Phenomenology:

The I Emerges

The Phenomenology of Spirit poses a major problem for Hegel scholarship. Hegel composed a book entitled the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1806 while at Jena.¹ This volume was to provide an introduction to Hegel’s system, showing the reader how natural consciousness (and therefore the reader’s own as well) achieves the standpoint of absolute knowledge, the standpoint of the system.

Ten years later the Phenomenology of Spirit appears embedded within the *Encyclopedia* system, surrounded by the Anthropology and the Psychology. Indeed, it is clear that very soon after the earlier book had been published Hegel began treating the Phenomenology as preliminary to the Psychology, rather than prefatory to the Logic. By 1812 the Anthropology had made its appearance as the predecessor to the Phenomenology.²

The two Phenomenologies do not correspond exactly in content either. In the early Phenomenology the major divisions include Consciousness, Self-consciousness, Reason, and Spirit. The version

¹. This volume’s original title, changed in proof, was *Science of the Experience of Consciousness*.
². There is an extensive debate over the relation of the Phenomenology to the Logic and the rest of the system; see Hans Friedrich Fulda, *Das Problem einer Einleitung in Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik*; and Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Idee einer Phänomenologie des Geistes*, for some of the principal contributions to that debate. Unfortunately, much of this debate has taken little account of the evolution in Hegel’s thought during his Nürnberg period. At present, however, there is simply no reliable edition of the Nürnberg materials. Until a reliable edition appears, Hegel scholarship must acknowledge a serious handicap.
we find in the *Encyclopedia* is much briefer. Spirit is no longer included (many of the topics discussed there show up in the philosophies of objective and absolute spirit), and Reason is highly truncated as well, shrinking to a mere transition paragraph to the Psychology.

The early Phenomenology seems to start where the later, *Encyclopedia* version does, but it continues on, including most of the themes and topics of the rest of the system. Yet we cannot say that in writing the early Phenomenology Hegel simply forgot to stop and added on the rest of the system, for there is good evidence that he did not see the book that way. Furthermore, inspection of Hegel's collateral work in 1805–6 indicates that what is presented in the early Phenomenology does not coincide with his explicit attempts at the time to elaborate his system.

It seems reasonable to suppose that Hegel did indeed continue beyond what started as the "Science of the Experience of Consciousness" to write something larger and slightly different, but not that he simply annexed a chunk of his system to his original manuscript; the Phenomenology is far too organically unified to be such an amalgam. I believe, rather, although I lack the space to argue it here, that the core of the Phenomenology in both versions is the analysis of the concept of an independent object of experience. The Phenomenology is about the subject-object relation; it is an analysis of what must be the case if that relation is to be *truthful*.

Hegel's analysis is essentially complete by the end of the sections on Self-consciousness. The early Phenomenology then goes on to interpret an astonishingly wide range of phenomena in terms of the basic structures identified in the early chapters. In the *Encyclopedia* the conceptual structures outlined in the Phenomenology are not abandoned, but neither are they the explicit model for the interpretation of all higher phenomena. The early Phenomenology is intended to show that the structures constitutive of consciousness (the subject-object relation) are revealingly applicable to all forms of human life—that a form of life (or social institution, etc.)

---

3. Even their beginnings are not perfectly congruent, for Hegel admits in the *Encyclopedia* version that it was a mistake to include specifically spatiotemporal concepts like "here" and "now" in the argumentation of the chapter on sense certainty (see §418).
is also a form of consciousness and vice versa. It is to demonstrate
that neither abstract discussions of the foundations of our knowl-
edge, such as Descartes's, nor psychological explanations, such as
Hume's, adequately portray the concrete, social reality of the sub-
ject-object relation. Thus scientific observation, morality, and reli-
gion are all treated as manifestations of knowledge, as forms of
consciousness, which means interpreting them in terms of the sub-
ject-object structure. In the *Encyclopedia*, on the other hand, each
phenomenon is examined on its own terms, not primarily as a form
of consciousness. There is no commitment to putting the subject-
object relation at the center of every case. In the *Encyclopedia*, there-
fore, the Phenomenology is confined to the examination of the
forms of consciousness as such.

According to Hegel, Kant's philosophy is nothing more than a
phenomenology, since it is concerned with the analysis of the sub-
ject-object relation (§415). Kant gives us a theory of consciousness,
according to Hegel, a theory of how an object can appear to a
subject—but Kant does not successfully push through to under-
standing the basis of the whole subject-object relation, to showing
us the truth of that relation, for he never goes beyond the ap-
pearance relation.

Because Hegel's phenomenology (primarily in the version of
1807) has already attracted so much commentary and critical atten-
tion, I do not rehearse its dialectic in this chapter. Because our topic
is the philosophy of mind per se, I focus instead on Hegel's concep-
tion of the subject of consciousness, the I, or, as he sometimes calls
it, the abstract ego.4

**Consciousness and the I**

There is considerable transcendental confusion surrounding He-
gel's concept of the I. To minimize the dangers, I treat this topic, like
the topics of my opening chapters, in a linguistic mode. All the

4. As Petry remarks in the introduction to his edition of the *Encyclopedia Phenome-
nology*, there has never been a systematic comparison of the two Phenomenologies.
(Actually, there may be more Phenomenologies, since the *Encyclopedia* went through
three editions, and there are versions left from the Nürnberg period.) This is a study
begging to be written.
essential points can be made for my purpose without treading heavily on swampy, transcendental ground. Accordingly, I try to answer two questions in this chapter: (a) What does the word "I" mean, according to Hegel; in Fregean terms, what are its sense and its reference? (b) What kind of creature can use the word "I"; that is, what is presupposed about the utterer in any significant use of the word?

Does "I" Refer?

Because sense supposedly determines reference, it might seem best to start by asking what the sense of "I" is for Hegel. But there is a prior issue: a common interpretation of Hegel claims that "I" does not refer at all, that reference to individuals, or at least singular demonstrative reference, is impossible. This claim is based on passages like the following:

[When I say "I"] I do indeed mean a single 'I', but I can no more say what I mean in the case of 'I' than I can in the case of 'Now' and 'Here'. When I say 'this Here', 'this Now', or a 'single item', I am saying all Thises, Heres, Nows, all single items. Similarly, when I say 'I', this singular 'I', I say in general all 'I's'; everyone is what I say, everyone is 'I', this singular 'I'. (PhG, p. 83; PhS, p. 62. Quotation marks added by Miller)

A parallel passage from the much later Berlin Encyclopedia shows that Hegel retained this view throughout his career.

Since language is the product of thought, nothing can be said in it which is not universal. What I only mean [meine] is mine [mein], belongs

5. Although Hegel does treat the word "I," his principal interest is in the concept expressed by the word and what it stands for. His discussions shift without much warning between the explicitly metalinguistic and the straightforwardly metaphysical. I follow suit and shift rather casually between the formal and the material modes.

6. I employ the Fregean terminology of sense and reference in this work without worrying about faithfulness to Frege's own use and without attributing any such distinctions to Hegel. This terminology allows us to raise some important questions about Hegel's understanding of the I.

phenomenology: the i emerges

only to me as this particular individual; but if language expresses only what is universal, I cannot say what I only mean. And what is unsayable, feeling, sensation, is not the most excellent, the most true, but rather the least significant, the least true. If I say: "the individual," "this individual," "here," "now," then these are all universalities; anything and everything is an individual, a this, and, if it is sensuous, it is here and now. Similarly when I say "I," I mean myself as this self which excludes all others; but what I say, "I," is just everyone; I, which excludes all others from itself. (§20, my tr.)

From our supposed inability to refer to individual objects it is thought that Hegel infers their metaphysical unreality as well as the impossibility of any knowledge of them. But in these passages Hegel does not deny that we can refer to individual objects. His argument is directed against a different doctrine: the belief that indexical reference affords us a direct, preconceptual access to individuals. He attacks the position that "our approach to the object must also be immediate or receptive; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself. In apprehending it, we must refrain from trying to comprehend it" (PhG, p. 79; PhS, p. 58).

Besides direct referential access, the empiricist Hegel is attacking also attributes to indexicals an epistemological role—that of providing direct, preconceptual epistemological access to objects. Hegel attacks this position by arguing that even indexical reference is conceptually mediated and therefore cannot afford us preconceptual epistemological access.

8. G. E. M. Anscombe has lately defended the position that "I" is not a referring expression. Hegel's supposed rejection of indexical reference cannot be assimilated to Anscombe's position, however. Anscombe wants to treat "I" as similar in use to the "it" in "It's raining," claiming that "I" has only a use, and neither a Fregean sense nor a reference. Hegel, in contrast, seems to say that "I" is a universal, implying that it is a general term applying to all conscious beings—really a predicate in its depth grammar, not a singular referring expression at all. Again, Anscombe thinks that "I" is quite peculiar, different from other indexicals, whereas Hegel lumps them all together. See G. E. M. Anscombe, "The First Person," in Mind and Language, ed. S. Guttenplan, pp. 45–66.

9. The position Hegel is attacking seems to have been most closely approximated by Bertrand Russell. I have discussed Hegel's position on indexical reference, names, and knowledge in more detail in "Hegel on Reference and Knowledge," Journal of the History of Philosophy 26 (1988): 297–307.

10. Plumer misinterprets Hegel's position here because he thinks that sense certainty's "basic aspiration is the relation of [singular demonstrative] reference"; "Singular Demonstrative Reference," p. 73. But this is not right. Sense certainty's basic aspiration is immediate, direct knowledge.
Denying our ability to refer to individuals is unnecessary to Hegel's goals; the arguments he presents actually assume that we can successfully refer to individuals. He returns again and again to the point that utterances containing "now" change truth-value over time, that utterances containing "here" change truth-value depending on the place of utterance, and that utterances containing "I" change truth-value depending on the utterer. These changes in truth-value depend on the reference of the indexicals. "'Here' is, e.g., the tree. If I turn round, this truth has vanished and is converted into its opposite: 'No tree is here, but a house instead'" (PhG, p. 82; PhS, p. 60).

Hegel's position on indexical reference is an attempt to assimilate indexical reference to descriptive reference. Reference via a description is clearly mediated by the concepts (the universals) involved in the description. Contrasting to descriptive reference is reference via a proper name, which Hegel admits is immediate, for proper names have no meaning:

Even the expression *this* contains no distinction; each and every something is exactly as much a *this* as it is an other. One *means* to express something completely determinate by "this"; but it is overlooked that language, as the work of the understanding, says only what is universal, except for the name of an individual object; the individual name, however, is something meaningless [*Sinnloses*] in the sense that it does not express a universal and appears as something simply posited, arbitrary, for the same reason that proper names [*Einzelnamen*] can be arbitrarily assumed, given, or even changed. (*WdL*, vol. 1, pp. 104-5, my tr.; *SL*, p. 117)

But if indexicals and descriptions both refer in a conceptually mediated manner, they nevertheless refer. Furthermore, indexicals, unlike names, have a meaning. This returns us to our original question, What does the word "I" mean?

The Sense of "I"

Hegel himself never precisely explains the meaning of "I." What, then, should we be looking for? The previous discussion of Hegel's treatment of indexical reference gives us a hint. Hegel classes "I"
Phenomenology: The I Emerges

together with "here," "now," and "this." It has not been uncom-
mon to take the word "this" as the basic indexical word, treating the
others as somehow derivative. And several things Hegel says indi-
cate that he also thinks of indexicals in this way: "if we take the
'This' in the twofold shape of its being, as 'Now' and 'Here' . . ." (PhS, p. 60; see also the passages from PhS, p. 62, and WdL, vol. 1,
pp. 104-5, quoted above).11

Hegel seems aware that "this," unlike the other indexicals, ad-
mits of completion by sortal predicates: "this man," "this ball," 
"this color." Indeed, given that indexical reference is always con-
ceptually mediated, there must be some sortal completion at least
implicit in any use of "this." The obvious derivations of "now" and
"here" from "this" seem, then, to treat them as already having a
sortal built in—"this time" and "this place." Such an approach
seems consistent with what Hegel says about "here" and "now"
and suggests what we need to look for in the case of "I": some
appropriate completion or specification of "this ____."

But what counts as an appropriate specification? Even if we could
assume that persons are the appropriate referents of "I," we still
could not infer that "person" is the correct completion for "this
____," because coextensionality does not guarantee sameness of
sense. Furthermore, many of the things Hegel says about "I" seem
to preclude its having the sense of "this person." We must therefore
look more closely at what he actually says about the I.

The passage quoted earlier from Encyclopedia §20 is a useful start-
ing point; in its continuation Hegel sounds most of the themes that
dominate his discussions of the I:

Kant made use of the awkward expression that I accompany all my
representations, also sensations, desires, actions, etc. The I is the
universal in and for itself, and commonality is also a form of univer-
sality, though an external one. All other men [Menschen] have it in
common with me to be an I, just as it is common to all my sensations,

11. In the Phenomenology of 1807, Hegel's treatment of "I" and "this" sometimes
seems to imply that they are coordinate—neither subordinated to the other, both
arising, as it were, together. There is much to be said for this interpretation, and I
cannot rule it out, but the preponderance of the passages seems to treat "this" as
prior. I doubt that Hegel had a clearly thought out position on whether "I" and
"this" were coordinated or subordinated.
Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity

representations, etc., to be mine. The I, however, abstractly as such, is pure relation to itself, in which all representation [Vorstellen], sensation, every state and every particularity of nature, talent, experience, etc., is abstracted from. The I is insofar the existence of wholly abstract universality, the abstractly free. That is why the I is thinking as a subject, and in that I am simultaneously in all my sensations, representations, states, etc., thought is everywhere present and runs through all these determinations as a category. (§20, my tr.)

The I is thus claimed to be (a) a wholly abstract universality, (b) pure relation to itself, (c) abstracted from all its particular states, and (d) thinking as a subject. And we are also given at least a partial specification of the things to which “I” can be correctly applied—to all humans. This passage, when correctly interpreted, is a key to Hegel's concept of the word “I.” The important clue is what Hegel says about the I as such, for the “as such” locution is essentially an operator restricting what can be correctly said about its argument to things that are specially connected to the sense of the argument expression. During the time Winston Churchill was the prime minister of England, it was true that the prime minister of England was a leisure-time bricklayer; but it is certainly false that the prime minister of England, as such, was a leisure-time bricklayer. The prime minister, as such, is a member of the cabinet, advisor to the throne, and resident of No. 10 Downing Street; but the prime minister, as such, is neither male nor female, short nor tall, Labour nor Conservative. To be more general, not everything true of A as such can be reckoned as part of the sense of “A”; but everything true of A as such must have some special connection with the sense of “A.” What is true of A as such is true of it because it can be correctly referred to by “A.” Of course, we must remember that even if it is false that A as such is F, it does not follow that A is not F. It is false that the president of the United States, as such, is a former screen actor, but it is nonetheless true that the president is in fact a former screen actor.

Hegel asserts that “the I, however, abstractly as such, is pure relation to itself, in which all representation, sensation, every state and every particularity of nature, talent, experience, etc., is abstracted from.” Let me put aside for the moment the idea that the I is pure self-relation. The I as such is abstracted from all of its
particular states; that is, there is no particular state that an I, qua I, must have. But this apparently leaves the I totally indeterminate.

Hegel does not, however, think of the I as indeterminate. For one thing, that would not distinguish "I" from "this." It is important that the I is abstracted from a specific group of states, namely, as we see from the list he gives, primarily mental states (in a suitably broad sense). But there is another important fact about the list from which the I as such is abstracted: thinking is missing from the list. Few philosophers distinguish mental representation and thought. Yet for Hegel there is a clear difference; representation is a sensuous, imagistic type of mental processing, whereas pure thinking is formal and nonsensuous (i.e., its phenomenology is not constitutive of it). Indeed, it is quite significant that thinking is omitted from the list of things from which the I is abstracted; only a few lines later, thinking is asserted to be the I. These considerations give us a preliminary understanding of the sense of "I," namely, "this thinking subject."13

This is not an entirely happy choice on Hegel's part, for there are problems with thinking that "I" has as its sense "this thinking subject." First, "this thinking subject" could refer to someone besides the utterer. "This thinking subject" could have the peculiarly first-person sense essential to "I" only if there were some special form of demonstration that necessarily indicates its user. But "this" used with that special form of demonstration would already be equivalent to "I," and the sortal would not be necessary. We would not need to specify what kind of thing—namely, a thinking thing—the "this" picked out. "I" would be as conceptually indeterminate as "this."

12. I have not tried to specify the sense of "this." A number of things Hegel says about "this" indicate that a "this as such" could only be a bare particular, something picked out as an individual shorn of all its properties. There are no bare particulars, however. See Aquila's interesting discussion in "Predication and Hegel's Metaphysics." If "I" and "this" are coordinate terms, then a "this as such" would be a pure or bare object contrasted with the pure or bare subject of the I.

13. This view obviously ties in with Kant's use of the first-person pronoun to express the transcendental unity of apperception. Hegel's interpretation of "I" is deeply influenced by Kant's reflections in the transcendental deduction (see WdL, vol. 2, p. 219ff.; SL, p. 583ff.). For an illuminating treatment of the thinking self in Kant, see Patricia Kitcher, "Kant's Real Self," in Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy, ed. Allan Wood, pp. 113–47.
One might try to give the demonstrative a smaller scope and take "I" to have the sense "the subject of this thought," but this has difficulties as well. This move seems to assume some form of inner demonstration, which is just as suspect as a form of demonstration that applies only to oneself. It also presupposes that we can individuate thoughts before individuating their subjects. As a way around this latter problem, we might suggest that there is a special access to my own thoughts, so that I need not individuate them by first individuating myself, but in that case again the simple "this" expressing such access would be sufficient. Adding that a thought is the kind of thing demonstrated is otiose.

In general, equating the sense of "I" with some form of the demonstrative use of "this" seems to necessitate postulating some special form of demonstrative contact that guarantees first-personness. This strikes me as implausible and ad hoc. And if I must employ a special access available only to me in thinking of myself, how can others understand my thoughts or assertions about myself? There is no adequate way to capture the essential first-personness of "I" using the essentially third-person resources of "this." Such considerations make it more plausible that "I" and "this" are coordinate, or even that "I" is the primary indexical.14

Nonetheless, according to the most natural interpretation of the texts, "I" has a two-part sense for Hegel: first, it designates a thinker, indeed, an individual thinker; second, it is the expression of that thinker's pure self-relation, which itself is partly constitutive of being a thinker. This pure self-relation is poorly expressed by an objective mode indexical like "this." (The nature of the pure self-relation intimated by the use of "I" is explored in the last section of this chapter.)

14. When Hegel calls something a "this," his intent is usually to emphasize the object's individuality. Hegel's concern with the metaphysical questions surrounding the relation between the individual and the universal dominates such discussions. He never explicitly discusses the specifically linguistic nature of the uses of "this" (or "I," for that matter) as a demonstrative or anaphorical term, or the conditions of its successful use. It is thus not surprising that Hegel fails to consider explicitly all the technical difficulties in the use of "this" or "I." Nor is it surprising that the natural proposal for the meaning of "I" stemming from the texts is subject to shortcomings. Hegel is so interested in emphasizing the involvement of universals in indexical reference that he pays only cursory attention to the specific differences between the indexicals and between indexicals and definite descriptions.
The Reference of "I"

Taking "this thinking subject" as our understanding of the sense of "I," we can now ask what the normal reference of a use of "I" is. Traditionally, one of four alternative referents for "I" has been defended: a body, a Cartesian-style soul, a concrete person (an animate organism strictly identical with neither body nor soul), or some different thing such as a transcendental ego.

We can take it for granted that Hegel, a self-styled idealist, would not take one's body to be the normal reference of one's use of "I." In the same vein, however, we might think that a good idealist ought to deny body or matter any essential role in the constitution of the thinking subject to which the "I" refers. This would disqualify the concrete person as the referent of "I," leaving only the substantial Cartesian soul or the abstract transcendental ego as appropriate candidates.

Hegel clearly rejects the whole notion of a Cartesian soul. The "soul" of rational psychology, Hegel complains, is a confused notion—an attempt to think of the human spirit on the model of a natural, material thing. Rational psychology attempts to distinguish the soul from natural things by simply denying certain natural predicates to it. But, Hegel in effect maintains, the predicates that capture the nature of spirit have an entirely different logical grammar and cannot be simply compounded from sense experience. Because the very notion of a Cartesian soul is confused, Cartesian souls can hardly be the referents of "I."15

Is the balance of reasons then thrown in favor of the "I" standardly referring to a transcendental ego, some relatively abstract entity, neither body nor soul nor concrete person, which lies behind the phenomena of the self? Kant was reluctant to identify the I that thinks with the empirical self and sometimes even with the noumenal self (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B423a). Given the importance of the Kantian conception of the transcendental ego for post-Kantian German idealism, it would seem plausible that Hegel followed suit and posited some transcendental entity as the referent of "I." But, despite these appearances, Hegel does not take this path. None of the motivations that pushed Kant to distinguish the empirical self

15. Recall the discussion of Hegel's critique of rational psychology in Chapter 1.
Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity

and the thinking subject have any significant hold on Hegel. Kant has three different motivations for regarding the I that thinks as nonempirical: his convictions about the nature and possibility of ethics, his belief that thinking things are in principle unknowable, and his belief that phenomenal properties are ultimately unreal.\textsuperscript{16} Hegel thoroughly rejects Kant's incompatibilism and the distinction between the moral and phenomenal self; morality must be a this-worldly affair or it is useless, according to Hegel. Because Hegel rejects the phenomenal-noumenal split, he can hardly maintain the irreality of phenomenal properties, or that natural properties are somehow fake (although they are false in the sense that they do not reveal the complete truth of things). Finally, rather than believing that the thinking subject must be unknowable in principle, Hegel believes the opposite. Only insofar as something exhibits the structure of thought is it knowable, and only thought is absolutely knowable.

We are forced, it seems, to reconsider the notion that a concrete person is always the referent of 'I.' There is, however, an objection to this—the fact that Hegel claims that the I as such is abstract. Because of the abstractness of the I, it seems capable of maintaining its identity across conditions in which the identity of a concrete person would not be maintained. For instance, I can imagine being the Emperor Claudius, and it seems plausible to claim that I might have been Claudius. In one sense it is clear that I, Willem de Vries, a man of the twentieth century, cannot have been Claudius; I have a certain objective reality that cannot be altered so radically without the destruction of the person I am. Nevertheless, we are able to imagine ourselves to be quite different beings from what we objectively are, and Hegel recognizes the importance of this ability to divorce ourselves from our objective reality and to project ourselves into a different, call it subjective, reality.\textsuperscript{17} But the abstractness of

\textsuperscript{16} See Kitcher, "Kant's Real Self," p. 122.

\textsuperscript{17} Zeno Vendler, in his article "A Note to the Paralogisms," attempts to exploit our ability to abstract ourselves from our objective situation to argue for a distinction between the transcendental I and the concrete person, but his argument assumes that our ability to imagine being something else means that it is really possible to be that thing. Then, assuming the necessity of all identities, it must be the case that either I am not identical to Willem deVries or "I" is not a rigid designator. But both "Willem deVries" and "I" seem to function as rigid designators. "The answer is that
the I does not mean that the concrete person is not the I, any more
than the abstractness of "this" means that it cannot pick out a
concrete object. Our earlier distinction between names and demon-
stratives shows that this objection is fallacious, for it assumes that
"I" is a name, not a demonstrative.

Kant ought to have endorsed the Aristotelian dictum that it is the
same thing that thinks that runs, but it is clear that Hegel does
endorse it. Thinking (at least in its subjective variety) is a human
activity. To be sure, it is a very special kind of activity, but no
activity can occur without being realized in some particular, natural
embodiment. To consider a human an I is to abstract from that
particular embodiment of thinking. That the I can be abstracted
from its embodiment no more implies their separability than the
abstractability of shape from color or equilaterality from equiangu-
ularity implies their separability.

THE THINKING SUBJECT

Universality and Self-relation

Let me summarize the position we have reached. Hegel takes the
sense of "I" to be (roughly) "this thinking subject." The referent of
"I," as we see in more detail below, is an individual human [Mensch]
in a complex situation. Our apparent ability to wrest the I from its

the T', the subject of such a transference, has no content and no essence; it is a mere
frame in which any picture fits; it is the bare form of consciousness" (Vendler,
p. 117). This leaves it difficult to understand just what the transcendental I is, but we
can already see that Hegel rejects several of the crucial assumptions in Vendler's
Kant-inspired argument. First, Hegel rejects the assumption that the impossible
cannot be imagined. The ability to divorce ourselves in imagination from our empiri-
cal reality does not show that the self is something different from its empirical reality.
Second, Vendler also seems to be arguing that because the sense of "I" is abstract, its
referent must be an abstraction, because it designates rigidly. If the "I" designates
rigidly, though, it does so via an abstract description, and the designatum need not
be abstract. There is nothing here to force Hegel away from "I" referring to a concrete
person. See Zeno Vendler, "A Note to the Paralogisms," in Contemporary Aspects of

18. It has been argued that there is no good reason for Kant to divorce the
empirical self and the thinking self, and that the thinking self must indeed be the
empirical self; see, for example, P. F. Strawson, The Bounds of Sense, pp. 162ff; or
Kitcher, "Kant's Real Self."
concrete actuality is due to the fact that the coherence of counterfac-
tual suppositions about \( x \) is controlled by the sense of the expres-
sion used to refer to \( x \). Because the sense of "I" is highly abstract,
there are few counterfactual suppositions that are absolutely in-
coherent for something referred to solely as "I." But the fact re-
mains that I am a man, according to Hegel, not a Cartesian ego.

The discussion of the sense of "I" began with a passage in which
Hegel characterizes the I as (a) wholly abstract universality, (b) pure
relation to itself, (c) abstracted from all its particular states, and (d)
thinking as a subject. So far, only the third and fourth characteris-
tics have been considered. To present a rounded account of Hegel’s
understanding of the "I," something must be said about its univer-
sality and self-relation. This also necessitates an explication of He-
gel’s conception of thinking, for a thinking subject is universality
and pure relation to itself in virtue of being a thinking subject.

There are two aspects to the claim that the I is self-relation—
material and formal. The sense in which an I is materially self-
related is the most directly understandable, for it concerns our
relations to our own internal states. More important, the formal
self-relation is made possible by the material self-relation. We there-
fore begin by looking at Hegel’s conception of the way each thinker
is materially self-related. This really only requires a review of the
previous development of subjective spirit with an eye to the emer-
gence of a self, for the material self-relation of the thinking subject is
the self-relation of the organism. As a preface to this discussion, let
me remind the reader that the overall structure and intent of He-
gel’s mature system is decidedly more Aristotelian in style than it is
Cartesian. Beginning with his logic cum metaphysics, Hegel traces
the overall, fundamental structures of reality. The structures for-
mally specified in the Logic are then applied to the analysis of
particular phenomena in ascending orders of complexity, each
building on the previous order, from mechanics through biology.
The philosophy of spirit picks up this progression, but one should
not think that the dividing line between nature and spirit is clearcut;
we have a great deal in common with animals. The Anthropology is
the transition point between the animal and the human; it describes
those structures essential to the emergence of the I.

The crucial stages of the emergence, as far as we are concerned,
start with sensation. A sensation has a peculiar two-sideness:
viewed naturalistically, it is a state of the body centered around a sense organ, but from the point of view of spirit (from within, as it were) it is an absolutely simple, given reality, without structure, without connection. The Anthropology describes a set of structures in which the particular sensations involved become increasingly less important as the functional organization of the structures becomes increasingly complex.

Sensations are, from one point of view, bodily states. The higher-level organizations into which the sensations are brought, however, are not per se bodily; rather, they are functionally specified and explained, and as such, they are only abstractly specified, the particular sensations involved being contingent to them. These structures of sensations exist as habits. "That the soul thus makes itself into an abstract universal being and reduces what is particular in feeling (and in consciousness) to a determination of it that merely is—this is habit... It [the soul] is free of [these determinations] in so far as it is neither interested in nor occupied by them; in that it exists in these forms as its possession it is at the same time open to the further activity and occupation of sensation as well as of the consciousness of spirit in general" (§410, my tr.). In an organism that has developed large-scale habitual patterns of behavior, individual sensations are important only insofar as they figure in these patterns. The soul is an abstract universal being insofar as it is best described and explained in terms of these abstractly specified, dynamic structures of sensations. The soul is the totality of them. But it is not in virtue of habit alone that man is capable of having an I: "This abstract being-for-self of the soul in its corporeality is not yet I, not yet the existence of the universal which is for the universal" (§409, my tr.). Achieving a self, an I, requires a further recursion. Freed from the particularities of sensation by reducing the role of sensation to that of mere contingent occasion for the soul's (abstractly specified) activity, the soul now reduces the role of those patterns of activity to occasions for higher-order structures. With this move the I—the subject of consciousness—emerges: "This being-for-self of free universality is the higher awakening of the soul to the I, to the abstract universality insofar as it is for the abstract universality, which is thus thinking and subject for itself and indeed subject of its judgment [Urtheil], in which it excludes from itself the natural totality of its determinations as [i.e., in the form of]
an object, a world external to itself, and so relates itself to it that it is immediately in that world reflected into itself—Consciousness” (§412, my tr.).

Habit, as Hegel describes it, can be thought of as the organization of sensory experience; the I emerges, not in that organization, but as the possibility of a further unitary organization of the various modes of first-order organization of sensory experience. A habit is an abstract universality in that it is the same across times and places, ready to manifest itself whenever it is elicited. It is in imposing a further, higher-order structure on our habitually structured sensory experience that the I and consciousness emerge. The I, then, apparently depends on the existence of a second-order functional organization.

If this is the nature of the I, we should be able to use it to illuminate the difference between animals and humans. Animals certainly have habits, but, if Hegel is right, these habits simply coexist within the animal, as it were. They are not subject to any higher organizing principle. Should two (or more) habits come into conflict, say, because the eliciting stimuli for two mutually exclusive behavioral patterns are present, the conflict is only resolved de facto, depending on which habit is more firmly entrenched. With humans, in contrast, there is a higher level of organization. Conflicts between habitual patterns are (often) resolved in a principled and not merely de facto manner. The human is self-regulating in a way the animal is not.

The picture obtained from the above discussion might be misleading, for some may be unable to resist the temptation to think of man’s initial reflective turn as essentially conscious, in which man is aware of the behavioral patterns or mental structures reflected on as either behavioral patterns or mental structures. This, however, would be a major mistake, a serious jumping of the gun. When Hegel insists that the natural determinations of the soul (the sensations, feelings, and first-order habits) are excluded from the soul in the form of an external world, in the form of objects, he should be taken at his word. The objects to which consciousness relates throughout the Phenomenology are, strictly speaking, internal constructions of consciousness out of the manifold of sensation. This is why Hegel can insist that “the Kantian philosophy is most accurately assessed as having grasped spirit as consciousness; and as
containing throughout not the philosophy of spirit, but only the determinations of its phenomenology" (§415, my tr.). The first-order patterns of mental activity on which consciousness directs itself do not appear to it as patterns of mental activity, but as constituting independent objects.

We can now see the sense in which the I, the subject of consciousness, stands in a material relation to itself. The objects it takes to be independent of itself, and in relation to which it defines itself, are in reality determinations of itself, for they are the complex structures of sensory data we have (subconsciously) prepared for further conceptualization.19

The I is a higher-order organizing principle. Strictly speaking, it relates itself directly only to other organizing principles, and thus only to things of its own basic ontological type. If we grant that organizing principles are always universals in some suitable sense (whether abstract or concrete universals), then the I, itself a universal, relates directly only to other universals, which are, furthermore, contained within it. This is the formal sense in which the I is a pure self-related universal. It is, to use the Aristotelian vocabulary, the form of forms. It is also important to note that this formal self-

19. Because of the essential self-relatedness of the I, it is tempting to attribute to Hegel the belief that all propositional attitudes are de se, a la David Lewis or Roderick Chisholm. The belief that all reference is directly to one's self and only indirectly, by means of individuating descriptions, to other things does not sit comfortably with other Hegelian doctrines. First, whereas Hegel sometimes seems to treat 'I' and the other indexicals as coordinate, he never seems tempted to make "I" primary. Second, the idea that we are, in thought, directly related to and directly aware only of ourselves flies in the face of the phenomenology (in the non-Hegelian sense) of thought; deep thought is precisely when we forget ourselves, lose ourselves, as Hegel remarks in several places. Third, insisting that we act as our own intermediary between our thought and the world still leaves us with an intermediary and thus threatens to revive the problem of a thing-in-itself inaccessible to us.

There are, however, other elements of Hegel's philosophy that indicate such an interpretation—his comparisons of the feeling soul to a monad, for instance. At a deeper level, Hegel's confinement to an Aristotelian logic of terms, which underlies his conviction that judgments and syllogisms are ways the internal structure of a concept (universal) unfolds itself, also encourages the view that thought and belief ought to be understood as self-attribution of a universal, whether in the still implicit form of a concept, the dirempted form of a judgment, or the fully unfolded form of a syllogism.

Hegel did not have a clearly articulated theory of the propositional attitudes; it was not a clear issue for the age. I presently believe that Hegel's position is indeterminate with respect to this question, although I hope to return to it in future work.
relation supervenes upon the material self-relation. Anything with
the material self-relation exhibited by a normal human being would
ipso facto also exhibit the formal self-relation of the I (though not
necessarily vice versa).

Thinking as a Subject

The major characteristic of the I—thinking as a subject—needs to
be further explicated. Thought is seen by Hegel as the universal
ordering activity manifested as much in the order of objective real-
ity as in our subjective mental activity. Pure thinking is the structure
or organizing activity necessary to any (metaphysically) possible
world; it is the system traced in Hegel’s Logic.

M. J. Inwood interprets Hegel’s claim that the I is thinking as a
subject to mean that Hegel identifies the pure I with the self-de-
termining system of pure thoughts. There are several startling
consequences of such an identification. First, there is no distinction
between individual thinkers. Inwood suggests that different par-
ticular egos might be identified with different chunks of the total
system of pure thoughts—namely, with that part of the system an
ego commands. But this seems already to presuppose the identifica-
tion of egos in some other way, for there is no way intrinsic to the
system of pure thoughts to differentiate egos. Second, identifying
the I with the system of pure thoughts would make it impossible to
distinguish any particular thinker from that system, from the Abso-
lute. A Kojevean vision of a megalomaniacal Hegel, who having
understood his own system has become the very intellect of God,
would be right after all. Another untoward consequence of such a
position is that it seems to make it impossible to draw the distinction
between occurrent thinkings, attributable to persons at specific
times, and the pure thoughts themselves. The system of pure
thoughts is always present—the pure thoughts are not datable. But
then how can I or my occurrent thoughts, which surely are datable,
be identical to (even part of) the system of pure thoughts? I argue

21. This consequence can be softened somewhat by taking the position that there
is only no distinction between individual egos qua pure thinkers. But if thinkers are
truly to be identified with pure thoughts, there can be no distinction among them,
for pure thought is one.
below that Hegel believes that at the highest level of mental ac-
tivity—pure thinking—we are the activity that thought is (see also
Chapter 11). But it is a mistake to take this to be a strict identity
between me and the system of pure thoughts; one batter does not a
ballgame make.

The untoward consequences of a strict identification of the pure I
with the system of thoughts can be avoided without losing the
essential and intimate relation between the two by employing one
of Hegel’s favorite devices, the distinction between form and con-
tent. The pure I and the system of pure thoughts must have, accord-
ing to Hegel, the same content, but in significantly different forms.
This distinction, as employed by Hegel, is not a simple juxta posi-
tion of two independent, separable elements in a complex whole.
Although one content can appear in different forms, it is sensitive to
the form in which it appears. A mismatch between form and con-
tent does violence to both. Without the appropriate form, the con-
tent cannot appear as it really is; an inadequate form distorts, or at
least conceals, part of the content.

The most familiar example of the use of this distinction within
Hegel’s system is his description of the relations among the triad of
the final stage (Absolute Spirit) of the philosophy of spirit: Art,
Religion, and Philosophy. Hegel claims that these three share a
common content—the self-knowledge of spirit as Absolute Spirit.
But he also claims that they differ in the form this content is given.
In Art, spirit’s self-knowledge is clothed in an externally perceptible
form; in Religion, it takes an imaginative, imagistic form. Only in
Philosophy does spirit’s self-knowledge attain the fully adequate,
explicit form best suited to it.

The system of pure thoughts is a network of interrelated pure
concepts. But his is how Hegel conceives of the I as well. Hegel
adopts the Kantian idea that the categories (pure concepts) con-
stitute the I in their operation. The subject and the object are simulta-
neously constituted by the activity of thought. But unlike Kant,
Hegel sees no reason to confine pure concepts to subjective minds
alone. Pure concepts are also constitutive of objectivity; anything
supposedly lying “behind” the objects of our thought must be nonobjective, illusory. Thus Hegel’s I is an active, self-constituting
system of pure thoughts.

The same may be said of the Idea, the total reality of the world.
The important difference between the I and the Idea is that the I is an existent self-constituting system of pure concepts (WdL, vol. 2, p. 220; SL, p. 583). To say that something exists or is existent is to say that it is involved in relations of mutual dependence with an indeterminate number of other things of similar status. "Existence is the immediate unity of self-reflection and reflection in another. It is therefore the indeterminate collection of existents as things reflected into themselves which are just as much appearances in another or relative, and which constitute a world of mutual dependence and an infinite connection of grounds and groundeds" (§123, my tr.). Existence is the form, for instance, of spatiotemporal particulars. The world-whole, or the pure Idea, cannot be said to participate in relations of mutual dependence—there is, after all, nothing else it can depend on. The I, however, does participate in such relations, for each person is an I necessarily related to other I's and to nonthinking beings as well. Thus, although the content of the Idea and the I are the same, their forms are significantly different.

Since existence is a matter of entering into dependency relations with other things, there is an inherent tension in the notion of the system of pure thoughts existing. The system is supposed to be absolutely self-determining. How can it adopt a form so antithetic to its nature?

This last shape of Spirit—the Spirit which at the same time gives its complete and true content the form of the Self and thereby realizes its Concept as remaining in its Concept in this realization—this is absolute knowing. . . . Truth is the content, which in religion is still not identical with its certainty. But this identity is now a fact, in that the content has received the shape of the Self. As a result, that which is the very essence, viz. the Concept, has become the element of existence, or has become the form of objectivity for consciousness. (PhG, p. 556; PhS, pp. 485–86)

The system of pure thoughts—the absolute Idea—cannot itself adopt the form of existence, for the system requires a form fully adequate to its content. Its content is the categorial structure governing the constitution of the world. Considered as a pure content, independent of considerations of form, this is the Concept—an
abstract structure (explored in the Logic) realized by the world-whole. The only form fully adequate to this content is the world-whole itself. But that abstract structure is also realized within the world; there are, as it were, partial, microcosmic realizations of the structure of the macrocosm. An existent individual who possesses sufficient internal complexity with the appropriate categorial structure partially realizes the Concept in a self-reflective mode. The content of each I is the same, but the individual I's, as distinct existences in the natural world, are themselves thereby distinguished.

It is, indeed, part of the very structure of the world that its own structure be internally duplicated in this way, and in this sense the world comes to its own fullest realization in our thought about ourselves as realizing the Concept.

All human activity is imbued with thought; thought is a moment in everything we do. Just as thought is involved in all the structures of the objective world, it permeates all the structures of subjectivity. In this sense we are always thinking, according to Hegel. But surely there are some episodes of mental activity which are pure thoughts in a more straightforward sense—for instance, what someone does in reading and understanding Hegel's Logik. Thought is the structure of our mental activity. In pure thinking that structure is also the object of our thinking. Thus thinking as a subject and thinking as an object coincide in pure thought, the self-conscious realization of the Concept.

We began with a question: According to Hegel, what am I? I am a complex organism whose internal states exhibit a self-reflective, multileveled structure enabling me to consciously recreate the structure exhibited in the world as a whole. I am a thinking thing and therefore necessarily also an embodied, sensate thing. Strictly speaking, I am neither a merely material nor an immaterial thing. What is important about me is not what I am made of, but what I do—namely, think. And in thought, at least, I participate in the Absolute.