

Jens Rometsch

Hegel On Knowledge of What We Are Doing

Abstract: Philosophical interests in knowledge tend to focus exclusively on knowledge of things or facts in the world and our knowledge of that knowledge. I will argue that knowledge of what we are doing should be an integral part of those interests. It is too rarely discussed to which extent an account of knowledge of our own non-epistemic activities might be necessary in order to get the full picture of how we relate to facts in trying to know them. (2.) Hegel's epistemology in the *philosophy of subjective spirit* is an interesting exception to this rule: A certain type of knowledge of what we are doing serves as a partial justification for his entire philosophical project, although in Hegel it rests obscure in what sense we can actually have that type of knowledge.

Keywords: knowledge, epistemology, action theory, Kant, Hegel, subjective spirit

Jens Rometsch: Institut für Philosophie, Universität Bonn, Deutschland, jens.rometsch@uni-bonn.de

1 The epistemological relevance of knowledge of what we are doing

When knowledge becomes a matter of philosophical interest, the subsequent questions “Knowledge of what?” and “Whose knowledge?” will also have to be dealt with. The latter question, so it seems, necessitates some kind of theory of the subject – some theory about that which is supposed to have or possess knowledge or cognition. The question of necessary features for such a subject has remained central to modern treatments of knowledge from Locke to Kant and Hegel. Thus, if epistemology and the theory of the subject somehow go together, the question of whether certain areas and types of knowledge might be of special epistemological concern should also seem relevant. My text starts with an introductory investigation of the epistemological relevance of knowing what we are doing. This introduction is meant to prepare an understanding for

the epistemological context in which Hegel's treatment of this type of knowledge becomes interesting (cf. (2.)). I will begin with an observation concerning a standard understanding of knowledge (a.). This understanding often ensues a theory of the subject that reduces it to its epistemic activities; any such reduction, so I will argue, causes problems (b.). I will point out why an integration of action theoretical considerations might be seen as a way of overcoming these problems (c.). However, the solution that action theory may provide is not fully satisfying, as is demonstrated by means of a parallel between the role of intentions in epistemic activities (d.) and non-epistemic activities (e.); this demonstration will illustrate why non-intentional non-epistemic activities are of equal interest to epistemology as intended actions. Epistemologically relevant knowledge of what we are doing should therefore also be interested in those activities; however, knowledge of what we are doing is not to be confused with "knowing how" (f.).

(a.) Since Descartes or even earlier, the philosophical problem of knowledge was supposedly about *all types* of knowledge. The general aim of uncovering the universal foundations of knowledge made it seem obvious that epistemology's concern had to be knowledge *tout court*, with disregard to possible different *kinds* of knowledge. So the need to differentiate between differently relevant types of knowledge was masked by a supposedly universal concept of knowledge. But looking at what epistemology has been doing over the last few centuries, an almost exclusive preference for certain types of knowledge is observable – in fact, modern epistemology hardly ever was about knowledge *tout court* in spite of its widespread claims to universality. A strong and steady mainstream of epistemology has restricted itself to examining *knowledge of things and facts in the world and our knowledge of precisely that knowledge*.

By integrating them into our knowledge claims, we usually think of things and facts in the world as fundamentally independent of our epistemic approaches. They are interpreted as being simply there, independent of whether and how we know them and independent of what we are. Realists assume that there are things and facts that persist independently of our knowledge of them – a volcano would still be a volcano, even if nobody had ever known about it.¹ Representationalist theories stress that we *represent* what we claim to have knowledge of.² But independently of whether things exist as we represent them

¹ Cf. Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (to name just two programmatic publications of a lately observable realistic trend).

² "In transcendental aesthetics, we have proven sufficiently: that everything that is being intuited in space and time, hence all objects of an experience possible to us, are nothing but appearances, i.e. mere representations that do not outside of our thinking possess any inher-

or not, whatever we represent as a knowable fact or object, must *within this very representation* be viewed as something that persists independently of our ways of representing it. If a representation of facts didn't constrain us to view them as in some ways independent of how we represent them, they could not be integrated into a *knowledge* claim: Every representational setting needs to differentiate between (the representation of) facts and (that of) fantasies in order to integrate knowledge claims into our various representations. Even though the "volcano" and all we claim to know about it might result from our ways of representing it, any justifiable knowledge claim about the represented volcano must represent it as existing independently of us and as not being a mere fantasy. Either way, whether things and facts in the world are considered as really existing independently of our epistemic approaches (such as our ways of representing them), or whether they are considered to be just a necessary correlative element of our epistemic approaches (like when it is necessary to represent something as independent of our ways of representing it in order to represent it as object of a knowledge claim): Our epistemic approaches may shape *how* things in the world appear to us – but at least the brute fact that they appear to us, is not supposed to depend on such shapings if "things and facts in the world" are not to include mere fantasies or fictions. *How* P appears might be due to our ways of representing P – within that representation of P, the assumption *that* it appears cannot be considered to be a pure representation (i.e. imagination), otherwise P would have been represented as a mere fantasy, i.e. as something we can't judge wrongly, because we make up the rules of what it is supposed to be. A *represented* fact still has to be represented as a *fact*, not as a fiction; it has to be represented as something for which we don't make up the rules. The basic epistemological law "facta sunt servanda" applies when it comes to knowledge of what is to be taken as "things and facts in the world". If we characterize something as factual, that characterization would have to imply that we cannot make up what it is.

(b.) Epistemologies that are restricted to examining knowledge of things and facts in the world and our knowledge of precisely that knowledge, tend to *limit* the subject to the role of the *knower*. Every form of epistemology would have to be interested in the subject as that which knows. But the question of

ently founded existence in the way we represent them, namely as extended beings or sequences of change" ("Wir haben in der transzendentalen Ästhetik hinreichend bewiesen: daß alles, was im Raume oder der Zeit angeschauet wird, mithin alle Gegenstände einer uns möglichen Erfahrung, nichts als Erscheinungen, d.i. bloße Vorstellungen, sind, die, so wie sie vorgestellt werden, als ausgedehnte Wesen, oder Reihen von Veränderungen, außer unseren Gedanken keine an sich gegründete Existenz haben." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 518f.)

whether an epistemologically interesting theory of the subject should *reduce* the knowing subject to its activities of acquiring knowledge, remains open. I call the activities by which we acquire knowledge *epistemic activities*. They include activities such as sensory based perception (seeing, hearing, etc.), representing and imagining (e.g. forming of images out of perception, recollection or fancy), or conceptual operations (e.g. forming judgments and inferences). How to classify epistemic activities and how to explain their cooperation for the purpose of acquiring knowledge can pose a central epistemological problem – early modern debates between rationalism and empiricism can be seen as centering around related issues. Another epistemological problem might be seen in the fact that it is hard to decide inasmuch we can count as authors or determining origins of our epistemic activities: Although it is obvious that they couldn't take place without us, it remains hard to decide in what ways we conduct them and in what ways we experience (suffer) them. The idea that a subject theory that reduces the subjects' activities to epistemic activities might be implausible is supported by the fact that outside of mainstream philosophical epistemology no such theory could ever apply. In biology, psychology, sociology, historiography, cultural studies and many other disciplines we deal with subjects – with sensing and thinking individuals and collectives doing things. None of these disciplines would think of reducing the subject to its epistemic activities, even though epistemic activities might play a decisive explanatory role in those disciplines. The question of why a certain mainstream of epistemology should be justified in explicitly or implicitly presupposing a subject that is reduced to conducting or experiencing epistemic activities remains yet to be answered: The epistemological presupposition of a subject as “consciousness”, “self-consciousness”, “mind” or “understanding” might be unjustifiable if these characterizations imply a reduction of the subject to epistemic activities. The fact that such a reduction is usually implied can be indicated by the observation that we commonly speak of how a “consciousness”, “mind” or “understanding” senses, feels, imagines or thinks; but that we would probably find it unusual to say that a “consciousness”, “mind” or “understanding” walks, waltzes, conducts an experiment in a laboratory or wages war.

(c.) If the idea of a subject limited to experiencing or conducting epistemic activities proves not to be an apt choice for the purposes of epistemology, we have to find out what other conception of the subject could be more suitable. According to one alternative idea, the subject should not only be considered as a knower, but also as an *agent*. The subject should not only be reduced to its epistemic activities, it should also be considered as subject in the position of performing actions. This would allow epistemology to examine knowledge of (1) things in the world, (2) our actions and (3) our knowledge of that knowledge (of (1) and (2)).

For a number of reasons, actions are indeed quite different from things in the world. We cannot represent them as things in the world that are independent from us. For sure, our actions happen in the world – if I get up and go for my daily walk, an event happens in the world just as well as in the case of an erupting volcano. But the factual character of a volcano-eruption differs from that of my daily walk with respect to the possibilities I ascribe to myself when it comes to changing it. Whereas I judge the occurrence of my daily walk to somehow depend on myself (e.g. on my intentions), I would be ill-advised to think that the occurrence of the erupting volcano might depend on myself. So not only *how* they happen, but also the fact *that* they happen makes actions different from things in the world. The idea of a subject that is not only experiencing and conducting epistemic activities but that is also performing actions in the world is closer to the implicit theories of the subject prevalent in the mentioned disciplines of biology, psychology, sociology, historiography or cultural studies. Starting with this modified theory of the subject, epistemology would not just be talking about the subject as “consciousness”, “self-consciousness”, “mind” or “understanding”, but about a subject qua human being.³ Actions happen in the world in a way that depends on subjects capable of forming intentions about how to act. Inasmuch as their factual character is linked to this capacity and to our subsequent performances, actions show that our epistemologically relevant being in the world is not limited to confronting things in the world by means of experiencing or conducting epistemic activities in order to acquire knowledge about those things. The epistemological relevance of actions lies in the fact that their factual occurrence is linked to our epistemic activities.

(d.) These observations seem to favor the option of complementing the idea of the subject in the role of the knower with the role of the agent: With this complementation, the subject (as that which knows) would not be reduced to its epistemic activities and its knowledge about itself as experiencing or conducting those activities; the subject would also be considered as an agent knowing about its actions. Epistemology would have to be complemented by action theory. However, this suggested option implies a specification that eventually proves to be just as unjustified as the reduction of the subject to experiencing or conducting its epistemic activities without any involvement with non-epistemic activities – namely the reduction of all non-epistemic activities to intended actions. The difficulty of such a specification can be demonstrated with a parallel in the realm of epistemic activities. Epistemic activities play a decisive role

³ This suggestion should be understood as hopefully being in a meaningful relation of family resemblance with S. Rödl’s idea of a “true materialism” concerning the “material reality” of a deliberately acting and receptively knowing subject. (Cf. S. Rödl, *Selbstbewußtsein*, p. 30f.).

in epistemology because they provide a source of knowledge. It is by experiencing or conducting them that we acquire knowledge. But they are not to be confused with knowledge. I might perceive, imagine or think something concerning P without knowing anything about P. Our epistemic activities don't have to be directed towards acquiring knowledge. They don't even have to occur because we intend them to occur – we don't necessarily see, imagine, or think P because we want to see, imagine or think P or because we aim at P by conducting these epistemic activities. Of course, the question of conducting epistemic activities with an intention to discover or know something should not be confused with the question of *intentionality*: I don't mean to support or dispute the claim that our epistemic activities are “directed towards” something or “are about” something – it would take an elaborate theory of epistemic activities to do justice to the wide array of questions raised by that claim. But since epistemic activities can take place even though we don't intend to make them take place, they might just as well take place without ever resulting in any knowledge. However, in some cases this unintended taking place of epistemic activities can even result in knowledge: Quite frequently, to give just one obvious example, we happen to coincidentally see things without any intention of observing or exploring them. And yet we extract knowledge claims from such coincidental episodes (“I happened to see... and it struck me that ...” or “I bumped into ... and noticed that ...”). Therefore, since every unintended taking place of epistemic activities might result in knowledge, the epistemological interest for them cannot be limited to their intended employment in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge.

In sum, such limitation doesn't seem advisable for two reasons: Firstly, it always remains possible, that no such intended pursuit of knowledge actually results in its acquisition. And secondly, it remains possible that knowledge is being acquired through epistemic activities occurring without being employed with the intention of acquiring knowledge or with any other intention. For all we know about acquiring knowledge, some combination of epistemic activities, some seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, etc. has to take place in order for us to know something. And for all we can say about the acquisition of knowledge *tout court*, it rests obscure whether intentional regimentation of epistemic activities in order to acquire knowledge is possible at all; and whether it is more likely to succeed than coincidental or inspirational acquisition of knowledge, rests fundamentally undecidable. These impossibilities disappear only when we specify types and areas of knowledge: Specific areas of knowledge might strongly recommend research methods and orderly proceedings of acquiring legitimately claimable knowledge. But with an exclusive regard to the general epistemological level of knowledge *tout court*, it is impossible to say and recommend which way of knowledge acquisition is to be followed. Whatever concept

of knowledge *tout court* or knowledge as such we apply, outside of epistemological debates we only ever deal with specific knowledge cases to which specific habits and rules of acquisition apply. And for these specific cases it is quite possible to see why certain recommended ways of knowledge acquisition might be promising or not. Any such recommendation for the general and unspecific concept of knowledge *tout court* would have to imply that we are in the case-independent, *general* position of successfully managing knowledge acquisition, regardless of possible areas and types of knowledge. Since we cannot generally exclude the possibility of possible areas of knowledge out of *our* reach (e.g. the number of galaxies in the universe or the eye color of Vercingetorix), I don't see on what grounds such a recommendation should be given.

For all we can say about the acquisition of knowledge *tout court*, it is simply the occurrence of epistemic activities, not their intentionally guided employment that can safely count as an *inevitable* source of knowledge. Depending on the area and type of intended knowledge, trying to get to know about a formerly unknown P by scrupulous observation, conducting experiments or methodical argumentation might reliably increase the likelihood of eventually really knowing about P. But the success of these attempts is never to be *generally* warranted and none of these or comparable attempts have to be claimed in order to understand the epistemologically relevant role of epistemic activities as a source of knowledge. We would certainly never know about P if no epistemic activity ever revealed anything about it – whether that activity is experienced or conducted by intention or not, is of comparatively minor importance. Therefore, the epistemological interest in epistemic activities cannot limit itself to their intended employment.

(e.) Getting back to the question of why adding action theory to epistemology might imply an over-specification, we may note that a parallel delimitation should guide our epistemological interest in our non-epistemic activities. Limiting our interests to (intended) actions would not allow us to fully understand the epistemological relevance of our active, yet neither epistemic nor intended involvement with things in the world. Therefore, if it were suitable to use the title “agent” at all, this title must not imply the specification of *intended* involvement with things in the world. There is simply no reason to reduce the realm of the subject's epistemologically relevant involvement with the world to intentional actions. Non-intentional (i.e. unintended) non-epistemic activities exhibit the same factual character that makes intentional (i.e. intended) non-epistemic actions epistemologically interesting in the first place: Unlike things in the world such as volcanoes or thunderstorms, they would also have to be characterized as occurrences (facts) in the world that could not take place without our involvement. Therefore, they deserve the same epistemological attention as intentional (i.e. intended) non-epistemic activities.

In support of this, we might want to observe that the role of intentions for explaining our non-epistemic activities (such as e.g. walking, waltzing or waging war) rests particularly obscure. There is no clear-cut and unambiguous link between intentions and presumably resulting actions. As is well known, our actions can be reasonably explained as being due to a virtually infinite number of possible intentions. Explaining actions with presumable intentions can only be limited by the sound observation that no action can *reasonably* result from just *any* claimed intention. I could very reasonably claim to have a great variety of intentions for writing this text, like e.g. the intention of expressing myself about epistemology and Hegel, the intention of impressing my neighbors, the intention of avoiding other chores by writing this text instead, etc. There is no end to the list of reasonably claimable intentions for any given activity. But it would be unreasonable to claim writing this text in order to practice my skateboarding skills or to initiate my time journey to the year of 1823, etc. – there is no end to the list of unreasonably claimable intentions either.⁴ The explanatory task of linking actions to intentions needs to separate reasonable explanations from unreasonable explanations. But this separation doesn't elucidate which of our non-epistemic activities have to be understood as intentional actions at all, or which of our reasonable explanations of intentions can actually claim truth. Therefore, there is no unambiguous separation of intentional and non-intentional non-epistemic activities. Take walking, waltzing or waging war: It is hard to say which parts of these complex activities can count as resulting from intentions and which parts are e.g. merely habitual or automatic and what the relevant intentions might actually consist in. I happen to claim that I am currently writing this text and that I actually intend to write it. The way my fingers move on the keyboard of my computer can be explained by my intention of writing this text. The explanation is quite exact, for all the keys are being pressed in a specific order that results from my pursued intention and the activities of my fingers can be described rather precisely by listing my sequential pressing of keys. However, it rests questionable inasmuch my admitted intention of typing this text accounts for a supposedly hidden intention of pressing various keys on my computer. Given my routine, I should not even have to look at the keyboard, let alone waste any thought about how to press keys. My guiding and outspoken intention of writing this text cannot consciously extend to *all* of the bodily

4 Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*. Like this example of someone writing a text, Anscombe's famous example of a man operating a water pump (p. 37ff.) shows that there might be infinitely many reasonable explanations as to why certain intentions might lead to certain actions, but that not every possible explanation one could give of an action can be considered as reasonable.

prerequisites of its execution, if it is ever to be successfully executed. The less I have to consider and intend what my fingers are supposed to be doing, the easier my typing will get accomplished. Not only do all of our actions contain pre-requisites elements that can't be intended at all (basic well-functioning of the body, a complex system of constant muscle contractions, e.g. for the sake of breathing, talking, or not falling of a chair, etc.). Most of our actions can only be intended with the realistic promise of their successful execution inasmuch as the routinely elements of their execution can be left to unintended automatisms. Nobody can play a tune on a piano while having to decide when to press each individual key; nobody can successfully pronounce a sentence while having to consider and intend the observation of all relevant grammatical rules. The success of intended and successfully executed actions is never to be had without the reliability of unintentionally executable routines.

Therefore, the distinction between *intentional (intended) actions* and *non-intentional (unintended) activities* is not of primary importance when it comes to explaining the role of non-epistemic activities in epistemology. The important thing to note is that whatever theory of the subject is applied, it should not reduce the relevant activities of the cognitive subject to purely epistemic activities. How the subject experiences and conducts epistemic activities and how it knows about them and about itself conducting them, is of major epistemological interest. But it rests epistemologically important to consider that subjects are not "minds" but stay involved in non-epistemic activities and claim knowledge about how these activities involve them with things in the world and other subjects. Therefore, no full account about how we know can be had without taking into consideration our knowledge of what we are doing – epistemically and non-epistemically. Non-intentional non-epistemic activities have to be part of any theory of knowledge-acquisition.

(f.) Knowledge of what we are doing is not to be confused with the knowledge of how to do things, i.e. practical knowledge or "knowing how".⁵ Before getting to know how to instrumentalize what we are doing, we must have gained some acquaintance with what we are doing. I don't notice my fingers moving over the keyboard of my computer in the same way as I notice the keyboard of my computer. In order to make them move the way I want to (which implies the practical knowledge of typing), I must take notice of their active presence on the keyboard, I must take notice of them doing something, of the fact that they are *my* moving fingers and hence not something like the keyboard they touch. I can know *what* I am doing without knowing *how* to do something

⁵ Cf. G. Ryle's famous distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how" (*The Concept of Mind*, p. 27ff.)

with it (i.e. how to employ my doing for any given specific aim). Our non-epistemic presence in the world is constantly being manifested to ourselves by our doings. Being able to know of our doings as that part of our intelligible surrounding whose factual character depends on us provides an important epistemic link to the factual character of things in the world. There are different kinds of facts with different specific characters – the specific factual character of our doings entails that they (like volcanoes) belong to the vast number of things and facts in the world even though (unlike volcanoes) our doings couldn't come into existence if we weren't involved with them at all. Our non-epistemic doings are factual and create facts in a world of facts that otherwise must be presupposed as existing independently from us. Our epistemic activities don't have that power: By perceiving, imagining or thinking P, I can only modify my perception, imagination or thought of P. But if P isn't reducible to being a fact about my perception, imagination or thought, if P is a thing in the world or a fact about things in the world, none of these epistemic activities are going to alter it.⁶

2 Hegel's recognition of the epistemological relevance of knowledge of what we are doing

Knowledge of what we are doing when performing non-epistemic activities is a very special case of knowledge. Its examination turns out to be just as integral for epistemology as the examination of knowledge of things in the world and our knowledge of that knowledge. Within Hegel's *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, it is the *philosophy of subjective spirit* (EPW §§ 387–482) that centrally covers most traditional epistemological topics.⁷ I will try to explain how the knowledge of what we are doing gains epistemological interest in this part of Hegel's philosophy. In order to do this, I will have to introduce the general project outline of the *Encyclopaedia* (g.) and the role of the philosophy of subjective spirit within that project (h.). I will then discuss why an examination of knowledge of things and facts in the world and our knowledge of that knowledge does not suffice for fulfilling that role, which explains the motivation of Hegel's

⁶ This last claim might have to be somewhat modified with regard to the special case of social facts.

⁷ I will quote and translate Hegel's works from the Moldenhauer-Michel edition (TWA). The *Encyclopaedia of philosophical sciences* (EPW) will be quoted by indicating paragraph-numbers, Hegel's other texts by volume and page number.

interest in the knowledge of what we are doing (i.). With this motivation in mind, Hegel's analysis of our subjective epistemic disposition for knowledge of what we are doing can be summarized (j.). But keeping this motivation in mind also helps to understand why Hegel's treatment of knowledge of what we are doing fails to explain the special character of this knowledge and its epistemological relevance (k.).

(g) Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* tries to deliver a sketch of how to explain reality in total. For Hegel, reality in total equals *thinkable* reality – the question of whether there is such a thing as an element of reality that resists being thought cannot even be reasonably debated, since any such debate would have to rely on what can be thought. If thinkable reality is to be thought *in total*, then the reality of thought must also be a part of it, since thinking takes place in reality. And for Hegel, thought is not only one part among others within the reality that is to be thought. Thought is that part of reality that is supposed to be thinking reality: If thought really happens and if thought really achieves to think reality, then reality thinks itself by means of such thought. The thinking of reality does not take place in some strange surreal sphere. It takes place in individual thinkers who are a part of the reality that is being thought. Hegel's project of thinking reality starts off with a presentation of the reality of *pure* thinking, or of thinking as thinking: *The Science of Logic*. *The Science of Logic* is meant to present all the categories of thinking that are also categories of that which is thought of – of reality insofar as it is accessible to thinking. And these categories and their categorical correlations must be shown by means of a method that is meant to present them *objectively*. Objective presentation requires the avoidance of subjective perspectives on the presented matter.⁸ Whatever is supposed to be presented objectively in this manner, is to be presented as if it were presenting itself, without any subjective additions of the philosopher.

Evidently, reality does not only consist in pure thought – there are those parts of reality that are not reducible to being thought – many things and elements in nature and the social sphere cannot be reduced to the fact that they are being thought (a tree in my thoughts is not a tree in my garden). Even though these parts of reality are not reducible to being thought, they are still thinkable. And insofar as they are thinkable, they supposedly fall under the categories of pure thinking. Whether that supposition proves to be true has to be examined by disciplines that Hegel summarizes as “Realphilosophie” (philosophy of reality). These disciplines deal with those parts of reality that do not only consist in thought. Only inasmuch as those parts of reality are to be ex-

⁸ Whether and in what cases subjective perspectives can be avoided at all, is of course still an important ongoing debate (cf. T. Lehtonen, “The Concept of a Point of View”).

plained in total by employing context modified categories of the *Science of Logic*, is it confirmed that the categories and concepts of pure thinking have an extension beyond the realm of pure thinking. Only this confirmation would allow us to follow Hegel and understand the *Science of Logic* as a pure and objective thought of thinkable reality as such.⁹

(h.) The philosophy of reality splits up into two major parts of extra-conceptual reality: Firstly there are those parts whose elements exist in an entirely passive relation to thinking – as only ever being thought of, but never as themselves thinking. The big label for this part of reality is “Nature”: Things in nature are to be conceptualized as that which is not thinking. The second big part of extra-conceptual reality is labeled as “Spirit” (*Geist*). Inasmuch as it is finite (in the sense applied to this term by Hegel), “spirit” remains embedded into nature: Human beings and their institutions remain natural inasmuch as they don’t dissolve into pure thinking.¹⁰ The only infinity to be found within human beings and their institutions remains in those parts of reality that prepare or incorporate how the thinking of reality happens: Art and religion as preparations, and philosophy as the final taking place of reality thinking itself. To a minor extent in art and religion, but especially in philosophy, reality thinks itself in a way that is not limited by any natural (finite) component – only here, the thinking of *reality* happens to be just a *thinking* of reality. There are two finite parts of spirit– subjective and objective spirit. The final part of the *Encyclopaedia* is dedicated to the “absolute” spirit, which comprises art, religion and philosophy as infinite modes of the thinking of reality.¹¹

⁹ Cf. Jens Rometsch, “Wirklichkeitskonstitution und Erkenntniskonstitution bei Hegel und Schopenhauer”, pp. 69-77.

¹⁰ Terry Pinkard’s latest study elaborates on this point with respect to *agency*: “For Hegel, to be an agent, is to not to be made of any particular stuff (say ‘mental’ as distinct from ‘physical’ stuff), since agents are, after all, natural creatures. To be an agent is to be able to assume a position in a kind of normative space, which, so it will turn out, is a kind of social and historical space.” (T. Pinkard, *Hegel’s naturalism*, p. 8).

¹¹ Since the elements (people, institutions, cultural achievements) of finite spirit don’t stop being natural even though something about them may count as instantiation of the “absolute spirit”, there is no teleological relationship between nature and spirit only to be safeguarded by some supernatural or divine position. Hegel’s philosophy does not suppose or need any such position: “Nature is not an appearance or illusion; it is nature. The teleological dimension of Hegel’s account of nature and spirit is both ambitious and complicated, but there is little evidence that he understands teleology in any intentional or realist way, as if nature must be understood as the product of divine design, or as if there were some sort of efficient causal force in the world, pulling the universe forward towards full self- development, as if some eventual end-state drew everything toward it and needed to be invoked to explain what happens.” (R. Pippin, “Naturalness and Mindedness: Hegel’s Compatibilism”, p. 196)

This ambitious project sketch of philosophy has to be taken into consideration in order to understand the role of Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit. With the *Science of Logic* being the fundamental part of the whole encyclopaedic project, Hegel shifts away from Kant's understanding of epistemology as the fundamental core in the architecture of systematic philosophy.¹² For Hegel, Kant's epistemological and subject-theoretical question of how our subjective constitution enables us to have sound knowledge of reality has to be rooted deeper in order to be properly treated. That's why the *Science of Logic* is the fundamental discipline in Hegel's philosophical approach and not epistemology. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* asks how forms of thinking (categories) can be legitimately employed by a cognitive subject whose sole active interest is that of having knowledge of things in the world and its own knowledge of that very knowledge. According to Hegel, for that question to become legitimate, another question must be answered beforehand: Namely the question of how to present the objective reality of pure or categorical thought *in total* (and not just in only one aspect of what the reality of categorical thought might be, namely a function of providing a presupposition for successful empirical judgments about things in the world).

Within this altered context, Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit reprises Kant's project of exploring how subjective experience can possibly be suitable for objective knowledge. The philosophy of subjective spirit has to demonstrate that we (as subjects) are in fact constituted in a way that enables us to conceive a *Science of Logic* or any other "philosophical science". This discipline has to demonstrate the subjective conditions that enable us to conceive art, religion and philosophy as Hegel understands them. The objective (socio-historical) conditions for this ability of ours are demonstrated by the philosophy of *objective* spirit. According to Hegel, subjects in history can only evolve in a context of social institutions. The historical evolution of institutions must have reached a certain point for thinking subjects to be capable of conceiving certain forms of art, religion or philosophy. In opposition to Kant's approach, the thinking subject as presented in the philosophy of subjective spirit is not a once-and-for-all or *a priori* model of human subjectivity as it presumably always has been and always will be. For Hegel, thinking subjectivity has resulted from objective historical conditions – just as it shaped these conditions of which it resulted from. The relation between subjective and objective spirit is complementary. Together, as two equally important parts in the philosophy of finite spirit, they produce and instantiate the infinite realm of "absolute spirit" (cf. EPW § 553).

12 Cf. Kant's idea of the "copernican turn" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B XVI, XVII).

(i.) Cognitive subjectivity as dealt with in the philosophy of subjective spirit involves our epistemic activities and our knowledge thereof. This first part of Hegel's philosophy of spirit deals with "the spirit inasmuch as it cognizes" ("der Geist als *erkennend*" cf. EPW § 387). As far as the division of labor between the philosophies of subjective and objective spirit goes, Hegel stays largely within the traditional epistemological framework. However, since the aim of the philosophy of subjective spirit is to explain how we as subjects can count as that part of reality in which reality thinks itself, the epistemic or mental activities examined in this discipline cannot be limited according to the traditional epistemological interest of attaining knowledge of things in the world and our knowledge of that knowledge. At least the subjective disposition for knowledge of what we are doing has to be included into this account in order to allow the philosophy of objective spirit to examine our socially relevant agency and its institutionalization. Moreover, the explanation of this disposition has to consider something else. If thinking subjects are to be claimed as that part of reality in which reality thinks itself, then the reality of these subjects should not only be limited to those activities that eventually culminate in thinking (i.e. epistemic activities). If what thinking subjects are were reducible to thinking, they would be in no position to claim *evidence* for the hypothesis that their thought and its thought-content has any power to explain what is happening in those parts of reality that don't purely consist in thinking. If thinking subjects were *only* thinking, their thinking might be too aloof for claiming that kind of evidence. However, if the reality of thinking subjects (i.e. what they are) comprises more than just their thinking, the way they can think and know about those parts of their *own* reality that are not reducible to being thought may serve as a first evidence for their capacity to think and know about those parts of reality *in total* that are not reducible to simply being thought (i.e. nature and spirit in total). If thinking subjects (namely philosophers) are to claim themselves as being that very special part of reality in which reality thinks itself, this claim should not just explain how their isolated thinking might support that role, but also how the reality of what they are apart from thinking might support the claim that their thinking supports that role. Therefore, thinking subjects as needed for Hegel's philosophical project have to understand themselves as also belonging to that part of reality which is not reducible to thinking. And this understanding stems from their specific way of knowing what they are doing. A traditional (e.g. Kantian) interest in knowledge of things and facts in the world and our knowledge of precisely that knowledge would be likely to only examine how we relate to reality in total by means of our epistemic activities that culminate in activities of thinking. However, if our ways of correlating to reality were reduced to epistemic activities alias thinking, then no examination of thinking alone could pro-

vide any support for our claims of actually thinking about reality in a way that doesn't miss what reality is about when it is not reducible to being thought. Knowing about what we are doing provides a knowledge of how we belong to reality in other ways than just by thinking about it. If we can know about how this part of our reality that is not reducible to being thought relates us with our surroundings, we should be able to know about other parts of reality that are not reducible to being thought.

(j.) Hegel discusses our subjective disposition for knowledge of what we are doing in the last two sub-sections (“practical spirit” and “free spirit”) of the last third of the philosophy of subjective spirit, which is entitled as “Psychology” (EPW § 440–482).¹³ The paragraphs about “practical spirit” (EPW § 469–480) start off from an elementary, immediate basis, with “practical feeling” (*praktisches Gefühl*). In contrast to other types of epistemologically relevant forms of feeling and intuition discussed in previous parts (such as the sensing and feeling of the soul (EPW § 399–409), the sensory certitude of consciousness (EPW § 418–419) or the intuition of intelligence (EPW § 446–450)), practical feeling already presupposes a rudimentary understanding of its motivation – because anything that seems to be immediately present in the way of a practical feeling is instantly *qualified* as attractive or repulsive. In Hegel's analysis, only a subject that already recognizes itself as the origin of all of its thought-contents (insofar as they are precisely that: *thought*-contents) can fully qualify the suitability of contents to its own being. A content of practical feeling is suitable to the subject if it is such that the subject would have *knowingly chosen* to not just produce it in thought but also in the reality of thought-external existence. In the context of “practical spirit”, feeling the repulsiveness of something amounts to not opting for it to happen, if one is given the choice; feeling the attractiveness of something amounts to opting for it to happen. Whatever our feelings are about can be deemed as desirable or undesirable: Feeling the desirability of a specific feeling and what it is about would make us choose the production of what it is about, if we had a choice. Feeling the undesirability of a specific feeling and what it is about would make us struggle against the production of what it is about.¹⁴ Hegel's examples illustrate how a “practical feeling” is always al-

¹³ For a more comprehensive study of the entire philosophy of subjective spirit, cf. Jens Roemtsch, *Hegels Theorie des erkennenden Subjekts*. Markus Gabriel's recently published *Transcendental Ontology* contains an innovative chapter on the epistemological relevance of the “Anthropology”, i.e. the first part of Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit (Cf. “The Pathological Structure of Representation as such: Hegel's Anthropology” in *Transcendental Ontology*, pp. 48–59).

¹⁴ However, *feeling* the (un-)desirability of something does not entail any explicit knowledge of what it is about, since feelings of this kind are not necessarily self-reporting and can be

ready such an implicit evaluative judgment: “Practical feelings” are feelings such as “shame, remorse, contentment etc.” (“Scham, Reue, Zufriedenheit usw.” EPW3 § 472). In order to feel shameful or remorseful about something, a possible understanding of the situation must be presupposed, even though e.g. shame is a feeling with all the immediacy of sudden uncontrollable physical symptoms such as blushing, etc. We cannot feel shame about something without the possibility of recognizing it as shameful; and if we, upon recognition, were given the choice, we would try to reverse the fact that it ever happened. Feeling remorseful about something equals wishing it had never happened – feeling content about something equals applauding the fact that it has happened. These feelings tend to assault us and we seem to suffer them passively.

Departing from “practical feelings”, Hegel continues to discuss more active, self-determined forms of volitional experience. Impulses and arbitrary will (*Triebe und Willkür*) are Hegel’s next candidates. If activated as arbitrary will, the subject knows itself to be free to actively pursue whatever it chooses. Any arbitrary will is already a summary and reflection of different and probably competing impulses. Therefore, there seems to be no immediate impulsive givenness in the experience of arbitrary will: Inasmuch as we dispose of arbitrary will, we can choose which impulses to obey and which to neglect. But this arbitrary freedom to do anything we want rests a simply *negative* freedom – a freedom from being externally forced to *certain* choices. Despite all the reflection it implies, arbitrary will turns out to be nothing but an involuntary, impulsive urge of a higher, more reflected order: Our freedom to choose the contingent impulses we submit to is still a submission to impulses. The arbitrary will is “only real as *subjective* and *contingent* will” (“nur als *subjektiver* und *zufälliger* Wille wirklich”; EPW3 § 478). It is only free *from* external constraint without knowing to what final end its freedom might be employed. Since Aristotle, the prominent candidate for such a final end is the concept of happiness (*Glückseligkeit*). But for Hegel, it is not at all sure that there has to be one form of happiness everybody strives to achieve (either knowingly or unknowingly). For all we know, people have very different ideas about the final end of their pursuits. Just as people’s pursuits are different, so are their ideas about happiness. If it boils down to individual pursuits of happiness (as Hegel seems to suggest), then once again only the sum of impulses determines our individual understanding of

quite vague. As J. D. Velleman points out with respect to actions performed out of desire: “Many actions that are performed out of desire are not preceded by any pangs, twinges or yearnings. You want something and you try to get it, without experiencing any conscious manifestations of the operative desire [...] Feeling a desire is not the same as recognizing it introspectively.” (J. D. Velleman, *Practical Reflection*, p. 23).

happiness. If happiness, as Hegel puts it “has its *affirmative* content only in the impulses” (“den *affirmativen* Inhalt allein in den Trieben hat”, EPW3 § 479), the problem remains the same as for an arbitrary will without such a proclaimed final end: Whatever makes us happy, remains impulsive and is not a matter of choice. Even though the subject as “practical spirit” is free from external constraints, it is limited by internal constraints as long as it is blindly directed towards limited aims – such as certain objects of arbitrary will or certain ideals of happiness which are unavoidably opposed to others and therefore partial and contingent.

The sub-section on “theoretical spirit” (EPW §§ 445–466) that precedes the presented sub-section on “practical spirit” finishes with a form of self-recognition that Hegel calls “theoretical intelligence”. Theoretical intelligence is characterized by a complete loss of external constraints of *thinking*. This loss is due to the thinking subject’s recognition of its own position as exclusive determining origin of *its own thoughts*. For a “practical spirit” another self-recognition is due; this self-recognition turns it into what Hegel calls “free intelligence”: The practical subject is to realize that its own unrestricted freedom to set any goal is the exclusive determining origin of *its being*. This self-recognition implies that the will becomes “spirit that knows itself as free and wills itself as its own object in this way; i.e. that has its essence as determination and aim” (“Der Geist, der sich als frei weiß und sich als diesen seinen Gegenstand will, d.i. sein Wesen zur Bestimmung und zum Zwecke hat”; EPW3 §482). The subject must recognize that its “essence” (i.e. what it truly is) does not include or demand the pursuit of any particular aim. We cannot “realize ourselves” or become what we truly are by aiming towards this or that goal. The subject’s true being is nothing more than its own original self-determining freedom from external and internal constraints. If “free intelligence” understands that it is already what it is supposed to be by being free, this does not result in any particular actions or new modes of conduct – this understanding is just the completion of the subject’s insight into its own self-reflective and self-productive structure: “This *universal* characteristic [of freedom] is only the will’s object and aim so far as it *thinks* itself, knows this to be its own concept and is *will* as free *intelligence* (“Diese *allgemeine* Bestimmung [d.h. die Freiheit] hat der Wille nur als seinen Gegenstand und Zweck, indem er sich denkt, diesen seinen Begriff weiß, *Wille* als freie *Intelligenz* ist” EPW3 § 481). “Free intelligence” or “free spirit” requires the subject to recognize how it is not just at the origin of its own epistemic activity (which, according to Hegel, culminates in thinking) but also at the origin of every other thinkable activity it might ever endeavor (like e.g. walking, waltzing or waging war). Therefore, in order to realize ourselves as “free intelligence”, our knowledge of our knowledge can’t be restricted to an understanding of how

to access thinkable things in the world by means of our epistemic activities; it also has to include knowledge of what we are doing with things in the world apart from sensing, feeling, imagining, representing or thinking them.

There is a fundamental difference between *this* recognition and arbitrary will's recognition of its capacity to choose no matter what. The "free spirit" knows that ultimately any individual aim can only be pursued for the sake of reaffirming and manifesting the spirit's own fundamental and universal characteristic of freedom. Due to *this* knowledge, "free spirit" is "the *notion* of absolute spirit" ("der Begriff des absoluten Geistes" EPW3 § 482). Only a finite subject that instantiates the "notion" of "absolute spirit" can attempt to practice philosophy as Hegel understands it. Only through knowledge of its own freedom, the subject may recognize that it is not just limited to originating and producing all of its epistemic activities and their contents. By recognizing that it can pursue *any* aim for the sake of its own freedom, the subject recognizes that in principle, it cannot encounter anything in the world that could not have been brought into existence for the same sake. "Theoretical spirit" (EPW § 445-468) only knows the *intelligibility* of all things it encounters to be a result of its epistemic activities. "Free spirit" recognizes that the *existence* of all things it encounters could have been the result of its own free activities, inasmuch as its essence as "free spirit" forbids being bound to only particular aims.

Hegel does not assume that we literally produce all objects: But only with the knowledge that *in principle*, we could have chosen every part and portion of reality we encounter to come into existence for the sake of maintaining our freedom to produce no matter what without being externally (e.g. by a given) or internally (e.g. by an impulse) restricted, can we principally claim to be that part of reality in which reality thinks itself. For Hegel, all of reality is thinkable. If thinkable reality rests only *thinkable* for us, then we cannot claim that our attempts to think how reality *really* is (i.e. independently of our attempts to think it) are able to touch reality as it really is. However, if we know that we are non-epistemically involved with reality, we also know that we would have no reason to think that certain modifications of reality could be possible without this involvement – namely those modifications that have to be counted as effects of our own doings. So the knowledge of what we are doing (i.e. of our non-epistemic involvement with the reality we think of) implies the knowledge that reality is not only thinkable for us, but also modifiable through us. At least on the abstractly general, epistemological level of knowledge *tout court*, the inclusion of knowledge about the modifiability of reality through our non-epistemic involvement implies the legitimate hypothetical claim that whatever there really is, could have been brought into reality by means of such modification. Obviously, realistic expectations would make us acknowledge that our power to

modify the thought-independent parts of reality is very limited. But the abstract basis of a notion of knowledge *tout court* does not allow for any norm for realistic expectations. Only concrete and more contentful forms of knowledge (e.g. “common sense”, everyday knowledge, scientific knowledge) allow us to know better how and to what extent our doings can modify reality. For knowledge of what we are doing *tout court*, the hypothetical claim of being able to produce thought-independent reality rests legitimate. And this claim beholds the merit of indicating that thought-independent reality remains thinkable for a thinking subject free to pursue any aim and free to pursue it by various modes of activity, not just in thinking. If we know that in principle we cannot only think, but also *produce* what we think to be the case thought-independently, then thought-independent facts cannot form a class of facts that resist being thought the way they are: Being able to *produce* P not out of a blind, primary or higher impulse, but only for the sake of displaying one’s own free intelligence *a fortiori* implies being able to *think* P the way it really is.

(k.) This consideration shows that Hegel’s interest for knowledge of what we are doing turns out to be closely related with the justification of his whole philosophical project. Hegel’s project tries to think reality in total. The project is only reasonable if reality can be thought the way it is. If that part of reality that is supposed to think it (namely thinking subjects) is not only involved with the rest of reality by merely thinking it, then the likelihood of thinking it the way it really is increases. Furthermore, if thinking subjects know of this involvement, they know that their thinking is not cut off from the thought-independent parts of reality. The knowledge of our capacity to produce things freely (with the freedom of an “arbitrary will” or that of the “free spirit”) is a knowledge of how we are doing whatever we are doing – therefore, it is also a knowledge of what we are doing. Doubts prevail when it comes to deciding whether all of our non-intentional and intentional epistemic activities amount to thinking, as Hegel’s philosophy of subjective spirit suggests. But very clearly, unlike our epistemic activities, our non-epistemic activities like walking, waltzing or waging war cannot be reduced or integrated into the realm of that which is purely thinking or being thought – indissolubly, they also belong to the realm of thought-independently existing nature. These non-epistemic activities constitute what we (as subjects thriving for knowledge) *are* apart from experiencing or conducting epistemic activities. We know about this indissoluble involvement with nature by knowing what we are doing.

Independent of how we judge Hegel’s entire project, his treatment of knowledge of what we are doing reveals two key options that the question of knowing what we are doing entails: To either claim that our doings are to be judged as effects of first or higher-order impulses or to claim that our doings are manifes-

tations of our always already prevalent freedom, happenings that are essentially undetermined by whatever need to follow this or that aim. It seems as if both claims about what we are doing involve decisions that cannot be motivated by epistemological considerations alone. And it also seems that both claims could be referring to non-epistemic activities and to epistemic activities: Are perception, imagination, representation and conceptualization guided by impulses or are they manifestations of our freedom, i.e. our indifference towards impulses? And it also seems that the decision between impulse-determination and free indetermination might depend on the respective epistemic or non-epistemic activity we are dealing with – among non-epistemic activities, walking, waltzing or waging war might present quite different cases, just as Hegel's philosophy of subjective spirit explicitly points out different cases for epistemic activities.

In Hegel's approach, the epistemologically relevant question about knowledge of what we are doing is blended into the claim of knowing that essentially we are doing things freely. But it rests unclear *how* our knowledge of what we are doing is affected depending on (a.) whether we are doing something out of a simple impulse, (b.) out of a particular arbitrary aim or (c.) for the sake of manifesting our own freedom. Are the different choice-characters of what we are doing in these three cases relevant for our respective knowledge of what we are doing? Are they relevant for knowing how the factual character of what we are doing relates us to the world of facts that are independent from our doings? Given the general outline of his project, Hegel would have to affirm these two questions, since only (c.) enables us to grasp how our thinking could produce a reliable case of reality in total thinking itself. As far as I see, Hegel fails to explain us the reasons for affirming these questions. If at all, they would have to be discovered in connection with a closer epistemological examination of knowledge of what we are doing.

References

- Paul Boghossian, 2006, *Fear of Knowledge. Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford (Oxford University Press)
- G.E.M. Anscombe, 1957, *Intention* (2nd ed.). Cambridge (Ma.) (Harvard University Press)
- Maurizio Ferraris, 2012, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*. Rome, Bari (Laterza)
- Markus Gabriel, 2011, *Transcendental Ontology. Essays in German Idealism*. London, New York (Continuum)
- G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*. 1970, Edited by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel. Frankfurt (Suhrkamp)
- Immanuel Kant, *Werke*. 1956, Ed. by W. Weischedel. Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft).

- Tommi Lehtonen, 2011, "The Concept of a Point of View." In: *SATS Northern European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (De Gruyter), pp. 237–252
- Terry Pinkard, 2012, *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature and the Final Ends of Life*. Oxford, New York (Oxford University Press)
- Robert Pippin, 1999, "Naturalness and Mindedness: Hegel's Compatibilism". In: *European Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 7, Issue 2 (Wiley), pp. 194–212
- Sebastian Rödl, 2011, *Selbstbewußtsein*. Berlin (Suhrkamp)
- Jens Rometsch, 2007, *Hegels Theorie des erkennenden Subjekts. Systematische Untersuchungen zur enzyklopädischen Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes*. Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann)
- Jens Rometsch, 2011, "Wirklichkeitskonstitution und ErkenntnisKonstitution bei Hegel und Schopenhauer." In: *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, Vol. 92. Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) pp. 69–86
- Richard Rorty, 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, (Princeton University Press)
- Gilbert Ryle, 2000, *The Concept of Mind (With an Introduction by Daniel C. Dennett)*. Chicago, (The University of Chicago Press)
- J. David Velleman, 2007, *Practical Reflection*, Stanford (CSLI Publications)