

ON THE SYSTEMIC MEANING OF MEANINGLESS UTTERANCES: THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE IN HEGEL'S SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: The aim of our paper is to offer a reading of the systemic significance of Hegel's inclusion of the concept of the sign in the 'Psychology' of his *Philosophy of Mind*. We hope to explain why it is that the Hegelian system positions a specific form of sign, the meaningless utterance, at the point of Mind's transition from 'mechanical memory' to 'Thinking'. Rather than analyse the subtle advancements in the unfolding of the self-determining activity of 'Theoretical Mind', our strategy will be to focus attention on what we take to be some central aspects of the philosophical system's wider developmental logic and of the general treatment of language in speculative philosophy. We do this by arguing that, according to Hegel's *Logic*, language provides the element in which persons are drawn together out of their independent subjectivity into a unity that gives expression to their universal nature as in process and, ultimately, as a project to be realized. This argument is supplemented by a reading of the general nature of the movement of Spirit within Hegel's system that draws attention to the significance of what we call 'the absolute potentiality' of Spirit. We argue that the transition from Mechanical Memory to 'Thinking' relies upon the activity of producing the meaningless utterance because this product of Mind reveals its universal nature to be its essential unity with its object. This transition allows us to show how Mind must be understood to return to itself out of its self-loss in Mechanical Memory. Finally we argue that the production of the meaningless utterance fulfils the requirement of reformulating the elementary idea of Spirit through an incorporation of the naturalness of the natural.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Language; Systematic Philosophy; Speculative Philosophy; Derrida

INTRODUCTION

The aim of our paper is to offer a reading of the systemic significance of Hegel's inclusion of the concept of the sign in the 'Psychology' of his *Philosophy of Mind*.¹ We

¹ *Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences 1830*, (text translated by W. Wallace and *Zusätze* (Hereafter 'Z') translated by A.V. Miller) Oxford, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1985. All references to this text will be abbreviated as 'PhM'. All other references to Hegel's work are drawn from the following texts and abbreviated as indicated. *Science of Logic* (translated by A.V. Miller) Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1990, abbreviated as 'SL'. *Logic: Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences 1830*, (translated by W. Wallace), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, abbreviated as 'EL'. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (translated by A.V. Miller) Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, abbreviated as 'PhS'. *Philosophy of Nature: Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences 1830* (translated by A.V. Miller) Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970, abbreviated as 'PhN'. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Part 1* (translated by E.S. Haldane) Lincoln and

hope to explain why it is that the Hegelian system positions a specific form of sign, the meaningless utterance, at the point of Mind's transition from 'mechanical memory' to 'Thinking'. Rather than analyse the subtle advancements in the unfolding of the self-determining activity of 'Theoretical Mind', our strategy will be to focus attention on what we take to be some central aspects of the philosophical system's wider developmental logic and of the general treatment of language in speculative philosophy.²

In section 1 we advance one substantive and one methodological claim. Firstly, we argue that, according to Hegel's *Logic*, language provides the element in which persons are drawn together out of their independent subjectivity into a unity that gives expression to their universal nature as in process and, ultimately, as a project to be realized. Secondly, we suggest an account of the general function of language should inform but should not be reduced to Hegel's account of the sign in the *Psychology*. In section 2 we offer a reading of the general nature of the movement of Spirit within Hegel's system that draws attention to the significance of what we call 'the absolute potentiality' of Spirit. In sections 3 and 4 we argue that the transition from Mechanical Memory to 'Thinking' relies upon the activity of producing the meaningless utterance because this product of Mind reveals its universal nature to be its essential unity with its object. Section 3 spells out the sense in which Mind must be understood to return to itself out of its self-loss in Mechanical Memory. Section 4 argues that the production of the meaningless utterance fulfils the requirement of reformulating the elementary idea of Spirit through an incorporation of the naturalness of the natural.

I READING HEGEL ON LANGUAGE

Within Hegel's system an account of the principle or general function of language is to be found in the *Logic*. According to the *Science of Logic*, in the world of spiritual relations chemically interacting objects, such as persons (SL p. 728) find their 'real possibility' in language. The '*sign* in general, and more precisely *language*,' functions as 'the *theoretical element* of the concrete existence of chemical objects, of their process and its result.' This is 'a formal element having an existence distinct from them—the element of *communication* in which they enter into external *community* with each other' (SL p. 729).

London, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, abbreviated as 'LHPH'.

² The exploration of this question can serve very different wider interests in the philosophical system about which our paper remains silent. W. A. de Vries takes us through a systematic elaboration of the different forms of mental activity (*Hegel's theory of Mental Activity*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1988). Even so, his analysis of Mechanical Memory only explains the transition to 'Thinking' in terms of the rather general observation that the emergence of words calls for their systematisation by Thought (p.163). On the other hand, J. McCumber's extensive reading of the constitution of 'names as such' in Mechanical Memory shows them to be a medium suited to the system's need for self-expression (*The Company of Words: Hegel, Language and Systematic Philosophy*, Illinois, Northwestern University press, 1993, pp. 229-241).

This account of language appears in the categorial development of Chemical Objectivity. ‘Objectivity’ signifies the absolute being of the Notion. It is a developmental cycle in which the objective Notion determines its subjective form in and through its absolute being (SL p. 597). Here, the Notion that, having established itself to be the essence of its object, submerges itself in the object in order to reach a point at which it determines its object as its own end or purpose (‘Teleology’). ‘Chemism’ accounts for the logical structure out of which teleological self-determination emerges. This structure deals with the activity of chemically interacting objects understood as objects specifically distinguished (a) as opposed in virtue of their differentiated essence and (b) as indifferent to each other’s essence.

In the chemical process the activity of chemically combining objects manifests their universal essence as a result of the sublation of their specific determinateness. But this process of interaction also produces their differentiation and return to their self-subsistence. Accordingly, their universal essence still has the form of an external relation, albeit in an absolute being. Objectivity in the form of the chemical process thus makes possible the reality of formal communication (of combination and differentiation) between beings whose absolute substantial unity is manifested in, but not determined by, the communication process. The self-determination of the process becomes an end to be realized. The chemical process thus results in the emergence of the teleological object.

What can the above structure of logical relations tell us about the function of language? In what sense is language the ‘real possibility’ of chemically interacting objects, such as persons? To begin with, we can read the above-cited reference to ‘the concrete existence of chemical objects’, as including reference to particular beings existing within the absolute being of the whole that Hegel’s philosophical system formulates as the ethical state. It is here that persons who are constituted as such particular beings come to realise their humanity in the sense of being ‘in an achieved community of minds’ (PhS p. 43). Following the logic of chemically interacting objects we can say that, acting as speaking subjects, persons negate their self-subsistent being without, however, losing their capability of returning to their self-subsistence. At the same time, this process gives their universality—their essential unity of being—objectivity, albeit only on a formal level. As a *formal element* language provides the framework of interaction in the form of communication that is, nevertheless, still external in the sense that it, itself, does not produce an absolute unity of being as a substantial bond. Instead, the *external community* of minds that can be achieved in the element of formal communication inevitably points to a project. The gap between the formality of persons-in-communication and their substantial-unity-of-being ensures that their interacting activity is taken to be a process that needs to become their project or end. So, for Hegel, the medium of language is ‘the real possibility’ of persons in that it positions speaking subjects as teleological beings in the above sense.

We will return below to the significance of this understanding of language as foregrounding the teleological being of subjectivity. For now, we want to make a

methodological point that will form part of the assumed background of our discussion of Hegel's treatment of the sign in the *Philosophy of Mind*. Our point is that whilst it may be very illuminating to bring together in a discussion of Hegel's theory of language the various references to language and linguistic entities that are to be found in different parts of his system, from the point of view of reading their systemic significance, it is unhelpful to read Hegel's general theory of the sign or language through a selective interpretation of any one aspect of this theory.

We can illustrate this point by reference to Derrida's treatment of Hegel's theory of the sign in 'The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology'.³ Here Derrida is concerned to expose the nature of the systemic determination of the concept of the sign and he also introduces his discussion of Hegel's theory of language by citing the passage from the *Science of Logic* that we discuss above. Yet he interprets this passage mainly by reference to an analysis of the references to the sign in the 'Psychology' on the ground that the Hegelian system develops its theory of the sign in the *Philosophy of Mind* (Derrida, p. 74). Not surprisingly, having located the system's theory of the sign in 'the science of the subject' and, hence, as 'part of the essential structure of the Idea's return to self-presence' (Derrida, p. 76), Derrida is then in a position to show how this treatment of the sign as part of the Psychology of Mind subordinates the sign to Mind's interest in manifesting the freedom of spirit, something that goes hand in hand with the privileging of speech over writing (Derrida, p. 86).

Derrida's analysis of Hegel's 'theory of the sign' through the *Philosophy of Mind* leads him to read the question of the systemic determination of the concept of the sign as a question about its constitution 'as the site of the transition', the bridge between two moments of full presence' (Derrida, p. 71). His question seems all the more appropriate because he does not take into account the claims of the passage from the *Science of Logic* that he cites. As we argued above, there, far from being constituted as the mere site of transition, language is connected to the elaboration of the objective universality of an absolute being, albeit as its process.

Unlike Derrida, we think that it is important not to credit Hegel's references to the sign in the 'Psychology' with attempting to do more than their positioning in the system would suggest is their purpose. Our discussion of their significance will take into account that this material deals specifically with the activity and result of *sign producing by the Subject*, as distinct from offering us a more comprehensive theory of the sign within the language system. The 'Psychology' is, of course, a developmental stage of the system that precedes the elaboration of the 'Ethical state' in relation to which we have discussed the principle or general function of language above. As such, we treat the Subject's sign creating activity as an earlier, more abstract moment in the elaboration of the Idea. This means that, from the point of view of a systemic reading, it deals with no more than one elementary aspect of the concept of the sign whose significance is best understood in the light of an appreciation of the wider purpose played by the

³ *Margins of Philosophy* (translated by A. Bass) Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1986, pp.69-108.

Philosophy of Mind in Hegel's system. We turn to a discussion of this purpose next.

II THE *PHILOSOPHY OF MIND* IN PHILOSOPHY AS THE WORLD'S SELF-KNOWLEDGE

As the last stage of Hegel's philosophical system, the *Philosophy of Mind* brings speculative philosophy to its end as 'the achieved notion of the whole'. But this end, according to Hegel, is still not 'a complete actuality' in that it is not 'the whole itself' (PhS Pref. ¶ 12).

So, in its non-identity with the whole, 'the notion of the whole' remains incomplete. This incompleteness is a characteristic of philosophy that is 'in the spirit of its time'. Hegel credits such philosophy with producing 'a new form of development'. This is a 'new philosophy' that also constitutes 'the inward birth-place of the spirit that will later arrive at actual form' (LHPh, p. 55). Speculative philosophy is distinguished as 'the birth-place' of the notion of spirit's absolute self-determination.

The 'new form of development' to which Hegel refers is the product of philosophy's 'actual difference' from 'that which is':

In as far as Philosophy is in the spirit of its time, the latter is its determined content in the world, although as knowledge, ["as the thought and knowledge of that which is the substantial spirit of its time"] Philosophy is above it, since it places it in the relation of object. But this is in form alone, for Philosophy really has no other content. This knowledge itself undoubtedly is the actuality of Mind, the self-knowledge of Mind which previously was not present: thus the formal difference is also a real and actual difference. Through knowledge, Mind makes manifest a distinction between knowledge and that which is; this knowledge is thus what produces a new form of development. The new forms at first are only special modes of knowledge, and it is thus that a new philosophy is produced (LHPh pp. 54-55).

Because in speculative philosophy Mind is absolute, its self-knowledge treats the world, not as an object opposed to it, but as the object for which Mind's self-recognition is the notion or principle. The world is here understood as the object that encompasses its notion and is encompassed by it. However, this mutual encompassing takes a form that denies concrete embodiment to the notion. For historical reasons, the spirit of modernity finds itself in the element of its pure self-awareness, or unconditional self-relation, at the same time as having a being that does not embody its notion. In other words, what we have here is a negative whole that brings together notion and reality, or thought and being, as 'absolute otherness'. This is why in speculative philosophy, Mind's self-knowledge is, according to Hegel, the outcome of 'pure self-recognition in absolute otherness' (PhS Pref. ¶ 26).⁴

⁴ For further discussion see T. Nicolacopoulos and G. Vassilacopoulos, *Hegel and the Logical Structure of Love: An Essay on Sexualities, Family and the Law*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, Chapters 2 and 3.

This absolute otherness is best understood in terms of what we might call unconditional or absolute potentiality. We use the term ‘potentiality’ here to characterise the world in its negative moment in order to highlight its teleological drive. That is, what we have here is a form of the whole in which the mutual referring of its two aspects—*notion* (thought) and *object* (being)—creates a dynamism that at once sustains their difference whilst moving towards its overcoming. It is worth noting that what we are referring to is not a mere potentiality in the sense of something that has not yet come into actual existence. By ‘absolute potentiality’ we mean to highlight that which Hegel has in mind when he speaks, by way of contrast, of ‘the power of free spirit’ (PhN § 376 Z).

The teleological drive of the whole in its negative moment is to be found in both aspects of the whole, in philosophical thought and in the being of the world itself in so far as the latter is an historical entity. As philosophical thought that is the world’s self-knowledge, the *notion* achieves the form (though not the actual being) of absolute unity with its being. This process of conceptual self-determination results in a coming to know the world as the teleological object, that is, the being whose purpose it is to embody the *notion*. For these reasons, in the *Science of Logic*—where the idea of ‘pure-self recognition in absolute otherness’ is worked out in the element of pure thought—the concept of purpose plays a fundamental role in the transition to ‘Absolute Idea’, as does the concept of history in the *Philosophy of Mind* when that developmental movement leads to ‘Absolute Mind’.

Within Hegel’s philosophical system the abovementioned self-knowledge first emerges explicitly in the *Philosophy of Mind*, since it is at this stage of the *notion*’s self-determination that spirit determines itself as an absolute potentiality in the above sense. That is, being undergoes a developmental process in the *Philosophy of Mind* that determines its philosophical form, or produces the self-knowledge of being, as that of its potential unity with its *notion*, that is, with ‘the achieved *notion* of the whole’.

Hegel characterises this developmental process as ‘the science of the Idea come back to itself out of that otherness’. The ‘otherness’ at issue here, or more precisely, ‘the science of the Idea in its otherness’, is articulated as the *Philosophy of Nature* that follows the *Logic*, ‘the science of the Idea in and for itself’ (EL § 18). The Idea’s return to itself is a return out of Nature that ‘is spirit estranged from itself’ (PhN § 247 Z) and, hence, as the other of spirit, is ‘indifferent subsistence’ (PhN § 248). In its return to itself as Mind, ‘the Idea has asserted a being of its own, and is on the way of becoming absolute’ in the sense that it has shown itself to be the truth of being in Nature and is therefore in a position to determine its ‘proper being’ (EL § 18). This self-determination brings together the existential element of Nature with the *notion* of absolute being whose abstract form has been worked out in the *Logic*. If this reading is correct, then the development of the *Philosophy of Mind* should reveal both the logical categories that govern the structure of its movement and the incorporation of the natural element as

part of this movement.⁵

III THE 'PSYCHOLOGY' AND SIGN PRODUCING ACTIVITY

Within the *Philosophy of Mind*, 'Psychology' is the last stage of 'Mind Subjective' in which Spirit 'has the ideal totality of the Idea—i.e. it has before it all that its notion contains: its being is to be self-contained and free' (PhM § 385). The 'Psychology' completes this developmental cycle because in it Mind is 'Mind defining itself in itself, as an independent subject' (PhM § 387). It begins with Spirit as the independent subject that has emerged out of the phenomenological process as the differentiated unity of subject and object. Although one might have expected Spirit to develop itself in precisely this determination immediately following the completion of the *Philosophy of Nature* given that the elementary idea of Spirit emerges at this point, the first two developmental cycles of the Subjective Mind, 'Anthropology' and 'Phenomenology', play an indispensable justificatory role. Through them Spirit justifies its independence, in the sense of determining itself as such, immanently to Spirit. More precisely, given that Spirit is a differentiated unity, in order to develop itself in this element, it must first demonstrate that this differentiated unity is the truth of unity, as this is constructed in the 'Anthropology', and of difference, as this is constructed in the 'Phenomenology'.

With the emergence of the notion of universal self-consciousness at the end of the 'Phenomenology', Spirit is in a position to move beyond its subjectivity and give an account of itself as the differentiated unity of subject and object that Hegel calls 'Reason' (PhM § 438). The development of Reason as this totality is achieved in its ideal form in the 'Psychology' that begins with 'Theoretical Mind'. According to Hegel, in 'Theoretical Mind' Spirit moves from a state of total self-loss ('Intuition') to a state of self-presence ('Thinking') through a reflective process that transforms the 'seemingly objective' object and gives it a subjective form by making it explicitly a product of Mind (PhM § 443 and § 443Z). This alteration of the object's form takes place via a series of mental operations that progressively overcome the Subject's dependence on sensuous experience as the material of Mind. It emerges as the result of 'mechanical memory' that produces the sign in the form of the meaningless utterance. We want to advance three claims in the light of our discussion in the previous sections. The first is that the self-loss from which 'Theoretical Mind' proceeds calls for an incorporation of nature. Second the transition to 'Thinking' requires an incorporation of what we might call 'the naturalness of the natural'. Our third claim is that sign-producing activity that takes the form of generating meaningless utterances plays precisely this role, consistently with the general function that the system attributes to language. The remainder of this section deals with the first claim and we complete our argument in the final section.

So why does the self-loss from which 'Theoretical Mind' proceeds call for an incorporation of nature? Mind proceeds from its self-loss because this is the immediate

⁵ For an account of the relations between the logical and real philosophical categories of the system see Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, Chapter 6

result of its being at once a totality—the differentiated unity of subject and object that we mentioned above—and in need of determining itself as this totality in its own element. In its progressive liberation from this state of self-loss, Mind must therefore reformulate its elementary idea and, as we argued in section 2, this goes hand in hand with an incorporation of nature.

In the self-development of Mind such an incorporation of nature becomes explicit when Mind determines its ‘Universal self-consciousness’ in the ‘Phenomenology of Mind’. Here the natural element emerges in Hegel’s account of the process of mutual recognition as the self’s ‘negation of its immediacy and appetite’ (PhM § 436). This is what Hegel has in mind when he characterises the selves of such mutually related subjects in terms of their ‘absolutely impenetrable’ self-subsistence (PhM § 436 Z). Still, in the ‘Phenomenology’, as in the ‘Anthropology’, Mind’s self-loss is relative to its respective moments of unity or of difference.

In contrast, Mechanical Memory supplies Mind with the element out of which to move to its full self-presence as Thinking. So, in what sense can Mind be said to overcome its self-loss in Mechanical Memory? Since loss belongs to Mind, to overcome its loss must mean that the element of its loss is transformed into a form of *self-expression*. That is, whereas Mind can be said to generate different forms of its self-loss throughout the movement from ‘Intuition’ to ‘Mechanical Memory’, it is only in the latter that Mind returns to itself out of its self-loss in the sense of explicitly mediating its self-loss. Whereas in its earlier developmental form, as Intuition, Mind’s self-loss is a matter of being lost in the apparent givenness of an external object so that its essential unity with its object is only implicit, as we hope to show below, in Mechanical Memory Mind’s mediation of its self-loss produces Mind’s very inwardness as a result and this return to its inward being is a turn to Thinking. We turn finally to an elaboration of this process.

IV MECHANICAL MEMORY AND THE MEANINGLESS UTTERANCE

According to the reading we are advancing, Mind’s self-determination as inward must involve it in a reformulation of the elementary idea of Spirit that in turn calls for an incorporation of the natural element in an appropriate form. In Mechanical Memory, Hegel tells us, the being of Mind as intelligence is transformed into ‘the universal space of names as such’. In this form of identification of its being with that of the sign in the form of the meaningless word, intelligence manifests itself as a being whose ‘power is a merely abstract subjectivity’ (PhM § 463). This power is the elementary form of Spirit that we analysed in section 2 in terms of an absolute potentiality. There we argued that Spirit is an absolute potentiality in the sense of the power that: (a) is generated by the difference between the notion of the whole as a unity of subject and object and its being; and (b) gives rise to teleological movement. So, in Mechanical Memory the elementary idea of Spirit is reformulated as the self-presence of the ‘merely abstract subjectivity’.

Now, in this form the being of subjectivity is identical with that of the sign that it produces because, as Hegel makes clear, a distinctive characteristic of the sign, in comparison with other representational entities, is the arbitrariness of the connection between the representation and the 'sensuous material' (PhM § 457). The sign is therefore an existent whose being is Mind's own product (PhM § 462). Further, in Mechanical Memory the object in question is a linguistic sign, rather than a non-linguistic sign, because language foregrounds the teleological being of subjectivity in the sense we analysed in section 1. So, in this reformulation of the elementary idea of Spirit, the movement of Spirit towards its end is made possible via its relation to the linguistic sign.

This said we have still to explain why the peculiar nature of the meaningless utterance renders it a suitable object for manifesting an appropriate incorporation of nature at this point of Mind's self-development. First, the meaningless word is an indifferent thing, like the indifferent subsistence that characterises the categories of Nature in giving expression to Spirit's self-estrangement. However, unlike the categories of Nature it is the absolutely indifferent. Mind produces the meaningless word as a thing with no connection whatever to meaning and, hence, in its difference from Mind, the word is completely devoid of Spirit, as distinct from having Spirit submerged in it. The absence of Spirit as Notion is what makes the natural distinctively natural. The meaningless word thus constitutes the object of Mind at this point in its development because it gives expression to the naturalness of the natural. This expression brings out the object's absolute dependence on the power of the Subject. This is why Hegel refers to the meaningless word as 'an unresisting element' (PhM § 444Z).

A second feature of the meaningless utterance to which Hegel draws attention is the fact that it vanishes. This feature makes the meaningless utterance a suitable object because it makes explicit the fact of the Subject's non-dependence on the being of an external existent. That is, in producing the sound that is completed in its vanishing Mind produces an object into whose being it is not capable of being absorbed. Instead it produces an object whose being necessarily returns Mind to itself as the universal space in which Mind's sound-generating activity takes place as its very own. Indeed, it is this activity of verbalizing a series of meaningless sounds that makes explicit the Subject's power to produce meaning given that the object is thus produced as that which is capable of receiving meaning (PhM § 464).

These features of the relationship of the Subject to its object, the meaningless utterance, result in the identification of the object with the Subject and, hence, in the Subject's complete inwardization as the unity of subject and object. In producing the subject-object relationship in this form the activity of Mind as Mechanical Memory also makes explicit the universal form of Mind as an *essential* unity. Even though Mind's thinking activity implicitly constitutes an essential unity throughout the developmental process of 'Theoretical Mind', whether immediately or in the form of an external relation to its object, in Mechanical Memory Mind explicitly mediates its self-loss by engaging in activity that reveals it to be the power to produce meaning. This self-

determination grounds the transition to ‘Thinking’, a transition that is made possible through the inclusion in Mind’s developmental process of a certain form of linguistic entity.

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