

HEGEL'S CONCRETE UNIVERSAL AS A LOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ARTICULATING UNIVERSALIZATION PROCESSES, THEIR CRITIQUE, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract. *This contribution aims to problematize the critical-transformative potential of Hegel's notion of the concrete universal analyzed from a logical perspective. I examine how this notion can help rearticulate the contemporary perspectives on universality in feminist philosophies and metaphilosophy. The first section (§§ 2-2.1) explores the metaphilosophical positions about philosophy's relationship to the universal as both an object and an epistemic activity. The second part (§§ 3-3.1) complexifies this investigation through feminist critique of historically produced forms of the universal. Despite their essential deconstructive work, I argue that feminist positions cannot renounce the dimension of the universal as a logical and practical condition for their transformative anti-oppressive projects. I also try to specify the salient aspects of a feminist theory of the universal. In the third section (§§ 4-6), I propose a logical reading of Hegel's notion of the concrete universal that can provide a fruitful epistemic framework for feminist readings as well as an internal critique of the universalist intentions of philosophy.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Metaphilosophy; Feminist Critique; Universalism; Concrete Universal*

1. Introduction: A Metaphilosophy of the Universal

Are the universal and domination two ingredients of the same story? Is oppression intrinsic to the formation of the universal(s)?

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These questions, whose possible answers have incalculable practical repercussions, have transformed a seemingly neutral philosophical inquiry about universality into a much-needed critical project that targets universalization processes¹. Following the drive of anti-oppressive theorizations, such as feminist and decolonial studies, the universal's connection to discrimination, marginalization, and the erasure of differences has been rigorously examined. Consequently, from being a problem constantly addressed *by* Western philosophy, the question of the universal has turned into (an urgent) one *for* it.

Tackling this issue involves considering at least two aspects and assessing their relationship. On the one hand, the notion of the universal is one of the *objects* that Western philosophy has historically always dealt with; on the other, it is also predicated on the *nature* or *constitution* of philosophy itself. According to Étienne Balibar, philosophy «has almost always been presented as a *discourse in the modality of the universal*: a discourse of truth, a discourse of totality, [...] of humanity and the human»². The universal is not just something that philosophy investigates as one topic among others; more radically, it is a category through which philosophy seeks to define its activity – it is a *self-referential*, or self-convoking, category.

This partial superimposition – or rather, this complexification – leads to the following issue: faced with a critique of the way(s) it has conceived of the universal, philosophy cannot simply dispose of it, excluding it from its objects of study, but is forced to question itself as well. This is why the above-mentioned critical project of universalization processes must be embedded in a larger project of philosophy's self-criticism. What should be developed is a 'metaphilosophy of the universal', understood as philosophy's critical reflection on its own universalizing claims and the very notion of the universal.

¹ By 'universalization processes', I mean the processes through which something (an ideal, essence, norm, definition, etc.) is established, recognized, and internalized as universal.

² É. Balibar, *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, in Id., *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, trans. by J.D. Jordan, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020, pp. 19-58, p. 41.

In the first part of this article, I consider some metaphilosophical modes of articulating the universal as the object and activity of philosophy. A tension will become apparent between what we might call a 'quantitative' and a 'qualitative' universal.

In the second part, I appeal to feminist theorization, which has played, and continues to play, a vital role in criticizing the notion of the universal and philosophy's universalizing pretension. I also highlight why, despite the fundamental deconstruction of both these aspects, feminist positions cannot renounce the universal as a *logical*³ and practical condition for social transformation in anti-oppressive directions.

Finally, I turn to Hegel to unite the various elements that emerge in the previous parts. I am interested in exploring the idea that the concrete universal can serve as a *logical framework for the critique and transformation* of the *co-constitutive relations* between the universal, the particular, and the singular in the universalization processes. This Hegelian model, I argue, has useful implications for both the metaphilosophical field and feminist elaboration on the universal.

2. *Metaphilosophy and the Universal Character of Philosophy*

In his lectures, collected under the title *Construction and Deconstruction of the Universal*, Balibar states that «the questions of the universal» are «by definition, *philosophical*; we might even wonder if they aren't *the* philosophical questions par excellence, since philosophy is, after all, the discipline that endeavors to *speak the universal*»⁴. This very idea, which appears in several of his texts⁵, seems to

³ By pointing to the universal as a *logical* possibility condition for transformation, I am referring to a condition of *thinkability* – more specifically, a condition without which it is not thinkable, and consequently not even epistemically justifiable, that global societal change can (possibility) and should (normativity) take place on the basis of feminist claims for social justice.

⁴ Balibar, *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 19.

⁵ On this, see especially Id., *Sub Specie Universitatis: Speaking the Universal in Philosophy*, in Id., *On Universals*, pp. 59-83.

allude to a *distinctive* relationship between philosophy and (the enunciation of) the universal.

Let us then take the following question as a starting point: Does philosophy indeed entertain a specific relationship with the universal? It could be objected that all fields of knowledge, as they strive to produce *theories*, tend toward the universal (as an object and an activity). However, as we will see, it has been emphasized or implied from many quarters that philosophy does hold a unique – though not necessarily exclusive – relationship with the universal. The specificity of this relationship must be determined in more detail. Let us therefore sketch out a panorama of options to circumscribe it.

2.1. Metaphilosophical Stands on Philosophy's Universality

Philosophy's connection to the universal is encapsulated in various aspects regarding its scope, which ranges from its objects and the approach taken toward them to the extent of the people it addresses and/or actively involves. As we shall see, philosophy's relationship to universality unfolds within a tension between a qualitative and a quantitative universal. In addition, abstractness (as generality) and concreteness (as particularity) are evoked indirectly.

To expand on these points, I introduce some possible interpretations of philosophy's universal character (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can, indeed, overlap) that I infer from the positions expressed by different (meta)philosophers. I begin by focusing on the universal as a philosophical activity (a; b) and then move on to the universal as a philosophical object and its relation to the human subject (c; d; e).

(a) *Totalizing attitude and tendency toward generality and abstractions*

One of the contexts in which the metaphilosophical reflection on the (supposed) universal character of philosophy emerges is philosophy's confrontation with the sciences. Universality, understood as an *all-encompassing rational propensity*, is one of the elements considered in appreciating the differences or similarities between these two areas of inquiry. There is a tendency (which, however,

excludes certain contexts of analytic philosophy⁶) to attribute the study of the particular to the sciences, whereas philosophy would manifest a greater inclination toward generality and abstraction based on a totalizing aspiration⁷. According to Paolo Parrini, while philosophical inquiry inherently demonstrates a comprehensive intent, the sciences begin with circumscribed goals and research, whose results may eventually converge into more unifying visions or theories⁸.

(b) *Synthetic activity*

The interpretation just mentioned serves as the basis for the next one: recognizing the universal character of philosophy in its activity as a *synthetic discipline*. According to this perspective, philosophy systematizes and integrates the knowledge of other disciplines⁹, seeking «a pattern – perhaps eventually [...] a single pattern, an all-explaining design»¹⁰.

Moreover, this synthetic endeavor does concern us: it is part of a quest in which humans are intimately involved. In her book *What is Philosophy For?*, Mary Midgley evokes an image of philosophy as an activity of connecting (and bringing *meaning* to) the various knowledge areas, fields, and changing visions on the «larger map of life as a whole»¹¹.

⁶ See for example D. Marconi, *Il mestiere di pensare*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014.

⁷ P. Parrini, *Fare filosofia oggi*, Roma, Carocci, 2018, p. 19, especially pp. 22-26 and p. 48.

⁸ See *ivi*, p. 48.

⁹ See P. Kitcher, *Philosophy Inside Out*, «Metaphilosophy», XLII (3), 2011, pp. 248-260, p. 254; M. Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 6; H. Sidgwick and J. Ward, *Philosophy, Its Scope and Relations: An Introductory Course of Lectures*, London, MacMillan and Co., 1902, p. IX. Significant in this regard is Willfried Sellars' famous statement that the «aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term» (W. Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*, in *Id.*, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, pp. 1-40, p. 1).

¹⁰ Midgley, *What is Philosophy for?*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 5.

(c) *Extent of the objects investigated*

Timothy Williamson tags philosophy as «hyper-ambitious», a discipline that has traditionally «wanted to understand the nature of *everything* [...] existence and non-existence, possibility and necessity; the world of common sense, the world of natural science, the world of mathematics» as well as «our understanding itself» and «what we do with that understanding»¹². Here, a third meaning emerges, according to which philosophy is universal. It is connected to the *extent of the objects* with which philosophy may (and aims to) engage. Such extension coincides with the *totality of possible objects*, which include – to borrow Sellars' words – «such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death»¹³.

(d) *Big questions as fundamental human concerns*

The fourth option, akin to the one just enunciated, has a different nuance. According to this position, philosophy is universal because it has *all humanity* as the 'recipient' of its activities. More specifically, philosophy's task is to respond to what Nicholas Rescher calls 'the big questions' that *concern us all*, the «key essentials of the human condition»¹⁴. He argues thus:

Philosophy is identified as one particular human enterprise among others by its characterizing mission of providing satisfactory answers to the 'big questions' that we have regarding the world's scheme of things and our place within it. And *these big issues relate to fundamentals of human concern, being universal in dealing with humans at large rather than particular groups thereof*¹⁵.

¹² T. Williamson, *Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 3.

¹³ Sellars, *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*, p. 1.

¹⁴ N. Rescher, *Metaphilosophy: Philosophy in Philosophical Perspective*, London, Lexington Books, 2014, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* (my emphasis).

[...] what philosophy endeavors (or should endeavor) to do is to look at the *sum total* of what we know and tell us what it means for us [...]. Dealing with being and value in general [...] the concerns of philosophy are *universal and all-embracing*¹⁶.

Evidently, this view is more layered because it institutes a specular connection between the objects of philosophy and what concerns the human *as* human. Specifically, a concatenation is established between (1) the objects of philosophy (i.e., the issues circumscribed by the 'big questions'); (2) their *all-encompassing scope* (the big questions are about reality as the «world's scheme of things» and the meaning of the human in it); (3) the fact that these questions are universal because they regard all human subjects and not just individuals or groups. In sum, philosophy would be universal because the questions it addresses investigate all of reality and the humans within it, and because these questions pertain to all humans, being intrinsically connected to them as such.

(e) *Doing Philosophy as Intrinsic to Human Nature*

The fifth perspective, a slightly modified and strengthened version of the previous one, affirms that philosophy is universal because it is *in the nature* of human beings to do philosophy – philosophical propensity is something *everyone* can manifest. A similar position may be used as an anti-oppressive argument. It is made explicit, for example, in Fernando Susaeta Montoya's book *Introducción a la filosofía Africana*, which aims to clarify what African philosophy is. He links «the universal character of philosophy» to recognizing that «the tendency to philosophize is part of the common (universal) nature of the human being», the «tendency to reflect on [...] fundamental questions [...] is part of human nature»¹⁷. The presence of this thesis in a text with such a focus on African philosophy highlights that anti-colonial, decolonial, and anti-racist critiques of the

¹⁶ Id., *Philosophical Inquiries: An Introduction to Problems of Philosophy*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010, p. 2 (my emphasis).

¹⁷ S. Montoya, *Introducción a la filosofía africana. Un pensamiento desde el cogito de la supervivencia*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife-Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Ediciones Idea, 2010, pp. 24-25; my trans.

purported universality of (Western) philosophy do not necessarily mean a denial of the universality of philosophy as an epistemic enterprise *per se*. On the contrary, these critiques can reinforce universality's meaning to reveal how, along with the notion of the human, it has been historically-geographically mutilated and limited in its scope.

The perspectives presented so far bring into play several aspects related to the issue of philosophy's relationship with the universal. They reveal a quantitative (or extensive) meaning of the universal, one that concerns both the objects investigated by philosophy (all possible objects) and the subjects involved in, or touched by, it (all humans can do philosophy and are affectable by it). Moreover, a qualitative universal meaning (the *what*) emerges: philosophy investigates the *big questions* that concern all humans and *not just specific groups* (let us keep this detail in mind, because it is a decisive quibble for what will be said about the feminist philosophical project). Finally, the perspectives outlined above shed light on certain core functions of philosophy's universal activity – namely, its tendency toward generality, abstraction, totalization, and synthesis.

Based on the elements introduced up to this point, I now turn to feminist theorizing. Its criticisms of the notion of the universal and philosophy's universalizing pretension offer an effective means to add complexity to the picture outlined thus far.

3. *Parallel Stories That Sooner or Later Intersect: Philosophy, Feminist Theory, and the Universal*

The encounter/clash between philosophy, feminist theory, and the universal begins in the antechamber. It is a story that concerns the very citizenship right of the feminist philosophical project¹⁸ within philosophy as a field of knowledge (an institutionalized one).

¹⁸ I use the expression 'feminist philosophical project' in a broad sense to refer to the vast, also internally discordant, theoretical production of feminist philosophies and feminist philosophical perspectives. Moreover, the phrase 'feminist philosophy' (in the singular) is used in this article for brevity but always denotes a *plural* theoretical project. On this topic, see V. Bortolami and G. Miolli, *Feminist Metaphilosophy: An Introduction*, «Verifiche», L (2), 2021, pp. 1-14, especially pp. 4-8.

I said that the qualification of 'universal' is also employed by philosophy in self-referential terms. Initially, feminist theorizing developed within the philosophical sphere was denied this privilege. Not only did it take a long time for it to mark its entry into the academic world (beginning in specific regions of the globe¹⁹), but this research field is still regarded through a biased external lens – a bias I define as the 'particularity bias'. One reason for feminist production's extensive difficulty in having the status of, primarily, theory and, secondarily, philosophy is due to the prejudice view that it lacks universality. Feminist thought production was deemed extremely political²⁰ (with the implicit – and all to be proven – assumption that this lessened its theoretical quality), and feminist perspectives were perceived as hopelessly particular, tied to specific interests: ideas conceived by women, for women, and about women²¹. If we recall the issues raised in the previous section, this translates into (1) denying that feminist philosophies tackle the 'big questions' that concern all human beings (instead, they focus on issues without universal scope); and (2) claiming that they affect and involve only groups of people (women) and not humanity in general.

Consequently, among the major tasks feminist philosophers have had (and still have) to tackle are two operations: (1) the first is to demonstrate that the expressions 'feminist philosophy' or 'feminist theory' – like all variations that combine terms related to the semantic field of knowledge production with the adjective 'feminist'

¹⁹ «[I]t wasn't until the early 1970s that feminist philosophy officially began to establish itself in the US and parts of Europe» (R. Falkenstein, *On the Uses and Abuses of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel*, «Verifiche», L (2), 2021, pp. 111-132, p. 118).

²⁰ See K. Wallace and M.C. Miller, *Introduction: Philosophy and Feminism*, «Metaphilosophy», XXVII (1-2), 1996, pp. 1-9, pp. 1-2.

²¹ This bias is well expressed in this passage: «Skeptics have couched their objections in the following terms: feminism is concerned with the position of women and feminists are dedicated to overcoming discrimination against women, while philosophy has more generic conceptual concerns than women and the discrimination they have experienced» (ivi, p. 2).

– are neither oxymorons nor contradictions²²; (2) the second is to explore the relationship of feminist theory *to* the universal. This means that feminist thought had to re-signify and re-inhabit the previously enunciated polarity between the activity of the universal and the universal as a subject matter to be investigated. On the one hand, it was necessary to reflect on how feminist thought production fitted (and fits) into philosophy as a theoretical undertaking with *universal ambitions* and that *enunciates* the universal; on the other, a treatment of the universal as an object of study addressed by feminist perspectives had to be developed.

Regarding (1), it is no coincidence that the first special issue of the journal «Metaphilosophy» (1996) devoted to exploring the metaphilosophical contribution of feminist philosophical perspectives²³ opens precisely with a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and feminism, one that clearly cannot be taken for granted. In the introduction, Kathleen Wallace and Marjorie C. Miller make the point that, in its subversive action, feminist philosophy is not just philosophy but «good philosophy», since «to be philosophical is to be prepared to be critical of what is well established or accepted as canonical, to be prepared to jettison what is arbitrary biased or merely conventional»²⁴. In addition (and this, again, echoes an aspect that was seen in the preceding section), against the idea that the feminist perspective is particular, the authors stress that feminist theoretical questioning spans «the same generic concerns that any ‘properly’ philosophical inquiry has», including questioning what is «distinctively philosophical»²⁵ and reconsidering the «issue of the ‘proper’ subject matter of philosophy»²⁶.

Concerning (2) – the relationship of feminist theory *to* the universal – feminist reflection can develop a critique of the universal(s)

²² See N. Scheman, *Feminist Epistemology*, «Metaphilosophy», XXVI (3), 1995, pp. 177-190.

²³ Reference is to the Special issue: *Contributions and Controversy in Feminist Philosophy*, «Metaphilosophy», XXVII (1-2), 1996.

²⁴ Wallace and Miller, *Introduction: Philosophy and Feminism*, p. 3.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 2-3.

as an object resulting from various philosophical theories but also a critique of the universal as a self-referential category of philosophy's activity. This means discussing the traditional Western philosophical canon in particular and the way philosophy has been practiced and thought. Both operations are thorny. Indeed, if feminist philosophies want to be recognized *as* philosophies, they cannot help but also question *their own* claims to universalization. There are at least two paths to doing so: deny that philosophy has universal scope (and thus somehow change the very concept of philosophy as enunciating the universal) or embrace this trait but subject it to critique and integrate this critique into the very ways in which feminist philosophies want to conceive of themselves as having universal scope.

3.1. Feminist Perspectives and the Universal as a Logical Condition of Collective Change

The picture I have presented so far gives us an idea of why the problem of the universal is central to feminist thinking. Now, I will focus on how the universal has been approached as an object of inquiry. However, my analysis also bears on the supposedly universal activity of philosophy. This is because the criticisms leveled at the universal as a notion also apply to the knowledge(s) (with a universal claim) that has or have produced and consolidated that notion. In fact, in feminist thought, it is crucial to hold together the concepts and the epistemic practices through which they are formed. One element cannot be analyzed without the other. This has the epistemic effect of reconnecting the universal as both an object and an activity within a framework where they mutually determine each other.

What does this mean in the discourse we are engaging here? It means, for example, that there are no pre-existing and self-evident 'universal big questions' on the one hand, and no subjects merely touched or involved by the universal on the other. Instead, there are epistemic practices carried out by certain subjects, which are constituted into bodies of knowledge and that decree, select, and legitimize what the 'big questions' are. At the same time, how these questions are theorized impacts the subjectification processes: on how embodied subjects and communities internalize epistemic norms and

conceive as legitimate or illegitimate, valid, or invalid their own cognitive needs and knowledges.

Consequently, the first significant aspect to note is that, when it comes to feminist thought, the critique's targets become the *production processes* of the universal(s) – in addition, of course, to the resulting *notions* of the universal (with their definitions and satisfaction criteria). The question 'What is the universal?' is rephrased as follows: 'How is a/the universal produced?'

In this context, feminist philosophers have sought to deconstruct the universal's normative forms²⁷ that Western philosophy has shaped through the processes of marginalization, removal, and disqualification of alternative epistemologies (epistemicide)²⁸. A central argument was to show how these (conceptions of the) universal(s) had been constructed through *abstraction* from bodies, specific subjectivities, geographical areas, epistemic paths, etc.²⁹ Western philosophy has thus been accused of producing *abstract* universals (both in terms of notions and legitimized epistemic practices) that are expressions of particular groups and that fail to account for the *concrete* dimension of excluded subjectivities and their *differences*.

Just notice the irony. The particularity bias is reversed: it is a feminist positioning that now accuses philosophy in its traditional canonization of having been, and being, a result of particularism. Supposedly universal notions, practices, and claims are denounced

²⁷ Reference is, for example, to the ideals of human being, objectivity, truth, reason, scientific knowledge, etc.

²⁸ B. de Souza Santos, *Una epistemología del Sur: La reinención del conocimiento y la emancipación social*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI, CLACSO, 2009; Id., *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, London-New York, Routledge, 2016. See also M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007; and R. Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema-mondo*, Milano, Meltemi, 2020, esp. pp. 64–92.

²⁹ Rosi Braidotti suggests that the production and reinforcement of abstract forms of the universal has involved at least three (often interrelated) processes: sexualization, racialization, and naturalization (R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge (UK)-Malden (MA), Polity Press, 2003, p. 27).

as *particularizations* of dominant groups, «namely propertied, white, European, and North American males»³⁰.

However, despite this reversal in the charge of particularity, do feminist positions not still remain particular perspectives? Where does their 'greater' right to claim a different conception of universality lie? The first step toward an answer is contained in what has just been introduced: the exclusion of the concrete dimension of differences that are not integrated into the normative definitions of the universal. Pointing to this omission is the first indication of these definitions' deficiencies. What is exhibited, then, is the need to mediate a so-called 'abstract' plane, which disregards differences, with a concrete plane, which makes such differences active elements in the generation of a more integrated universal (this position is sometimes referred to as *pluriversalism*, a stance that «seeks to conceive of a universal that acknowledges the existence of plurality»³¹).

A clear example of this process is found in Seyla Benhabib's article, *The Generalized and the Concrete Other*³². She contends that philosophical moral theories should complement the conception of the 'generalized other' – the foundation of modern theories of the social contract and an ethics of justice – with the conception of the 'concrete other', which serves as the reference point for an interactive universalism and an ethics of care and responsibility. The generalized other view conceives of the individual as a rational subject and entitled to equal rights and duties. It abstracts from concrete individuality (bodies, affections, histories, desires, and needs) and is based on «what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common»³³.

³⁰ S. Benhabib, *On Hegel, Women, and Irony*, in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. by P. Jagentowicz Mills, University Park (PA), The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, pp. 25-43, p. 26. See also Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, pp. 13-54.

³¹ Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio*, p. 92; my trans.

³² S. Benhabib, *The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory*, in *Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, ed. by S. Benhabib and D. Cornell, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 77-95.

³³ Ivi, p. 87.

The concrete other perspective, on the other hand, incorporates into the conception of the other their history, affective and emotional dimensions, as well as their embodied individuality and situatedness. In adopting this perspective, we abstract from what we have in common and rather value the differences, which, «in this case», affirms Benhabib, «complement rather than exclude one another»³⁴.

Through a series of argumentative passages, Benhabib contends that the political-moral conception based on the generalized other is rooted in a 'definitional identity' that ignores the plurality of differences and makes it impossible for a moral point of view built upon it to be effectively universalized. Conversely, a proper universalization process should include not only 'communality' between individuals but also the idea that «every rational being» is «an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution»³⁵. However, Benhabib does not disqualify the generalized other's point of view. Disregarding this – primarily logical – commonality plane, linked to the idea of justice grounded in abstract identity, could lead to moral relativism and the production of discriminatory moral theories (as they would be founded on specific differences). Against a prescriptive distinction between the generalized and the concrete other, Benhabib defends a critical one: «the concrete other is a critical concept that designates the *ideological* limits of universalistic discourse» and makes visible what is «*unthought*» and unexamined in it³⁶. Hence, it is important to preserve the integration and dialectical tension between these two standpoints.

To highlight another decisive element, let us now return to the question posed earlier: despite its criticism of the philosophical tradition as an expression of particularism, does feminist theorizing still not embody a particular perspective? To this concern, we can add another: even if we acknowledge the particular nature of feminist positioning, why can it not forgo 'enunciating the universal' and instead must justify why its conception is 'more universal' than others? It should be underlined that, for feminist philosophical positions on

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 92.

the universal, the impossibility of such a renunciation implies that they cannot radically deconstruct the idea of philosophy as an activity that has universal and universalizing claims.

The answer to the first question can be briefly dismissed. Yes, feminist positions remain particular. The most compelling elements emerge in the analysis of the second question. It leads us to explore why feminist theories cannot simply get rid of the notion of the universal and why it is epistemically (and politically) more fruitful for them to instead 'experiment with the universal' through new conceptualizations of the co-determining relationships between the individual, the particular, and the universal.

Feminist positions cannot simply cast the universal aside primarily for a *logical* reason, which, while emphasizing the particularity of feminist perspectives, also reinscribes them within the broader project of constructing the universal. This logical reason is well expressed by what Balibar significantly presents as the «Hegelian paradox of the universal: that is, the idea [...] that due [...] to an internal contradiction, *it is impossible to speak the universal without immediately transforming it into a particular discourse (or a particular representation)* – in other words, into its opposite»³⁷. Any enunciation or conception of the universal, as soon as it is formulated, manifests itself as particular, as such enunciations are produced in a *determined space-time* and are uttered by determined subjects with particular interests³⁸. Using feminist lexicon, we could say that such enunciations are situated.

As will be evident at this point, feminist theorizing is not immune to the Hegelian paradox: its critique of the particular forms of the universal is also a particular position. It is thus necessary to recognize that, at the formal, abstract-logical level – which is independent of the particular content claimed – feminist stands on the universal are as valid as those they criticize. We thus pass from the enunciation level of the universal to that of «*the conflict of universalities* – or

³⁷ Balibar, *Sub specie universitatis: Speaking the Universal in Philosophy*, p. 70.

³⁸ See Id., *Preface: Equivocity of the Universal*, in Id., *On Universals*, pp. VII-IX, p. VII.

conflicting universalities»³⁹ (a theme Balibar takes from Judith Butler and whose ‘philosophical exposition’ he traces in Hegel⁴⁰). Within this conflict, feminism and anti-oppressive theories in general must argue why they can generate from their particularity a universal that has beneficial and transformative effects *for all* in the social, political, and cultural dimensions. This (firstly) logical relationship between the particular and the universal is what informs statements such as ‘We should all be feminists’ (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) or definitions of feminism such as that of bell hooks: «to be ‘feminist’ in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people [...] liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression»⁴¹.

Evidently, for feminist critical positions to claim that their particular view is valid and extensible – that it can act *from* and *beyond* its particularity toward a regeneration of the universal – they must refer to the universal’s dimension⁴². The universal is a necessary logical condition not only to enunciate the particular’s interest but also to vindicate its transforming effect in a broader sphere, which exceeds it. The universal is thus a necessary logical condition of thinkability and action.

Admitting such a dimension, however, also involves clarifying what kind of universal is being aspired to. This means that a *theory* of the universal should be elaborated upon. From what has been discussed above, such a proposal cannot interpret the universal in terms of subsumption, homologation, mere generalization, or as an

³⁹ Id., *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 44. See also J. Butler, *Competing Universalities*, in J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London, Verso, 2000, pp. 136-181.

⁴⁰ Balibar recognizes as Hegel’s idea «that the typical form of particularization [...] of the universal is *conflict* and, ultimately, *the struggle to the death of competing enunciations of the universal*» (Balibar, *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 47).

⁴¹ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, London, Pluto Press, 1982, p. 195.

⁴² This point is also argued by Jamila M.H. Mascot in her article *Hegel e la disputa sugli universali. Universalismo strategico e politiche dell’emancipazione*, included in this volume.

abstraction from 'concrete' subjectivities (in the sense previously outlined), geographical areas, and alternative epistemologies. On the contrary, from a feminist perspective, the universal should be capable of articulating differences and, most importantly, *the relationships among them*, which are the mediation processes through which differences co-determine one another. For this reason, although theories tend to have generalizing purposes and identify structural traits, the differences involved and their interdependence (i.e., relationality) must be carefully observed, analyzed, and complexified. In this picture, what is emphasized is the active-generative capacity of differences⁴³ and their power for mutual transformation in view of

⁴³ This is found, for example, in Audre Lorde's famous contribution *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (in *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. by C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa, Watertown, Persephone Press, 1981 [1979], pp. 98-101). In her scathing critique to white feminism, she argues that an account that overlooks differences cannot be said to be truly theory, much less feminist theory. «It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory [...] without examining our many differences, and without significant input for poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians» (ivi, p. 98). Likewise, Lorde emphasizes «the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be [...] seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening» (ivi, p. 99). In the same vein are bell hooks' statements in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, South End Press, 1984, p. x): «Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences», which would «serve to unify rather than to polarize». In the same direction are S.J. Khader's analyses that favor a decolonial, anti-imperialist feminism that unmasks and corrects the «highly selective» «Western interest in 'other' women», and takes advantage of the generative contribution of differences against the imposition of 'abstract universal norms' (S.J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 1). In this sense, Khader's thesis is thus: «feminism requires universalist opposition to sexist oppression, but feminism does not require

common goals, which is pursued by following extremely different strategies depending on the contexts (this theoretical model is the basis, for example, for alliance politics and the politics of locations⁴⁴). The underlying idea is that, in a complex relationship system, these part(icular)s' interactions can impact the formation of the universal. The latter is not conceived of as a datum dropped from above once and for all – it is, inherently, a process of *generative relational construction*, one that is liable to self-transformations⁴⁵.

As mentioned, the ways in which the universal is treated as an object of study also influence how philosophy is understood as a universal activity. If philosophy is declared an activity of all and affecting all, feminist criticism will seek to interrogate who is really recognized as a legitimate subject of philosophy and why, as well as who is marginalized. It will also examine what recognition in the philosophical enterprise of previously excluded subjectivities entails (consider, in this regard, projects aimed at transforming the philosophical canon). In addition, the analysis will investigate the criteria for selecting the 'big questions' and introduce previously unacknowledged big questions, such as the incidence of gender in epistemic and social practices (and in the very constitution of philosophy as an epistemic enterprise⁴⁶). The value of philosophy's abstracting, totalizing, and synthesizing tendency (Synthesizing what? At the cost of what?) will also be scrutinized. Overall, the same work of taking charge of differences and their transformative power will also have to be brought back to the ways and practices by which philosophy is done. This

universal adoption of Western – or, more specifically, what I will call 'Enlightenment liberal' – values and strategies» (ivi, p. 3). On this topic, see also M.A. McLaren, *Decolonizing Feminism Through Intersectional Praxis: On Serene Khader's Decolonizing Universalism*, «Metaphilosophy», LII (1), 2021, pp. 93-110.

⁴⁴ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 53: «the grandiose and aggressive universalism of the past, [...] is replaced by a situated and accountable perspective».

⁴⁵ See C. Arruzza and L. Cirillo, *Storia delle storie del femminismo*, Roma, Edizioni Alegre, 2017 (in particular, see Chapter 8: *Verso un nuovo universalismo insorgente e femminista*).

⁴⁶ See A. Castillo, *MATRIX. El género de la filosofía*, Santiago de Chile, Ediciones Macul, 2019.

means that the feminist theoretical proposal accommodates a metaphilosophical conception that philosophy is a necessarily plural project «in form, content and purpose»⁴⁷.

4. *Toward Hegel: Conflicting Universalities and the Excess of Universality*

A recapitulation that makes explicit some assumptions and how they are (also) related to Hegelian thought is now appropriate. Filtering the general metaphilosophical outlines of the relationship between philosophy and the universal through feminist critique shifts the focus to the dynamics of the universal's constitution and construction. This change in emphasis necessitates the development of an epistemic model flexible enough to admit the contradictions arising from the inevitable particularization of the universal once it is determined, the consequent conflicts between different universalisms, and the possibility of critique and transformation processes occurring within the universal's formation. To speak of the 'construction' of the universal means embracing the fact that singularity and particularity actively intervene in the processes of the universal's conformation. The required epistemic model should be thus able to articulate the universal in relational and processual terms and the mediating relations in it should 'thicken' the codetermination among particular positions.

Second, both metaphilosophical and feminist positions imply at least two declinations of the universal, which we can designate using Balibar's terminology. An *extensive* meaning of the universal and an *intensive* one are at stake. The former is to be understood as «universality as 'inclusion' or 'integration'»⁴⁸, «whose core idea is that a principle of right, salvation, justice, or culture must be *extended* to the whole humanity, must reach its furthest *limits*, thus allowing

⁴⁷ Wallace and Miller, *Introduction: Philosophy and Feminism*, p. 1. See also K. Dotson, *How Is This Paper Philosophy?*, «Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy», III (1), 2012, pp. 3-29; and Falkenstern, *On the Uses and Abuses of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel*.

⁴⁸ Balibar, *Racism, Sexism, Universalism*, in Id., *On Universals*, pp. 1-18, p. 5.

humanity to unify and totalize itself»⁴⁹. The latter, on the other hand, refers to «universality as ‘nondiscrimination’»⁵⁰, «the illustration of which is provided» for Balibar «by the ‘proposition of equal liberty’ between human beings»⁵¹. We could rephrase the question thus: on the one hand, we are concerned with determining who (or what) enjoys universality, who are the subjects involved in it; on the other, we focus on the ‘content’ of the universal – that is, what are those concepts, ideas, principles, values (or whatever) that are, or are to be, regarded as extendable to all⁵².

Now, the attempts to understand and signify the universal oscillate between these two poles, and it is precisely on them that the critique and transformation processes intervene, highlighting the limitations present in both meanings (e.g., the exclusion of certain human groups or an intensive universal compromised by prejudices). Critique and transformation can let an «excess of [...] universality»⁵³ emerge, a «reminder» or «supplement»⁵⁴ – an extension or content that was not captured by the previous conceptions of the

⁴⁹ Id., *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Id., *Racism, Sexism, Universalism*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Id., *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 26.

⁵² As seen, Balibar identifies this content in «*equaliberty*», which «states that in a given political community [...] the condition for the freedom of individuals and social groups, for *the absence of tyranny*, is their mutual equality, *the absence of privileges*, and vice versa» (ivi, p. 46). See also Id., *La proposition de l'égaliberty*, Paris, PUF, 2010. ‘Equaliberty’, however, is a result that could change; moreover, it could undergo decolonial criticism that pinpoints its matrix inspired by Western Enlightenment values later imposed on other cultural contexts.

⁵³ M. Tomba, *1793: The Neglected Legacy of Insurgent Universality*, «History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History», V (2), 2015, pp. 109-136, p. 110. By ‘excess of universality’, the author refers to political actions and concrete subjectivities that, on the one hand, are excluded (extensively) from the ‘universality declaration’ (specifically, from the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789) and, on the other, have a content-related ‘surplus’ not caught by that same declaration based on an abstract juridical universalism.

⁵⁴ Balibar, *Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal*, p. 37.

universal and whose position is configured as much as a deconstruction of them as a construction of a reworked concept of the universal.

How can we think about this excess of universality? Balibar – through Hegel, and particularly through his analysis of the positions on the universal advanced by the figures of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*⁵⁵ – binds together several points. The first is the already-mentioned Hegelian paradox: «*By simply stating the universal, [...] one immediately, irremediably, finds oneself in extreme particularity*»⁵⁶. The particularity problem of the enunciations of the universal (or universalisms) is not solvable by ‘diminishing’ their reality and preserving the integrity of the universal with a capital U – it is not viable to pose an ontological separation «between the *reality* [...] of the universal and the *appearance* [...] of the universal inherent in universalisms»⁵⁷. In the Hegelian view, the universal is not transcendent with respect to its enunciations; on the contrary, it realizes itself only if it determines (and thus particularizes) itself – in other words, only if it articulates itself into a *content*. The conflict among universalisms is thus an *intrinsic* condition of the universal. According to this reading, the ‘excess of universality’ is internal to the very process of the universal’s realization: «it is an internal supplement, an indispensable part of the construction itself»⁵⁸.

In the space of this ‘excess’ act the processes of critique and the reworking of the determinations of the universal toward new contents, which in their constitution integrate both the *relation* to other universalisms and the *knowledge* brought by the implemented critique (in Hegelian terms, this is captured by ‘determined negation’⁵⁹). This very knowledge is a *constitutive* and integral part of

⁵⁵ See *ivi*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 46. Balibar stresses that Hegel «rigorously refused the possibility of metalanguage, the illusion of being able to position oneself beyond the discourses of the universal in order to evaluate and relativize them on the basis of an absolute criterion. [...] [T]he universal does not exist *elsewhere*, prior to or beyond its enunciations» (*ivi*, p. 47).

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), in *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter abbreviated as *GW*), vol. 20, in collaboration with U. Rameil, ed. by W. Bonsiepen and H.-C. Lucas, Hamburg,

content transformation. This detail is not minor if we conceive the ‘content’ of the universal as an object equally constituted by epistemic processes: by the *activity* of knowing the universal⁶⁰.

What I am now interested in addressing is the *logical* framework underlying the progressive constitution of the universal. I hold that Hegel provides a model for a ‘logic of the universal’ that can become an interesting tool in the hands of other theories, such as feminist ones. This logical model – which I identify as the process of the *concrete universal’s formation*⁶¹ – is what can also be used ‘against’ Hegel – namely, against the (historical-geographical and ideological) instantiations of the universal in his *Realphilosophie*⁶².

5. *A Logical Reading of Hegel’s Notion of the Concrete Universal*

In philosophical discourse, the universal is, as previously noted, both an object and a self-referential category. These aspects, although related, remain distinct in the presented metaphilosophical views. With Hegel, we enter a different field, since the universal’s development as a philosophical object is equally and explicitly the development of philosophical activity. This can be rephrased into Hegelian terms by stating that the unfolding of the philosophical content (the concept as the universal) is its own method. A major

Felix Meiner Verlag, 1992, note to § 82; Eng. trans. by K. Brinkmann and D.O. Dahlstrom, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, note to § 82. Henceforth, the work will be cited as ‘Enc.’, followed by the relevant paragraph number.

⁶⁰ An insightful reading that exposes the processes of knowledge integration into (logical) content constitution is provided in A. Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel’s Logic, Obliquely*, New York, SUNY, 2018.

⁶¹ In pursuing this investigation, I coincide with Anna C. Ploug that «concrete thinking is at its core a question of logical form» (A.C. Ploug, *Concrete Concepts: The Logic of Problems in Post-Hegelian French Philosophy*, Roskilde, Roskilde Universitet, 2024, p. 1. This work is Ploug’s PhD dissertation).

⁶² This idea forms the ‘intra-Hegelian’ background to the proposal I present here; however, I will not explore it in depth in this contribution.

implication of this is that, for philosophy, reflecting on the universal's constitution does not simply mean 'applying' a critique to this notion; instead, it is a process of self-criticism: a critique of how the knowledge that exposes the universal is constituted and of how such knowledge is integrated into the universal's content determination. Here, I hypothesize that the development of the concrete universal (or the concrete concept), understood from a *logical* point of view, can be interpreted as a process of production, critique, and transformation of the universal as simultaneously the object and the activity of philosophy. To build on this hypothesis, I am interested in narrowing the meaning of 'concrete' and clarifying the aspects involved in the universal's (re)determination process.

As Paolo Giuspoli remarks, Hegel's speculative, technical sense of the term 'concrete' can be illustrated through its etymology: it is «understood [...] as that which constitutes and manifests itself *through* the *concreſcere* of its determinations»; it «indicates a *system of conceptual relations*»⁶³. When we read 'concrete' in reference to the concept or (which is the same for Hegel) the universal, we must first think of a *content* that has been *posited* through a *process* of self-determination⁶⁴. What is meaningful is that this content consists of

⁶³ P. Giuspoli, *Idealismo e concretezza. Il paradigma epistemico hegeliano*, Roma, FrancoAngeli, 2013, p. 14; my trans.

⁶⁴ The concrete universal is the concept that «produces *its very self*» (*Enc.*, note to § 163; refer also to § 164). See further Id., *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band. Die subjektive Logik (1816)*, in *GW*, vol. 12, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1981, p. 36; Eng. trans by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 533: «Life, the 'I', spirit, absolute concept, are not universals only as higher genera, but are rather *concretes* whose determinacies are also not mere species or lower genera [...]. [...] The true, infinite universal, the one which, immediately in itself, is just as much particularity as singularity [...] *determines* itself freely; the process by which it becomes finite is not a transition, the kind that occurs only in the sphere of being; *it is creative power* as self-referring absolute negativity. As such, it differentiates itself internally, and this is a *determining*, because the differentiating is one with the universality». Hereafter, this work is abbreviated as '*SL II*'; references indicate the page number of the German edition, with the English translation in parentheses.

a ‘growing’ and complexification of conceptual relations – that is, in the articulation of differences that demonstrate an increase in *code-termination* relations: «the rational is [...] *concrete*, because it is not *simple, formal* unity, but a *unity of distinct determinations*»⁶⁵.

The universal understood in its speculative sense, Hegel warns, should not be confused with other (static) determinations of the universal, which, however, are part of the broader process of the (content and epistemic) constitution of the concrete universal. These forms are «the universality of reflection – i.e., *communality* [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*] or *totality* [*Allheit*]» and «that *abstract* universality [*abstrakte Allgemeinheit*] which stands outside and in opposition to the individual – i.e., the abstract identity of the understanding»⁶⁶.

How should we grasp the unfolding of the concrete content of the universal construed as the progressive determination of ‘systems of conceptual relations’? To answer this, I refer to the Doctrine of the Concept. I argue that especially this part of the *Science of Logic* can be read as an unfolding of the forms (which are equally content determinations)⁶⁷ of the universal-particular-singular relation. I take this whole process as the logical development of the concrete universal. Such a process is both deconstructive and constructive: on the one hand, it unmasks the one-sidedness of the deficient configurations of that relation; on the other, this (epistemic) critique is integrated into its new determinations. In a minimal sense, this means that the concrete universal can be interpreted as the process through which (abstract) universality, (abstract) particularity, and (abstract) individuality are dialectically redetermined in reciprocal codetermination and interrelation.

⁶⁵ *Enc.*, note to § 82.

⁶⁶ *Id.*, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *GW*, vol. 14.1, ed. by K. Grotzsch and E. Weisser-Lohmann, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2009, note to § 24; Eng. trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by A.W. Wood, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, note to § 24; see also *Enc.*, addition to § 80.

⁶⁷ Indeed, in Hegel’s view, the concept’s logical content is the very self-determination of the logical form. See *SL II*, pp. 25-26 (523-524).

This dynamic begins to be seen clearly in the logical form of the judgment, which Hegel defines as the «first *realization* [*Realisierung*] of the concept»⁶⁸. Hegel claims that subject and predicate are mere 'names' for the concept's *determinations*: universality, particularity, and singularity⁶⁹. These determinations (and their mutual relations) form what Hegel calls the *logical content* of the judgment. They can be in the relation of the singular to the universal, of the singular to the particular, or of the particular to the universal – that is, in the relation between «*determinate* and still *indeterminate* concept»⁷⁰. Overall, the section on judgment reveals the process through which this logical form redetermines itself in its content. More specifically, it is the relations between the determinations of the concept (i.e., universality, particularity, and singularity) that are redetermined. The dialectical movement presented therein can certainly be explained as a critique of the different forms of judgment (and of *the* form of judgment as a thought determination within the Doctrine of the Concept). Nevertheless, it is primarily a critique of the various modes of relating the universal, the particular, and the singular. Among these modes, we find, for example, *inherence*, *subsumption*, and so on.

To further develop this line of reasoning, I would like to introduce another example: mechanism. It is, in the first place, a structure or process in which certain relations between the parts – and between the parts and the whole – are articulated. Specifically, there is a transmission of movement in the mechanism: a continuation of one part into the other but without any mutual reflection between them or any reflection of a part into the whole. The structure of the mechanism is therefore that of an aggregate of parts that remain unchanged in their relations, since these very relations are something external to the individual parts⁷¹. Hegel's most interesting observations appear when he introduces an expression that might seem oxymoronic: 'spiritual mechanism'. In the sphere of spirit, the part (namely, the individual) can be involved in extrinsic relations in

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 53 (550).

⁶⁹ See ivi, pp. 53-54 (550-551), and p. 32 (529).

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 53 (551).

⁷¹ See ivi, p. 133 (631).

which a content continues itself without being substantially changed. Hegel presents the ‘spiritual communication’ (*geistige Mitteilung*) of laws and morals (*Sitten*) as an example of a formal mechanical process. In it

a determinateness continues undisturbed from one person to another, generalizing itself unaltered [*ohne alle Veränderung sich verallgemeinert*] [...]. Now in the region of the spirit there is an infinitely manifold content capable of communication, for by being taken up into intelligence the content receives this *form* of universality in which it becomes communicable. [...] Laws [*Gesetze*], morals [*Sitten*], rational conceptions [*vernünftige Vorstellungen*] in general, are in the region of the spirit communicable entities of this kind; they pervade individuals unconsciously imposing themselves on them⁷².

Laws, morals, and representations are thus mechanically communicable contents, as they constitute a universal sphere that does not encounter any opposition or obstacles in individuals but penetrates and expands in them without them being fully aware of it. In these universal spheres, the individual is indeed elevated to a universal dimension, but in an immediate (abstract) way that does not involve her decision, freedom, or transformation. Mutual codetermination between these universal spheres and the individual is absent. In this context, the critique of mechanism is foremost a critique of the deficient mode(s) of the relation between the universal and the singular that it embodies. In spiritual mechanical communication, «the freedom of individuality is still lacking [...], and since this freedom does not appear in it, the mechanical act appears as a merely external one»⁷³.

Externality is one of the names ‘abstraction’ can take in Hegel’s philosophy. It can also mean the condition of being isolated, fixated (in opposition, or by distinction, to something else)⁷⁴, void of content or determination, ‘pure’ (not involving any empirical content), immediate, and not yet developed (just ‘in itself’). However, it can

⁷² Ivi, p. 138 (635-636).

⁷³ Ivi, p. 133 (631).

⁷⁴ It must be emphasized that this moment is, nevertheless, indispensable in any epistemic process for Hegel. The problem is not that it is manifested but that it is absolutized and made rigid.

also refer to the crucial moment in the concreteness development (e.g., the «abstract side or that of the *understanding*», which constitutes the first moment «*of every properly logical content [Momente jedes Logish-Reellen]*, that is to say of every concept or everything true in general»⁷⁵) and to the fundamental theoretical-practical structure such as the pure self-reference of the concept (or the 'I'), which can abstract from any determinate content and recognize itself as this universal abstract activity of negation⁷⁶.

What is important to note here is that, in the process of redefining the universal-particular-singular relational plexus, there intervene what I describe as the transversal operators of abstraction and concretion, which continue to redetermine themselves in turn, marking 'sensitive points' of co-determination or isolation, of transformation and communication, and of ossification and opposition or negation among the universal, particular, and singular.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have formulated the hypothesis that the logical development of the concrete universal – understood as the processual redetermination of the universal-particular-singular relational plexus – provides a dynamic framework for the critique and regeneration of different conformations of the universal. Furthermore, I suggested that this model is particularly useful for both a 'critical metaphilosophy of the universal' and for feminist purposes.

Hegel's theoretical account helps refine the views emerging within the metaphilosophical scenario. These readings leave ample room for ambiguity and interpretability, alternately focusing on the *objects*, *subjects*, or *activity* of philosophy. In addition, a fairly static representation of the universal arises. Regardless of whether it is placed, the universal appears as something that is 'already there'. A perspective such as Hegel's, instead, expounds on the universal as a

⁷⁵ *Enc.*, § 79 and note to § 79.

⁷⁶ See *SL II*, pp. 32-37 (529-534). «[T]he concept is *absolute self-identity* by being first just this, the negation of negation or the infinite unity of negativity with itself. This *pure self-reference* of the concept, which is such by positing itself through the negativity, is the *universality* of the concept»; *ivi*, p. 33 (530).

process that is simultaneously a deconstruction and construction of the universal's determinations (i.e., of different 'systems of conceptual relations' between singularity, particularity, and universality). This view questions the unilateral and motionless definitions of the universal, such as 'generality', 'commonality', 'sum total', 'inherence' (to all human beings), and so on, which seem to be the unexpressed logical substrates of the metaphilosophical positions outlined.

The other issue is understanding how a logical reading of Hegel's concrete universal can be useful for feminist theorization. I have argued that feminist perspectives must admit the universal's dimension (at least) as a logical condition of thinkability and action. However, it should not be the product of exclusionary abstraction, generalization, or absolutization of a particular position. Rather, what feminism requires is a universal conceived as a self-transforming process and internally differentiated according to situated contexts. Moreover, the generative power of the relationships between the differences (which in such relationships are themselves transformed) must be embraced as a decisive factor in the creation of new determinations of universality⁷⁷. All these aspects can be accommodated and further expanded within a logical reading of Hegel's concrete universal. With this notion, we are offered a conceptual tool to rethink the universal in terms of a relational, transformational, and self-critical logical process.

Let us recap some of the most salient elements of Hegel's framework. First, with his conception of the concrete universal, analyzed from a logical point of view, Hegel offers possible answers to the question, 'How is a/the universal produced?'. In fact, he presents the development of different 'logics of the universal' – the different ways of determining the relationship (and codetermination) between the universal, particular, and singular. In other words, the process of the concrete universal enacts constructions and deconstructions of systems of conceptual relations (logics) that bind the universal, particular, and singular. The decisive point for a feminist theory of the universal is that the Hegelian concrete universal is conceived from the start as consisting of codetermination relations between

⁷⁷ An illuminating work on how these processes of mutual generative redetermination among differences can concretely take place is bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York-London, Routledge, 1994).

universality, particularity, and singularity – the concrete universal is already thought of as a conceptual relational system: «the true, infinite universal [...] is just as much particularity as singularity»⁷⁸.

In addition, the development of the concrete universal shows as *immanent* to its process the conflict between the particularized determinations of the universal and the 'excess of universality' as the (logical) space in which critique and regeneration of the universal in intensive and extensive terms are at stake. Importantly, this means introducing epistemic processes (i.e., 'knowledge gains') into the new *content* determination of the universal – a decisive aspect when we consider, for example, the codetermination of philosophical practice as a claimed universal epistemic activity and the constitution of the philosophical object 'universal'. An innovative Hegelian element should then be emphasized. Hegel complexifies the associations between the concrete, abstract, universal, particular, and singular. On the one hand, he questions the immediate superimposition between the particular/singular and the concrete and, on the other, between the universal and the abstract. In the various conformations of the universal-particular-singular relational plexus, the dynamics of abstraction and concretization intervene, and they can equally affect the particular and the singular. The latter are not concrete *per se*; indeed, in conditions of 'non-relation', isolation, rigid opposition, non-communication, or mechanical transmission, they can be abstract. Their 'concreteness' depends on the degree of relational density in which they are constituted and act.

By considering the abstraction or concretion dynamics operating in the determinations of the universal (understood as relational plexuses), a more refined analysis of these very determinations can be done. Such a consideration provides vantage points from which to assess the relational logical structure underlying the enunciations of the universal and to identify the 'sensitive junctures' in them – the aspects that may eventually result in the domination, oppression, or absolutization of identity (due to the sharpening or crystallization of the abstract processes) or in the critique and liberation developments, owing to a complex construction of the universal's content on the basis of differences and their generative and mutually transformative contribution.

Specifying all these elements leads us to problematize a potential monolithic conception of the 'concrete other'. From a Hegelian

⁷⁸ *SL II*, p. 36 (533).

perspective, we might say that the situated condition of a subject or group of subjects is not in itself a guarantee of concreteness. This is probably the further conceptual step that Hegel allows us to take, launching an inexhaustible challenge. The sense of this challenge is condensed in the key, counterintuitive, and remarkable insight to use the adjective *concrete* to define the 'true' universal, thus subverting its semantic, theoretical, and practical landscape. Different from metaphilosophical positions, and even feminist stands, Hegel's proposal restores concreteness not so much (or not only) to particularity and singularity but to universality constituted as a relational process. The notion of the *concrete* universal is an element of conceptual innovativeness that compels a rethinking of abstraction, concretion, the universal and of the active role of differences as particularizations of the universal with universalizing ambitions. In doing so, the concept of the concrete universal raises the stakes greatly, rediscusses all the terms involved, and enables an increasingly mediated, and less immediate, understanding of the universal's formation process.

A final point I would like to underscore is that the development of the concrete universal is open to historical and contingent generation⁷⁹. It does not predetermine empirical content but elaborates a critical logical method for examining what is historically and contingently produced. In feminist terms, it leaves room to imagine alternative redeterminations of the universal. The concrete universal, interpreted along the lines here proposed, is a tool that can serve feminist purposes precisely because it does not impose a static universal content or norm but displays a transformative and critical process that implies constant work to rearticulate the relations between universality, particularity, and singularity. This crucial work invests not only the *notions* of the universal produced from time to time but is equally concerned with *how* they are formulated (that is, the epistemic practices through which they are forged) and illuminates the reciprocal shaping of these two aspects. The logical framework of the concrete universal is thus also a good point of departure for a critical metaphilosophy of the universal – a project in which philosophy evaluates the codetermination relations between its analysis of the universal as an object of study and as its own activity.

⁷⁹ To state that the concrete universal does not predetermine an empirical content is not to say that it has no content: the content involved is logical – namely, the system(s) of conceptual relations.