing, in this case, is absolute because it marks an inclusive breadth of knowledge. One way to understand this interpretation is to observe the relation between the self and complete self-knowledge. A whole account of the self demands an understanding of both everything that is the self and everything that is not the self. Complete self-knowledge thus means all possible knowledge. While one might argue that accordingly, complete knowledge of anything qualifies as absolute knowledge for it also involves both what a thing is and what a thing is not, self-knowledge must be prioritized because knowledge of anything always begins with knowledge of the knower, which is to say, self-knowledge.

Hyppolite's first reference to what absolute knowledge is appears in his analysis of Hegel's demonstration of how the finite spirit reconciles with the infinite spirit. Hegel writes, "In this posited at the same time that the *third* moment, the *universality* or *essence*, counts only as *knowledge* for each of the two sides that stand over against each

other; and finally the latter equally resolve the empty antithesis still remaining and are the knowledge of 'I'=I'; this *individual* Self which is immediately a pure knowing or a universal."¹⁵ The knowledge of I=I is the individual self equals to the universal self. Hyppolite explains, "this knowledge reconciles the finite and the infinite because it is simultaneously the knowledge that the absolute has of itself and that of this finite spirit which raises itself to universal self-consciousness."¹⁶ In terms of the function concept, this means the particular instantiation of $\Phi(x)$ and the original $\Phi(x)$ are one and the same because each version of $\Phi(x)$ is also a universal representation of $\Phi(x)$. That is to say, $\Phi(x)_1 = \Phi(x)$.

I find Hyppolite's approach particularly apt for exploring absolute knowledge because it shares a similar construct with the Hegelian concept. I=I is a specific instance of absolute knowledge that represents absolute knowledge in every form. Its significance comes from the bond between the universal and the individual, *how* I balances with I, rather than what I=I signifies. In others words, its meaning is in that which is not presented, as words cannot inclusively show the internal development that marks its essence. My aim in what follows is to uncover the "invisible" implications as such and explain why a finite formula translates into infinite knowledge.

Hyppolite affirms that this meeting between the finite spirit and the infinite spirit within I=I is absolute knowledge itself. One way to understand this claim is to recall the ancient equation of wisdom with the knowledge of all divine and human things. In this case, what constitutes wisdom is not the ability to identify the sum total of divine and

¹⁵ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 482.

¹⁶ Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, 596.; Hyppolite remarks that what he means by universal self-consciousness is "what logos thinks is the identity of thought thinking with thought thought, of logos with the thought of the philosopher." Ibid.

human things. Instead, to be wise is to understand the connection between all divine and human things and know where each fits in relation to the other. Similarly, I=I is not just a simple tautology; rather, its significance lies in the bond between the individual self and the universal self.

Hyppolite's interpretation of absolute knowledge raises two immediate questions. First, as Hyppolite asks, "How can a knowledge which of itself is atemporal, an absolute knowledge, have temporal conditions in the existence and development of a humanity?"¹⁷ In other words, how can absolute knowledge, which is infinite by nature, exist finitely? Second, even if such mediation were possible, how does one attain absolute knowledge through I=I? The first question extends into the conflicting relationship between religion and philosophy, which I shall later address. For now, it is important to understand how I=I must be read before we attribute greater implications to this formula.

To say what I=I is, one must know what it is not. In his Preface, Hegel famously derides Schelling for his philosophy of identity as "the night in which...all cows are black."¹⁸ This depiction refers to a way of thinking that mechanically incorporates different content into the same formula. This becomes a kind of static formalism that doles out bland identities. The differences between oppositions are flattened and their polarities meshed together as one. In this case, individual determination is not possible because grounding everything into the same substance collapses the relationships between individuals. Hegel gives the example of the absolute conceptualized as "A=A"¹⁹. This formulation is stagnant because it lacks an organizing principle to develop the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

particulars through themselves. Instead, it takes the particulars as universals. In other words, A is infinitely “stretched” to resemble the whole. Just as the night engulfs all cows into the dark, everything this formula encounters is subsumed as a part of A.

The mistreatment of concept as substance maps out this example of $A=A$. In his analysis of representational thinking, Cassirer asserts that the representational thinker is mistaken when he or she takes the principle Φ as the indicative sum for the series x . He states, “They [representational thinkers] take the Φ as though it were itself an x , or as though it were at most the mere sum of the x 's, an $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$ etc.”²⁰ This is erroneous for two reasons. First, Φ loses its identity as a modifying principle, and instead becomes a substance made of x . That is to say, Φ equals series x . Second, if $\Phi(x)$ necessarily requires the sum total of Φ and the sum total of x to have meaning, $\Phi(x)$ is confined to the significance of its representation.

Cassirer writes, “The unity of the ‘thing’ never dissolves into a single one of its appearances...each individual appearance represents the thing but as a particular can never truly coincide with it.”²¹ Under this condition, an indicative concept is the sum of its parts, but each individual part does not represent the sum. In other words, $\Phi(x)$ is x_1 , but x_1 does not reflect $\Phi(x)$. The dysfunctional relationship between the universal and the particular prevents the concept from independently modifying its series to generate greater meaning. Analogous to $A=A$, $\Phi(x)$, as a container of x 's, becomes the stretched A.

Cassirer's functional logic shows that to prevent $I=I$ from the fallacy of $A=A$, one must clearly distinguish the functionality of $I=I$ from its representation. Even though

²⁰ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, 326.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 327.

I=I represents absolute knowledge, it functions only as an analog. This means I=I is one way to understand absolute knowledge; it is not absolute knowledge itself.

The second implication of I=I is it reveals the relationship between religion and philosophy. For Hyppolite, religion is the final step of the ladder that leads to philosophy, which is what he takes to be absolute knowledge. The naïve consciousness, for the first time, is able to reconcile the finite with the infinite in religion. Unlike A=A, the infinite equals the finite not because they are subsumed into a larger whole; but rather, each opposite is also its counterpart. The finite is what becomes the infinite and the infinite is the finite's potential to be. The finite and the infinite are in a true infinity. An image for this is the phoenix that arises from the ashes of its predecessor. The ashes are what give life to the phoenix, and the phoenix is what the ashes become.

In terms of how the true infinity maps onto the way consciousness understands itself, Hyppolite describes, “infinite reason knows itself in human self-consciousness and is infinite only in this finite knowledge of itself; conversely, human self-consciousness only attains itself in this self-knowledge and this actual reconciliation.”²² Reason, insofar as it applies to the human consciousness, is infinite, and can expand without bounds. The knowledge of the human consciousness, or self-knowledge, is inherently finite. In other words, by determining the self, consciousness contains the infinite and the finite in a true infinity.

Hyppolite believes that religion remains a step below philosophy because it reconciles the finite with the infinite in the form of the in-itself. In religion, self-knowledge exists as a potential that requires external actualization. Whereas in philosophy, self-knowledge exists as a potential fulfilled by itself through itself and

²² Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, 599.

synthesizes the finite and the infinite into an in-and-for-itself.²³ Even though consciousness attains self-knowledge through a true infinity in both religion and philosophy, Hyppolite considers religion to be a passive synthesis whereas philosophy is an active one. In other words, religion and philosophy are treated as the same in kind with a difference in degree. The problem with this conception, I think, is it pays insufficient attention to the disjunction between the in-itself and for-itself, and ultimately squashes the two moments into a third thing instead of preserving the tension between their polarities. I shall later discuss this in detail; for now, I will first establish the grounds that lead up to this problem.

A metaphor for how Hyppolite conceives the distinction between these two forms of consciousness is the stages of child development. In the beginning, the infant comes into the world unaware of her freedom. She is only implicitly free because freedom exists only as a potential recognized by the parent. The infant, living in complete accord to the rules of the parent, is a being in-itself. She exists for others.

Yet, as the infant becomes a child, the child subjectively discovers for the first time its freedom through an act of rebellion. Now, the child gains a sense of self-awareness and tries to assert itself by saying “NO!” to the parent. Although the child is explicitly free, its freedom is negative because such freedom exists only in contrast to conformity. Here, the child is a being for-itself and exists as the opposite of the other.

Finally, as the child matures into an adult, he or she reconciles infancy and adolescence with adulthood. The adult fulfills his or her potential of freedom and actualizes positive freedom by determining his or her own being. The adult realizes that he or she does not exist for others or as the opposite of an other. Instead, the adult is his

or her own person. Now, the adult is neither a being in-itself nor a being for-itself, but a being in-and-for-itself.

Hyppolite believes this difference between synthesis as an in-itself and synthesis as an in-and-for-itself marks the divide between near-attainment and actual attainment of self-knowledge. The contrast between how consciousness relates to its synthesis in religion and philosophy elucidates this difference.

For the religious consciousness, synthesizing the opposites produces “a content which is still alien to it instead of being its own work.”²⁴ Consciousness experiences estrangement from its synthesis because, akin to the infant, consciousness relies on an other to recognize itself. Just as the infant relies on the adult, in this case, consciousness abides by scripture. Through interpreting religious doctrines, consciousness recognizes itself through the external self that is in relation to God.

Religious thinking as such is *Vorstellung*, or “picture-thinking”²⁵. This means, instead of directly accessing the significance that thought carries, consciousness conceives thought as a thing presented to the mind, much like a signpost placed before an object. An example of this is using a representational image such as the trinity to think about God, as opposed to thinking about God directly as mentioned above. Through *Vorstellung*, consciousness engages scripture to see a version of the self presented to itself.

While the religious consciousness does mediate the finite with the infinite, *Vorstellung* prevents it from attaining true self-knowledge because the reconciliation that consciousness finds does not come from within itself. Instead, it is an external

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Verene, *Hegel's Absolute*, 118.

affirmation. Hegel writes, “Thus what in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other*, is here the *Self’s* own *act*.”²⁶ The religious consciousness remains an in-itself because it continues to exist for others, namely, God. What consciousness took to be the unity between the finite, its particular self, and the infinite, its universal self, is only an external presentation of its potential self. This is problematic because self-knowledge cannot truly be knowledge of the self if it depends on an other to reflect the self to the self. The infant will never be self-determinate if it only knows itself through the eyes of the parents.

Hegel’s bad infinity (*das Schlecht-Unendliche*) of the unhappy consciousness provides a way to understand why *Vorstellung* is fallible.²⁷ Whereas the true infinity determines itself within itself by containing the infinite and the finite in one process, the bad infinity houses an infinite imprisoned by the finite. Hegel states this in his *Science of Logic*, “ [the bad infinity] is the negation of the finite it is true, but it cannot in truth free itself therefrom. The finite reappears in the infinite itself as its other, because it is only in its connection with its other, the finite, that the infinite is.”²⁸ Although the infinite negates the finite, it only does so externally. The finite and the infinite are taken as unique entities that stand apart from one another. *Aufheben* cannot take place because the self must be organically incorporated back into the self after its negation; yet in this case, each side needs the constant recognition of the other to affirm its identity. Without the finite, the infinite is meaningless, and vice versa.

Consequently, both the infinite and the finite exist only in connection to the other. Neither is whole by itself. Hegel describes in his *Science of Logic*, “What we have

²⁶ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 485.

²⁷ Verene, *Hegel’s Absolute*, 92.

²⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 142.

here is an abstract transcending of a limit, a transcending which remains incomplete because it is not itself transcended. It is the negation of the finite that is true, but it cannot in truth free itself therefrom.”²⁹ Simple negation fails to reconcile the finite with the infinite because it does not recognize their interconnectedness. The finite is the potential for the infinite, and the infinite is what the finite ought to be. The being of each must be recognized as being in the other instead of non-being of the other. The bad infinity is trapped in a vicious cycle precisely because it dichotomizes the finite and the infinite into black and white oppositions. Subsequently, the infinite overlooks the limitation that it transcends is actually itself.

An illustrative metaphor for the bad infinity is a pair of parallel lines that extend indeterminately. The lines are relentlessly trying to reach a beyond, a *Jenseit*, that is forever unreachable. The true infinity, on the other hand, is a line that bends back to connect with itself and takes the shape of a closed circle. It begins out of its end and ends in its beginning. The true infinity does not wait for a thing apart from itself to fulfill its identity. Its entirety is always in the present. Conversely, the bad infinity cannot determine its own being because it extends without an end. Hegel depicts this as, “[it is] *supposed to be not there*.”³⁰ The bad infinity is never wholly “there” as it always has a part of itself lost to the future.

Analogously, the religious consciousness, like the bad infinity, does not come to know itself through itself; rather, it requires affirmation from an outside source. This is reminiscent of Plato’s third man argument, where the mandatory middle term triggers an infinite regression. In the case of religious consciousness, this would imply that since

²⁹ Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, 142.

³⁰ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 149.

consciousness relies on an external presentation to recognize itself, the presentation of consciousness will need an external presentation of the presentation of consciousness to recognize itself, and so on.

Philosophical consciousness, at the other end of the spectrum, feels at home with its synthesis of the finite and the infinite because philosophy is the true infinity. As the pursuit of wisdom, which is the knowledge of divine and human things, philosophy reconciles the infinite and the finite in its being. Unlike the religious consciousness, the philosophical consciousness is not estranged from its self because it does not await an external other to activate its potential self. Philosophy exists as the unity between its potential self and its realization.

Hyppolite turns to Hegel's analogy of the budding flower to explain this in terms of an "organic genesis"³¹. Hegel explains, "The bud disappears in the blossoming of the flower, and we could say that the bud is refuted by the flower"³². Just as the flower negates the bud that it stems from, the infinite contradicts the finite that it grows out of. "But at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only reject each other, but in which each is as necessary as the other, and this equal necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole"³³. Despite their rigid polarity, the bud and the flower are intrinsically conjoined. The bud blossoms into the flower, and the flower grows out of the bud. While both cannot subsist together, neither can exist without the other. Philosophy can unify its potential and the realization of its potential because it shares this organic structure. In the same manner, Hyppolite

³¹ Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, 597.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

affirms, the philosophical consciousness reconciles the in-itself and the for-itself into its form of the in-and-for-itself.

As I have mentioned earlier, I think this conception is problematic because the in-and-for-itself is a third thing that fails to preserve the tension between the in-itself and the for-itself. Synthesizing the two moments produces a unity that destroys their individual identity. Hegel's sense of opposition, I think, means the opposites form a whole, but the whole is not what the opposites become. In other words, the in-itself and the for-itself compose a whole because they are both sides of a duality. Synthesizing the two is equivalent to removing the disjunction between in-itself and for-itself and labeling the whole as in-for-itself.

The Taoist concept of Ying and Yang [陰陽] provides an insight for the importance of the disjunction. The Taoists believe that the Ying, which means the dark, and the Yang, which means the light, together compose the world, which is a duality of dark and light. The Ying and the Yang are opposites that do not dissolve into each other because each side needs the other to retain its significance. An example of this would be how a shadow requires both darkness and light. It cannot exist in either pure light or pure darkness.

Accordingly, to assert that Ying and Yang is a synthesis between the two is incorrect because "Ying-and-Yang" does not hold the same connotation as the original Taoist concept. The forced conjunction negates the "twoness" of Ying and Yang. The shadow, in this instance, becomes the color grey. Analogously, what the consciousness pursues through reconciling the in-itself and the for-itself is not framed by in-and-for-itself. Instead, what it seeks is the wholeness that is generated by preserving both sides of the duality.

Returning to our investigation of how I=I as a finite formula contains the possibility of infinite knowledge, the answer to this is reflected through the fundamental difference in thought between religion and philosophy. Although both forms of consciousness contain the finite and the infinite as a true infinity, what divides the two is that the former treats self-knowledge as something *vorgestellt*, a thing presented to the mind, and the latter conceives self-knowledge as *Begriff*, or the concrete concept.

Hyppolite explains, “The concept is the subject that is simultaneously specific and universal, self-consciousness that is *this specific* self-consciousness and at the same time is *universal*.”³⁴ Distinct from *Vorstellung*, consciousness does not grasp *Begriff* as one would grasp a mental image of something actual. Instead, the Hegelian *Begriff* formulates the particular in a way that reveals the particular’s relation to the universal. This is possible because to think in the form of *Begriff* is to think in terms of the whole. This allows consciousness to understand the particular not just as a representation, but as it is.³⁵ Accordingly, self-knowledge acquired through the *Begriff* is both knowledge of the individual self and knowledge of all selves. Self-knowledge, in this instance, is the knowledge of how the self interconnects with other selves.

How does this correlate to I=I? In *Vorstellung*, representation is key. That is to say, one must consider each instantiation in I=I in order to give a full account of its significance. In terms of the *Begriff*, relationship is key. This means the significance of the universal self equating to the individual self is not embedded in either the individual or the universal. Instead, it is how the universal relates to the individual that makes I=I meaningful.

³⁴Ibid.: 598.

³⁵ Verene, *Hegel’s Absolute*, 102.

Subsequently, when consciousness achieves the absolute knowledge of $I=I$, its achievement is determined by its form of thought. Using $\Phi(x)$ as an example, the consciousness that adopts *Vorstellung* needs to lay out every instantiation of x in the series to arrive at the knowledge $\Phi(x)$. Even though consciousness has the potential to achieve $\Phi(x)$, its knowledge is always chained to the next instantiation of x . On the other hand, consciousness that thinks in terms of *Begriff* focuses on the logic between Φ and x to figure out the bond between $\Phi(x)$. While it doesn't map out all the versions of $\Phi(x)$, it understands $\Phi(x)$ by apprehending the connection that holds every instantiation together.

In the case of $I=I$, I is equal to I because the individual self is an instance of the universal self and the universal self is made up of the individual selves. Hyppolite writes, "Universal self-consciousness *exists* and comprehends itself in this specific and historical self-consciousness, which actualizes this absolute life and in its turn recognizes itself in this universality."³⁶ This formula contains absolute knowledge because the universal and the individual self, as referents, apply to an inclusive breadth of knowledge. All things in the world either conform to one or the other. Through *Begriff*, consciousness attains absolute knowledge because it knows that regardless of the scope that $I=I$ presents, every combination of the universal self equating to the finite self is held together by the same finite formula. And like $(\Phi)x$, while consciousness has a potential to arrive at absolute knowledge through *Vorstellung*, it is always dependent upon a constant "beyond".

To really answer why Hyppolite finds absolute knowledge through $I=I$, I think what James Joyce said in an interview with Arthur Power is a particularly fitting

³⁶ Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, 600.

response. "I always write about Dublin," Joyce said to Power, "because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world."³⁷ The true concern is not whether the city that Joyce writes about is Dublin or Paris or London, but if what he writes about is the way that things actually are. Getting to the heart of Dublin means to see Dublin in relation to the whole.

Dublin, under Joyce, can access all the cities in the world because as the knowledge of whole things, it also contains the knowledge of the whole of things. Likewise, Hyppolite picks I=I because it gives a full account of absolute knowledge as achieved by self-consciousness. I=I is different from other analogs of absolute knowledge such as *Begriff* to the extent that Dublin is separate from Paris. Yet at the same time, I=I and *Begriff* are the same in that they both balance the universal and the individual.

What I have shown through this chapter is Hegel's absolute knowing can be treated as an inclusive form of knowing. The resulting absolute knowledge does not depend on an expansiveness that reaches beyond itself to be absolute; rather, it is absolute because its particular existence is also a complete realization of its universal potential. Self-knowledge, Hyppolite shows, is an example of knowledge as such. Knowing the self is both to know one's self and to know self-knowledge as that which applies to every self. The interconnection between the particular and the universal comprise the whole, making self-knowledge a form of absolute knowledge. This notion of absolute as the preservation of dualities will become more prominent if, along side

³⁷ Ellmann Richard, *James Joyce*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 505.

the classic western interpretations, we also consider the eastern reading of absolute knowledge through the Taoist conception of Wu Wei.

The Taoists' Absolute Knowledge

Hegel says in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* that, “philosophy exhibits the appearance of a circle which closes with itself, and has no beginning in the same way as the other sciences have.”³⁸ If absolute knowledge were to fit in this pictorial analogy, then it would be a smaller circle that closes the larger circle of the *Phenomenology*. From the instant that the consciousness first tries to grasp what absolute knowledge is to the moment that consciousness suddenly attains it, consciousness has undergone a journey within a journey. From the perspective of the last chapter of the *Phenomenology* consciousness can look back on all the stages of the journey and see the journey as a circle. What consciousness finds through this subset voyage is not divine enlightenment or anything that is beyond the ordinary. Instead, it is as Joyce says in *Ulysses*, “If Socrates leaves his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend. Every life has many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves.”³⁹ The consciousness that returns from its intellectual journey continues to meet with the various stages of consciousness, except now it sees them not as illusions, but as they actually are. The wise man, as a parallel, is wise not because he can win all quarrels, but because he has seen all the quarrels there are and understands how to interact when he comes across a quarrel.

³⁸ Wallace William, *The Logic of Hegel* translated from *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 22.

³⁹ Joyce James, *Ulysses* (Lexington, KY: Simon & Brown, 2012), 9: 1041-6.

Understanding absolute knowledge, I believe, is similar to understanding a mathematical equation. That is not to say it is a quantitative endeavor; but, because the mind takes similar steps to develop its grasp for both subjects. In the case of mathematics, upon first encounter, the mind draws from what it finds most relatable to translate the equation. $2+2=4$, for instance, is perhaps interpreted by having two pairs of objects being piled into a group of four. As its understanding develops, the mind is then able to recognize the concept of the equation and see the organizing principle that holds it together. With $2+2=4$, the expression on the left side is bonded to the right side by amounting to an equal sum. Finally, when the mind gets a complete hold of this equation, it is able to apply mathematical knowledge to different things in the world. It is to be noted that the application of this knowledge does not physically alter things in the world. Instead, it gives the mind a new way to perceive the same things, which subsequently changes how the mind frames the world.

This process is akin to the attainment of absolute knowledge because the mind also begins with analogs, proceeds to the abstract, and ends with knowledge that sheds a different light on its original conceptions. We see the first step in the correspondence that Kojève establishes between absolute knowledge and the wise man. The wise man is introduced as the link between the infinite realm of absolute knowledge and the finite realm of humanity. His wisdom comes from knowing things that are divine and human and the respective causes of each. This does not mean the wise man simultaneously grasps everything in the temporal and a-temporal realm; rather, because he understands the relationship between divine and human things, he is able to figure out how each subject is instantiated into particulars.

The second step, recognizing the concept of absolute knowledge, is articulated through formal logic. As Hyppolite shows with $I=I$ and Cassirer demonstrates with $\Phi(x)$, absolute knowledge is a form of the true infinity— an infinite that contains the finite and infinite within itself. The individual self equates with the universal self and the universal self is what grows out of the individual self. Each is the other's counterpart. In like manner, even though Φ and x are fundamentally different logic types, Φ and x are inseparable because their significance is preserved to the extent that they are bonded together as $\Phi(x)$. In and by themselves, Φ would be an empty principle and x would be a blind series.

Now, in the case of absolute knowledge, the third step of grounding the theoretical in the practical is distinct from common subjects. Absolute knowledge is not a thing to be cashed out. The mind that grasps absolute knowledge does not reach a summation, but a consummation. Absolute knowledge is not the apex of knowledge, but all knowledge. This means its application does not dichotomize what falls within absolute knowledge and what is left behind. Instead, the True is the whole. Absolute knowledge is the knowledge that is devoted to preserving the disjunction between opposites and recognizing that there is a “double sense of all things.”⁴⁰

For the philosopher who holds to the correspondence theory of truth, this is a tremendously slippery idea to apprehend because absolute knowledge is not a static presentation of things in the world, such as an encyclopedic text. In his preface, Hegel uses the image of “a synoptic table like a skeleton with tickets stuck all over it”⁴¹ to warn against the fallacy of a simple catalogue, in which the disposition to order and arrange

⁴⁰ Verene, *Hegel's Absolute*, 98.

⁴¹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 30.

the subject mistreats it as a lifeless substance.⁴² While a labeled skeleton may present every part of the human body, it does not convey humanity. Analogously, simply applying concepts to the world is likely to overlook the organic form that absolute knowledge takes.

Thinking in such a manner is like fitting square pegs into round holes. It not only misses the point but also destroys the original. As we have seen earlier with Hyppolite's synthesis, by forcing the in-itself and the for-itself into the rigid definition of in-and-for-itself, he fails to preserve the disjunction between the duality. A true grasp of Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge, I believe, requires us to look beyond what is framed by words. To say what something is, is to say what it is and also to say what it is not, to state its negative. Yet, absolute knowledge is inclusive of both.

Here, I turn to the eastern canon to convey this ineffable quality of Hegel's absolute knowledge because for the Asian philosopher, doing philosophy is not just an intellectual endeavor; it is also engaging in a practical way of being in the world.

The *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi is a Taoist doctrine that exemplifies philosophical thinking as such. It pursues human wisdom by way of "actionless action", a manner of conduct that interjects only the necessary amount of action to bring things in accord with their natural course. Its central concern is to understand the Tao, an expert way of being in the natural world. While this may seem nonsensical at first glance, its depth becomes apparent when one understands the origins of Taoism.

The analytic depth psychologist Carl Jung describes Taoism as "a thinking in terms of the whole."⁴³ This description refers to how Taoism accentuates the

⁴² Verene, *Hegel's Absolute*, 2.

⁴³ Wilhelm, *Secret of the Golden Flower*, 489.

macrocosm by always choosing the middle course, seeing things as they are and avoiding the seduction of particular extremities. The Taoists devised this mode of thinking by observing nature: through balancing opposites, nature ensures all things follow their natural courses. When the earth is too dry, the clouds rain. When the flood is too high, the sun shines. The Taoists believe that since this archetype has always prevailed, it would be wise to conduct the self as nature does— to act always with moderation and without excess.

So what is the Tao? As Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi describes, “The state in which ego and non-ego are no longer opposed is called the pivot of Tao.”⁴⁴ As a concept, the Tao is that which exists *through* the opposites and dwells in the middle ground. It does not pertain to any one side because choosing one thing means to negate its counterpart. And as such, the name of the Tao is only an indexical term. The first line of the *Tao Te Ching* states, “The Way [Tao] that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way: The names that can be named are not unvarying names.”⁴⁵ The Tao is not captured by a concrete definition because it does not reside as a definite. For a thing to be stated, one must be able to categorize the thing as what it *is* and what it *is not*. Yet in this case, the Way is found in neither category because it is impervious to relativity. To claim X is good also implies that X is not evil. Yet if X thrived between the duality of good and evil, neither good nor evil can adequately describe X.

Common descriptors of the Tao relate to its flexibility and permeation of all things. One way to think about how the Tao functions is to liken its behavior to water, “The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not

⁴⁴ Jung, C.G., *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Bollingen Series XX: the Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 72.

⁴⁵ Waley, *The Way and Its power*, 141.

scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain.”⁴⁶ Water does not rush to the fore or force itself to push towards a certain direction. It flows without actively trying to flow. Water also does not choose between what it nourishes. It is for both the pure and the foul because it pertains to the laws of nature rather than that of man. In front of water, the disdainful and the praiseworthy are equally creatures of thirst.

The Tao, like water, abides by its own pace and follows its own accord. It actively does without trying to do. The literal translation of Tao is “nature’s way”. This claims that the Tao is a reflection of nature’s higher logic. Such logic is distinctive from how human beings understand the world because nature does not differentiate between what ought and ought not be done. It simply seeks to bring things back to the way they *naturally are*. An example of this is the lack of moral consideration in nature, “Heaven and Earth are ruthless; To them the ten thousand things are but straw dogs.”⁴⁷ Nature, as implied by Heaven and Earth, is ruthless because it acts only in accord to its own way. When a tornado wreaks havoc, it is not being an “evil” tornado, it is just being the way it is. Nature approves of both the good *and* the bad, believing in both the truthful man *and* the liar because nature does only what needs to be done. Thus all things to nature are temporal and insubstantial like the ceremonial straw dogs that we make as attractive objects and then ritually destroy.

In Taoist terms, how the Tao operates is characterized by the concept Wu Wei, which literally translates into non-doing. It designates a kind of human behavior that is in harmony with the Tao. Analogous to the Tao, Wu Wei cannot be actively pursued for its entire essence rests in taking action by simply being, just as nature does everything

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 151.

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 147.

without doing a specific thing, i.e. the sun shines without trying to shine and the flowers bloom without trying to bloom. One way that the Taoists employ Wu Wei is through their practice of calligraphy with water on stone. Using water instead of ink implies the written character is evanescent because every character written in this form will evaporate. Choosing to write on stone instead of paper indicates that no physical change is interjected through the act, for no amount of brush strokes will dent the stone. Value is gained by engaging in this practice because it reminds the practitioner that all things, like his transient work, are ephemeral. And in this sense, even though there is a lack of net result, something is gained out of nothing.

The Sage is a human representation of Taoist philosophy that exemplifies this particular comportment. The Sage knows that he cannot articulate the Tao with language, and thus he carries on a wordless teaching⁴⁸. This means he does not express the Tao through any sort of advice-giving or instructional remark. Instead, he demonstrates Wu Wei through his conduct. The Sage is a prudent person, that is to say, he preserves a balance in his action so that he acts without creating reactions. The Sage gives each problem the precise amount of action for resolution. Examples of this would be to employ force instead of violence or to be just instead of cruel. This kind of conduct depends on an insight to the bounds of moderation and the ability to distinguish between surplus and deficiency. The Sage not only knows how to respond in particular to any and all situations, he also has a constant awareness of the bigger picture. In other words, Wu Wei is a profound form of *savoir-faire* that governs human conduct in the world.

⁴⁸ Ibid.:197.

Although Wu Wei is conceptualized as an embodiment of the Tao, ultimately, I think it falls short of evoking the full spirit of the Tao. Wu Wei, as a definite concept, is constantly attached to its opposite, purposeful action. And as such, Wu Wei by itself cannot fully access the middle ground of the Tao because at any moment it dwells on one opposite over the other. Yet, the same attempt made through the paradox of “Wei Wu Wei” produces a distinct result. The literal translation of Wei Wu Wei is doing non-doing. Unlike Wu Wei, both sides of the opposites are presented in this paradox. The Tao is manifested through Wei Wu Wei not simply because the entire duality is presented; but, because the contradiction between the opposites accentuates the role that each side plays within the whole and their interconnectedness each has with its counterpart.

Ying and Yang, for example, illuminate their unique identities through the tension generated from their contradiction as being Ying and Yang. Its pictorial symbol portrays this notion.⁴⁹ Yang and Yang make a full circle because the Ying does not cross over to the Yang nor does the Yang spill upon the Ying. For a thing to be held together, it must involve an equal amount of strain and slack. Excessive strain collapses the thing, yet too much slack disperses it. The right amount of tension between the Ying and Yang actively reminds each of its necessary connection with the other and the delicate balance that they share together.

Given the Tao’s emphasis on the interdependence between contraries, the Tao formulates the absolute in a distinctive way different from its western conceptions. Absolute knowledge is not an achievement; instead, it is a way of being in the world. To

⁴⁹ The symbol of Ying and Yang:



see how this unfolds, it is necessary first to understand the separation between the eastern and western philosophical mindset.

In the western canons, philosophical knowledge is commonly perceived as something to be actively attained. Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is a purposeful pursuit that hopes to acquire wisdom. This intellectual quest typically takes the shape of a rational corpus that aims to either prove or disprove a specific thing.⁵⁰

For the east, philosophy must be lived. Much like the Taoist Sage who demonstrates Wu Wei through prudence, philosophical thinking is manifested through how one conducts the self. Textual philosophy is regarded as an analog for the greater concepts that stand beyond the framework of language. Whereas the west generally abides by the letter of the philosophical corpus, eastern thinkers believe that words by themselves fail to capture the organic form of philosophy. Philosophy as recorded by language is only a particular instantiation of the original concept, just as the *Tao Te Ching* says in the very first line, “the Way that can be told of is not the unvarying Way.”⁵¹ The unvarying Way is the universal that the particular names of the Way collectively attempt to reach. Yet this endeavor is destined to fail because the Way is ineffable. Every descriptor in language is played off of its opposite. What is big is not small; what is tall is not short. Yet the Way, as the middle ground between opposites, is inclusive of both sides. It is big and small, tall and short. No definite word can grasp the Way because the Way involves every word.

⁵⁰ My goal is not to accuse all western philosophers of only conducting rational investigation, for I do realize that there are numerous examples such as the Stoics, Socrates, Nietzsche, etc. that see philosophy as a way of life. Instead, I simply want to point out that rational investigation seems to be the norm of how philosophy is done in the west.

⁵¹ Ibid.:141.

This separation in philosophical thinking between the east and the west forms a sharp contrast as to how absolute knowledge is conceived. For the western thinker, absolute knowledge entails a sense of achievement. With Kojève, we see absolute knowledge is described in proprietary terms: “To ask any question whatsoever leads sooner or later, after a longer or shorter series of answers-questions, to one of the questions found within the circular knowledge that the Wise Man possesses.”⁵² In his analysis, Kojève shows that absolute knowledge is circular knowledge because every particular instance of knowledge is contained in absolute knowledge and absolute knowledge is contained in every particular instance of knowledge. Through the awareness of his identity as a man who understands his relation to humankind, the Wise Man possesses absolute knowledge. In other words, absolute knowledge is like an intellectual trophy that is won through the grasping of how the whole is held together.

Similarly, Hyppolite’s exposition is driven by the attempt to ground absolute knowledge in the finite so that he can prove its accessibility to humankind. This intention is directly expressed through the question that opens his analysis of absolute knowledge, “How can a knowledge which of itself is atemporal, an absolute knowledge, have temporal conditions in the existence and development of a humanity?”⁵³ Hyppolite unfolds this question through the equivalence of the universal self with the individual self, or I=I. He affirms that when consciousness adopts thinking in the form of *Begriff*, I=I becomes a form of self-knowledge. This is because consciousness realizes that regardless of the scope that I=I presents, every combination of the universal self equating itself to the individual self is held together by the same bond as presented

⁵² Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 94.

⁵³ Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit”*, 596.

through I=I. By altering one's mindset, one finds absolute knowledge through self-knowledge. And as such, a finite formula can contain infinite knowledge. These two cases show that in the western philosophy, the pursuit of absolute knowledge is akin to reaching for the crowning jewel of all knowledge. It is a thing to be obtained, rather than attained, through rigorous philosophical labor. And once he or she possesses absolute knowledge, his or her intellectual quest is attained.⁵⁴

On the other end of the philosophical spectrum, the Taoists fundamentally reject any attempt to obtain absolute knowledge. Here, absolute knowledge can be seen as a form of the Tao. The two are comparable because absolute knowledge in the Hegelian sense consists of a true infinity that also sheds light on the Tao. Just as the true infinity does not pit the infinite against the finite, the Tao observes the interconnectedness between opposites. The *Tao Te Ching* states, "To become straight, let yourself be bent. To become full, be hollow."⁵⁵ While this depiction may appear to be a contradiction, it is only because one has yet to think in terms of the whole. Being bent is necessary to becoming straight because what is now straight was once bent. Being hollow is necessary to becoming full because what is now full was once hollow. Opposites contradict each other only in their immediacy. On the grander scale, the necessary conjunction between the two harmonizes their polarities.⁵⁶ This kind of conjunction

⁵⁴ My aim is not to accuse all philosophers in the western tradition of thinking about knowledge as a form of domination. I recognize that there are several who resist this mindset; Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, are the ones that immediately come to mind. My point is here to illuminate Taoist thinking by stating its negative.

⁵⁵ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 171.

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that one way to think about this kind of conjunction is to use musical harmony as an analog; as in a harmony, no note is dissolved into the other, but something new is held together by the different parts.

characterizes the Tao. The Tao is absolute because it holds together both sides of the duality.

Turning back to the Taoist's rejection of the attempt to obtain absolute knowledge, this endeavor is condemned for two reasons: First, the Taoists believe that to strive for something only means that one has not recognized the transient nature of all things. The person who actively tries to move in a certain way or achieve a specific goal only shows that he or she is still caught within the fleeting moment of things. The wayfarer trapped within the thick of the fog does not exit into the sunlight by wandering in a random direction. Action as such will only cause greater disorientation. Instead, simply by waiting for the fog to pass, he or she will have achieved without effort what otherwise would be a tiresome and fruitless attempt. As the *Tao Te Ching* remarks, "He who stands on tip-toe, does not stand firm; He who takes the longest strides, does not walk the fastest...he that possesses the Tao does not linger."⁵⁷ What the Taoist advocates is not to surrender oneself out of resignation; but rather, to bear in mind that acting before knowing how to act is futile. Attempting to obtain absolute knowledge is foolish because the effort that one invests is wasted by the failure to recognize the way of nature.

Second, the Taoist conceives of absolute knowledge as intrinsically unobtainable.⁵⁸ It is not a thing to be grasped by the mind. This has echoes of the Hegelian *Vorstellung*. Instead of directly accessing the significance that thought carries,

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 173.

⁵⁸ One must note the difference between obtain and attain. The former refers to acquiring something external to the self, such as obtaining permission from another; whereas the latter pertains to the internal, such as one attains the goal that one sets for the self. Thinking through *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* shares the same distinction; Hegel believes absolute knowledge is attainable, rather than obtainable.

in *Vorstellung*, consciousness conceives of thought as a thing presented to the mind, much like a signpost placed before an object. Hegel warns against “picture-thinking” as such because this kind of thinking does not produce true self-determination. The external other stuck between consciousness and its apprehension of self-knowledge prevents consciousness from reconciling with itself through itself.

The Taoist shares this Hegelian concern but provides a distinct explanation. Absolute knowledge cannot be obtained because its absolute nature does not allow it to be something definite. If it were obtainable, absolute knowledge would not be absolute, for then it is rendered into the opposite of unobtainable. No form of opposites can pin down the absolute because all opposites are but fleeting variables. Change is always occurring through opposition as opposites grow out of each other; only that which is unvarying is absolute⁵⁹.

An analogy for this is the rising and setting of the sun over a tall mountain. At dawn, the sun illuminates one side of the mountain and shadows the other. Yet as the sun sets through the day, the side that was brightened is casted into darkness, and the side that was darkened is now illuminated. The mountain that change occurs upon is the mortal being. The Taoist Sage who is in harmony with the Tao knows that sunrise and sunset are just how the sun naturally is. He does not dwell upon the interchanging relation between that which is revealed or concealed, for he knows these occurrences are only temporary. That which was obscured might one day be clear, and that which was clear might one day be obscured. The Taoist Sage stands his ground and remains

⁵⁹ This is not to say change itself is that which is absolute; rather, what is unvarying in this constant play between opposites is how oppositions give rise to each other through their interconnection.

unaffected. This sort of conduct exerts authority without engagement. It is Wu Wei. On the other hand, if the person fails to recognize the transient nature of the contraries, he will always be caught within these momentary exchanges. By reacting to the conversions that occur infinitely, he shall ultimately collapse himself in the attempt to do so.

Likewise, instead of trying to obtain absolute knowledge as an object to be acquired, one should attune the self to absolute knowledge just as one would be in harmony with nature. The Taoist Sage does not try to overcome the Tao, but acts in accord *within* the Tao.

So how does this distinction contribute to answering our central question, i.e. how is Hegel's absolute knowledge absolute? Hegel's absolute knowledge interpreted as a form of the Tao is a natural way of being in the world. One does not try to incorporate absolute knowledge into oneself; instead one incorporates the self into absolute knowledge by realizing that the Tao is what is most constant. Conversely, Hegel's absolute knowledge as interpreted by Kojève and Hyppolite is knowledge of the infinite understood through the finite's relation to the infinite. Understanding the Wise Man reveals wisdom through connecting the particular instantiation of a wise *man* with the universal representation of the bond between wisdom and man, a *wise man*. Through the knowledge of the individual self as equated to the universal self, or $I=I$, consciousness apprehends absolute knowledge by recognizing the finite bond that is infinitely repeated in every combination of the universal and the individual. For the western thinker, the dialogue between question and answer culminates in absolute knowledge, which simultaneously responds to the question at hand and to all possible questions. In other words, when the person arrives at absolute knowledge, every answer he or she gives is both a unique solution and an absolute answer.

If we stay faithful to Hegel's conception of the true is the whole, then despite the apparent contradiction between the eastern and western interpretation of absolute knowledge, we see that both sides are connected by the mutual belief that absolute knowledge is found in what is most ordinary. With Kojève, the wise man's wisdom comes from his understanding of the further whole of which he is a part. With Hyppolite, the knowledge of I=I contains absolute knowledge because the universal and the individual self, as referents, apply to all things in the world. The Sage demonstrates Wu Wei through how he conducts his self. In all three instances, absolute knowledge is not knowledge that is unexpected. It is not a transporting experience or the acquiring of an extraordinary vision. Instead, it can be expressed as a form of self-knowledge. We began our understanding of Hegel's absolute knowledge with the Zen quotation, "Before Satori, mountains are mountains, valleys are valleys; After Satori, mountains are mountains, valleys are valleys". Hegel's absolute knowledge is absolute because it recognizes that it is not the mountains and valleys that change; it is the self that changes. The lack of self-knowledge invites its fulfillment, and its fulfillment always presupposes a lack. Fulfilling this non-fulfillment reveals absolute knowledge.

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