

THE QUEST FOR MONISM: ON THE UNITY AND CONTRADICTORINESS OF HEGEL'S CONCEPT

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Abstract. *The article offers a reconstruction of Gregory S. Moss's interpretation of Hegel as developed in Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics. It focuses on the status of the Concept and on the claim that its unity is intrinsically contradictory, outlining the main theoretical articulations of Moss's argument. The book's treatment of the contradictions faced by traditional metaphysics is presented in outline, as a basis for a closer examination of the critical issues that emerge from the author's proposal. While acknowledging the originality and speculative strength of the account, the article raises some reservations concerning the relation between concrete universality and particularity within Moss's dialectic reading of Hegel.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Concept; Monism; Unity; Contradiction*

Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics: the Logic of Singularity, the last book by Gregory S. Moss, investigates the status of the Concept in Hegel's thought, offering what is presented as a metaphysical interpretation of Hegel. The text stands out for its rigorous argumentation and its theoretical orientation, as it aims at defending the fundamental value of Hegel's logic within ongoing contemporary philosophical debates. Although the volume's extensive reach does not allow to treat it in its entirety, an attempt is made here to offer, albeit briefly, a concise exposition of it, with the aim of highlighting its most interesting aspects and noting, finally, a possibly critical one. The reconstruction focuses particularly on the theme of the universality and the contradictory nature of the unity of the Concept, and is aimed at exploring the soundness of the strongly monistic interpretation of Hegel's philosophy

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provided by the author. Following Moss's exposition, the text is divided in two parts. The first briefly outlines the *pars destruens* of the book, in which the author highlights the inherent difficulties of traditional pluralist metaphysics. The second part follows the *pars construens* and raises a possible objection against his speculative monism.

1. *The Contradictions of Traditional Metaphysics*

The first chapters of the book are devoted to reconstructing and assessing a fundamental tendency within the Western metaphysical tradition. Through thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and above all Kant, Moss traces the recurrent inclination of philosophical thought to ground knowledge in a plurality of principles. This tendency finds its most paradigmatic expression in the Kantian dualisms between understanding and sensibility, the universality of the categories and the particularity of intuition; oppositions that epitomize this metaphysical orientation. While such a stance allows for a philosophical justification of the heterogeneity of empirical experience, it is nonetheless vulnerable to the charge of relying on unjustified presuppositions, as it proves incapable of accounting for what Moss, following Hegel, refers to as *Singularity*: the unity – indeed, the theoretical centre around which the entire work revolves – of particularity and universality. Thus, the author's attention turns to those who attempted to purge the Kantian system of its fundamental flaw by engaging in the search for the «synthetic universal» – i.e., the Absolute – in which all heteronomies could locate their genesis. In particular, the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling share the goal of overcoming Kant's duality of principles, either by appealing to intellectual intuition for the transcendental analysis of the I, or by employing it in order to ensure the identity of subjective and objective, spirit and nature. However, in either case this leads to rehabilitating a certain form of 'self-referentiality' such that the Absolute, the principle, 'knows itself', posits itself as the object of itself as subject. For Moss, this unitary form of identity and difference corresponds to the ontological and epistemological foundation of the only possible

metaphysics. He identifies its origin in the neo-Platonic tradition – particularly in Plotinus – and sees this tradition as finally finding its most accomplished expression in Hegel’s thought¹, more so than in Fichte or Schelling. Read from a neo-Platonic perspective, the Hegelian system indeed enables a correct understanding of the Absolute – or similarly, of the One. The distinctive feature of Hegel system is the conscious adoption of those traits of thought that the Western tradition has often, to varying degrees, rejected: the self-reference of the principle, which was already anticipated by other proponents of the idealist movement, and the possibility of violating the principle of non-contradiction.

In general, the thesis underlying the historico-philosophical reconstruction of the book’s first chapters is that dualist philosophies like Kant’s have always precluded themselves from an authentic understanding of the Absolute; and this is due to their strenuous allegiance to Aristotle’s *principium firmissimum*. Moreover, the very division of principles is a result of the dogmatic acceptance of the law of non-contradiction, as the impossibility of self-reference. Therefore, the *a priori* unity of subjectivity and objectivity, depends on it. What then needs to be noted, according to Moss, is how detrimental the consequences are for a philosophy that does not take the form of speculative monism: from the rejection of the Absolute does not in fact solely follow the impossibility of a correct determination of the finite. Rather, and above all, from this it follows the emergence of unresolvable aporias which cannot be overcome unless one is willing to renounce to the assumptions they are based upon. Thus, as recognizing the value of Hegelian metaphysics allows to approximate as closely as possible the authentic nature of the Absolute, a refusal of Hegel’s principles leads inevitably into contradiction and exposes one to the dangers of six paradoxes that form the central focus of the first part of the book. In order of consideration, these are:

¹ Cf. G.S. Moss, *Hegel’s Foundation Free Metaphysics: the logic of Singularity*, London-New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 73-91. As Moss writes: «Plotinus also conceives of thought thinking itself as staying the same as itself in its otherness». This constitutes the «dimension of the Neo-platonic legacy in Hegel» (ivi, p. 264).

The problem of nihilism: The assumption of an original separation between subject and object, spirit and nature, prevents the establishment of a single criterion for determining the truth of assertions. As Moss shows, following Schelling, since there is only one truth, there must also be only one principle. To deny this is to forfeit any guarantee of the truth-value of distinct and incompatible propositions, as these would be derived from different principles. If multiple principles existed, contradictory propositions could both be true; but this is impossible, because the incompatibility of two propositions implies a difference in their truth-values. In Schelling's case, the postulation of the principle of identity is intended precisely to reconcile the separate domains of spirit and nature.

The problem of instantiation: once the postulate of the duality of principles is accepted, one cannot provide a valid criterion for there to be correspondence between the two poles. In the case of Kant's *Critique*, that the intellect cannot be intuitive in fact prevents a real understanding of objectivity; while in the case of the platonic *Parmenides*, the impossibility for the universal to be, wholly or partially, in the particular, obliging their division, denies the formulation of judgment, so that a *petitio principii* follows².

The missing difference: from the juxtaposition of conceptuality and objectivity it follows that the concept cannot exhibit «existential implication»³. But then there is no rationale for the difference between the class of concepts and particular concepts, neither internally nor externally. Not internally, because by assumption the universality of the concept does not inherently contain the principle of its own differentiation. Not externally, because there are no concepts external to the class of concepts; nor can the diversity of concepts have a non-conceptual origin – otherwise, the class of concepts would not be such⁴.

² Ivi, pp. 94-101.

³ «Existential implication is the thesis that the universal is sufficient for its own particularization, such that from the claim that 'all S is P' one can infer that 'there is some S such that S is P'» (ivi, p. 145).

⁴ Ivi, pp. 159-162.

Absolute empiricism: the opposite hypothesis, that the conceptual content is in fact solely empirical, also leads to a contradiction. Specifically, it would require the identification of the universal of the concept and the sensory particular, contrary to all premises. Alternatively, if the existence of the former is entirely denied, the latter becomes unrepresentable and devoid of determination⁵.

The problem of onto-theology: if the opposition of object and concept grants the latter the status of universal, then it also turns out, contradictorily, to be particular. In fact, the concept's impossibility of internal differentiation presupposes that it assumes a determined form (e.g., unity, indivisibility), which, however, is opposed to other forms. Eleatic aporias such as that of nothingness find their origin in this paradox: that the universal, as such, is already determined, and therefore particular; that being, in order to be, must set itself against nothingness, thereby entering into a relationship with something. When elevated to an absolute, the unconditioned universal cannot be confined within an oppositional realm, nor thereby be subject to definition⁶. This is the problem that negative theology seeks to address: the Absolute must be conceived as a unity that transcends all qualification, because attributing qualities to the Absolute – even those of universality or infinity – inevitably entails its determination. And since every determination implies opposition – as it is the case, particularity or finitude –, such attribution results in the particularization of the Absolute, thereby negating its unconditionality.

The third man: since the Absolute, in order to be referred to as «Absolute», requires a certain form of conceptualization in judgment, what follows can only be a *regressus in infinitum*. If, as noted with the onto-theological problem, the Absolute corresponds to an unrepresentable universal, then any attempt to conceptually describe it, being inherently particularizing, will prove insufficient. This inadequacy will eventually lead to the need

⁵ Ivi, pp. 169-170.

⁶ Ivi, pp. 189-191.

to postulate a further Absolute, which is not particular (yet, paradoxically, particular because of that), not determined (yet already determined), and so on, *ad infinitum*⁷.

According to the author's thesis, recognizing the contradictory nature of the principle turns out to be the only way to avoid the paradoxes that compromise dualist metaphysics (as well as, on closer inspection, the Eleatic monism that shares the same logic). It is Moss's belief that the concept is thus a «dialetheic»⁸ concept, namely determinable only in a double-edged sense, as at once universal and particular. Refusing to indulge in the possibility of an easy mysticism⁹, he therefore opts for the Hegelian alternative, that of «absolute dialetheism», which is the subject of analysis in the second part of the book.

2. Absolute Dialetheism and the Theory of Singularity

Moss develops his theory of Singularity through critical engagement with contemporary philosophical currents, thereby bringing the originality of his position into sharp relief. His rejection of traditional logic paves the way for a framework grounded in fundamentally different assumptions; assumptions that allow the Absolute to be conceived as merging together attributes long regarded as mutually incompatible. In this light, the concept of the «synthetic universal», whose necessity was indicated by both the late Fichte and Schelling, becomes a concrete possibility when reinterpreted through Hegel. This concept corresponds to the «existential implication» that classical metaphysics had largely excluded: the possibility for the universal to generate the particular

⁷ Ivi, pp. 226-234.

⁸ Ivi, p. 234. From the noun «dialetheia», it is a neologism inherited from the logician Graham Priest. It denotes a true contradiction. Cf. the well-known article G. Priest, *What Is So Bad About Contradictions?*, «The Journal of Philosophy», 95 (8), 1998, pp. 410-426.

⁹ See Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, pp. 244-245.

internally, from within itself; the possibility for the universal to be particular, as it produces its own otherness. In the reconstruction offered by the author (chapter eight), the particularization of the universal is an expression of a reflexive, self-referential logical movement. What was previously implied as the problem of the third man now becomes an inherent quality of the concept itself: its determination as an absolute whole, corresponding to a conceptual predication, is already a particular definition of it; or, in other words, a moment initially seen as analytic, where the universal registers its identity with itself, through the act of positing a relation, defines its particularity, ultimately resulting in a synthetic process. From the definition of the self-identity of the concept it follows, at the same time, that it is also different from itself. This is so inasmuch as in the analytic proposition «A is A», which asserts the self-equality of the universal, the concept A is universal insofar as the content of A is concerned, but particular concerning its form. For it appears that A is as such *one in number*¹⁰, and therefore, by definition, particular. Again, in the propositional form, the universal falls into a division such that, understood as a predicate, it results in something determined. The process of defining the concept turns out to change its status, revealing a division between what is posited (the finite form of the predicate) and what is presupposed (its universality). Through the analysis of the concept, its contradictory nature thus emerges: defined as universal, it is, for that very reason, particular. Particularity is inherent within universality as that which determines it. The unity of the universal with the particular is the Singularity, the concrete understanding of the Absolute¹¹. Now, the fact that Moss identifies, in the pages

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 261.

¹¹ As Moss sums up: «The unity of the universal with the particular is what Hegel calls the *singular* (Einzelheit), or what has for a long time been translated and discussed as *the individual*. Each universal is ‘such and such’ – it is universal. Yet, each universal is particular, for it is a differentiation of universality or an *instance* of universality. Each is a *this*. Since the universality is both a ‘this’ and a ‘such and such’, it is *this such and such*, it is not just universal or particular, it is

of the *Science of Logic*¹², such a characterization of the Concept is one of the distinguishing features of his interpretation of Hegel – especially when compared to the dominant ones. Not only is such an exegesis of the Hegelian Idea clearly incompatible with the deflationist theses of Hartmann¹³ or the coherentist theses of Brandom¹⁴ and Kreis¹⁵, but it also shows a quite significant gap in comparison to other interpretations of Hegel's dialectic which nevertheless share the opposition to the principle of non-contradiction¹⁶. Whereas traditionally the negation of the Aristote-

both. The identity of each universal as *this such and such* is what Hegel captures with this term 'singularity': it is the unity of particularity and universality» (ivi, pp. 264-265).

¹² As is evident, the reconstruction previously provided generally follows, albeit not exclusively, the one articulated by Hegel in the Doctrine of Essence, specifically in the well-known dialectic of identity and difference. See ivi, pp. 254-258 and G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (henceforth GW, followed by the number of the respective volume), in Verbindung mit der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft herausgegeben von der Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Hamburg, Meiner, 1968ff., vol. 11, pp. 260-265.

¹³ See K. Hartmann, *Die ontologische Option: Studien zu Hegels Propädeutik, Schellings Hegel-Kritik und Hegels Phanomenologie des Geistes*, Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1976; on this line, see also the anti-realist interpretations of Fulda and Henrich. See H.F. Fulda, D. Henrich, *Materialien zu Hegels 'Phanomenologie des Geistes'*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1973.

¹⁴ See R. Brandom, *Holism and Idealism in Hegel's Phenomenology*, in id., *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 178-209.

¹⁵ See G. Kreis, *Negative Dialektik des Unendlichen: Kant, Hegel, Cantor*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2015.

¹⁶ For a non-coherentist account see, for example, M. Wolff, *Über Hegels Lehre von Widerspruch*, in D. Henrich (ed. by), *Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik. Formation und Rekonstruktion*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1986; C. Iber, *Metaphysik absoluter Relationalität, Eine Studie zu den beiden ersten Kapiteln von Hegels Wesenlogik*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1990; M. Bordignon, *Ai limiti della verità. Il problema della contraddizione nella logica di Hegel*, Pisa, Ets, 2015; E. Ficara, *The Form of Truth: Hegel's Philosophical Logic*, Berlin, DeGruyter, 2020.

lian axiom has been regarded as belonging to the sphere of the finite – and thus confined to individual dialectical moments, with the Absolute conceived as a reconciliatory instance that reestablishes the unity of the whole¹⁷ – Moss's interpretation introduces a significant shift, one that reconfigures the entire structure of the system. Moss himself, quoting Hegel, refers to it as an «inverted world»¹⁸: the individual dialectical moments are indeed abstract, but insofar as they do not completely partake in the rational contradiction of the Idea; the finite determinations are clearly in themselves contradictory, nevertheless because their intellectual understanding does not fully recognize the «speculative» contradictory nature of the Absolute. Thus, the actual truth of Singularity is opposed to the merely apparent truth of finiteness; a *Wirklichkeit* is opposed to a *Realität*, where only the former assumes the infinite form of the concrete universal, while the latter is still defective, insufficient.

While Moss is certainly not the only interpreter who reads Hegel in this manner – and indeed the influence of the non-foundationalist school where he comes from is evident¹⁹ – the

¹⁷ The idea of an *ablatio alteritatis*, negating the dialectical contradiction within the unity of the absolute, was commonly shared throughout all the twentieth century. Among the most well-known cases, the interpretation given by the first generation of the Frankfurt school. See T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in Id., *Schriften*, vol. 6, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1973; H. Marcuse, *Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt a. M., V. Klostermann, 1932; M. Theunissen, *Sein und Schein. Die kritische Funktion der Hegelschen Logik*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1980.

¹⁸ «The dialetheic world is not our *consistent* world of 'super-sensible' laws [i.e., the principle of non-contradiction] but it is that *consistent world inverted* [...]. The Absolute Concept of which Hegel speaks [...] is a true contradiction. Or rather, the relative world of oppositions in which concepts remain what they are in excluding their negations in itself the *inversion of the inverted world* – the dialetheic world turned upside down». Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, p. 277.

¹⁹ See for example W. Maker, *Philosophy Without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1994; R.D. Winfield, *Overcoming Foundations: Studies in Systematic Philosophy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.

philosophical implications of such a stance deserve more consideration. If a criticism were to be raised, the main concern would be that an interpretation that posits, as it appears, two different forms of contradiction, one *false*, the other *true*, runs the risk of reconstituting an aporetic form of dualism. This is at least what seems to emerge from chapters eleven and fourteen, where it becomes clear that in the distinction between the actual reality of the Absolute and the realm of finite determinations the latter's side also encompasses the totality of the empirical dimension²⁰. According to the reconstruction presented at this point, on the one hand there is the self-referential truth of the Concept, and on the other hand the falsity of the hetero-referentiality of representational conceptuality, that's such because it places its own particularity not within itself, as the authentic Absolute does, but in the external realm of the sensible world: «If we consider some examples of empirical kinds we shall see right away how nature fails to exhibit the 'strictness of the concept' and 'runs wild into the blind irrational'. [...] The lesson, of course, is that empirical determinations are not reflexive or *self-predicative*»²¹. Now, while this interpretation may help avoid some of the paroxysms denounced by Krug, such as the possibility of deriving a pen from its mere concept (since such a concept would in fact be intrinsically false), it nevertheless raises potential philosophical worries about the nature of the opposition between the *concrete universal*, on the one hand, and *the abstract domain of empirical representations*, on the other. The question thus follows: isn't this a reenactment of the onto-theological problem, insofar as the Concept, even in the face of its speculative understanding, reveals an excess, an otherness, that denies its status as an absolute universality? Doesn't the opposition between the finite and the infinite correspond to the reaffirmation of an unjustified dualism, moving away from Hegelian principles? Upon closer examination, the fundamental problem of Eleatism – i.e., the problem of nothingness – resurfaces: that which opposes the

²⁰ See Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, p. 445ss.

²¹ Ivi, p. 446.

whole, contradicts its essence and does not share its status, is still something that, by being placed beyond it, by the mere fact of being, prevents its actual existence. If, as the Author claims, it is true that «the self-thinking thought of Absolute knowing has no concern for empirical determinations»²², then what follows is that these determinations, being excluded from the realm of the Idea, imply the denial of its universal character²³. Indeed, Moss actually gives a justification of the opposition between empirical-conceptual particularity and concrete universality. It can be found at the end of the aforementioned chapter eighth, where he claims a partial departure from Priest's dialetheism. Here, it is argued that for the contradictory nature of the Absolute to be authentic, it must itself embody contradiction to the extent that the negation of contradiction ensures its consistency. As Moss states, «since consistency is also the negation of contradiction, one could properly construe consistency as the self-externality or self-alienation of contradiction with itself»²⁴. It would then be possible, in this way, to interpret the opposition of the finite as a confirmation of the contradictory nature of the Absolute. Without such heteronomy, the Absolute would cease to be itself. If the dimension of finiteness

²² Ivi, p. 464.

²³ In this perspective, it may be appropriate to note how the identification of a dualistic framework at the foundation of the Hegelian system wouldn't stand alone when compared to other interpretations within the tradition (and could be inspired by Hegel's own word; see, for example, GW 14.1, p. 14). On the contrary, the inclination to interpret the Hegelian thought dualistically emerged early on and, in fact, was a distinctive feature of readings offered by the Hegelian Left (from Ruge and Feuerbach to Heine, Haym and Engels), extending even to the neo-Kantianism of Baden (see, in this regard, the 1905 *Antrittsvorlesung* by E. Lask, *Hegel in seinem Verhältnis zur Weltanschauung der Aufklärung*, in id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr/P. Siebeck, 1923). The problem, of course, lies in the fact that such an interpretation would openly contradict what Moss himself argues in the first part of his text, especially concerning the qualities that the Concept, as examined, must necessarily possess.

²⁴ Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, p. 280.

were denied, infinity would consequently vanish, as it would be deprived of the inherent contradiction that defines it. Moreover, as Moss points out, if such a distinction were to be supported, the empirical dimension would no more be a mere presupposition, since, just as the absolute would be self-consistent, the finite determinations would find their own *raison d'être* in its contradictory character. They would stop being «*ungrounded* assumptions. Because they are results of the creative activity of the concept»²⁵. However, this proposed solution, in addition to raising suspicions of being an *ad hoc* response, carries potentially uncontrollable consequences for the very understanding of the qualities of the Absolute. In fact, it would soon turn out that the Absolute is both universal and not universal, both particular and not particular, so that profound doubts would then arise regarding the actual status of the Concept. More specifically, what would compromise the validity of Moss's response is the fact that, upon closer examination, the universality of the Absolute would be denied by a particularity that is not internal to it, but rather external. This is because the dimension of finiteness in the empirical world, when considered in this manner, could hardly be identified with the particularity emerging from the self-referential structure of the concept examined earlier. If, in that case, the particularity was regarded as the result of an immanent necessity of the conceptual analysis and presented as a content indistinguishable from the determination of the universal, it now seems that the representative content could not be deduced from the concept of universality alone, and it appears, instead, that a specific presupposition is required solely to ensure the intrinsic contradictoriness of the Idea. But, if this is the case, it is then clear that such a presupposition would effectively involve a contradiction quite different from the 'speculative' one revealed by the Absolute, as it would only imply that the Concept, in the face of this distinction, is not the whole, but rather something finite. What should be acknowledged is, consequently, that when faced with two different kinds of particularity – one *concrete*, implied by the self-identity of the universal,

²⁵ Ivi, p. 468.

and the other *abstract*, presupposed for the self-externality of contradiction – a third one emerges: the universality of Singularity would, in fact, not be such, since its contradictory nature postulates the existence of an outer world, lacking its self-referential structure. In short, to claim that the existence of a world of phenomenal appearances renders the contradiction of the Absolute consistent is not the same as claiming that the contradiction of the Absolute is determined by its self-reflective character. In the former case, particularity stands in opposition to the universality of the Absolute, as something external to it; in the latter, it is the product of the Absolute's self-determining movement. And it is difficult to see how these two alternatives could be reconciled, for the generation of particularity by the self-reflective structure of the synthetic universal – namely, the universal's opposition to itself, and its becoming particular in that opposition – does not amount to an opposition to the empirical world, but rather to its own universality.

Although the difficulty identified above has the potential to compromise the soundness of Moss's metaphysical proposal, it hardly affects the overall quality of his book. There is no doubt that *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics* stands out for its clarity of exposition, intellectual acumen, and rigorous writing. Its interpretation is original and challenging. Moss's volume is notable not only for its original neo-Platonic interpretation of the Hegelian philosophy but also for the thorough exploration of its theoretical core. These characteristics serve as an invitation for readers to engage with the challenging textual content and, perhaps, inspire them to undertake further critical examinations. The enduring issue of the principle of knowledge here finds its own new, meticulous thematization: not merely a reflection on the answer Hegel gave to it, but rather the genuine attempt to offer, through Hegel, its solution.