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Subjectivity and Dialectic: Hegel in Dialogue with Gadamer

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Abstract

In this article, I defend the contemporary significance of Hegel's thought on subjectivity and dialectic by involving Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Hans-Georg Gadamer in a dialogue, and then, by clarifying the characteristics of spirit and concept. Hegel's theory of subjectivity and his thought on dialectic face many criticisms. One such critic is Gadamer; however, Gadamer's philosophy is, in fact, quite close to Hegel's. I take the Hegel-Gadamer relationship as one illustration of Hegel's relevance and influence. I then further demonstrate Hegel's contemporary importance by analyzing the characteristics of spirit and concept. Finally, I propose that Hegel's absolute spirit and concept remain significant.

Résumé

Dans cet article, je défends la signification contemporaine de la pensée de Hegel sur la subjectivité et la dialectique en impliquant Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel et Hans-Georg Gadamer dans un dialogue, puis en clarifiant les caractéristiques de l'esprit et du concept. La théorie de la subjectivité de Hegel et sa pensée sur la dialectique font face à de nombreuses critiques. L'un de ces critiques est Gadamer ; cependant, la philosophie de Gadamer est, en fait, assez proche de celle de Hegel. Je prends la relation Hegel-Gadamer comme une illustration de la pertinence et de l'influence de Hegel. Je démontre ensuite l'importance contemporaine de Hegel en analysant les caractéristiques de l'esprit et du concept. Enfin, je propose que l'esprit absolu et le concept de Hegel restent significatifs.

Keywords: Hegel; Gadamer; subjectivity; dialectic; dialogue

1. Introduction

In the “introduction” of his recent article “Hegel's Truth and Gadamer's Method,” Daniel O. Dahlstrom summarizes scholars' different ideas about the Hegel-Gadamer relationship (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 232).¹ Most studies focus on explaining their similarities and clarifying their differences. Topics such as subjectivity, self-consciousness, reflection, language, dialogue, dialectic, infinity, finitude, etc. are

¹ About the different ideas and arguments of the Hegel-Gadamer relationship, also see footnotes 4–6 of Dahlstrom's (2022) chapter.

more frequently discussed than others.² Generally, Hans-Georg Gadamer is critical of self-consciousness with its many forms of subjectivism. Although he holds that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy is beyond such subjectivism,³ Gadamer also deems Hegel's philosophy as philosophy of subjectivity. For Gadamer, it is not Hegel's dialectic, but dialogue, not Hegel's concept, but language, that reveal the world experience of human beings. However, Gadamer also deems himself an inheritor of Hegel's thought, and he declares the "tension-filled proximity" (Gadamer, 1981, p. 53) or "strained closeness" (*spannungsvolle Nähe*) (Risser, 2002, p. 86) towards Hegel. In the contemporary philosophical context, Gadamer's self-description of his relationship with Hegel is typical, because indeed many post-Hegelian philosophers share this "tension-filled proximity" towards Hegel. In this article, I take the Hegel-Gadamer relationship as an example in order to defend the contemporary significance of Hegel's philosophy. My focus is to explain their differences using a discussion of Gadamer's criticisms of Hegel's subjectivity and dialectic, and then to reveal their "closeness."

Hegel's philosophy, especially his theory of subjectivity, together with its dialectical method, faces many challenges. Since the 1960s, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and Frankfurt school's critical theory all have shown an anti-subjective tendency. "Anti-subjectivity" has become a philosophical "convention." On the one hand, post-structuralists represented by Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, etc. have expressed doubts about the modern subject and subjectivity. They have such ideas as "the death of the subject" or "the death of man."⁴ On the other hand, post-modernists, represented by Jean-François Lyotard, regard subjectivity as the cause of "modern pathology" (Bowie, 2003, p. 13). Moreover, the critical theory of the Frankfurt school also has the anti-subjective tendency. For example, although Jürgen Habermas supports the rationality of Enlightenment and criticizes the anti-rational position, to some extent, he is supportive of the "anti-subjectivity" movement (Sherman, 2007). Hegel's thought on dialectic and concept faces no fewer controversies and difficulties. Karl Marx transforms Hegel's dialectic in a significant way. Benedetto Croce also criticizes a lot about Hegel's logic and dialectic in his *What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* (Croce, 1915, pp. 12, 56–57). Faced with these challenges, it is still an important question as to what kind of contemporary significance we may derive from Hegel's theory of subjectivity and his thought on dialectic and concept.

This article aims to elucidate the contemporary significance of Hegel's thought on subjectivity and dialectic by first involving Hegel and Gadamer in a dialogue, and then, by clarifying the characteristics of spirit — which is taken as an important subject — and the characteristics of concept in Hegel's philosophy. Section 2 expounds Gadamer's criticisms of Hegel's subjectivity and dialectic. Section 3 analyzes the "proximity" or "closeness" between Hegel and Gadamer. Section 4 defends

² See Pippin (2005, pp. 79–97). James Risser addresses the Hegel-Gadamer relationship mainly from the aspects of language, dialectic, and dialogue (Risser, 2002).

³ "In particular, Hegel's powerful speculative leap beyond the subjectivity of the subjective Spirit established this possibility and offered a way of shattering the predominance of subjectivism" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 37).

⁴ In his early years, Foucault showed an obvious anti-subjective tendency with his statement of "the death of the subject." However, he later advocated for a new kind of subject.

the importance of Hegel's thought on spirit and concept through a detailed analysis of their characteristics. Finally, in Section 5, I conclude with two further comments about Hegel's absolute spirit and his concept.

2. Gadamer's Criticisms of Hegel's Subjectivity and Dialectic

The Hegel-Gadamer relationship is quite complex. The purpose of this section is to reveal their different philosophical positions by expounding Gadamer's criticisms of Hegel concerning subjectivity and dialectic. In criticism of Hegel's subjectivity, like many other post-Hegelian philosophers, Gadamer defends Hegel's objective spirit and opposes Hegel's absolute spirit. For Gadamer, Hegel's absolute spirit, which is a kind of infinite subjectivity, is a closed totality, allowing no further possibility. In criticism of Hegel's dialectic, Gadamer replaces it with dialogue, and replaces concept with language. Gadamer is also unsatisfied with Hegel's dialectical method because it brings the self and the other into a reconciliation. Moreover, for Gadamer, human experience is finite. Only through dialogue and language can the human experience be open.

2.1 Criticism of Hegel's Subjectivity

"Subjectivity" in Hegel's philosophy has multiple levels of meanings. What is relevant here is first the spirit. Hegel takes spirit as an important subject,⁵ which manifests itself in individuals, communities, and the whole universe. It is subjective, objective, and absolute. However, in the ultimate sense, Hegel's subject is absolute spirit. It is not only the subjective self, but also the objective substance. Subject as absolute spirit is subject-substance or subject-object as a unity. Hegel claims in the "Preface" of *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*"⁶ (Hegel, 1977, pp. 9–10). Hegel opposes both an unmoved substance and an empty subject, the latter being characteristic of the modern consciousness, the effect of which is subjectivism.

With the similar purpose of criticizing the modern subjectivist tendency, many post-Hegelian philosophers have inherited Hegel's thought on the objective spirit. For example, Wilhelm Dilthey takes the objective spirit as the absolute spirit or above the absolute spirit. He extends the objective spirit to encompass "every form of life" and subsumes the forms of absolute spirit (art, religion, and philosophy) under it (Dahlstrom, 2022, pp. 236–237). Dilthey replaces Hegel's absolute knowing with historical consciousness and claims a kind of objective knowledge.⁷ However, Dilthey's approach is challenged by Gadamer. "We may ask how this claim can be justified without implying a concept of absolute, philosophical knowledge beyond

⁵ Concerning the relationship between subject and spirit, it should be asserted in advance that, on the one hand, Hegel's subject has many forms, such as life, soul, consciousness, intelligence, etc. Spirit (in a narrow sense) is one of them. On the other hand, we can also take life, soul, consciousness, intelligence, etc. as forms of spirit (in a general sense), as is demonstrated by Hegel's philosophy of spirit. This article takes spirit as one main subject in order to expound subjectivity. More detailed analysis will be given in the following sections.

⁶ The italics in this article are quoted in the original and not intentionally altered by the author.

⁷ Dahlstrom names it "Dilthey's half-hearted Hegelianism" (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 236).

all historical consciousness” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 228). In Gadamer’s mind, historical knowledge without the guarantee of the absolute, philosophical knowledge may result in relativism (Dahlstrom, 2022, pp. 237–238).

Although Gadamer criticizes Dilthey, he similarly appropriates Hegel’s objective spirit and criticizes Hegel’s absolute spirit and absolute knowledge. For Gadamer, Hegel’s absolute spirit, whose nature is the infinite subjectivity, is a closed totality, allowing no further possibility. Gadamer praises Hegel’s effort in overcoming “the primacy of self-consciousness” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 27), thus, to a certain extent, overcoming modern subjectivism. However, Gadamer thinks that Hegel does not get rid of subjectivism completely (Pippin, 2005, p. 83). Especially, when Gadamer takes Hegel’s absolute as a totality and as a completion of the spirit’s self-knowledge, he means that Hegel’s spirit has come to an end and the totality is a closure. Thus, in Gadamer’s mind, Hegel’s spirit as subject is completely satisfied at last since it reaches the absolute or the infinite. But, for Gadamer, there is no such end. Spirit moves and is always moving. For example, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics hold that understanding the tradition is a process that will never end.⁸

Related to the criticism of Hegel’s absolute spirit, Gadamer deems Hegel’s ontology as a kind of theology. Hegel, just like the Greek philosophers, takes “the being of beings” as “a being that fulfilled itself in thought” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 453). Hegel makes such hints. For example, he takes the content of logic as “*the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit*” (Hegel, 2010b, p. 29). In his *Lectures on the Proofs for the Existence of God*, Hegel even considers the knowledge of human beings towards God as God’s knowledge of himself, which also equals human beings’ self-knowledge⁹ (Hegel, 2007, p. 126), and which is also one source of the self-transparency of spirit’s knowledge. But, for post-Hegelian philosophers, especially due to the distinction between the divine and the humane, the infinite and the finite, the above thought

⁸ It is related to Gadamer’s insistence on finitude and “bad infinity.” Gadamer’s opposition towards totality and completion has its background. He mainly criticizes the methodological understanding of human experience and its taking the history as an object. For him, human experience is limited and open.

⁹ It is quite similar to Pippin’s term “humankind’s self-divination” (Pippin, 2005, p. 284, footnote 4). Hegel’s original words in *Vorlesungen Über die Beweise vom Dasein Gottes* are like this: “Daß der Mensch von Gott weiß, ist nach der wesentlichen Gemeinschaft ein gemeinschaftliches Wissen, — d. i. der Mensch weiß nur von Gott, insofern Gott im Menschen von sich selbst weiß; dies Wissen ist Selbstbewußtsein Gottes, aber ebenso ein Wissen desselben vom Menschen, und dies Wissen Gottes vom Menschen ist Wissen des Menschen von Gott. Der Geist des Menschen, von Gott zu wissen, ist nur der Geist Gottes selbst” (Hegel, 1969, p. 480). Hegel expresses similar ideas in many other occasions. For example, in *The Encyclopedia Logic*, when comparing the differences between the ancient subjectivity and ancient gods with the absolute subjectivity of Christianity and Christian God, Hegel explains, “God wants all human beings to be helped and this is a way of articulating that subjectivity has an infinite value,” “God himself is known [gewußt] here as the absolute subjectivity, and subjectivity contains in itself the aspect of particularity, *our* particularity is also by this means recognized, not merely as something that is to be abstractly denied, but at the same time as something to be preserved” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 221). Ludwig Feuerbach argues for a similar view in *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)*: “*Das Bewußtsein Gottes ist das Selbstbewußtsein des Menschen, die Erkenntnis Gottes die Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen. Aus seinem Gotte erkennst du den Menschen und hinwiederum aus dem Menschen seinen Gott; beides ist identisch*” (Feuerbach, 2006, p. 46).

of Hegel is challenged more and more. This is also one reason that Gadamer criticizes Hegel's infinite or absolute spirit.

In criticism of Hegel's absolute subjectivity, Gadamer also opposes the complete self-transparency of spirit. Following Martin Heidegger and opposed to Hegel's infinite subject, Gadamer emphasizes "the radical finitude"¹⁰ (Gadamer, 1975, p. 467). For him, human beings are finite. He even derives the finitude from Hegel's concept of "the cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*)" (Gadamer, 1981, p. 46). The fact that even the historical heroes cannot control their own fate is a good demonstration of the finitude of human existence. Due to the finitude and limitation, there is no possibility to arrive at the absolute truth or self-transparent knowledge. Instead, Gadamer emphasizes "the finitude of our historical experience" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 453). Like Heidegger, Gadamer also holds that the truth of being is both unconcealing and concealing, which is in opposition to Hegel's understanding of self-transparent absolute knowledge.¹¹

In Gadamer's understanding, Hegel's attributing everything to absolute spirit or making the absolute as the reason for everything prevents the openness of experience.¹² For Gadamer, the human experience is finite and can never be concluded. Nor can it be reduced to absolute knowledge. An experienced person knows the limitedness of his experience and is thus open to more experience. Gadamer takes encountering with the tradition or the other as an important way to gain experience, and the mediation between the past and the present is always open rather than closed or finished.¹³

¹⁰ Plato, in his *Symposium*, states that "none of the gods loves wisdom or wants to become wise — for they are wise" (Plato, 1997, p. 486; *Symposium* 204a1). In Plato's mind, there is a distinction between gods and philosophers, the latter being the lovers of wisdom. So, the distinction between gods and human beings, between the infinite and the finite, is rooted in the Greek thought. Also see Dahlstrom's illustration in footnote 29 (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 244).

¹¹ Merold Westphal summarizes Gadamer's criticism of Hegel's absolute knowledge from three aspects: one, knowledge equals self-knowledge; two, "the transparency of the idea to itself or spirit's self-consciousness"; and three, when the above two are achieved, philosophy becomes science as the "perfection of experience." Against the "self-transparency," Westphal analyzes Gadamer's understanding of the "opaqueness" of historical situation (Westphal, 1992, pp. 102–103).

¹² Günter Figal mentions "the ambivalence of Gadamer's principal work [*Truth and Method*]" concerning openness and closedness. "*Truth and Method* brings two quite different things together: first, openness, which we find in the priority of the question, in the understanding of meaning as 'direction of meaning,' [*Richtungssinn*], and in the emphasis on the finitude of every interpretation; and, secondly, the closedness [*Geschlossenheit*] of the event of meaning, which finds expression above all in the thought of a continuous tradition that is always already completed, and in the image of a 'unified stream of historical life.' Gadamer wants both, and it is not easy to see how both can be convincingly brought together" (Figal, 2002, p. 121). Here, we can see that Figal is doubtful about Gadamer's self-claimed openness.

¹³ By emphasizing the importance of tradition, Gadamer is more concerned about the "substantiality" of historical life. "This almost defines the aim of philosophical hermeneutics: its task is to retrace the path of Hegel's phenomenology of mind until we discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 301). Thus, Gadamer takes "substantiality" as the way to overcome subjectivity, for Gadamer grounds knowing and self-knowing in being, language, tradition, and substantiality of the historical. See Figal (2002, p. 105). However, Hegel advances from the "substantiality" forward to the absolute, which is taken by Gadamer as another form of subjectivism. Therefore, as a whole, Gadamer regards Hegel's philosophy to be subjective.

Gadamer speaks highly of Hegel's objective spirit. This can be demonstrated by Gadamer's emphasis on the "cultural formation," the characteristics of which he derives mainly from Hegel's philosophy.¹⁴ Gadamer achieves his criticism on the subjectivist tendency of artistic taste embodied in Immanuel Kant's aesthetics by drawing inspiration from Hegel's account of the ontology of art. Gadamer makes it clear in *Truth and Method*:

Admittedly, Hegel was able to recognize the truth of art only by subordinating it to philosophy's comprehensive knowledge and by constructing the history of worldviews, like world history and the history of philosophy, from the viewpoint of the present's complete self-consciousness. But this cannot be regarded simply as a wrong turn, for the sphere of subjective mind has been far exceeded. Hegel's move beyond it remains a lasting element of truth in his thought. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 85)

From the above quotes, it can be seen that Hegel's overcoming of modern subjectivism has left a significant impact on Gadamer's thinking. Although Gadamer is unsatisfied with Hegel's "complete self-consciousness," he nonetheless relies on the objective side of Hegel's thought and treats it as "a lasting element of truth in his [Hegel's] thought" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 85).

In contemporary Hegelian studies, the objective spirit is more favoured. Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, and Robert Brandom (to name a few) all elucidate their philosophical claims and principles based on Hegel's objective spirit, not to mention the world-wide Marxist studies. The objective spirit directly concerns history, society, politics, and morality, and thus seems more real and tangible and more relevant to everyday individual and communal life. The forms of absolute spirit are art, religion, and philosophy. These are the fields that are more abstract, more metaphysical, more spiritual, and more belonging to the superstructure. For some people, these fields are not as relevant to everyday life. In fact, Hegel has already mentioned people's doubt towards philosophy, especially towards logic. Sometimes, people learn logic and that way of thinking, but after that, most people remain as they were (Hegel, 2010a, p. 49). And worse still, the study of logic may even bring some unwanted results. "Through thinking, the positive state of affairs was deprived of its power" (Hegel, 2010a, p. 50). It may even threaten the status quo of the objective life. Therefore, Hegel is fully aware of the difficulties of logic. They are quite similar to the criticisms that absolute spirit and absolute knowledge face in our time.

In short, Gadamer praises Hegel for overcoming the subjectivist tendency in modern philosophy and for establishing the objective dimension. But, like many other post-Hegelian philosophers, Gadamer stops at the gate of absolute spirit. He deems that absolute spirit, whose nature is infinite subjectivity, is a closed totality. He also holds that absolute knowledge is completely self-transparent. Instead, Gadamer speaks highly of Hegel's objective spirit and maintains the finitude of human experience. Gadamer's criticism of Hegel's subjectivity is representative of

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis, see Dahlstrom (2022, pp. 233–234).

later philosophers, who are also unsatisfied with Hegel's absolute. The Hegel-Gadamer relationship is a good example for further revealing Hegel's contemporary relevance.

2.2 Criticism of Hegel's Dialectic

Hegel's dialectic is closely related to his theory of subjectivity. "Dialectic" is a word that describes how the subject moves, develops, and determines itself. Generally speaking, with this dialectical way of development, the subject first comes out of itself, then finds itself in its other, and finally overcomes the alienation [*Entfremdung*],¹⁵ thus returning to itself. Through this process, the subject renews itself constantly. For Hegel, everything develops dialectically, whether it be spirit or concept.

Gadamer's treatment of Hegel's dialectic is complex. Importantly, Gadamer tries to replace Hegel's dialectic with dialogue. Gadamer takes Hegel's dialectic to be a method, which he believes to be under the influence of René Descartes.¹⁶ For Gadamer, Hegel's emphasis on "science" and "methodology" is quite similar to the modern self-consciousness.¹⁷ Gadamer is more on side with the ancient Greek dialectic, represented by Plato and Socrates.¹⁸ Following them, Gadamer considers dialectic to be a process of live conversation, of questions and answers, rather than the logical science where concept determines itself and comprises a whole system.¹⁹

Gadamer is particularly unsatisfied with Hegel's system of concepts. "The systematic derivation of pure concepts in the *Science of Logic*, in which spirit has attained 'the pure element of its existence, i.e., the concept,' subsequently determines the system of science as a whole" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 79). In Gadamer's opinion, Hegel's exposition of thought through concepts takes "Plato's unending discussion of the soul with itself" only as "a formal model" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 79). However, it is exactly "Plato's unending discussion of the soul with itself" that Gadamer considers as the hermeneutic dialogue. By replacing Hegel's dialectic with dialogue, Gadamer attempts to retrieve dialectic in hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1976, p. 99).

For Gadamer, Hegel's self-determination of concepts is limited. Gadamer regards Hegel's dialectic as "a monologue of thinking that tries to carry out in advance what matures little by little in every genuine dialogue" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 363). Gadamer admits the similarity between Hegel and the Greek metaphysics: both consider

¹⁵ There is certain debate concerning whether we can apply the concept "alienation" to Hegel's philosophy, as this word is loaded with Marxist meaning. Here, I follow both A. V. Miller and Pinkard. In their translations of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both have translated "*Entfremdung*" into "alienation" (see Paragraph 19 of both versions).

¹⁶ Westphal holds a different view. He distinguishes between Hegel's method and Descartes' and Kant's methods. To him, Hegel's method is non-violent, while Descartes' and Kant's methods are violent, aiming at aggression and domination (Westphal, 1992, p. 99).

¹⁷ "[T]he basis has to be the methodologically rigorous one of a 'science' which ultimately is founded upon Descartes's idea of method and which, within the framework of transcendental philosophy, is developed from the principle of self-consciousness" (Gadamer, 1976, pp. 78–79).

¹⁸ Pippin points out that Gadamer disagrees with Hegel on understanding the ancient dialectic and ancient subjectivity (Pippin, 2005, p. 82).

¹⁹ About their relationship with the ancient Greeks, it may be said that Gadamer relies on the ancient thought more, while Hegel sublates the ancient and integrates it with the modern, although he also inherits the ancient thought.

knowledge to be part of being, and take being as the basis for thinking and knowing. However, Gadamer also holds that Hegel replaces the “natural element” in Greek thought with “forms of knowing,” and with a system of concepts (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 240). For Gadamer, concepts are like the skeleton of the flesh, while the “natural element” is more concrete and livelier than the concepts. Thus, the dialectic in Hegel’s logic is not the live dialogue and conversation carried out by the ancients. For Gadamer, although Hegel opposes abstract concepts, the dialectical and logical development of concepts are no less abstract than what he has criticized.

Moreover, for Gadamer, it is language rather than concept that plays a vital role in our experience of the world. Gadamer believes that Hegel does not give language enough attention. In Hegel’s dialectic, language is a kind of assertion and statement.²⁰ Language is for the game of thoughts and concepts. But, for Gadamer, “the dialogical character of language” is an important way to overcome “the subjectivity of self-consciousness” (Gadamer, 1981, p. 56). Language is the medium where experience of the world occurs. “[W]e followed the trail of language, in which the structure of being is not simply reflected; rather, in language the order and structure of our experience itself is originally formed and constantly changed” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 453). Language enables understanding and constitutes the meaning of the world experience. In Gadamer’s mind, our experience of the world is language-based, i.e., linguistic. There is no such an “object” as the world before the hermeneutical consciousness because both the world and consciousness are linguistic.

Furthermore, for Gadamer, dialectic and concepts conceal the being of things, and only through dialogue and hermeneutic language does the meaning of things reveal itself to us. Gadamer considers concepts to be the determination of the historical life of being, and concepts are the self-alienation of the living spirit. “The concepts in which thinking is formulated stand silhouetted like dark shadows on a wall” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 35). In Gadamer’s mind, it is language that enables the logical concepts, and the latter only express part of the live experience that is language-mediated.²¹ Also, the meaning of things is multiple. Each time, only one certain aspect is revealed or said. There is always something “unsaid.” So, what we see through concepts is also one-sided and blind. This one-sidedness and blindness cannot be eliminated through Hegel’s dialectic, but only through dialogue and the event of language.

Moreover, Gadamer criticizes Hegel’s dialectic because it integrates the other into the self. With dialectic, for Hegel, the reconciliation in the spirit is important. Spirit estranges itself and returns to itself from its other, in which process the spirit also gains its self-consciousness and self-knowledge, elevating its individuality to

²⁰ Of course, Hegel’s philosophical statement is different from the traditional one. Hegel emphasizes the inseparability of the subject and the predicate, especially in the development of spirit and concept.

²¹ For Hegel, it is in the concepts that the living spirit is in and by itself. In contrast, when spirit is represented through feelings, intuitions, and imagination, it is in the alienated forms. Hegel’s division of Science into Logic, Philosophy of Nature, and Philosophy of Spirit can illustrate this point. In Hegel’s mind, Logic is “the science of the idea in and for itself,” Philosophy of Nature is “the science of the idea in its otherness,” and Philosophy of Spirit is “the idea returning back to itself from its otherness” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 46). The last phase of the Philosophy of Spirit is philosophy as such (or logic), thus returning to the beginning and starts a new dialectical process.

universality. It is also the process of Hegel's *Bildung*²² or cultural formation (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 233). However, this process is generally considered as achieving an identity of the self and the other, which in Gadamer's understanding is the result of the dialectical development of spirit as subject, and which indicates totality and completeness of the dialectical process. As is understood by Gadamer, Hegel's cultural formation does not lie so much in the alienation as in "the return to oneself — which presupposes alienation, to be sure" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 13). This is where Gadamer differs from Hegel. For Gadamer, "the other" should not be integrated to "the self." On understanding tradition, Gadamer opposes Friedrich Schleiermacher's restoration of the past, and he acknowledges Hegel's "*thoughtful mediation*" of the past and the present (Gadamer, 1975, p. 161). For him and for Hegel, each such "mediation" is an elevation from individuality to universality. This is the process of *Bildung*. Without this elevation, no cultural progress can be achieved. However, for Gadamer, this process will not stop at the identity of the self and the other. Tradition, no matter how much we have understood it, will always remain to be understood again and again. In Gadamer's mind, cultural formation can never come to an end, certainly not in absolute knowledge.²³

In opposition to the completion of spirit through the dialectical development and against the dialectical relationship between the self and the other, similarly, Gadamer holds that the hermeneutical experience can never be complete. The hermeneutical understanding is not even progressive. Unlike Hegel, for Gadamer, there is no "end" at which to aim. There is even no better understanding. "It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 296). Also, for Gadamer, experience is not science, and cannot be science (Gadamer, 1975, p. 349), quite different from Hegel's idea that the experience of consciousness is science. Gadamer agrees with Hegel that experience is what one is conscious of. Consciousness bestows meaning on the "object," or even finds its certainty in the "object."²⁴ For example, when we understand the tradition, we find ourselves and our self-knowledge in it. But, for Gadamer, the consciousness and the object can never be identical. The other cannot be eliminated or sublated by the consciousness. Likewise, experience is never complete. The hermeneutical experience is the experience of the other and a conversation with the other. Neither the self nor the other is the dominator.

²² *Bildung* is a German word, which is generally translated to mean education, cultivation, and formation.

²³ Theodore George gives a different exposition of Gadamer's understanding of Hegel's "absolute" or "absolute knowledge." "Gadamer recognizes that by absolute knowledge, Hegel did not have in mind a comprehensive knowledge of the laws of nature or an exhaustive grasp of all things." Rather, "absolute" indicates a kind of independence from restrictions. "Absolute" is also the guidance for speculative reflection (George, 2009, p. 8). In his "*Wort und Bild*" article, Gadamer also mentions that "The term 'absolute' means independence from all restrictive conditioning" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 197).

²⁴ From this perspective, we may deem that, to a certain extent, Gadamer is a transcendentalist. Westphal also mentions that we should be cautious in denying Heidegger to be a transcendentalist philosopher. "For in important senses Heidegger is a transcendental philosopher. *Dasein* is the totality of the conditions of possible experience, a 'subjectivity' which gives meaning to the nature and culture in which it lives" (Westphal, 1992, p. 128).

For Gadamer, the intelligibility of experience cannot be formalized and conceptualized in logic²⁵ or by dialectic. Through the dialectic and its relationship with the subject (i.e., the subject develops dialectically), Hegel is devoted to the intelligibility of being (in the Heideggerian sense) or the intelligibility of experience (in the Gadamerian sense).²⁶ Hegel, like the other German idealists, bases this intelligibility on the subject or the self, with the difference that Hegel's ultimate subject is absolute spirit that undergoes dialectical and historical development.²⁷ But, for Gadamer, the intelligibility of experience lies in language and dialogue. In Gadamer's mind, "the occurrence of language in understanding and agreement became the underpinning of finitude" (Gadamer, 1981, p. 56). Thus, language and dialogue are indications of the finitude of human beings and human experience, in contrast to the infinity of Hegel's absolute spirit and absolute knowledge.

As we can see, dialectic as a method is closely related to Hegel's theory of subjectivity. Generally, dialectic is criticized for bringing the activity of the subject to an end and making the system closed, complete, and finished once and for all. Gadamer replaces dialectic with dialogue, and replaces concept with language. For him, Hegel's dialectic together with the system of concepts is rather formal and abstract. Only through language and dialogue can the experience of the living spirit be disclosed. Further, in Gadamer's mind, what matters is not the reconciliation of the self with the other in spirit or subject through the dialectical process, but the preservation of the other. Moreover, it is dialogue and language, instead of dialectic and concept, that guarantee the finitude and openness of human experience.

Gadamer's criticism towards Hegel's dialectic is also representative. Likewise, we can take this criticism as an example of the "tension" between Hegel and other post-Hegelian philosophers. But, Gadamer's criticisms of both Hegel's subjectivity and dialectic point to the contemporary relevance of Hegel's philosophy. Moreover, in addition to the "tension," the Hegel-Gadamer relationship has another important aspect, which is "proximity" or "closeness," and from which more contemporary significance of Hegel's philosophy can be revealed.

3. "Closeness" Between Hegel and Gadamer

In Section 2, I discussed Gadamer's criticisms of Hegel's subjectivity and dialectic, emphasizing their different philosophical views. In this section, I dig further into the Hegel-Gadamer relationship, paying attention to their similarities. I argue that, despite their apparent differences, they share similar views on the dialectical relationship between infinity and finitude, on the importance of cultural formation or *Bildung*, on the intelligibility and openness of human experience, and finally on

²⁵ However, as Pippin points out, Gadamer's understanding of meaning and intelligibility may lack certain rule or norm (Pippin, 2005, pp. 94–95).

²⁶ How we make sense of ourselves and our surrounding world is always a question for serious philosophers.

²⁷ Hegel's understanding of subjectivity is both transcendental and post-transcendental. The latter is based on the historical situatedness of spirit. Being post-transcendental is also what makes Hegel's spirit different from the subject of other modern philosophies. More detailed analysis will be given in Section 4.

metaphysics. To some extent, this “closeness” reveals Hegel’s contemporary relevance and influence.

The Hegel-Gadamer relationship is not easy to define. Gadamer himself admits his “tension-filled proximity”²⁸ (Gadamer, 1981, p. 53) or “strained closeness” (*spannungsvolle Nähe*) (Risser, 2002, p. 86) to Hegel. Therefore, in spite of the differences or tensions, we also need to expound their “proximity” or “closeness.” Many recent studies also emphasize their “closeness.” For example, James Risser argues that “Gadamer’s whole of tradition is but a variation on the Hegelian ‘truth is the whole’” and “the movement of tradition is not unlike the movement of spirit that wants to make itself at home in the world” (Risser, 2002, p. 87). We may even say that Gadamer is not so far from Hegel, although Gadamer bestows different meanings to “subject” and “subjectivity.” Dahlstrom summarizes four aspects in which Hegel has influenced Gadamer, and which are reflected in *Truth and Method*.²⁹ Similarly, Pippin mentions that Hegel’s “possible philosophical relevance for Gadamer and his contemporaries was first of all the systematic question of the human sciences, the *Geisteswissenschaften*.” Especially, Hegel is helpful in the latter’s construction of “a ‘conversational logic’ in interrogating the past,” “a self-correcting process of historical change,” “‘effective history’ (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in understanding our own situation,” and “his [Hegel’s] entire systematic attempt to show that understanding other human beings and their cultural and political achievements could never happen were they to be understood as ‘objects’”³⁰ (Pippin, 2005, p. 92).

The first “closeness” between Hegel and Gadamer is their dialectical views towards the relationship between infinity and finitude. Based on what is analyzed in Section 2, Gadamer stands on the ground of finitude. In his “The Actuality of the Beautiful” (*Die Aktualität des Schönen*) (Gadamer, 1977), Gadamer praises Heidegger for the concept of “unconcealment.” However, Gadamer claims that closely related to “unconcealment,” the concepts of “concealment” and “hiddenness” are “part of the finitude of the human beings.”³¹ For Gadamer and Heidegger, finitude is characteristic of the “being” of humans. As Thomas Sheehan argues, it is not that humans are finite in comparison with God or gods (Sheehan, 2015, pp. 241–242). It is from the

²⁸ In the “Foreword to the Second Edition” of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer mentions that he follows Kant’s conclusion in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which sets limits on human knowledge. However, he also acknowledges Hegel’s importance. “Nevertheless, the tradition of metaphysics and especially of its last great creation, Hegel’s speculative dialectic, remains close to us. The task, the ‘infinite relation,’ remains” (Gadamer, 1975, p. xxxiii).

²⁹ These four aspects can be summarized as follows: one, “Hegel’s account of ‘the fundamental movement of the human spirit’ in cultural formation”; two, “his [Gadamer’s] recognition of ‘the decisive truth’ for hermeneutics that history is not about restoring the past but mediating with contemporary life”; three, “the connection between life and self-consciousness”; and four, “his [Gadamer’s] dialectical conception of genuine experience” (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 241).

³⁰ The last point has something to do with Gadamer’s criticism of the modern scientific method. Westphal discusses the joint effort of Hegel and Gadamer in arguing against applying the methods of mathematics and natural sciences to philosophy. In particular, Westphal mentions that Gadamer learns from Hegel to “surrender to the life of the object.” Here, I think “object” means the matter itself or *die Sache selbst*, different from the “object” that is dominated and manipulated by the knowing subject in modern sciences. For a detailed analysis, see Westphal (1992, pp. 97–102).

³¹ Gadamer’s original words are “Neben der Entbergung und untrennbar von ihr steht gerade die Verhüllung und die Verbergung, die Teil der Endlichkeit des Menschen ist” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 45).

“being” of humans ourselves that we are limited and finite. In the ultimate sense, we are mortal. Also, for Gadamer and Heidegger, only based on this finitude, human beings seek to understand the meaning of being and beings. “Our urge to survive resists death and the chaos of things going their own way apart from us.” “We struggle for a secure space where we can, at least for a while, hold things together.” “Our inescapable need of meaning is both the passing remedy for and the surest sign of our mortality. We cannot have one without the other” (Sheehan, 2015, p. 114).

Although Gadamer stands on the ground of finitude, he also stresses the dialectical relationship between infinity and finitude. For example, he holds that language is speculative.³² In each speech or discourse, what is said is always related to what is unsaid. What is said is limited, while what is unsaid is infinite. The meaning in each speech is the combination of the said together with the unsaid. “To say what one means, on the other hand — to make oneself understood — means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 464). Gadamer intends to integrate the finite into the infinite. In order to clarify this point, it may be necessary to quote another paragraph from Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*:

Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning. The occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally. All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out. That is why the hermeneutical phenomenon also can be illuminated only in light of the fundamental finitude of being, which is wholly verbal in character. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 454)

Language is limited, but it is also unlimited. There is always something more, something “unsaid” beyond the “said.” In Gadamer’s mind, there is a kind of “transcendence” from the finite to the infinite in language.³³ According to Jean Grondin, “To possess a language is in a way to be able to rise above it, to enlarge our horizons whilst remaining in the horizon of possible sayings.” “Human language is thus characterized by a perpetual self-transcendence: it always goes beyond itself by the very fact that it is language,” and “it is always possible to understand oneself in another way, and to raise oneself above established understanding” (Grondin, 2003, p. 148).

In terms of infinity and finitude, Hegel also holds a dialectical view. It is generally believed that Hegel favours the infinite and opposes the finite. However, this is only

³² Gadamer shares a similar view with Hegel on the “speculative.” Both refer it to wholeness and totality, thus infinity. “Someone who speaks is behaving speculatively when his words do not reflect beings, but express a relation to the whole of being” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 465).

³³ Heidegger, according to Sheehan, also acknowledges the unlimitedness of the human’s ability to know and to will. “What is more, there is *in principle no limit* to what we can know about the knowable or do with the doable. There should be no shrinking back from the human will, no looking askance at the scientific and technological achievements of existentiell ‘subjects’ in the modern world ...” (Sheehan, 2015, p. 209).

one aspect of the whole story. In explaining *Dasein*, Hegel claims that “Insofar as human beings want to be actual, they must exist [*muß dasein*] and to this end they must limit themselves. Those who are too dismayed at the finite do not accomplish anything actual, but instead remain trapped in the abstract and fade away into themselves” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 148). However, the finite has limitation in itself. It must go beyond itself, because it is “something” that is also “the other.” This kind of self-contradiction drives itself beyond itself and arouses change. “Living things die, and they do so simply because they carry the germ of death in themselves” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 148).

Related to the dialectical relationship between the infinite and the finite is Hegel’s idea of the “good infinite.” For Hegel, the “bad infinite” is “Something becomes an other, but the other is itself a something, hence it likewise becomes an other, and so on and so forth ad infinitum” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 149). That is to say, something and the other are external to each other. The “good infinite” or “true infinite” consists in “being with itself in its other, or, put in terms of a process, to come to itself in its other” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 149). The infinite and the finite are in a dialectical relationship. They should not be taken separately. In other words, Hegel’s good infinite integrates the finite into itself. It means that the finite plays its role in the infinite. Finite experience, the multiple phenomena, something sensible and perceptible are all important. But what Hegel wants to say is that we cannot stop at these finite things. We need a higher horizon and a total perspective, which is infinity. Under and guided by the infinite, we deal with the finite and sublimate the finite.

Hegel’s infinite or the good infinite is not a fixed or unmovable substance, but instead is the subject that moves and develops. It is generally supposed that Hegel advocates for the “good infinite,” while Gadamer supports the “bad infinite.” However, when we take Hegel’s spirit or subject as a constant movement or development, Hegel’s “good infinite” may not differ so much from Gadamer’s “bad infinite.” Gadamer declares: “I became an advocate of the ‘bad infinite’ for which the end keeps on delaying its arrival — something that for Hegel is not merely an untruth but a truth as well” (Gadamer, 1981, p. 40). Moreover, as is discussed above, Gadamer himself acknowledges the transcendence from the finite to the infinite. Thus, despite the apparently different positions concerning infinity and finitude, in fact, both Gadamer and Hegel combine the infinite and the finite, which shows their “closeness.”

The second “closeness” lies in the importance of cultural formation (*Bildung*) to both Hegel and Gadamer. Actually, Gadamer draws a lot from Hegel’s thought on cultural formation. According to Dahlstrom, there are at least three aspects for which Gadamer should be grateful to Hegel. First, Gadamer acknowledges *Bildung* is acquiring the ability to elevate one’s individual perspective to a universal level. Second, Gadamer learns from Hegel that *Bildung* is the process of gaining self-consciousness through work or labour. Third, Gadamer recognizes “the fundamental movement of the human spirit,” which means “to reconcile oneself with oneself, to recognize oneself in another’s being”³⁴ (Dahlstrom, 2022, pp. 233–234). Cultural

³⁴ The English translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall is as follows: “Even in this description of practical *Bildung* by Hegel, one can recognize the basic character of the historical spirit: to reconcile itself with itself, to recognize oneself in other being” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 12).

formation or *Bildung* is one main aspect of spirit. It is the process in which spirit gets to know itself and to actualize itself. Its importance for both Hegel and Gadamer reveals their shared concerns and interests in understanding the development of spirit.

The third “closeness” that is worthy of mention is that both Hegel and Gadamer pursue the “intelligibility”³⁵ of the human experience. The whole system of Hegel’s philosophy is to explain the meaning of being. For him, the best way to achieve the intelligibility is through concepts. Gadamer, following Heidegger, also focuses on the “meaning of being.” Gadamer relies more on language to clarify the world experience. He speaks of “an anteriority of language to thought. To think is to try to explain yourself in words.” However, as Grondin reveals, “Gadamer eventually speaks of a contemporaneity of language to thought, rather than of an anteriority” (Grondin, 2003, p. 143). Of course, we cannot deny the importance of language or even the “anteriority of language to thought” in Gadamer’s philosophy.³⁶ But we can at least detect a kind of hesitation or uncertainty about the language-thought relationship. After all, for Gadamer, as well as for Hegel, language and thought or concept are to understand our being in the world. That is to say, both Hegel and Gadamer hold that world experience is intelligible, either through concept or through language, or through both.

Apart from intelligibility, both Hegel and Gadamer also stress the openness of human experience. Although Gadamer deems Hegel’s absolute to be a closed and complete whole, in fact, Hegel’s absolute spirit and infinite subject may not be so closed or complete. For Hegel, the absolute is both completed and to be completed. Therefore, instead of being closed, Hegel’s absolute is open. “Having been completed” is only one aspect of Hegel’s absolute. The other aspect is “to be completed,” which shows the openness of Hegel’s thought. With finitude, what Gadamer and Heidegger pursue is the openness of experience. For example, in art, it means to dig out “more” meanings from the artwork.³⁷ In Heidegger’s words, *Dasein* is between “having been completed” and “to be completed.”³⁸ So, concerning the human experience, both Hegel and Gadamer hold an open attitude.³⁹

³⁵ Sheehan discusses the importance of “*Bedeutsamkeit*” (meaningfulness), and “*Welt als Bedeutsamkeit*” (world of meaningfulness) in Heidegger’s philosophy. “If things are the meaningful (*das Bedeutsame*), their being is their meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*). Heidegger equates ‘the question of the meaningfulness of things’ with ‘the question of the being [of things]’” (Sheehan, 2015, p. 118). For Hegel, it is the Concept (*Begriff*) that comprises the content of the meaningful (*Bedeutungsgehalt*).

³⁶ Westphal also analyzes the priority of language to concept in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. He summarizes five aspects through which Gadamer tries to retrieve dialectic in hermeneutics and to make the natural logic or “logical instinct” of language the basis of Hegel’s transcendental logic (Westphal, 1992, pp. 105–106).

³⁷ Gadamer’s original words are “im Werk der Kunst noch mehr ist als nur eine auf unbestimmte Weise als Sinn erfahrbare Bedeutung” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 45).

³⁸ Further evidence is that Heidegger, influenced by Aristotle’s idea on movement and his thought on “actuality” and “potentiality,” takes *Dasein* as an unfinished whole. It is already “a whole,” but it is also moving towards the whole (Sheehan, 2015, pp. 50–53).

³⁹ One piece of evidence that can show Hegel’s openness is that he doesn’t make any prediction about the future. He mentions several times that philosophy is not about the future but about what is present, what is eternally present. In *Philosophy of Mind*, Hegel criticizes the “foreknowledge” of the future made by the

The last “closeness” between Hegel and Gadamer can be seen through Gadamer’s acknowledgement of Hegel’s metaphysics. In contemporary philosophy, Hegel’s metaphysics, ontology, and logic face many obstacles. However, Gadamer is not as critical as many other philosophers concerning Hegel’s metaphysics.⁴⁰ For example, Gadamer shows more sympathy than Heidegger. Gadamer concludes “The Heritage of Hegel” article with the following words:

That does not mean that metaphysics as a science, this unique form (*Gestalt*) of our Western civilization that found in Hegel its triumphal completion and its end, would be possible for us. But without this heritage of metaphysics, it would not be possible for us even to comprehend what that science is that determines our age most profoundly, and what place it assumes and what function it serves within our own self-understanding. In full awareness of our finitude we remain exposed to questions that go beyond us. They befall us — if not already the individual in his most quiet moments, then all of us from the vantage of that in the light of which we all know ourselves; and in this way we all confirm Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute spirit. With him we know about the manifoldness of the encounter with ourselves that reaches beyond every historical conditionedness. We encounter ourselves in art, in spite of all social utilitarianism. We encounter ourselves in the challenge of religion that perdures in the age of science. No less do we encounter ourselves in thinking. There it is the questions that we call philosophical and that promote us ever further in our intercourse with our philosophic tradition. From them in truth no thinking being can ever completely hold himself at a remove. I do not need to demonstrate this further in Swabian country. These questions hold us in suspense. (Gadamer, 1981, pp. 52–53)

This paragraph is a good summarization of the “closeness” between Hegel and Gadamer as Gadamer recognizes Hegel’s heritage for us to understand ourselves and for our cultural formation or *Bildung*. It also reveals Gadamer’s dialectical view on the relationship between the finite and the infinite as we also pursue “questions that go beyond us.” Gadamer also emphasizes the importance of Hegel’s doctrine of absolute spirit for us to seek meaning in the modern world. In short, Gadamer means that, despite many differences and changed circumstances between Hegel and our contemporary world, despite many possible insufficiencies of Hegel’s metaphysics in solving the present problems, and despite the difficulties in understanding Hegel, we still need to inherit his metaphysics in order to understand the science “that determines our age most profoundly.” As Gadamer acknowledges,

clairvoyant vision: “it must be said that it would be desperately wearisome to have exact foreknowledge of one’s destiny and then to live through it in each and every detail in turn” (Hegel, 1971, p. 112).

⁴⁰ Dahlstrom also mentions that Gadamer may not object to Hegel’s absolute metaphysics. What Gadamer insists is that “his [Gadamer’s] appropriation of Hegel’s insights cannot entail an embrace of Hegel’s ontology.” That is to say, Gadamer, by following Heidegger, aspires after “the ontological structure of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 294). However, Dahlstrom is suspicious of what Gadamer’s hermeneutic ontology is (Dahlstrom, 2022, p. 242).

Hegel's absolute spirit (which comprises of art, religion, and philosophy) still holds us. Gadamer's self-acknowledgement also demonstrates his "closeness" to Hegel.

Of course, there are more aspects about the "closeness" or "proximity" between Hegel and Gadamer. Both have covered many important topics concerning human understanding, knowing, and being. What I have discussed in this section, namely the dialectical relationship between the infinite and the finite, the importance of cultural formation or *Bildung*, the intelligibility and openness of human experience, and Gadamer's acknowledgement of Hegel's metaphysics are four main aspects of their "closeness." Based on this "closeness," we can see Hegel's relevance and influence on contemporary philosophers. However, in order to further defend the contemporary significance of Hegel's theory of subjectivity and his thought on dialectic and concept, I will give more elucidation in the next section.

4. Hegel's Theory of Subjectivity

In Section 2, Gadamer's criticisms of Hegel's subjectivity⁴¹ and dialectic are analyzed, with the emphasis on their different philosophical positions. In Section 3, their similar views on several important issues are discussed, revealing their "closeness." This section is focused on elucidating Hegel's theory of subjectivity through an analysis of the characteristics of Hegel's spirit as subject and the characteristics of concept. The purpose of this elucidation is to further clarify the contemporary significance of Hegel's philosophy.

It is generally believed that the dilemmas of modernity — such as nothingness of existence, emptiness of the spirit, and loss of meaning — are caused by the modern subjectivity, especially theoretical rationality. So, the criticism of modernity, represented by post-modernism and post-structuralism, is mainly the criticism of modern rationality. Philosophers who criticize modern rationality believe that reason has become an "instrumental reason" and has become the power to suppress people rather than serve people. For many critics, modern subjectivity can lead to the separation between man and nature, between man and man, and between theory and the real world. Nowadays, nature is more and more under the control of human beings, and human affairs are dealt more and more technically. Heidegger attributes these to the "*Gestalt*" (enframing) way of thinking, which corresponds more or less to Hegel's criticism of understanding. Phenomena, such as utilitarianism, manipulation, calculation, commercialization, etc. are reflections of certain aspects of this "*Gestalt*" way of thinking. For the above reasons, we are now faced with a crisis of subjectivity.

In contemporary debates, many people have attempted to define "subjectivity" in the modern sense. Dieter Henrich believes that "subjectivity" is characteristic of the subject and is the inner organization of the subject's consciousness. This organization makes the subject's self-understanding and the understanding of the surrounding world possible (Freundlieb, 2003, p. 33). Kim Atkins (2005) holds that "subjectivity"

⁴¹ Hegel's concept of "subjectivity" is very complex. Hegel mentions it in almost all of his works (including edited manuscripts and lectures). To some extent, we may deem that Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of subjectivity.

is a kind of self-reflective activity, which is the reflection and evaluation of thoughts, emotions, and actions. Jason M. Miller (2011) sees “subjectivity” as an individual or collective identity. In Manfred Frank’s view, “subjectivity” is the consciousness of one’s own being (Frank, 1997). Foucault points out that “subjectivity” is constituted by the discourse of truth, which forms the subject’s experience of self and others (Foucault, 2017, p. 13). These attempts show certain aspects of “subjectivity.” However, to some extent, it is Hegel who reveals some of the most essential characteristics of subjectivity.

4.1 Characteristics of Spirit as Subject

“Subjectivity” is closely related to “subject.” In Hegel’s philosophy, “subject” takes many forms, including soul, consciousness, self-consciousness, spirit, concept, rationality, history, etc. In this section, I want to explain some of the characteristics of subjectivity reflected in *Phenomenology of Spirit* by taking spirit as the main subject. The purpose of this explanation is twofold: one, to correct certain misunderstandings about Hegel’s main concepts, and two, to manifest the importance of Hegel’s absolute spirit for the present.

The first important characteristic of spirit as subject is that spirit is a subject-substance in unity or as a whole, which also constitutes its absoluteness. One important principle of Hegel’s philosophy is “substance is subject.”⁴² However, it is not a fixed formula. Actually, what we see in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the process of substance becoming subject and subject becoming substance. It is the aim of the spirit’s development that, at the end of this process, the spirit knows itself both as subject and substance. Hegel deems that it is in the form of concept⁴³ (or notion) that spirit achieves this absolute knowledge.

Thus, what in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other*, is here the *Self’s* own *act*; the Notion requires the *content* to be the *Self’s* own *act*. For this Notion is, as we see, the knowledge of the *Self’s* act within itself as all essentiality and all existence, the knowledge of this subject as substance and of the substance as this knowledge of its act. (Hegel, 1977, p. 485)

Here, Hegel distinguishes philosophy as a science from religion. In religion, the content and form of spirit are still external to each other. Thus, the knowledge gained in

⁴² There is certain debate concerning whether we can use this formula as a principle of Hegel’s philosophy or not. Here, I use Westphal’s study as support for my analysis. Westphal in his monograph *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity* mentions that theses like “Substance is Subject” “the Absolute is Spirit,” and “the True is the Whole” are important for Hegel’s construction of philosophy as a system (Westphal, 1992, p. 118). Also, these principles are emphasized by Hegel in the “Preface” of *Phenomenology of Spirit* when he explains why and how the self-knowledge of spirit is science (Hegel, 1977, p. 14).

⁴³ Here, “concept” is not capitalized, although it does refer to Hegel’s concept. In this article, “Concept” is capitalized only in emphasis or when it is related to “Idea.” Moreover, when “Idea,” “Other,” “Logic,” “Philosophy of Spirit,” and “Philosophy of Nature” are used in the capitalized forms, my purpose is also to give emphasis. Otherwise, lower cases are used.

religion is not the complete self-knowledge of spirit. But, in philosophy, in the form of concept,⁴⁴ spirit achieves true knowledge through “the Self’s own act.” This knowledge is also the spirit’s essentiality and existence, and is the substance. According to Hegel, absolute knowledge is the knowledge that refers to “this subject as substance” and “the substance as this knowledge of its act.”

The second important characteristic of spirit as subject is that it aims at truth. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, truth is closely related to the subject. They promote each other in mutual relations and in their progress and activity. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the “being” of humans is manifested in their “spirituality,” represented by the various “ideologies.” If these different forms of “consciousness” are understood at an individual level or seen from the perspective of a person,⁴⁵ the activity of spirit can be regarded as a process in which one pursues self-knowledge, and which becomes an event of truth (in a Heideggerian sense). But, this process requires a person to make “spiritual” changes in order to gradually approach the truth, and even become truth itself, thus turning the self-certainty of one’s knowledge into truth. At the same time, truth or subject should not be taken as a given or a static thing, but it is a process that is constantly being pursued. The process depends on the changes that the subject has made in himself. Reaching truth at a certain stage is also a completion of the self at a certain stage. This completion is also preservation and transformation, which is the process of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*).

The third important characteristic is that spirit as subject is always active and undergoing changes, instead of being fixed and static. Hegel believes that “The absolute mind, while it is self-centred *identity*, is always also identity returning and ever returned into itself: if it is the one and universal *substance* it is so as a spirit, discerning itself into a self and a consciousness, for which it is as substance” (Hegel, 1971, p. 292). As we can see, for Hegel, absolute spirit is “returning and ever returned into itself” and it discerns “itself into a self and a consciousness.” As a self, it remains self-identical. As a consciousness, it is self-difference that takes itself to be the object and the substance. Further, absolute spirit as subject is a constant process without any definite ending point, because it is “returning and ever returned into itself,” the present progressive tense being a guarantee of the constant process. This is also the difference between Hegel’s absolute spirit and Baruch Spinoza’s substance. Once absolute spirit stops at a certain point, it would become just like Spinoza’s unmovable substance. Although Hegel deems that “thinking, or the spirit, has to place itself at the standpoint of Spinozism” in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Hegel, 1990, p. 154), he also tries to sublimate Spinoza’s substance. That is also why his logic moves from the doctrine of essence, the last phase of which is Spinoza’s substance, to the doctrine of concept.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Concept is also an important subject. Its characteristics and significance will be discussed in Section 4.2.

⁴⁵ Of course, this is only a partial perspective, since “spirit” cannot just be regarded as an individual or a person. “Spirit” has subjective, objective, and absolute dimensions in Hegel’s philosophy of spirit. Here the explanation should be understood only analogically.

⁴⁶ Pippin holds that Hegel’s philosophy may not be “metaphysics of presence” and Hegel’s “truth of actuality” should not be understood as a “dead repose.” If there is a certain kind of repose, it refers to the Concept’s self-certainty. But the Concept or Idea also includes opposition in itself: “it eternally creates

The fourth characteristic is that spirit as subject is transcendental because it is the condition for the world to be meaningful.⁴⁷ Closely related to the “transcendentality” of spirit is its characteristic of “ideality.”⁴⁸ Hegel argues in *Philosophy of Mind* that “We must designate as the distinctive determinateness of the Notion of mind, *ideality*, that is, the reduction of the Idea’s otherness to a *moment*, the process of returning — and the accomplished return — into itself of the Idea from its Other” (Hegel, 1971, p. 9). In the relationship of subject-object or self-world, spirit as subject will not let the object go untouched or remain as it was, but instead turns the latter into “a *moment*” or the Other into itself, thus idealizing it. In this process, the object or the world also gains its meaning. The ability of spirit to idealize makes it the condition for the world to be meaningful. In this sense, spirit as subject can be taken as transcendental. However, this does not mean that spirit is subjectivist. On the contrary, spirit as subject-object is the mutual formation of the subject and the object, the self and the world. Hegel does acknowledge the importance of the object and the world in the process of any meaning-formation. The transcendentality of the spirit refers to the leading role spirit as subject plays in this process. Spirit contains infinite possibilities, which is also the basis for the various understandings of the world. To some extent, spirit as subject gives meaning to the world. The meaning-giving relationship between the subject and the world is of great significance in Hegel’s theory of subjectivity.

The last important characteristic that I want to emphasize is that spirit as the subject is post-transcendental, for it is historically conditioned and undergoes historical movement.⁴⁹ Spirit as subject is different from both the ancient’s understanding and the modern consciousness. Different from the ancients, who place the rational order

and eternally overcomes that opposition, in it meeting with itself” (Pippin, 2005, p. 97, footnote 36). The word “eternally” is worth noticing.

⁴⁷ There are some debates about whether Hegel’s philosophy is transcendental or not. Westphal holds that Hegel is both transcendental and post-transcendental. Hegel preserves transcendentalism in the sense that he recognizes “the activity of the knowing subject,” and he goes beyond transcendental philosophy, thus becoming post-transcendental, in the sense that the “condition for the possibility of experience is seen as itself conditioned, as situated in an historical-social context” (Westphal, 1992, p. x). Also, in the sense that Hegel’s philosophy “seeks to make manifest the conditions of the possibility of whatever is to be understood,” it can be taken as “a transcendental enterprise” (Westphal, 1992, p. 75). Especially, Westphal considers Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to “belong to the tradition of transcendental philosophy (however un-Cartesian and un-Kantian it may be)” (Westphal, 1992, p. 109).

⁴⁸ I’m grateful for a comment given by a reviewer, in which that person mentions that “the subjectivity implies a negation, that is denegation of itself — and even an abnegation in the terms of spirituality.” It reminds me of the ideality of spirit, which also involves spirit’s self-negation in the relationship with the world, and which helps spirit turn the world into its Other.

⁴⁹ Angelica Nuzzo compares Hegel’s “absoluteness” with Kant’s. “In this position, however, the absoluteness of Hegel’s spirit is *not* the same as the absoluteness characterizing the ‘unconditioned’ of Kant’s speculative reason. Although all the limiting conditions are finally overcome, they are still immanently present within spirit’s experience and actuality — they are overcome but not left behind once and for all; they are overcome but not properly transcended. The transcendence of Kantian reason’s unconditioned is utterly foreign to the immanence — indeed to the worldliness — that always and necessarily affects the absoluteness of Hegel’s spirit. Spirit is absolute *within, not beyond experience and actuality*” (Nuzzo, 2019, p. 219). For Hegel, the “limiting conditions” are overcome by the absolute, but they are also inside the spirit. The absolute is always creating oppositions in itself and overcoming them. Quite simply, for Hegel, transcendence and immanence, absoluteness and worldliness, are not external to each other.

before and above self-consciousness, and regard the rational order as something higher than self-consciousness, Hegel believes that self-consciousness has its rational order in the “absolute,” which is the complete self-knowledge. Hegel’s “absolute” is the completion of the modern subject (German, 2011, p. 233). However, Hegel’s subject is also different from the modern consciousness or the modern “self,” because Hegel holds that the subject has a historical dimension. In other words, the uniqueness of Hegel’s dealing with the modern problem of “subjectivity” lies in that he makes subjectivity a historical movement between subject and object. He admits that subjectivity is influenced and bounded by historical “context,”⁵⁰ thus making the subjectivity objective, and further absolute and infinite.

In a nutshell, the above characteristics of spirit as subject are related to its absoluteness, wholeness, unity, activity, truth, constant change, and process. Spirit as the condition for the world to be meaningful and its historical situatedness are also particularly stressed, which makes it transcendental and post-transcendental at the same time. Hegel’s spirit as subject is often criticized (even misunderstood) by contemporary philosophers. The discussion in this section intends to make a certain defence for Hegel.

4.2 Dialectic and Characteristics of Concept

Hegel’s dialectic and thought on concept are often challenged by contemporary philosophers. Gadamer’s criticism is representative, as is discussed in Section 2.2. This section reveals the importance of dialectic as an immanent method to the content and subject itself. Dialectic plays an important role not only in the development of spirit as subject, but also in the development of concept as subject. Four special characteristics of Hegel’s concept will be expounded in this section, namely it is objective, rational, dialectical, and historical, thus further defending the contemporary significance of Hegel’s theory of subjectivity and his thought on dialectic and concept.

Hegel’s theory of subjectivity is inseparable from the dialectical method. Heidegger also acknowledges the close relationship between method and subjectivity in Hegel’s philosophy:

“Method” is the innermost movement of subjectivity, “the soul of being,” the production process through which the web of the whole actuality of the absolute is woven. “Method,” “the soul of being” — that sounds like fantasy. It is commonly thought that our age has left behind such errors of speculation. Yet we are living right in the midst of this supposed fantasy. (Heidegger, 1998, p. 326)

As is revealed by Heidegger, Hegel’s “method” is “the innermost movement of subjectivity,” “the soul of being.” Thus, unlike the method used in mathematics and modern sciences, Hegel’s dialectical method is not external to the subject. In

⁵⁰ The transcendental and post-transcendental characteristics of Hegel’s subjectivity are also emphasized by Westphal (1992, pp. 128–129). He mentions the “transcendental turn” and the “post-transcendental turn” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. By the former, he means that the truth of things and consciousness is self-consciousness. By the latter, he means the worldliness and the historical situatedness of the spirit as subject.

the “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when Hegel criticizes mathematics, he reveals the external relationship between the subject matter and the construction of proof in demonstrating a theorem or proposition (Hegel, 1977, pp. 25–28). In *Science of Logic*, Hegel also criticizes the external relationship between method and content in modern epistemology. In the “Preface to the First Edition,” when Hegel considers making “a completely fresh start with this science [logic],” he means that “an altogether new concept of scientific procedure is at work here,” which is the dialectical procedure. He emphasizes that the method of philosophy “can only be the nature of the content which is responsible for movement in scientific knowledge, for it is the content’s own reflection that first posits and generates what that content is” (Hegel, 2010b, pp. 9–10). The method is the “content’s own reflection” and the content’s own development. Thus, the method is immanent to the content. This method is applicable not only to spirit as subject, but also to concept as subject.

Following the dialectical method, the first special characteristic of Hegel’s concept is that concept is objective rather than subjective. In logic, Hegel criticizes understanding and the representational thinking because they are embodiment of the subjectivist consciousness. In Hegel’s view, the traditional metaphysics, Kant’s philosophy, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s philosophy are all representatives of understanding. The traditional metaphysics is finite. It imposes limited thinking presuppositions, such as being and infinity on God, the world, and the soul. However, in this way, the thing and its concept are only externally related (Hegel, 2010a, p. 69). Due to subjectivism, there are different opinions on God, the world, and the soul.

Hegel is unsatisfied with Kant’s understanding of concept. In Kant’s critical philosophy, whether concepts are subjective or objective is debatable.⁵¹ In Hegel’s opinion, Kant’s “objective” is also in a subjective sense, because the categories only belong to the thinking subject. For Hegel, the concepts in logic both define our way of thinking and are constitutive of the structure of the world. So, they are both subjective and objective. “[T]he true objectivity of thinking consists in this: that thoughts are not merely our thoughts but at the same time the *in-itself* of things and of the object-world [*des Gegenständlichen*] in General” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 85). Hegel believes that “the objectivity of thinking” both belongs to us and the things themselves. The concept is the essence of the thing itself, which Brandom calls “conceptual realism” (Brandom, 2019, p. 3).

The second special characteristic of Hegel’s concept is that concept is rational. Rational concept provides a solution to the problems caused by understanding and the representational way of thinking, especially the problem of modern subjectivism. Hegel’s philosophy is based on rationality. For Hegel, rationality is a combination of concept and reality, subjectivity and objectivity. What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational. Rational actuality is actual rationality, and furthermore, it is the Idea. The reason that things are truthful is that their reality is consistent with the Idea. Hegel claims, “But *everything* actual, insofar as it is something true, is also the idea and possesses its truth only through and in virtue of the idea” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 283).

⁵¹ Kant believes that categories are universal and necessary, so they are objective. But categories are also connected with the spontaneity of consciousness, so they are subjective.

The third special characteristic of concept is that it follows the dialectical process. As is analyzed above, the dialectical method is immanent to the subject and content. The development of concept is self-determined. Truth as the idea is the realization of the consistency between concept and reality, which undergoes a series of intermediary processes. Hegel stresses that the intermediary process takes place within the concept and without resorting to external things. “[T]his central point exhibits the mediation *in it* [i.e. in that standpoint] itself and, indeed, in that mediation’s true determination, not as a mediation with and through something external, but as establishing itself in itself [*sich in sich selbst beschließend*]” (Hegel, 2010a, p. 118). The self-determination and self-development of concept is illustrative of the dialectical method.

The final special characteristic of concept that is worth mentioning is that concept also goes on an intermediary process in history,⁵² thus obtaining its substantive content. Theories on subject and subjectivity since modernity are generally lacking in substantive content. The problem of the subjectivist tendencies in understanding and the representational thinking also lies in the lack of substantive content. On the contrary, Hegel’s logic is the development of the concept with its own reality. Hegel praises Kant insofar as he already regards the concept as the original unity of the apperception. “It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Reason that the *unity* which constitutes the *essence of the concept* is recognized as the *original synthetic unity of apperception*, the unity of the ‘*I think*,’ or of self-consciousness” (Hegel, 2010b, p. 515). However, Kant misses the point later by separating the world of experience and thing-in-itself, as well as by limiting knowledge in the sphere of the former. “Then, again, the Kantian philosophy has never got over the psychological reflex of the concept and has once more reverted to the claim that the concept is permanently conditioned by the manifold of intuition” (Hegel, 2010b, p. 520). Thus, Kant’s categories are actually not self-determined and lacking in the true reality. Whether the concept has its own content or not is a difference between Hegel and Kant as well as between Hegel’s understanding of concept and those of others. Taking concept to be self-determining and self-developing in history is the unique feature of Hegel’s logic.

In the modern and contemporary philosophical context, Hegel’s dialectic and his thought on concept are often devalued. The immanence of the dialectical method to content is often neglected. Moreover, subjectivism represented by understanding and the representational thinking also overshadows the conceptual way of thinking. In the context of modern philosophy, being objective, rational, dialectical, and historical is what makes Hegel’s understanding of concept special. The elucidation in this section will hopefully arouse more interest in Hegel’s dialectic and his thought on concept, and cause philosophers to reconsider their contemporary significance.

⁵² From the perspective of Hegel’s logic, the concept as subject is “out of time.” However, Hegel’s philosophy is also a combination of logic and history. It may sound like a cliché, but the historical dimension is something that distinguishes Hegel from others. It is also an aspect in Hegel’s philosophy that has influenced later philosophical development.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this conclusion, I want to briefly add two thoughts about Hegel's absolute spirit and his concept, as further proof of their contemporary significance.

First, as an important subject, Hegel's spirit is subject-substance, which overcomes the subjective tendency of the modern "self," and includes the substantial content (the social and historical aspects) within itself. However, what is understated is that Hegel does not stop at the objective spirit⁵³ (which generally includes right, morality, ethics, and history). For Hegel, both the subjective spirit and the objective spirit are limited. They belong to the field of finitude. The absolute spirit is a higher phase than the objective spirit and it is the truth of both the objective spirit and the subjective spirit. In a secularized world, it is true that the objective spirit is more relevant to us today. However, we should acknowledge that, for Hegel, it is absolute spirit that is the true and ultimate subject. Absolute spirit (the areas of art, religion, and philosophy⁵⁴) concerns the wholeness of our being. Even if we want to "apply" his objective spirit, we'd better place it within the system and understand its relationship with his absolute spirit.

Second, Hegel's concept is also a subject which develops into a whole system, and which enables us to know what we are, how we think, and how we understand our world. It is also the mutual formation of the subject and the world. Concepts help us to understand what kind of logical order and logical relationship makes us what we are today. Also, concepts contribute to our understanding of the world around us. Concepts not only express our own subjectivity, but also reveal the nature of things.⁵⁵ Logic, as well as *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is a "story." But what we are now is not made up of "facts" that occur in the world, but rather of our understanding of ourselves and the world we are in. Hegel's philosophy provides us with a "whole" vision and a conceptual framework. It works as a guide for our understanding and being. This "whole" vision of concepts is also characteristic of Hegel's theory of subjectivity.

In short, despite the many criticisms and challenges that Hegel's philosophy faces, I argue that his theory of subjectivity, together with his thought on dialectic and concept, is still of importance. After all, how we deal with Hegel's philosophy concerns more about our being and our understanding at present rather than Hegel's being and understanding. Our understanding of ourselves and the world is closely related to subjectivity. Only equipped with a good understanding of subjectivity can we

⁵³ In Hegel's mind, the field of objective spirit is still limited. Ethical life, society, and political institutions are not in the sense of "the fullness of spirit's self-knowledge" (Nuzzo, 2019, p. 222). The historical process is the being and development of spirit, but in this process, it is also limited. As Nuzzo summarizes, "Spirit must learn how to think beyond history while still living within it — it must learn how to be what it is (i.e., 'absolute spirit') in the intuitive language of art, in the representational language of religion, and in the conceptual language of philosophy. This, and this only, is spirit's true — because truly final — absoluteness. Ultimately, it is the absoluteness of an open-ended task" (Nuzzo, 2019, p. 224).

⁵⁴ Nowadays, there are a lot of concerns about the "end of art," "end of religion," and "end of philosophy." From these "ends," we can also see the dilemma of absolute spirit. More detailed defence of the importance of these areas is beyond the present article.

⁵⁵ "[T]he concept is what is truly first and the things are what they are, thanks to the activity of the concept dwelling in them and revealing itself in them" (Hegel, 2010a, p. 238).

satisfactorily deal with contemporary problems such as alienation, instrumentalization, utilitarianism, commercialization, mechanization, etc. Hegel's theory of subjectivity and his thought on dialect and concept can give us inspiration and be of much help in these respects.

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