

# TOTAL REALISM WITH MYSTICAL MODESTY: A COMMENT ON GREGORY MOSS' 'HEGEL'S FOUNDATIONS FREE METAPHYSICS'

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***Abstract.** In my comment, I focus on Gregory Moss' thesis that Hegel's Concept is self-particularizing and, thereby, existentially implicating. While I am extremely sympathetic with this reading, I will raise two worries. The first one concerns Moss' identification of the Concept's self-particularization with self-instantiation, which I believe is too austere to satisfy the need for the Concept to produce its own existence as Absolute. By reconstructing Hegel's discussion of essence as absolute negativity and reflection, I will suggest that Hegel presented an understanding of the Absolute as self-differing, rather than as self-instantiating, or self-repeating. My second worry concerns Moss' identification of absolute existence with absolute knowledge, the latter being the knowledge produced by philosophy. I argue that this identification makes the Absolute finite. Thus, I conclude that Moss' «total realism» needs to be mended with what I call 'mystical modesty'.*

***Keywords.** Absolute Existence; Essence; Positing; Instantiation; Expression*

## 1. Introduction

I believe that Gregory Moss' *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics* is one of the most interesting contributions to Hegel scholarship appeared in the last few years. Despite the breadth and ambition of its objective, and its highly speculative content, the book reads very easily, presenting highly complex and abstract notions with engaging and effective prose. The book spans over a quite vast array of authors in the Western philosophical tradition and, while focusing on Hegel, manages to offer a reconstruction of

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their thoughts that is not just instrumental to the interpretation of Hegel's text and does not make them into straw men<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, it offers a rigorous and detailed discussion of Section I. 'Subjectivity' of the Doctrine of the Concept, suggesting – in my view very convincingly – that this section, and especially Hegel's discussion of Concept within it, provides the key to understand the overall scope and structure of the *Logic*<sup>2</sup>. These merits serve a very ambitious aim, and namely: demonstrating that Hegel's metaphysics solves some core paradoxes which have riddled the Western metaphysical tradition, threatening, on the one hand, the possibility to demonstrate that the world – and everything within it – exists, and, on the other, the possibility to rationally account for this existence, or, more simply, the possibility for rational knowledge of what there is. Moss' interpretation is not only illuminating and authoritative, being grounded in rigorous textual analysis and conceptual insight. It also has the merit of producing a much-needed shift in recent scholarship on Hegel's metaphysics, calling some unwarranted interpretative assumptions of this debate into question – especially with respect to Hegel's supposed disdain of issues traditionally connected to *metaphysica specialis*. Moss' book not only presents a novel reading of Hegel, but also one that can interact in new and different ways with research in contemporary metaphysics – giving defenders of postmodernism and new realism a hard time, and lending a hand to authors who, in the recent analytic debate, have championed the inevitability of and the need to return to questions of fundamentality. In what follows, I will focus on two aspects of

<sup>1</sup> While *Hegel's Foundations Free Metaphysics* focuses mostly on the tradition of Western metaphysics, discussing, among others, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, and Jacobi, Gregory Moss' other work brings the discussion of the book's main thesis (such as Absolute Dialetheism and Total Realism) into dialogue with the traditions of Japanese philosophy (esp. the Kyoto School) and of mysticism. See G.S. Moss, T. Morisato (eds.), *The Dialectics of Absolute Nothingness*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> See G.S. Moss, *Hegel's Foundations Free Metaphysics*, New York-London, Routledge, 2020, p. 372: «If we understand the revelation of the concept, we shall be grasping the form of the conceptual development as such in the *Science of Logic*».

Moss' interpretation that I believe are in tension with the overall aim of the book, and I will point at possible solutions to this tension (section 3). As the title anticipates, my claim will be that the definition of «total realism», or «absolute knowledge» will have to be weakened by the introduction of what I will call «mystical modesty», for it to be coherent with the necessary existence of the Absolute, which is the other main claim in Moss' argument.

As illustrated in my Introduction to this Book Symposium, the pivot of Moss' argument is the overcoming of the problem of nihilism, or the demonstration that the Absolute – meant as a self-determining principle, capable of grounding all of existence in its unity – must exist. This is achieved through a careful reading of the first section of Subjective logic, and of the Chapter Concept more specifically, as a new version of the ontological proof<sup>3</sup>. The driving insight behind this reading is that the Concept is self-particularizing and, thereby, existentially implicating, because its particularization, or instantiation, is its existence. Moss demonstrates this commenting the *On the concept in general* section opening the Subjective Logic, focusing on Hegel's discussion of the «concept of the concept». Hegel is adamant that this concept is not a finite concept, because it does not derive its content from the reference to an external object. More importantly, Moss highlights, the «concept of the concept» represents thought's capacity to instantiate itself in virtue of itself. Indeed, the «concept of the concept» is a universal that is also its own instantiation: it is both universal and *a* universal, both concept and *a* concept. Thus, the «concept of the concept» is existentially implicating in its self-reference: it must exist, it is a concept

<sup>3</sup> By this, Moss means that the Concept chapter in the *Logic* presents a concept, which Hegel calls the Concept and which Moss considers equivalent to the Absolute, or God, which entails its existence. As in the traditional ontological argument, the fact that such a concept can be thought immediately proves that it exists – or, as Moss more radically puts it: the thought of the Concept, or the Absolute *is* its existence. However, as Moss himself points out, Hegel's ontological proof differs in form from the other versions of the ontological argument given in the tradition, because it does not start out from the definition of God, and rather immanently derives the Concept as a result out of the dissolution of finite conceptuality throughout the Objective Logic. See *ivi*, pp. 329ff.

that immediately implicates its existence: «The self-referential aspect of the question ‘what is the concept’ implies that it is an instance of itself. Thus, the self-predicative character of the question implies that the concept is existentially implicative»<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, the Concept is also the Absolute, as that which is existentially implicating, or which gives itself its own existence and determination – being thus «the One and all». Moving from the demonstration that the Concept is self-instantiating, Moss holds that absolute existence and absolute knowing are the same – a coincidence which he calls «Total Realism». Thought is self-particularizing, which also means that it implicates its very own existence: it is its own instantiation and necessarily exists. As such, it is the Absolute (and not just the demonstration that the Absolute, or God, must exist). This also entails the claim that the Absolute is realized in philosophical thinking. Indeed, it is in the latter that the Absolute, as the self-particularizing concept, comes to be.

The Absolute overcomes its alienation in relative being and comes to exist absolutely in philosophical knowledge [...] the philosopher is the means by which the Absolute exists absolutely<sup>5</sup>.

## *2. Existence between Difference and Identity*

My first worry is that Moss’ account for the existence of the Absolute, or the Concept, is too austere to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of nihilism. More precisely, I fear that Moss’ reading can only account for the existence of the Absolute as Absolute, or for the Concept as concept, and not for their existence as a manifold (of determinate concepts other than the concept of the concept, or of manifold finite beings other than the infinite being laying ‘beyond’ them). If this is so, the problem of nihilism would present itself again. Indeed, in this view, the Absolute, or the Concept, could only exist as identical to themselves, and cannot exist as

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 7.

what is other than themselves. Therefore, the existence of anything that is not the Absolute, or of any concept that is not the Concept, would remain unaccounted for, or ungrounded – so that the question of why the Absolute exists in finite, manifold, and contingent beings remains unanswered. I believe that the reason for Moss' excessively austere understanding of absolute existence lies in his understanding of the implication of existence as instantiation. Indeed, instantiation entails a relation of identity, rather than difference, between what instantiates and what is being instantiated. I don't see how this model of existential implication can lead out of indistinction. The understanding of the implication of existence in terms of instantiation is supported by the reading of difference as self-mediation and positing which drives Moss' reading of the Doctrine of Essence as providing the blueprint for the structure of the Concept. I believe that this understanding of difference is reductive (and at odds with Moss' own understanding of difference and of contradiction as constitutive of the Absolute), and that Hegel developed a much more 'generative' understanding of difference in his discussion of absolute negativity in the Doctrine of Essence. Moss is right in saying that Hegel's core insight is that, to think the Absolute, identity and difference cannot be separated, or that identity cannot be considered ontologically prior to difference, as the PNC would require. The priority of identity produces difference as between something and other, two distinct *relata* reciprocally limiting and excluding each other. In this horizon, no Absolute can be thought: the Absolute would have to be identical with itself, while its existence, or its determination in a plurality of entities, would be something other than the Absolute, limiting the latter from without and having to be grounded in a principle other than the Absolute itself – which would make the Absolute not Absolute and rather relative. To overcome this, Hegel introduced what Moss calls «absolute difference» as the difference in virtue of which the very distinction, or opposition, between identity and difference can be thought. As such, this difference is necessarily ontologically prior and has nothing outside of itself: anything 'other' than absolute difference *is* absolute difference.

Absolute difference is not one side of an opposition: it is the difference *simpliciter*, not difference opposed to some other. Absolute difference is not itself immediately opposed to identity. Instead, absolute difference is the difference itself between 'difference' and 'identity' [...]. To put it another way, absolute difference is the whole of the opposition: it is the Absolute [...]. Difference as difference is both difference and identity. Its identity is to be different from itself<sup>6</sup>.

As absolute difference, the Absolute can «amplify» itself beyond its mere identity with itself and indistinction. It can, that is, become other than itself, determining itself in a variety of existing others, without losing its identity with itself: «Dialectic is the self-amplification of thought by means of the self-referential character of conceptual thinking»<sup>7</sup>. While grasping that the Absolute's essential character must be that of self-differing (or absolute difference), Moss remains too focused on self-mediation and identity in his reconstruction of Hegel's argument to fully appreciate its implications. Consider this passage

Hegel's definition of the Concept is the power of self-differentiation, or better: self-particularization in which each element of the whole is identical to the whole itself<sup>8</sup>.

While this is correct, and it is true that absolute difference is identical with itself in its difference, it is important to understand that the fact that «each element of the whole is identical to the whole itself» does not mean that they are the same thing, or equivalent. Indeed, this would lead back to simple identity and, consequently, to indistinction. I believe what Hegel meant by this «being identical» is that they have the same structure of double negation, making them self-sufficient, independent, or immediate. Precisely in this lays the true, absolute power of Hegel's Absolute, which the metaphysics prior to him had dissolved into identity and mediation. Indeed, Hegel's Absolute is such because it has the

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, pp. 255-256.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 259.

capacity to produce true others than itself, as themselves «absolute» in the sense of resisting reduction and mediation to a higher unity. How this is possible and is indeed the implication of «absolute difference» becomes clear in reading Hegel's discussion of Essence as «absolute negativity» and «reflection». In Essence, Essence is presented by Hegel as the «in itself and for itself», an expression reserved to identify the Concept, as that which can be itself in its other, and is therefore not for another as a qualitative something determined in its opposition to its qualitative other would be. This quality of essence is connected to its being «absolute negativity»: essence is not something positive or substantial, but it is the negativity in virtue of which the determination of determined being, as the object of the Doctrine of Being, negate and dissolve themselves into one another in Measure: «Essence is what it is, not through a negativity foreign to it, but through one which is its own – the infinite movement of being»<sup>9</sup>. As such, essence is a negativity that has no qualitative other to negate: no determinations are left after the dissolution of Measure. Thus, it is self-referred negativity, a coincidence of negativity with itself.

It is indifferent to every determinateness of being, otherness and reference to other have been sublated. But neither is it only this in-itselfness; as merely being-in-itself, it would be only the abstraction of pure essence; but it is being-for-itself just as essentially; it is itself this negativity, the self-sublation of otherness and of determinateness<sup>10</sup>.

It is clear that this is the kind of difference Moss calls «absolute»: it is something whose identity, as the reference of itself to itself, is realized in a differing of itself from itself – which Hegel expresses with double negation: negativity is the reference of negativity to itself, the negation of the negation, which essence is in

<sup>9</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band. Die objective Logik (1812/1813)*, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 11, Hamburg, Meiner, 1978, p. 242 (henceforth GW 11); Eng. trans. by G. Di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 338.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 242; Eng. trans., p. 338.

the first place. Since Hegel defines absolute negativity as the «in and for itself», it is also clear that, out of essence's double negation, determination, as the other of essence, needs to result. As the «in and for itself», absolute negativity is self-determining, and it is not determined by opposition to a qualitative other. Thus, absolute negativity should produce its own determination. For this reason, Hegel says that the main scope of essence is to «give itself existence [*Dasein*]»<sup>11</sup>. Even though this will only be realized at the end of the Doctrine of Essence, and namely in the concept, the main structure of this determination is already fully discussed in Reflection<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Reflection is defined as that whose «being is to be what it is not»<sup>13</sup>. In Reflection, two different forms of determination through negation are discussed. In order of appearance in the text: positing (Positing reflection), presupposing (External reflection), and determining (Determining reflection). It is a merit of Moss' reading to highlight how these passages provide the blueprint for the Concept<sup>14</sup>. However, Moss' reading inverts the order (and importance) of positing and presupposing. While for Moss positing comes second and is the «truth» of presupposing, it comes first in the text. This inversion crucially shapes the understanding of the overall section: presupposing, being presented as coming first in the section, is read as a limited and partial understanding of determination, which does not realize the double negation characteristic of «absolute negativity», or «absolute difference». Consider these passages, where Moss presents positing as the realization of «ideality», a term he associates with the Concept, or with the Absolute as

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 242; Eng. trans., p. 339.

<sup>12</sup> For a reading of the structure of essence as Reflection as presenting the speculative core elaborated throughout the Doctrine of Essence and as a prefiguration of the Concept, see E. Tripaldi *Hegel's Metaphysics of Subjectivity: The Truth of Substance*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2026, Ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup> GW 11, p. 251; Eng. trans., p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> While this is indicated explicitly by Hegel himself in the opening of Essence, the importance of these sections has been vastly undermined by recent Hegel scholarship (with the notable exception of B. Bowman, *Hegel's Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the realization of absolute difference<sup>15</sup>. In them, he identifies the problem stunting essence from becoming concept as the maintenance of difference within itself, rather than the inability to produce true difference or to give itself *Dasein*.

In the act of positing, essence indeed negates any external mediation, and it thusly transcends all otherness. For this reason, in the category of determining reflection essence also achieves ideality. But the transcending of otherness in the logic of essence preserves a difference and mediation within itself [...]. In unifying itself to what it is not, essence does not abolish the other or become identical in content with the other, but preserves what it is not within itself as different from itself. This tension is maintained until the development of the Concept in which the distinction between determiner and determined is abolished<sup>16</sup>.

However, if one looks at the Reflection section in the *Logic*, it is positing which is introduced first, and is overcome in presupposing,

<sup>15</sup> As a side note, it is true that the Concept's determination in universality, particularity, and singularity can be accounted for in terms of positing. This is, however, not as good a thing as Moss holds. Indeed, the Concept, as the first category of the Subjective logic – and not to be fully identified with what is being discussed as «the concept of the concept» discussed in the On the concept in general section preceding it – identifies a standpoint of complete, almost excessive self-mediation and identity of the Absolute, or absolute difference, with itself. Here, too, otherness, or *Dasein*, is missing: «The moments of the movement of the substantial relation through which the concept came to be and the reality thereby exhibited are only in the transition to the concept; that reality is not yet the concept's own determination, one that has emerged out of it» (G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band. Die subjektive Logik (1816)*, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, in Id., *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12, Hamburg, Meiner, 1981, p. 29 (henceforth GW 12); Eng. trans. by G. Di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 526).

<sup>16</sup> Moss, *Hegel's Foundations Free Metaphysics*, p. 366. See also *ivi*, p. 371: «Unlike the logic of essence, in the self-differentiating concept all differences between determiner and determined vanish» and pp. 386-387: «The self-differentiation of the universal, what [...] was called 'positing' is identical to being-in-and-for-itself».

as that which better realizes «absolute negativity» or «absolute difference». Indeed, positing captures the understanding of the relationship between essence (as self-identical and self-referred negativity) and its existence (*Dasein*) illustrated in *The Essential and the Unessential* and in *Shine*. There, essence's existence (*Dasein*) was understood as «unessential», or as an «illusion». Contrary to what Moss holds, this is not a good thing. In considering its existence as «illusion» or as «unessential», essence failed to give itself existence. This can be expressed in one of two ways. On the one hand, in thinking its existence as just an «illusion», essence failed to present it as anything substantial, or concrete. This «leaves out» the aspect of essence's *Dasein* for which it is, indeed, substantial and concrete. This dimension of immediacy, which characterizes essence's existence as it appeared in the Doctrine of Being, needs to be accounted for by essence itself and needs to be seen as a product of essence's self-realization as absolute negativity. Otherwise, this immediacy will 'fall outside' of essence and limit it from without, making it «in itself» and not «for itself». On the other hand, considering essence's existence as just an «illusion», or as «inessential» means reducing it to a mere «negative» of essence, defining it as that which is nothing independently of essence – which means: nothing but essence. As a «negative» of essence, essence's existence is not really there – it is simply negation, not-essence. Thus, it cannot be essence's existence (because it is actually nothing). This horizon does not take essence out of the indistinction of simple self-identity: nothing came out of this negation. This is the horizon which Hegel ascribes to «positing»:

The posited is therefore an other, but in such a manner that the self-equality of reflection is retained; for the posited is only as sublated, as reference to the turning back into itself [...]. Positedness is equally an existence, but its ground is being as essence or as pure negativity; it is a determinateness or a negation, not as existent but immediately as sublated<sup>17</sup>.

Being essence's main burden, positing reappears several times throughout the Doctrine of Essence, to signal a failure of essence in

<sup>17</sup> GW 11, p. 255; Eng. trans., p. 351.

giving itself its existence as a true other than itself. Consider its re-proposition (denounced by Hegel's reference to Shine, as the consideration of which positing emerged as the truth) as the «positive exposition of the Absolute», an understanding in which the Absolute's particularization is seen as something only instrumental to the Absolute's self-mediation. Hegel's problem with this perspective is in this instance very clearly stated as the impossibility to solve the problem of nihilism, or the inability to truly drive difference and determination into the Absolute itself:

This exposition has itself also a positive side, for in foundering to the ground the finite demonstrates that its nature is to be referred to the absolute, or to contain the absolute within. However, this side is not as much the positive exposition of the absolute as it is rather the exposition of the determinations, namely that these have the absolute for their abyss, but also for their ground, or that that which imparts subsistence to them, to their reflective shine, is the absolute itself. – Being as shine is not nothing but reflection, reference to the absolute; or it is a shine inasmuch as that which shines in it is the absolute. This positive exposition thus halts the finite just before its disappearing: it considers it an expression and a copy of the absolute. But this transparency of the finite that lets only the absolute transpire through it ends up in complete disappearance, for there is nothing in the finite which would retain for it a difference over against the absolute; as a medium, it is absorbed by that through which it shines<sup>18</sup>.

The problem with positing is that it understands essence's existence, or determination, as a movement of simple negation: essence negates its identity with itself, and this posits determination as the negative of essence<sup>19</sup>. For this to hold, essence would have to be something substantial, or positive, of which the posit can be the negation. But essence is, itself, a negation: the negation of Being's determinations into its self-reference, or unity. The negation in

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 372; Eng. trans., p. 468.

<sup>19</sup> As the highest instance of this issue, Hegel will notoriously present Spinoza, in the Remark ending the Absolute section later on in the Doctrine of Essence (ivi, p. 376; Eng. trans., p. 472ff.).

virtue of which essence gives itself existence through positing is a negation of this negation. Thus, essence's *Dasein* should be understood as not-the-negative-of-essence: as that which is independent of essence's negation, or as that which resists reduction to essence's self-identity. This is what Hegel calls presupposition<sup>20</sup>.

Reflection, as the sublating of the negative, is the sublating of its other, of the immediacy. Because it is thus immediacy as a turning back, the coinciding of the negative with itself, it is equally the negation of the negative as negative. And so it is presupposing. – Or immediacy is as a turning back only the negative of itself, just this, not to be immediacy; but reflection is the sublating of the negative of itself, coincidence with itself; it therefore sublates its positing, and inasmuch as it is in its positing the sublating of positing, it is presupposing. – In presupposing, reflection determines the turning back into itself as the negative of itself, as that of which essence is the sublating. It is its relating to itself, but to itself as to the negative of itself; only so is it negativity which abides with itself, self-referring negativity [...]. The turning back of essence is therefore its self-repulsion<sup>21</sup>.

As presupposition, essence's existence is also a double negation. As such, the presupposed resists and opposes essence's own double negation as absolute negativity: these now oppose each other as two self-standing (although grounded in the same movement of self-differing) 'absolutes':

Positedness is not yet a determination of reflection; it is only determinateness as negation in general. But the positing is now united with external reflection; in this unity, the latter is absolute presupposing, that is, the repelling of reflection from itself or the positing of determinateness as its own. As posited, therefore, positedness is negation; but as presupposed, it is reflected into itself. And in this way positedness is a determination of reflection<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> S. Houlgate *Essence, Reflexion, and Immediacy in Hegel's Science of Logic in A Companion to Hegel*, ed. by S. Houlgate, M. Baur, Malden, Wiley, 2011, pp. 139-158.

<sup>21</sup> GW 11, p. 251; Eng. trans., p. 347.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 256; Eng. trans., p. 352.

It is in virtue of this redoubling of double negation, that essence can recognize its own existence, or *Dasein* as its own. *Dasein* also is a double negation, and it is in this sense the same of essence, because it has the same structure. This being the same, however, is realized in being the other of essence, or that which resists assimilation into essence's identity. This is the true realization of essence's identity because essence is not simple identity, but rather the identity of absolute difference, identity as self-differing. This what Hegel calls essence's «self-rejoining»<sup>23</sup> in its own *Dasein*: in the radical otherness, resistance and immediacy of the other that it (presup)posed, essence sees itself realized.

Because of this reflection into themselves, the determinations of reflection appear as *free essentialities* [...]. In them the determinateness has become entranced and infinitely fixed by virtue of the reference to itself. It is the determinate which has subjugated its transitoriness and its mere positiveness to itself, that is to say, has deflected its reflection-into-other into reflection-into-itself<sup>24</sup>.

This movement provides the blueprint for the becoming-concept of essence in the *Wirklichkeit* section which concludes Objective Logic. There also, we see how the Absolute cannot be realized as a substance with mere accidents, who are fully reducible to the unity of substance, completely determined by substance's necessity and with no independence of their own<sup>25</sup>. Rather, the Absolute is realized in a constant movement of internal splitting into two substances as *Wechselwirkung*: one, active, driving towards fragmentation and individuation, the other, passive, driving towards unity and self-reference. In *On the concept in general*, it is this never-ending split, and the recognition of it as the realization of the Absolute's

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 387; Eng. trans., p. 484.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 256; Eng. trans., p. 352.

<sup>25</sup> «In so far as such an accidental being seems to exercise a power over an other, that power is that of substance that encompasses them both [...] Because of this immediate identity and presence of substance in the accidents, there is still no real difference present» (ivi, pp. 395-396; Eng. trans., pp. 491-492).

unity as self-differing (or «absolute difference»), that is indicated as the essential structure of the Concept as a metaphysical structure:

Each side, therefore, in accordance with how it refers to the other both as identical with it and as the negative of it, becomes the opposite of itself, but, in becoming this opposite, the other, and therefore also each, remains identical with itself. – But both, the identical and the negative reference, are one and the same; substance is self-identical only in its opposite and this constitutes the absolute identity of the two substances posited as two. It is by its act that active substance is manifested as cause or originary substantiality, that is, by positing itself as the opposite of itself, a positing which is at the same time the sublation of its presupposed otherness, of passive substance. Contrariwise, it is by being acted upon that the positedness is manifested as positedness, the negative as negative, and consequently the passive substance as self-referring negativity, and in this other the cause simply rejoins itself. Through this positing, therefore, what is presupposed, that is, the implicit originariness, becomes explicit; but this being, which is now in and for itself, is only by virtue of a positing which is equally the sublation of what is presupposed, or because the absolute substance has returned to itself only out of, and in, its positedness and for that reason is absolute<sup>26</sup>.

This, and not positing, realizes essence's constitutive character as «absolute negativity». Determining, as the third understanding of how essence can give itself its own existence in Reflection, expresses precisely the acknowledgement that essence's determination will always appear as a presupposition – or as something radically other, independent, and resistant with respect to essence itself. Precisely as such, it is the realization of essence's self-reference as «absolute difference», or «absolute negativity». Insofar as it is its realization, and not a qualitative other grounded in a different principle, the presupposition can also be seen as essence's posit. This, however, can be done only if it is understood that essence's *Dasein* is essence's realization, or its posit, precisely in its being truly other to it, or in its being its presupposition:

<sup>26</sup> GW 12, p. 13; Eng. trans., p. 511.

There are two distinct sides to the determination of reflection. First, reflection is positedness, negation as such; second, it is immanent reflection. According to the side of positedness, it is negation as negation, and this already is its unity with itself [...]. To this extent, reflection is a determining that abides in itself. In its essence does not exit from itself; the distinctions are solely posited, taken back into essence. But, from the other side, they are not posited but are rather reflected into themselves; negation as negation is equality with itself, not in its other, not reflected into its non-being<sup>27</sup>.

In my view, Hegel's point here is that the existential implication of the Absolute as «absolute difference» cannot be understood as instantiation, or self-repetition. This would not allow a true self-amplification: the absolute does not become anything other than itself; nothing 'new' would come out of it. This is not something that Moss misses entirely, and I believe it is the direct implication of his description of the Absolute as «absolute difference» and as a true contradiction: «The universal is free power. It is a power because it is the source of change – the source of differentiations. Yet, it is free, for it is determined by itself, differentiated by itself»<sup>28</sup>. However, his reading of the Absolute's existence as instantiation and as a posit fails to support this insight. The Absolute needs to be understood as «absolute negativity», or «absolute difference», which means that it needs to be seen as always self-othering, or self-differing. Being «absolute difference», the Absolute can only be realized in its continuous splitting into itself and its other. This insight is expressed by Hegel in the metaphor of «self-repelling» as the constitutive movement of essence as reflection: every time essence

<sup>27</sup> GW 11, p. 257; Eng. trans., p. 353.

<sup>28</sup> Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, p. 397. See also p. 409: «It is in virtue of the self-contradiction of universality that the universal gives rise to consistent, other-exclusive particulars». Briefly after, this self-contradiction is however once again derubricated to «illusion» (as the illusory character of posits), see pp. 411: «In virtue of differentiating itself, the universal creates two mutually exclusive universals: particularity and universality [...]. In virtue of the self-contradiction of universality, the illusion of the consistency and mutual exclusion of the universal and the particular arises».

negates its other to show that it is (nothing but) its own positing, and to 'reunite with itself', or «turn back» to its identity, it actually refers its negation to itself as negation, therefore 'jumping out of itself' and presupposing its other<sup>29</sup>. This image of the Absolute as never-ending self-repelling entails the idea of an Absolute that is always in the making, and always in the process of splitting and tearing itself apart in a variety of new, contingent happenings, *ad infinitum*. Using the metaphor of knowledge, this is an Absolute which immediately escapes out of its own understanding, every time it makes sense of itself as a unity, or a totality. This brings me to my second worry, which concerns Moss' understanding of the role of (human) rationality and philosophy in the realization of the Absolute.

### 3. *Mystical Modesty: What Was God Thinking Before Us?*

As reconstructed above, Moss' «Total Realism» claims that absolute knowledge is absolute existence, or that the Absolute exists as the Concept – meant as the kind of infinite, or absolute thinking that characterizes philosophy. My issue with this view is that it links the existence of the Absolute to the existence of a specific being (namely human beings, as subjects of discursive rationality and, potentially, subjects of philosophical knowledge). This restricts the Absolute's power of self-instantiation, or self-expression, making it dependent on one, specific and individual, finite condition (therefore making the Absolute in itself finite, and not absolute). Moreover, by linking the existence of the Absolute to the existence of human being, or human rationality as the subject producing philosophical knowledge, this argument also creates the problem of how to relate the beings that exist(ed) 'before' human beings appeared on Earth to the existence of the Absolute: are they expression of the Absolute's existence, or not? If this were to be answered in the negative, this would create a limit to the Absolute, as there would be something that is not-the-Absolute. Also suggesting these are 'incomplete' forms of the Absolute's realization

<sup>29</sup> D. Henrich, *Hegels Logik der Reflexion*, in Id., *Hegel im Kontext*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1971, pp. 95-157.

would not solve the problem: the Absolute would still be dependent on a specific historical condition to be fully realized. The argument can be posed also independently of temporality or history, which makes it even more radical: if the Absolute exists as the Concept, realized in philosophical thinking perfumed by human philosopher, what is everything else? Moss addresses this argument when discussing Quentin Meillassoux's renowned argument for ancestrality<sup>30</sup>. Rightly, he claims against Meillassoux that Hegel's Concept, or the kind of thinking accessed by philosophy through speculative thought, is above the objection for ancestrality, because it is not reducible to human thinking, and rather expresses the Absolute's quality of self-determination<sup>31</sup>. However, I believe he does expose himself to this objection in his immediate identification of absolute existence with absolute knowledge, or in its claim that the Absolute is realized by the practice of philosophy.

Hegel's heterodoxy consists in making God's self-knowledge dependent upon the knowledge of a particular being [...]. Human knowing [...] is not only a necessary self-particularization of the concept but also necessary for the self-realization of the Absolute Idea as Absolute Spirit. In the self-knowledge of philosophy, spirit absolutizes itself [...]. Without a knower that exists in the domain of *Realphilosophie* the absolute concept could not come to exist in the form of a science<sup>32</sup>.

These claims can be understood in one of two ways: there was no God, or no Absolute, before there were philosophers, or the Absolute was there before philosophers, but in an unrealized way. I don't believe either of these solutions is coherent with the

<sup>30</sup> Meillassoux's argument seeks to refute correlationism, or the doctrine that reality necessarily conforms to human discursive rationality, by asking how it was possible for reality to even exist before there were humans and concepts (Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, ed. by R. Brassier, London-New York, Continuum, 2011, pp. 1-27).

<sup>31</sup> Moss, *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, pp. 374-375.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, pp. 489-490. See also ivi, p. 485: «The Absolute comes to be Absolute by coming to exist in the mind of a knower of the Absolute».

affirmation of the Absolute's necessary implication of existence. If the Absolute must exist, why should its power of existing be limited to a human activity, or be dependent on a human philosopher to be realized? Was the Absolute non-existent, or not fully existent, until human beings also existed? And, if the Absolute is only realized in absolute knowledge, and the absolute must exist, was the appearance of humans on earth also a necessity entailed in the Absolute's existential implication? This seems to me as a limitation of the power of existential implication with which the Absolute should be endowed. We can grant that the Absolute exists also in thought, but we must admit that, if the Absolute must exist, it should be capable of existing in infinite many other ways – independently of the existence of anything specific, philosophers included.

Moreover, if the Absolute's existence needs to be understood as a self-othering, rather than self-instantiation, the role of philosophy within it should be reconsidered. As a practice of rational mediation of everything into a unitary principle, philosophy could at best be seen as embodying one side of the movement by which the Absolute exists, to which another movement, of self-repelling and resistance to mediation, should correspond<sup>33</sup>.

#### 4. *Total Realism with Mystical Modesty*

Moss might argue that my second worry goes in a way too mystical direction, because it entails the suggestion that the Absolute somehow exceeds conceptual thinking, which would make the Absolute finite as the other of thought. I am sympathetic with this critique. However, I don't think this is the only alternative to «total realism» as Moss introduces it. What if we could fully rationally know the totality of the structure of the Absolute as self-differing,

<sup>33</sup> I have suggested that Hegel's understanding of the work of philosophy should be read precisely in this way in E. Tripaldi, *The Unity of Correlation and Non-Correlation: Contingency, Objectivity, and the possibility of Ecological Thought in Hegel*, in *Das Selbstverständnis der Philosophie und ihr Verhältnis zu den anderen Wissenschaften – Hegel-Kongress 2023*, ed. by D. Emundts, K. Koch, D. Quadflieg, Frankfurt a.M., Klostermann, 2025, pp. 775-785.

self-othering, and necessarily existing, without this having to mean that we know *all* of the Absolute, in all the ways in which it can (ever) manifest? Why say that our concept of the Absolute *is* the Absolute, or that our thought of the Absolute is the only way in which the Absolute exists (fully, as Absolute)? What if we saw philosophy's activity, as a process of mediation and recollection of everything to the unity of the concept; not as the completion and perfection of the Absolute, but rather as one side of its various, many, and infinite movements of self-repelling, only functional to its othering in yet something else that resists mediation, or that we don't know? To use an expression from Heraclitus, to which Moss returns often in the book, what if philosophy's work was not to chase the Absolute out of its hiding once and for all, but rather to play hide and seek with it, explaining everything so that a new hiding place, resistant to explanation, would become visible?