

THE CONCRETE UNIVERSAL AS A CRITICAL NOTION: AN INTRODUCTION

by Giovanna Miolli and Pablo Pulgar Moya*

Abstract. *The present introduction outlines the motivations behind this editorial project, which takes the concrete universal as its focus, and briefly reflects on both the critical potential of this Hegelian-inspired notion and the ambiguities it entails. It also proposes three conceptual coordinates that frame the concrete universal as a central intra-Hegelian issue: the logical structure of the ‘concept of the concept’; the reconfiguration of the relationship between concreteness and abstraction; and the dialectical interplay between logic and Realphilosophie. It is remarked that the concrete universal involves the co-constitution of the universal, particular, and singular, revealing universality as inherently self-mediating and immanently realized. It is further suggested that the concrete universal may be understood as a ‘polyfunctional’ notion that brings together various dimensions of Hegel’s system.*

Keywords. *Concrete Universal; Hegel; Abstraction; Logic; Realphilosophie*

1. *The Generativity and Conflicts of the Concrete Universal*

This editorial project emerged from what might be called a ‘philosophical obsession’: how *generative* can a concept with a troubled history – one that has shown itself capable of malfunction and even oppressive tendencies – still be? For us, this question found its paradigmatic referent in the notion of the *universal*.

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This publication is part of the *InRatio* project (PI: Giovanna Miolli), which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101025620; and of the Fondecyt Project 3220866 (PI: Pablo Pulgar Moya).

We hypothesized that one possible answer lies in the idea that the universal remains theoretically fertile precisely *because of* how it has been transformed – or forced to transform – through sustained critical engagement. In other words, it is the processes of constructing and deconstructing the universal that continue to define its philosophical relevance. What matters most is not the achievement of a fixed or widely accepted definition, but rather the struggle over its meaning, through which the universal is articulated, contested, and sometimes institutionalized. It is within this disputed terrain that specific epistemic and political claims about what the universal ought to be are continuously negotiated. What is at stake, philosophically, is thus the normative and prescriptive space in which the universal takes form – a «‘discursive horizon’ of competing claims»¹ where temporary agreements coexist with enduring tensions and sites of resistance. As Étienne Balibar wryly observes, «the enunciation of the universal serves less to unify human beings than to promote *conflict between and within them*. In other words, it unites only by dividing»².

To delve even deeper into the question of the universal, we chose an ‘access point’ to serve as a possible kaleidoscope of reflections. The challenge was to select an aspect that, on the one hand, would reintroduce the conflictual core of the universal, while on the other, would pave the way for its reinterpretation and experimentation in an anti-oppressive sense. We believe that this matrix can be found in the concept of the ‘concrete universal’.

It is certainly no secret that this term «has a distinctively Hegelian ring to it»³. In fact, (1) we were particularly interested in

¹ S. Benhabib, *On Hegel, Women and Irony*, in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. by P. Jagentowicz Mills, University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, pp. 25-43, p. 2.

² É. Balibar, *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, Engl. trans. by J.D. Jordan, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020, p. vii.

³ R. Stern, *Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal*, in Id., *Hegelian Metaphysics*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 143-176, p. 143. In addition to Stern’s valuable contribution, other recent works that explicitly address the theme of the concrete universal in relation to Hegel include the following: W. Kisner, *The Concrete Universal in Žižek and Hegel*, «International Journal of Žižek Studies», II (2), 2008, pp. 1-35; C. Baumann,

examining this concept as it is explicitly articulated and named in Hegel's philosophy. Our engagement with the question of the universal may well have originated from the awareness that, at a certain point in the history of thought, an apparently oxymoronic expression had been coined – one that challenged a long-standing tradition linking universality with abstraction, while instead opening up space for processes of co-determination (rather than subsumption) between the universal and the particular or singular.

However, we were also eager to explore other directions: (2) to investigate early anticipations of the concrete universal and (3) to map some of its contemporary transformations or re-significations. In short, our general intention was to put the notion of the 'concrete universal' to the test, namely, to consider this concept as one that enables us to think and do (new) things. What can we still achieve with this concept, and in which fields? What horizons does it open up? What phenomena or processes does it help us to articulate? At the same time, (4) it was crucial to maintain a position of 'alertness' and awareness with respect to potential oppressive implications of this very notion. These four directions have all been embraced in this Special Issue. The collected texts, authored by scholars with diverse philosophical backgrounds as well as different geographical areas of activity, seemed to 'fulfill the prophecy'.

The Hegelian matrix of the concrete universal runs as a central thread throughout the volume. The collection features a preliminary study of the various aspects and meanings of the universal that feed into Hegel's mature conception (Schlömp-Röder), as well as a detailed examination of the logical structure of the concrete universal, especially through the lens of the logic of the concept (Profili).

Some contributions reflect on how the speculative notion of the concrete universal can help us make sense of different kinds of structures and relations – such as the loving union (Bordignon) or

Adorno, Hegel and the Concrete Universal, «Philosophy and Social Criticism», XXXVII (1), 2011, pp. 73-94; M. Bordignon, *A noção hegeliana do universal concreto e a metafísica dos processos*, in *Hegel e a Contemporaneidade*, ed. by R.P. Tassinari, A. Bavaresco, M.M. Magalhães, Porto Alegre, Editora Fundação Fênix, 2020, pp. 193-211; A.C. Ploug, *Concrete Concepts: The Logic of Problems in Post-Hegelian French Philosophies*, Roskilde, Roskilde Universitet, 2024 (PhD Dissertation).

the Self understood as a genus of itself (Ennen). In one case, this conceptual framework is applied to the relation between living organisms and their environment, offering a perspective that engages directly with current debates in the philosophy of mind and ecological psychology (Sandnes Haukedal).

The volume also fosters conversations across philosophical traditions and authors, intersecting with the fields of metaphysics, philosophy of mathematics, critical theory, and contemporary social and political philosophy. Among the lines of inquiry explored is Hegel's reading of Montesquieu, with a focus on how the political dimension is integrated into the system of objective spirit and how this relates to the idea of the concrete universal (Rategni). A further strand of research developed in the volume offers a comparative analysis of the functions of Hegel's notion of the concrete universal and Alfred Sohn-Rethel's concept of real abstraction, particularly in relation to Marx (Pulgar Moya). Another topic addresses the influence of Hegel's notion on early British Idealism, particularly with regard to Bradley's logic and metaphysics (Cavalli). Cassirer's engagement with the concrete universal in the context of his philosophy of mathematics is also examined (Laino), as is the connection between the concrete universal and speculative freedom in Hegel, developed through a critical reading of Honneth's account of social freedom (Bianchi).

A significant number of the essays included in this volume (Baumann, Guzmán, Locatelli, Mascát, Miolli, Wieland) directly or indirectly engage with what might be called the *ambiguity* of the universal – or its equivocality, to borrow a term used by Étienne Balibar⁴. On the one hand, the universal can lend itself to oppressive formations; on the other, its critique and reconstruction can serve emancipatory purposes.

Exploring both these dimensions – the oppressive and the emancipatory – and their possible entanglements often involves investigating the co-determination of theory and politics. More precisely, it entails examining the material consequences of certain theoretical articulations of the universal, as well as the ways in which

⁴ See É. Balibar, *Preface: Equivocity of the Universal*, in Id., *On Universals*, pp. VII-IX.

emerging political and social practices feed back into the formation of new theories of the universal.

Within this contested domain, the notion of the ‘concrete universal’ occupies a central place precisely because of its unusual conjunction of universality and concreteness. To invoke this concept, even outside of strictly Hegelian contexts, is to draw attention to the relational, determinate, and content-rich dimensions involved in the formation of the universal. It means, in other words, thinking of a universal that does not rest on the abstraction from particularity and singularity, but rather takes shape within them. In political terms, this emphasis restores meaning to differences and their capacity to constitute the universal. At the same time, however, it brings to the forefront the potential *conflict* among particulars⁵ and their possible universalistic claims – claims that may be abstract precisely in that they disregard their relation to others. Hence, the tension persists between generative dynamics on the one hand, and potentially oppressive or exclusionary tendencies on the other. In its mere enunciation, the ‘beautiful formula’ of the concrete universal is thus no naïve guarantee of a harmonious and ‘inclusive’ universal. Rather, it sheds light on the processes of construction and deconstruction through which the universal is formed – each time involving a specific configuration of the relationship between the universal, the particular, and the singular.

That the concrete universal is not, in itself, a resolved or ‘irenic’ matter – a concept by which we *finally* (!) declare that the universal is constituted through its determination in particulars and singularities, rather than through abstraction from them – is evidenced by the very ambiguity with which this concept unfolds in Hegelian philosophy. It is no coincidence that emancipatory readings of the concrete universal most often draw on the *Science of Logic* (as the process of positing the free structure of the concept), the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (as the process through which consciousness emancipates itself from unilateral practical-epistemic positions up to the standpoint of philosophical science), or certain passages of the *Philosophy*

⁵ On this point, see the aforementioned Balibar, *On Universals*, as well as J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London-New York, Verso, 2000.

of Right (where the role of civil society and particular interests in the formation of the state – as a universal reference – is discussed). In these sections of Hegel's work, the structure of the concrete universal is amenable to interpretations that harness its 'positive' critical potential – that is, its capacity to reveal the insufficiency of various configurations of abstract universals and to reclaim significance for the determinate content of particularity and singularity, along with their active role in transforming the universal itself.

It would be far more complex, however, to employ the notion of the concrete universal in liberatory terms by grounding it in its 'historical instantiations', as they emerge from Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. This difficulty is tightly bound to the charge of Eurocentrism often leveled against Hegel – namely, the idea that the historical processes of the universal spirit's concretization (as well as of speculative philosophy itself) find their fullest realization within the modern white European space-time⁶. The historical and geographical delimitation of the realization of the concrete universal thus runs the risk, in turn, of obscuring processes of oppression embedded in its very instantiation.

To speak of the concrete universal, beyond laying the groundwork for an extra-Hegelian inquiry – one that relates Hegel to the history of thought and to our present – is, therefore, also an intra-Hegelian issue. It involves identifying the 'fault lines' within his system on which to engage, and through which to continue using Hegel, despite and beyond Hegel – an operation frequently undertaken by feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist perspectives that repurpose Hegelian conceptual tools for new uses and contexts. In this sense, the intra-Hegelian question of the concrete universal places at the center the relationship between logic, the system of objective spirit (particularly with reference to civil society, the state, and inter-

⁶ See S. Castro-Gómez, *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana*, Bogotá, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 1996, pp. 69 ff.; B. Boostels, *Hegel en América*, «Tabula Rasa», XI, 2009, pp. 195-234; A. Narváez and P. Pulgar Moya, *From Nation to Religion: Hegel's Critique of the Political Economy of Colonialism*, in *Hegel's Political Philosophy: Themes and Interpretations*, ed. by E. Sembou, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2021, pp. 127-152; F. Sanguinetti, L. Corti and G. Miolli (eds.), *Lecture di Hegel dall'Africa e dalla diaspora africana*, Padova, Padova University Press, 2024.

state relations), and the philosophy of history. It calls for once again problematizing the link between speculative logic, where the processes of concretization (and thus determination) of the concept as Idea are unfolded, and *Realphilosophie*.

As the preceding discussion has shown, the notion of the concrete universal remains critical – both as a tool for critique and as a concept that can itself be subjected to critique. Rather than embracing a utopian vision of the concrete universal as a panacea for theoretical difficulties (such as the integration of the universal, particular, and singular) or political challenges (such as the harmonious coming together of differences within a shared existential project), this volume underscores its potential by approaching it as a persistent and insistent category: one that unsettles rigid oppositions and opens space for transformative thinking.

2. *The Concrete Universal as an Intra-Hegelian Question*

A few additional remarks are in order regarding the notion of the concrete universal as an intra-Hegelian question. Three key aspects can be identified as guiding coordinates for engaging with the conceptual framework of this notion: it refers to the logical structure of the ‘concept of the concept’; it reconfigures the relationship between concreteness and abstraction; and it functions as a tool for interpreting the mutual implications between logic and *Realphilosophie*.

As previously mentioned, the notion of the concrete universal articulates a form of universality that is not reducible to mere abstraction or emptiness, but necessarily involves a reference to the particular and the singular. The persistence of the universal within the particular and the singular – and their reciprocal reference back to the universal as co-constitutive of universality itself – is a defining feature of the ‘concept of the concept’, as presented at the beginning of the Doctrine of the Concept in the *Science of Logic*⁷.

⁷ As Robert Stern stresses, Hegel «conceives of the concrete universal as ‘the universal of the Notion’, in so far as it involves a dialectical relation to particularity and individuality, whereas the abstract universal does not» (Stern, *Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal*, p. 154).

For Hegel, if the concept lacks the capacity to account for the concrete, it remains undetermined and empty in its simplicity. In developing the ‘concept of the concept’, Hegel is therefore particularly critical of the abstractly conceived universal, stressing its explanatory insufficiency in accounting for the very nature of universality. It is precisely this insufficiency that calls for the necessary dialectical process of conceptual determinations, a process that hinges on the concrete formulation of the universal. Within this dynamic, the ‘struggle’ between universality and particularity emerges as an ongoing tension over the self-determination of conceptual complexity. In this light, the self-determination of the concept lies in its immanent acceptance of its own negativity – its inherent need for completeness⁸. This very necessity expresses the freedom proper to the concept. Insofar as it is free, the concept possesses the potential to *co-grow* (*concreſcere*) within its own universality.

The freedom of the concept – which Hegel also depicts in more evocative terms as *free power*, *free love*, or *boundless blessedness*⁹ – enables a transformation in our understanding of logic and of what is instantiated within practical philosophy. This freedom is a defining feature of Hegelian philosophy and is what allows logical analysis to extend into the domains of nature and spirit. The latter, in particular, occupies a central place not only in Hegel’s own philosophical project but also in the work of those thinkers who have reclaimed the concrete universal as a concept of enduring significance for practical philosophy, especially within the field of contemporary political thought.

The structure of the ‘concept of the concept’ as the ‘minimal logical basis’ for understanding concrete universality is one of the paths through which the mutual implications between logic and *Realphilosophie* can be explored. Although the relation between

⁸ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band. Die subjektive Logik* (1816), in *Gesammelte Werke* (henceforth *GW*), vol. 12, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1981, p. 35; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 532. Hereafter abbreviated as ‘*SL II*’; references indicate the page number of the German edition, with the English translation in parentheses.

⁹ See *ibidem*.

concept and reality (understood as nature and spirit) is not fully resolved in the *Logic*, it should be noted that the development of the concept of the concrete universal already exhibits multiplicity in its theoretical and practical dimensions. Concrete universality provides philosophy with a ‘polyfunctional concept’ that expresses the unity among the various dimensions of the Hegelian system. The immanent relation of the concept to the rationality of the real entails that the concept is always instantiated concretely in the surrounding reality. Indeed, the concrete universality of the concept is not merely about thinking the particular within the concept, but rather about the very capacity of concepts to be ‘plastically’¹⁰ instantiated in the world.

This way of understanding the rational reality of the concept is the cornerstone of the ‘holistic argument’ of the system itself, such that the recurrence of the formulation of concrete universality manifests an intra-Hegelian totality that may be traced not only in the Doctrine of the Concept, but also in the Philosophy of Nature, of Subjective Spirit, of Objective Spirit, among others. This is not the place for a detailed conceptual reconstruction of the expression ‘concrete universality’ across the different parts of the system. Nonetheless, we would emphasize that the implications of the self-referential and self-determining conceptual determinations within subjective logic find a mode of immanence in the thinking of the particular and the singular within reality.

One final point deserves attention: underscoring the concrete dimension of the development of the concept does not entail a rejection of abstraction. Hegel’s interpretation of the relation among the universal, the particular, and the singular, integrates abstraction immanently, making it a necessary moment in the conceptual concatenation. Indeed, the only viable path to the theoretical consistency of the concrete universal is not a simple negation of the explanatory power of pure abstraction, but its dialectical articulation, one that returns to the concept as an element that maintains its universality even in contexts of particularity and singularity¹¹. The Hegelian operation does

¹⁰ See C. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 181.

¹¹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, in *GW*, vol. 20, in collaboration with U. Rameil, ed. by W. Bonsiepen and H.-C. Lucas, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1992, § 163; Eng.

not, therefore, abolish abstraction, but rather redefines it in contrast to its unreflected interpretation:

[W]hat makes Hegel's 'concrete universality' infinite is that it *includes 'abstractions' in concrete reality itself, as their immanent constituents*. To put it another way: what, for Hegel, is the elementary move of philosophy with regard to abstraction? It is to abandon the common-sense empiricist notion of abstraction as a step away from the wealth of concrete empirical reality with its irreducible multiplicity of features: life is green, concepts are gray, they dissect, mortify, concrete reality. (This common-sense notion even has its pseudo-dialectical version, according to which such 'abstraction' is a feature of mere Understanding, while 'dialectics' recuperates the rich tapestry of reality)¹².

Hegel reinterprets abstraction philosophically in at least two major ways, both of which are integrated into the process of forming the concrete universal. First, abstraction is understood as a constitutive moment in the development of the concept – specifically, the stage of the abstract universal, described by Hegel as the pure, negative, self-referential activity that stands apart from all determination: «the free sameness with itself»¹³. Hegel consistently presents this moment as a central element in the structure of the concept, the speculative method, the 'I', and the will, among others¹⁴. Although

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, § 163: «The *concept* as such contains the moments of *universality* (as the free sameness with itself in its determinacy), *particularity* (the determinacy in which the universal remains the same as itself, unalloyed), and *individuality* (as the reflection-in-itself of the determinacies of universality and particularity, the negative unity with itself that is the *determinate in and for itself* and at the same time identical with itself or universal)». Henceforth, references to this work will appear as 'Enc.', followed by the paragraph number.

¹² S. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 395.

¹³ Enc., § 163.

¹⁴ See *SL II*, 17 (514): «The concept, when it has progressed to a concrete existence which is itself free, is none other than the 'I' or pure self-consciousness. [...] [T]he 'I' is the pure concept itself, the concept that has come into *determinate existence* [Daseyn]. [...]. [T]he 'I' is in *the first place* purely self-referring unity, and

this stage does not exhaust the articulation of the concept, it nevertheless represents an indispensable and irreducible part of it.

Second, in speculative terms, abstraction must always be grasped as an *abstraction from* some content or *from* a process of mediation that has been, so to speak, ‘compressed’ into a result. This result – namely, a content determination – is what the understanding takes as an immediate, self-subsisting given¹⁵, rather than recognizing it as the product of a mediating movement¹⁶. In this sense, abstraction can be read as a form of immediacy that ‘forgets’ – or fails to make explicit – the mediating processes involved in the determination of the contents of the concept (or of the I, the will, consciousness, and spirit). Making such mediating processes explicit in the positing of conceptual content – that is, in the becoming-concrete of the concept – amounts to a ‘correction’¹⁷ of abstraction understood as immediacy. The ‘correction’ of abstraction

is this not immediately but by abstracting from all determinateness and content and withdrawing into the freedom of unrestricted equality with itself. As such it is *universality*, a unity that is unity with itself only by virtue of its *negative* relating, which appears as abstraction, and because of it contains all determinateness within itself as dissolved». See also Id., *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *GW*, vol. 14.1, ed. by K. Grotzsch and E. Weisser-Lohmann, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2009, § 5; Eng. trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by A.W. Wood, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, § 5: «The will contains (α) the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the ‘I’^s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure thinking of oneself».

¹⁵ These statements echo Hegel’s claims that: «there is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be *unseparated* and *inseparable* and the opposition between them nothing real» (Id., *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Teil. Die objektive Logik. Erster Band. Die Lehre vom Sein* (1832), in *GW*, vol. 21, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1985, p. 54; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, p. 46).

¹⁶ See *Enc.*, § 80: «Thinking as *understanding* does not budge beyond the firm determinateness [of what is entertained] and its distinctness over against others. A limited abstraction of this sort counts for it as self-standing and [as having] being [*als für sich bestehend und seyend*]».

¹⁷ A. Koch, *Sein – Wesen – Begriff*, in *Der Begriff als die Wahrheit. Zum Anspruch der Hegelschen ‘Subjektiven Logik’*, ed. by A. Koch, A. Oberauer and K. Utz, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003, p. 80.

refers to a process of liberation from indeterminacy, namely, the movement from the vagueness of what is merely abstract toward conceptual concreteness and determinacy.

This process of liberation from the merely abstract is, at the same time, a process of becoming concrete, through which reason (*Vernunft*) overcomes understanding (*Verstand*) by means of a densification – or fulfillment – of conceptual content. As abstraction simplifies, concretion complexifies: the less abstract a determination is, the more internally differentiated it becomes. The concrete thus emerges not as the opposite of the abstract, but as its truth, realized through a dialectical process of «sublation-through-fulfillment»¹⁸. This rational correction of the understanding shows that what appears simple is, in fact, grounded in a deeper structure of mediated, complex concreteness.

3. Overview of the Monographic Section

This monographic section includes contributions from invited authors (Charlotte Baumann, Michela Bordignon, Luis Guzmán, Jamila M.H. Mascát, Lelia E. Profili, Tobias Wieland) and submissions selected through a call for papers and a blind peer review process¹⁹ (Andrea Bianchi, Giulio M. Cavalli, Timo Ennen, Luigi Laino, Silvia Locatelli, Matteo Rategni, Rasmus Sandnes Haukedal, Jürgen Schlömp-Röder, Roberto Leone Zellini), along with articles by the editors, Giovanna Miolli and Pablo Pulgar Moya.

The volume spans various dimensions of Hegel's systematic thought – logic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. The original German expression is «Aufhebung-durch-Erfüllung». We suggest that this very process might aptly be designated as *Aufhebung-durch-Konkretion*, a form of sublation achieved not through negation alone, but through a progressive movement into concreteness.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that, in response to the call for papers, we received twelve submissions, only one of which came from a woman. While this is not the place for a thorough analysis of this fact, we feel it is important to mention it and not let the issue go unacknowledged.

spirit – while also opening up emancipatory perspectives and engaging with contemporary theoretical frameworks such as decolonial and feminist theories.

The first article in this special issue, titled *Die Typologie des Allgemeinen – Eine Vorstudie zu Hegels Formel des «concreten Allgemeinen»*, is authored by Jürgen Schlömp-Röder. He presents a nuanced typology of universality that must be taken into account for an adequate interpretation of the concrete universal. According to Schlömp-Röder, once we recognize that Hegel applies the notion of the concrete universal in both his *Logic* and his *Realphilosophie*, any reading of this formula must attend to its concrete character and to the moments of the concept within Hegel's system. To support this claim, his study explores the manifold dimensions of universality. Hegel posits a *Bewegung* (movement) of the universal as the coherence among its forms or types – a dynamic that requires further elaboration and may point to the internal proliferation of the concrete. The author emphasizes that Hegel provides only a rudimentary elaboration of the concrete universal as an independent logical figure, and that he repeatedly circles around a self-referential structure – through the self-movement of the concept, being-in-and-for-itself, the process of recognition, and return- or reflection-into-self. The systematic importance of the concrete universal is underscored by the fact that this formula appears throughout Hegel's real philosophy, particularly within the domains of objective and absolute spirit.

Lelia E. Profili, in her paper *El universal concreto. Clave de una transformación especulativa de la metafísica*, argues that Hegel's notion of 'concrete universality' inaugurates a transformation that distances itself from traditional metaphysical frameworks and anticipates a post-metaphysical horizon for contemporary thought. She poses the central question: from what kind of metaphysics has Hegelian thought emancipated itself? Her article seeks to address this question through a close hermeneutic reading of the logic and systematic structure of the concept of the concrete universal, as well as its operative role within real philosophy. She focuses on the models of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to articulate the contours of Hegel's post-metaphysical project. Her analysis demonstrates that, although it is accurate to claim that Hegelian

philosophy sheds the remnants of a representational or ontotheological metaphysics – beginning with the notion of concrete universality – it would be misleading to suggest that it becomes fully detached from metaphysical concerns.

The third essay, *Das Ich als Gattung seiner selbst*, by Timo Ennen, investigates Hegel's conception of the 'I' as the genus of itself, drawing on key passages from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*. Ennen examines the specific nature of self-consciousness, which, for Hegel, is characterized by its structure as a concrete universal. While the 'I' is abstract insofar as it is not identified with any particular being, it is at the same time concrete, as it realizes its freedom from particularity through its own process of particularization or self-determination. In this respect, the 'I' lacks an external, higher universality that could determine it from outside itself – distinguishing it from natural life, such as that of animals, whose genus-universality exists externally to them. For Hegel, spirit does not function as an external determinant of the 'I'. This framework culminates in a critique of naturalism and the hermeneutics of suspicion, explored in the final section of the article.

Rasmus Sandnes Haukedal's article, *The Concrete Universal of Embodied Concepts*, approaches Hegel's notion of the concrete universal through the lens of contemporary philosophy of mind. Haukedal argues that the concrete universal – closely tied to the subjectivity and historicity of nature – offers valuable conceptual resources for current philosophical debates. He contends that, for Hegel, the concrete universal is actualized in the living organism – not as something applied externally to the world, but as internal to the organism's becoming. This perspective opens the way for a rethinking of the environment's status as something independent of the organism, and responds to a central critique of ecological psychology: namely, its alleged reintroduction of representationalism through the idea that organisms 'pick up' information from their surroundings. In contrast, Haukedal emphasizes that, while the environment is not given independently of the organism, it nevertheless imposes constraints on the affordances available to it – affordances that are both shaped by and shape the organism's interaction with the world. His article thus shows how Hegel's concept of

the concrete universal remains highly relevant for contemporary discussions in the philosophy of mind.

The paper *Kant on Concrete Universals: An Inquiry into Lowest Species* by Roberto Leone Zellini explores the notion of the concrete universal through a reconstruction of Kant's concept of the *lowest species* – a term not explicitly identified as such in Kant's writings, but argued here to function as its conceptual equivalent. Despite the apparent paradox contained in the expression *concrete universal* – which traditionally juxtaposes the singular and inimitable with the multiply exemplifiable – the article challenges the widespread assumption that Kant denies the existence of lowest species altogether. It maintains that Kant's arguments against lowest species apply only to empirical concepts and are methodologically limited. In contrast, geometrical concepts, as defined and constructed in mathematics, are shown to function as lowest species within Kant's system. Zellini develops this claim by analyzing Kant's theory of geometrical construction and demonstrating that such concepts resist further logical division. The article concludes by affirming the conceptual synonymy between *lowest species* and *concrete universal*, thereby offering a new perspective on the structure of Kant's conceptual architecture.

Matteo Rategni's essay, *Hegel lettore di Montesquieu. L'emergere del «politico» come «punto di vista della suprema universalità concreta»*, examines the development of Hegel's theory of the ethical and political significance of *Gesinnung* (disposition) in the context of his Jena writings and later lectures on the philosophy of right. Focusing on the period between 1817 and 1820, Rategni traces how Hegel's reflections on the sentiment required to reconcile particular subjectivity with universal interest increasingly intersect with Montesquieu's theory of the principle of government. The article argues that Hegel's early emphasis on *Vertrauen* (trust) as the appropriate disposition of the second estate evolves into a deeper engagement with Montesquieu's idea that each form of government presupposes a corresponding sentiment (e.g., honor in monarchy). Through a close reading of Hegel's lecture manuscripts and the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Rategni shows how the concept of *Gesinnung* becomes a crucial entry point for integrating a newly emerging 'political element' into Hegel's system. Montesquieu's influence proves decisive for Hegel's mature

political philosophy, as he preserves the speculative core of the theory of government principles and develops it into a comprehensive theory of *Gesinnung*, which by 1819 is regarded as 'essential in the State'.

Pablo Pulgar Moya's article, *Producing Material Abstractions: Marx's View of Hegel's Concrete Universality*, compares the conceptual efficacy of Hegel's notion of the *concrete universal* with Alfred Sohn-Rethel's concept of *real abstraction*. Sohn-Rethel's theory seeks to explain the conditions under which epistemological determinations are abstracted in Marx. Pulgar Moya argues that Hegel's concept of the concrete universal offers greater explanatory power in accounting for the categories of Marx's critique of political economy than Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction. He contends that the concept of capital, as the foundational category of Marx's critique, functions as a non-ontological instantiation of concrete universality – an abstraction grounded in a materially constituted reality defined by intersubjective relations. For Pulgar Moya, the concreteness of universality encompasses a plurality of real, intersubjective relations. The concrete universal is not merely a common principle; it is also actualized in particular instances and demands a *formative exposition*, which he terms the *formative exposition of capital*.

Giulio M. Cavalli's contribution, *Dal concetto all'esperienza. L'universale concreto in Bradley e nel primo idealismo britannico (1865-1893)*, examines the philosophical relevance of the concrete universal within both the theoretical and practical dimensions of British idealism. Focusing in particular on F.H. Bradley's logic and metaphysics, Cavalli situates his discussion within the broader context of early British idealism. The article begins with a brief preliminary reconstruction that highlights the speculative centrality of concrete universality in Bradley's philosophy. Cavalli limits his analysis to issues of a logical-epistemological and metaphysical nature, arguing that the Hegelian and idealist legacy in Bradley undergoes a significant transformation – from *concept* to *experience* – which would later influence early twentieth-century philosophy. For Bradley, the concrete universal comes to define the very structure of experience, irreducible to merely relational thought. At the same time, Cavalli emphasizes that Bradley does not lapse into the anti-intellectualist tendencies of thinkers like James or Bergson, but remains

aligned with a fundamentally rationalistic tradition extending from Plato to Hegel.

Structured in five sections, Luigi Laino's article, *The Early Cassirer and Hegel's «Concrete Universal» in the Philosophy of Mathematics*, examines the influence of Hegelian thought on Ernst Cassirer's philosophical project, with particular attention to his engagement with the concept of the concrete universal in the context of mathematical philosophy. The article traces the intellectual trajectory through which Cassirer came to adopt this notion, situating it within his broader philosophy of mathematics. It opens with an analysis of Hegel's conception of the mathematical infinite in the *Science of Logic*, highlighting its connection to the function concept and the logic of the concrete universal. Laino then explores the mediating role of figures such as Moritz Drobisch and Hermann Cohen – particularly Cohen's reflections on the calculus – as key interlocutors between Hegel and Cassirer. The article concludes by arguing that Cassirer's early philosophical outlook not only resonates with Hegelian logic, but also reconfigures its implications in original and significant ways.

Andrea Bianchi's contribution, *Universale concreto e libertà. Sull'irriducibilità della libertà speculativa hegeliana alla libertà sociale*, offers a critical analysis of Hegel's effort to surpass both the traditional abstract conception of the concept and Kant's model of transcendental synthesis, which, in Hegel's view, retains a dualism between form and content. Against this background, Hegel articulates a dialectical, non-psychologistic understanding of conceptual development, in which determinations arise immanently from the self-movement of the concept rather than from external intuitions. This framework grounds his theory of freedom – particularly in the transition from substance to concept in the *Doctrine of Essence* and in the *Philosophy of Right* – where the freedom of the will reflects the structure of the concept as a concrete universal. Bianchi's article critically engages with Axel Honneth's reinterpretation of Hegelian freedom as social freedom, raising the question of whether such a reading remains faithful to the speculative dimension of Hegel's original project. The article argues that the gap between Honneth's position and Hegel's framework reveals key limitations within contemporary critical theory.

Michela Bordignon's article, *L'amore etico tra limitazione e libertà, tra individualità astratta e universalità concreta*, draws primarily on Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* to examine the experience of the loving union as one in which limitation and liberation are dialectically intertwined. The essay explores the ecstatic dimension of love as an affective disposition through which the subject renounces their abstract individuality in order to experience unity with the other. Bordignon contends that this ecstatic movement does not signify a loss of individuality; rather, it enables a fuller experience of selfhood, insofar as love rests not only on immediate affect but also on a conscious, rational, and reflective openness toward the beloved. From this perspective, the article foregrounds the emancipatory value of the self-feeling generated in love, interpreting it through the dialectic of free will at the outset of objective spirit and the logical structure that underlies it – namely, the pure logical form of the concept's freedom as a concrete universal.

Silvia Locatelli's paper, *Hegel's Antigone: Sittlichkeit as a Concrete Universal*, offers a political interpretation of Hegel's concept of the concrete universal, focusing on *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) as articulated within the domain of objective spirit. Drawing on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the article mobilizes the figure of Antigone to resist the ossification – or stagnation – of spirit, illustrating how particularity, marked by the feminine, can sustain the dynamism of the universal. The first section explores the logic of the concrete universal in Hegel's *Science of Logic* and its political realization in ethical life, understood as a transparent and reciprocal relationship between individual and institution. Ethical life is presented as an active and dynamic unity, sustained by individual agency that participates in, without being subsumed by, the universal. The second section addresses the tension between *custom* in ethical life and *habit* in subjective spirit, foregrounding the threat posed by formalism to the vitality of the universal. The final section turns to Antigone as a paradigmatic figure who interrupts the universal when it becomes rigid, thereby preserving its speculative movement. From a feminist perspective, Locatelli ultimately argues that fidelity to Hegel's thought requires a critical transcendence of its conceptual and historical limitations.

Charlotte Baumann's contribution, *Concrete Universality as a Critical Tool: Hegel, Adorno, Césaire*, explores how Adorno and Césaire engage with and critically rework Hegel's concept of the concrete universal. Unlike abstract universals, which impose uniformity, the concrete universal affirms difference within unity, envisioning a form of society that recognizes and sustains diverse identities, experiences, and needs. While Hegel regarded such universality as realizable, Adorno and Césaire remain skeptical of its attainment under the conditions of modern capitalism. Nonetheless, they retain key Hegelian insights: the tension between the universal and the particular – both socially and epistemologically – is real, oppressive, and in need of transformation. Rejecting any reconciliation that subordinates the particular to the universal, they argue instead that genuine universality must integrate and express the specificity of the individuals and groups it encompasses. Adorno exposes the violence of abstract concepts in capitalist society and calls for a reimagined freedom capable of resisting systemic domination. Césaire, with a more hopeful vision, imagines a collective process in which historically marginalized experiences reanimate universal concepts as living expressions of liberation. Together, their work reconceptualizes humanity and freedom not as static categories, but as evolving, relational, and socially embedded ideals.

Jamila M.H. Mascat's article, *Hegel e la disputa sugli universali. Universalismo strategico e politiche dell'emancipazione*, revisits Hegel's concept of universality through the lens of its political implications. Drawing a diverse and non-linear intellectual trajectory – from Hegel to Donna Haraway, through Marx, Fanon, standpoint epistemologies, Black feminism, critical philosophy of race, and decolonial thought – the article explores how modern Western universalism has been persistently challenged for disguising particular interests as universal principles. Mascat demonstrates how critical thought and emancipatory struggles – led by workers, colonized peoples, and marginalized women – have both exposed these exclusions and reappropriated the language of universality as a site of resistance. From Fanon's call for a new humanism to the revolutionary praxis of the Combahee River Collective, these interventions highlight the generative power of what Mascat calls 'partisan universals'. Revisiting Hegel's critique of abstract

universalism and his formulation of the concrete universal, the article suggests that Hegelian dialectics can inform a radical politics of emancipation – one that, paradoxically, seeks to abolish its own partiality in the name of a renewed and inclusive universality.

Giovanna Miolli's contribution, *Hegel's Concrete Universal as a Logical Framework for Articulating Universalization Processes, Their Critique, and Transformation*, explores the potential of Hegel's notion of the concrete universal for the fields of contemporary metaphilosophy and feminist philosophy. It argues that the concrete universal can serve as a *logical* framework for interrogating and transforming the co-constitutive relations among universality, particularity, and singularity within the dynamics of universalization. The aim is to present the concrete universal as a relational process in motion – capable of both exposing the limitations of existing forms of universality and generating new, more integrated configurations. Conceived in this way, the concrete universal provides a productive epistemic structure for feminist analyses that seek to dismantle historically entrenched conceptions of the universal, while preserving its necessary role in grounding global, extendable, anti-oppressive claims. Simultaneously, it offers a theoretical resource for advancing a reassessment of philosophy's universalist aspirations, intervening in metaphilosophical discourses that frame philosophy's relation to the universal as both an object of inquiry and a mode of epistemic engagement.

Luis Guzmán's article, *Hegel, Las Casas, and the Erasure of Particularity: The Pedagogical Coercion of the Barbarian*, critically engages with Hegel's depiction of the 'barbarian' as a natural being incapable of achieving freedom – a condition that, in Hegel's view, is fully actualized only within European culture. In this framework, the barbarian's particularity disqualifies them from universality and, consequently, from freedom itself. Within the context of modernity, two options remain: assimilation through a civilizing mission – effectively a form of pedagogical coercion involving the erasure of particularity – or physical elimination. Guzmán's analysis unfolds along five axes: Hegel's Eurocentric notion of freedom; the role of negativity and contingency in emancipation; internal tensions in Hegel's account of freedom; the figure of the barbarian; and, finally, Bartolomé de las Casas' defense of Indigenous sovereignty in the

1550 Valladolid debate. For Guzmán, Las Casas offers a counter-model to Hegel's universalism, acknowledging Indigenous error without denying cultural and political legitimacy – a stance that resists the erasure of difference under the guise of universality.

Tobias Wieland's essay, *On the Question of the Concrete Universal: The Plurality of Life and Decolonial Critique*, argues that Hegel's concept of the concrete universal disrupts entrenched binaries between abstraction and concreteness. The article proposes that subaltern epistemologies and counter-hegemonic traditions provide critical standpoints from which to interrogate and resist the exclusionary models of universality that dominate the Western philosophical canon. Through the actualization of Hegel's speculative dialectic, the concrete universal emerges as a resource for rethinking identity, recognition, and knowledge in more pluralistic and inclusive terms. To develop this claim, the article draws on two key references that guide its interpretation of Hegel's speculative logic. The second section offers a politically inflected reading of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Science of Logic*, aimed at reconfiguring Hegel's ontology in light of conceptual emancipation. In conclusion, Wieland considers how Hegelian universality might be rethought through the lens of decolonial critique, particularly with respect to epistemic politics and the enduring legacy of coloniality.

Overall, the contributions collected in this special issue testify to the philosophically dense and plastic nature of the concrete universal. It stands as a decisive concept for interpreting Hegelian philosophy – both as a whole and in its specific articulations – while also offering a fertile conceptual framework for contemporary appropriations across a range of fields, including political philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of mathematics, ecological thought, and feminist and decolonial theories. Despite the 'distinctively Hegelian ring' of this notion, it remains a powerful resource for confronting contemporary theoretical and political challenges linked to the ever-contentious question of the universal.

We are deeply grateful to the guest contributors who responded to our invitation with both enthusiasm and commitment. We also extend our thanks to all the scholars who submitted their work, demonstrating a keen interest in the themes explored in this issue, as

well as to the reviewers for their generosity and thoughtful engagement. Special appreciation is reserved for Francesco Campana, Paolo Giuspoli, Armando Manchisi, Elena Nardelli, and Barbara Santini, whose support during the final stages of editing proved invaluable.