

# Hegel on Scepticism and Irony

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## 1 Scepticism in Hegel's Philosophy

Scepticism for Hegel<sup>1</sup> does not simply represent a philosophy of great historical relevance. More radically, it constitutes an essential moment in the construction of any true philosophy. Scepticism in fact is both the introduction and the negative side of philosophical work itself: in it, the finite determinations of the intellect contradict themselves, revealing their own inadequacy.<sup>2</sup> But this triple meaning – historical, isagogic and logical – applies only to ancient scepticism – *i.e.* to that of the Pyrrhonian and Academic tradition, especially the neo-Pyrrhonism of Aenesidemus, Agrippa, and Sextus Empiricus, and above all to Plato's *Parmenides*, which Hegel

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations have been used for Hegel's works: GW = *Gesammelte Werke*, Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften mit Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (eds.), Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968-, 31 vols. References are to volume and page; TW = *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*. Theorie-Werkausgabe, E. Moldenhauer und K.M. Michel (eds.), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969–71. References are to volume and page. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> There is a wide literature on this theme. See for instance: H. Röttges, *Dialektik und Skeptizismus. Die Rolle des Skeptizismus für Genese, Selbstverständnis und Kritik der Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main, Athenäum, 1987; M.N. Forster, *Hegel and Scepticism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989; H. F. Fulda and H.-F. Horstmann (eds.), *Skeptizismus und spekulatives Denken in der Philosophie Hegels*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1996; G. Movia (ed.), *Hegel e la filosofia ellenistica*. Atti del Convegno di Cagliari (3–4 Aprile 1995), Cagliari, AV, 1998; K. Vieweg, *Philosophie des Remis. Der junge Hegel und das «Gespenst des Scepticismus»*, München, Wilhelm Fink, 1999; I. Testa, *Hegel critico e scettico. Illuminismo, repubblicanesimo e antinomia alle origini della dialettica*, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2002; M. Biscuso, *Hegel, lo scetticismo antico e Sesto Empirico. Lo scetticismo e Hegel*, Napoli, La Città del Sole, 2005.

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considered to be scepticism's true masterpiece. Modern scepticism, by contrast, such as the work of Hume or Schulze, he considered a weakened and inconsequent form of it, or, worse, a disguised dogmatism.

Indeed, one of Hegel's main goals in *Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie* (*The Relation of Scepticism to Philosophy*) (1802) is to distinguish "true scepticism" – ancient scepticism – from its inauthentic modern form. He considered the latter, in its then-latest expression by Schulze, to be confused with the crude dogmatism of common consciousness. True scepticism is a resolutely anti-dogmatic philosophy which, with its ancient ten tropes, combats that dogmatism and its naive faith in the finite, and which, with its five subsequent tropes, destroys the philosophies of the sciences and of intellectualism. Modern scepticism, on the other hand, puts "an undeniable certainty in the facts of consciousness" and limits "every rational knowledge to the formal unity that must be brought to those facts".<sup>3</sup> This is precisely what makes it inferior to its ancient predecessor, which had resolutely denied such certainty as well as such knowledge, having been a suspension of judgement on any sense- or intellectual content.

Let us now turn to the historical meaning of this clear-cut distinction between the respective natures and merits of modern and ancient scepticism. A certain characteristic of the scepticism of all periods is revealed: its subjectivism – that is, its vindication of the freedom of the subject vis-à-vis his objective world. Neo-Pyrrhonian scepticism, the form which Hegel privileges for his consideration, was organically linked to the culture of the imperial Roman world in which it had flourished, and in which it had offered a coherent representation of the dissolution of the ancient ethos, the alienation of the individual from the world and from his own community and its customs, and his tendency to withdraw into interiority to claim back the freedom of self-consciousness and reject the truth of content presenting itself as true. Modern scepticism – a category which embraces not only the Anglo-Saxon empiricism of Berkeley and Hume, but even the transcendental idealism of Kant and Fichte – is an expression of modern culture. What characterized it is a split between consciousness and world, and more generally by moral and epistemic subjectivism: the position of such philosophies, both sceptical and idealistic, is that self-consciousness is certain to be any reality, and that no content can be accepted as true because it is other with respect to the formal identity of thought with itself (in the case of transcendental idealism), or because it is not the representation of the subject (in the case of empiricism).<sup>4</sup>

In fact, in dealing with the Academic scepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades, Hegel had explicitly recognized the profound kinship between ancient and modern scepticism. To him, the general position of Academic scepticism is that "truth is a subjective conviction of self-consciousness". To this he added: "this agrees with the subjective idealism of modern age".<sup>5</sup> In his criticism of the Stoic conception of

<sup>3</sup> GW, 4, 202.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Biscuso, *Idealismo e scetticismo nella Fenomenologia dello spirito. L'introduzione alla Ragione*, in «Il Cannocchiale», 2007, 3, pp. 83–98; Id., *Idealismo, scetticismo e filosofia moderna tra Fenomenologia dello spirito e Lezioni sulla storia della filosofia*, in «Il Cannocchiale», 2008, 1, pp. 91–115.

<sup>5</sup> TW, 19, 336.

knowledge, Arcesilaus had maintained that thought could not assent to a being alien to thought, and that consequently no subjective persuasion could be raised to the status of objective knowledge. “Therefore,” Hegel remarks, “here Arcesilaus proposes the same famous distinction that has *again* appeared with so much importance in the modern age: the opposition of thought and being, of ideality and reality, of the subjective and the objective”.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly Academic and neo-Pyrrhonian scepticism cannot be identified *tout court*; Hegel seems to alternate between conflating their substance (the difference between them is “certainly very formal, and means little”,<sup>7</sup> he says at one point) to spreading them apart such that for the Academic version “subjective conviction” is the point of departure, and everything appearance – which makes it similar to modern subjectivist idealism<sup>8</sup> – while the neo-Pyrrhonian version, although it too claims that everything is appearance, “goes beyond the followers of the modern, purely formal, idealism” because by “dealing with the contents, and showing that every content, whether felt or thought, has its own opposite”. Neo-Pyrrhonians show, therefore, that contradiction lurks within all content whatsoever – *i.e.*, that the value of any statement is the same as its opposite; this is the objective aspect of Scepticism in its appearing, – not subjective idealism. This very distinction vindicates the theoretical value (isagogic and logical) of scepticism, especially in its neo-Pyrrhonian form.

Hegel had explicitly emphasized this in his Jena work. There he individuated “three modalities”<sup>9</sup> by means of which scepticism presents itself: first, “the scepticism that is identical with philosophy” – *i.e.*, the scepticism of Plato’s *Parmenides*; second and third, the two forms in which it is separated from – *i.e.*, respectively, the “ancient, true scepticism” of Pyrrho (to whom Hegel mistakenly attributes Aenesidemus’s ten tropes), and the later scepticism (that of the five tropes of Agrippa and of Sextus Empiricus’s work), which was hostile to philosophy, and which he accuses of having become dogmatism.<sup>10</sup> Now the point I wish to emphasize here is that Hegel’s “noblest side of scepticism” consists in “the tendency against the dogmatism of common consciousness, a tendency that can be found in all three of the aforementioned modalities, and which comes down to scepticism’s being identical with philosophy, but only representing its negative side: that is, even when it is separated from it, it never goes against it”.<sup>11</sup> Thus the function of scepticism, in all three of its modalities, consists, in more or less appropriate ways, in its being the negative side of philosophy, in denying and destroying finite knowledge – both that of common, naive consciousness, and that of educated consciousness, the dogmatism of intellectualistic sciences and philosophies.

This assignment of an introductory function to scepticism is not limited to Hegel’s first Jena period (in which the aforementioned *Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie* appears) but continues into the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*

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<sup>6</sup> TW, 19, 345. emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> TW, 19, 336.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> GW, 4, 222.

<sup>10</sup> GW, 4, 213.

<sup>11</sup> GW, 4, 222.

(*Phenomenology of Spirit*) (1807), in the Introduction of which Hegel presents the phenomenological approach as “the itinerary of natural consciousness, which leads towards true knowledge”.<sup>12</sup> Natural consciousness is the consciousness that naively accepts as true what it is certain of, and thus necessarily falls into contradiction with itself because such certainty will coincide with truth only in absolute knowledge; the progress of natural consciousness is accordingly defined as “the pathway of doubt [*Zweifel*], or, more precisely, the way to despair [*Verzweiflung*]”. On this path, in fact, the natural consciousness loses its truth: with the arrival of doubt, consciousness does not divest itself of that doubt in order to restore a truth, but rather is led into a step-by-step “despair of the so-called representations, thoughts, and natural opinions” (the various steps, or “figures” of the itinerary) by “scepticism’s turning against the whole of apparent consciousness” (56) – that is, against the whole of that consciousness to which content appears asking to be justified in its pretence to truth. The dialectical rhythm of the *Phenomenology* is thus articulated by the various modalities of consciousness: natural consciousness accepts the content the truthfulness of which it is certain, while scepticism uncovers the contradictions of the naive consciousness. Eventually the philosophically attained consciousness – what Hegel calls “absolute knowledge” and which reconstructs the phenomenological itinerary as an autobiography of the spirit – translates the negative outcome of scepticism into a positive result, such that consciousness does not stop at contradiction, but progresses beyond it towards a new figure.

Scepticism, therefore, is not simply a particular figure of the phenomenological itinerary which is inserted between Stoicism and the unhappy consciousness, but is a *configuration of consciousness* in general: it is the manner of operating of that consciousness which determines the self-contradictory aspect of every finite knowledge (such as that of natural consciousness), pushing consciousness itself towards true knowledge and beyond susceptibility to self-contradiction. It is in this sense that scepticism maintains its role as an introduction to philosophy: it induces pre-philosophical consciousness to deny itself and go beyond itself into absolute knowledge. Hegel himself recognizes this role retrospectively in his 1817 *Encyclopedia*:

Formerly I treated the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the scientific history of consciousness, in the sense that it, as the first part of philosophy, must precede pure science because it produces the concept of it. But at the same time consciousness and its history, like any other philosophical science, is not an absolute beginning but a member of the circle of philosophy. *Scepticism*, as a negative science developed through all the forms of finite knowledge, would present itself anyway as a similar introduction.<sup>13</sup>

Now in logic there is no longer any need for an introduction, for there one arrives at “pure science”. And so, just as phenomenology must transform itself from being an introduction to philosophy (of which it constitutes the “first part”) to being “a member of the circle of philosophy”, so must scepticism abandon its isagogic function of a “negative science” which destroys “all the forms of finite knowledge” in order to

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<sup>12</sup> GW, 9, 55.

<sup>13</sup> GW, 13, 34.

assume the form of a dialectical moment. More precisely, the role played by the sceptical configuration of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is played in the *Logic* by the second side of logical thinking (*das Logische*), which is to say the second side of the structure of rationality: the rational-negative, or properly dialectical, moment. While *intellectual* thought (the first side of logical thinking) “stops at fixed determination and at its diversity from other determinations”,<sup>14</sup> “the dialectical moment consists in going beyond such finite determinations, their passing into their opposite determinations”.<sup>15</sup> Conceived intellectually, this dialectical moment “constitutes, especially in its manifestation in scientific concepts, *scepticism*; scepticism contains simple negation as a result of the dialectical moment”.<sup>16</sup> In general, then, dialectical thought, denying the absolute character of the intellect’s distinction, transforms its relationships of difference into relationships of opposition, or, better, of contradiction. Such contradiction can be conceived intellectually and be the conclusive outcome of dialectical negation (a null result), in which case we have scepticism, or it can be developed into a synthesis that comprehends its elements as its immanent moments. That is why Hegel can conclude that dialectics is “the motor soul of scientific knowledge”<sup>17</sup>: because it allows the contents of science to acquire a necessary development in order to elevate themselves beyond the finite.

Thus, both in the *Phenomenology* and in the *Logic*, scepticism, at least insofar as it coincides with the dialectical negation of the finite, continues to play an essential role, representing the negative side of true philosophy.

## 2 Socratic Irony Between Dialectics and Scepticism

There in the addition to section 81 of the *Encyclopedia* we read that “dialectics in philosophy is nothing new”: if Plato is the inventor of dialectics, which appears in his work “in free and scientific form” and therefore “objective” form, “in Socrates the dialectical element, coherently with the general character of his philosophizing, is still configured in a prevalently subjective way – that is, as *irony*”.<sup>18</sup> Now, is the link made here between scepticism, irony, and a *subjective form of dialectics* a legitimate one?

It is possible to answer yes to that question as long as we bear in mind that the definition of scepticism emerging in section 81 must be articulated as having two different meanings: (1) on the one hand, scepticism is the “negative science developed through all the forms of finite knowledge” – and in this sense it identifies itself with the negative function of dialectics, which poses the fixed determinations of the

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<sup>14</sup> TW, 8, 169, §80.

<sup>15</sup> TW, 8, 169, §81.

<sup>16</sup> TW, 8, 172, §81A.

<sup>17</sup> TW, 8, 173.

<sup>18</sup> TW, 8, 174.

intellect in reciprocal contradiction – (S1); (2) on the other hand, however, scepticism amounts to intellectually conceiving the contradictions of the intellect, for which the outcome of those contradictions is a null result (S2). If this is granted, then the question becomes how to show *that* Socratic irony plays the role (S1) of a “negative science” of finite knowledge, and to clarify *if* it can be translated into the properly sceptical attitude (S2) of denying every knowledge. In doing so, it will be necessary to briefly look at the problem of subjectivism such as it has come out with reference to academic, neo-Pyrrhonian, and modern scepticism.

A quotation from the note to §140 of the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts (Outlines of the Philosophy of Right)* (1821) summarizes well the two main characteristics of Socratic irony: (a) its being a dialogue strategy, and (b) its aiming at a knowledge that is merely presumed, not actual: “Socrates applied [irony] in a personal dialogue, against the pretension of the uneducated and sophistic consciousness”<sup>19</sup> – that is, of educated consciousness.

The first characteristic permits us to better understand the subjective nature of Socratic dialectics, and therefore its difference from Plato’s objective dialectics. In the same passage from the *Outlines* we read:

Irony concerns only an attitude of the discourse towards *persons*; without personal address, the essential movement of thought is the dialectics, and Plato was so far from taking the dialectical element or even irony for the ultimate thing and the idea itself but, on the contrary, he put an end to the wandering of thought, and even more of subjective opinion, and immersed and finished it in the substantiality of the idea.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, irony is defined in the *Philosophie der Geschichte (History of Philosophy)* as “the subjective form of dialectics... a peculiar way to behave between persons”, while dialectics, denuded of this relational aspect, has to do with “the reasons of the thing”.<sup>21</sup> Here Hegel recognizes the genesis of dialectic in dialogue: in it, dialectic is still embodied in persons, so to speak. Nevertheless, it is not a comparison of opinions: the very nature of irony prevents that. As is well known, Socrates used irony to pretend to know less than his interlocutor, or even to know nothing at all, in order to induce him to express his ideas and the reasons on which they are based, in order then to confute their validity. That is, by not offering views opposed to those of his interlocutor, Socrates prevents him from responding with a counterargument.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to irony and to the profession of ignorance, the dialogue takes the form of an interrogation of the converser, an examination and confutation of his answers.<sup>23</sup>

The subjective aspect then consists first of all in the fact that the exercise of philosophy, in its tripartite interrogation-exam-confutation structure, is always circumstantial, for it depends on the interlocutor (his profession, his particular knowledge,

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<sup>19</sup> TW, 7, 277.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> TW, 18, 458.

<sup>22</sup> see Plato, *The Republic*, 337a, for example.

<sup>23</sup> see Plato, *Apology*, 29e, for example.

his social condition, etc.). However, this does not mean that Hegel view the goal of Socrates's philosophy as being the transformation of the existence of the conversing person, inducing him to take care of himself; rather, he views the goal as knowledge of what is true and right, a goal that Plato realized by de-personalizing his teacher's dialectics and holding firm the thing that is being discussed rather than the person with whom we discuss.

Having shown, then, that Socratic irony's being propaedeutic to the interrogation-examination-confutation exercise makes it eligible as playing the same function as scepticism (S1), let us pass now to the second characteristic of Socratic irony: its dissolution of false representations, and thus its opening up of possibilities for philosophical speculation. Socrates, Hegel maintains, usually started his research by challenging his interlocutors (be they young Athenians, common people, or learned sophists) on their faith in "habitual representations"<sup>24</sup>: by pretending at the outset to accept such representations too, he would induce the others, by means of his apparently naïve questions, to explain their principles. In such a way he could draw two consequences: he could show that in the representations of his interlocutors are present either contents which *differ* from familiar principles, or consequences which *contradict* those principles.

The first case, then, is when "consciousness wonders whether in what is familiar [*Bekanntes*] is contained what was not being sought in it".<sup>25</sup> This recourse to the verb "wondering" indicates a new introduction: as Aristotle had stated at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (a text that Hegel knew well), wondering is the beginning of philosophizing, because he who wonders is in the *aporia*. Socrates acknowledges his knowing nothing, and is thereby pushed to escape from ignorance.<sup>26</sup> The difference is that wondering, for Aristotle, is produced in the face of the unknown, and thus is the dawn of knowledge, the not-knowing that is not yet perceived as not-knowing; by contrast, Socratic wondering, in Hegel's view, is already a first result, the not-knowing that *is* recognized as not-knowing, the negation of equating the familiar and the known (*i.e.*, the cognitively understood).

The second case is that in which Socrates drew "from each determined proposition, or from its consequences, the contrary of what the proposition express".<sup>27</sup> Here Hegel refers to the *elenchus*, which originates in irony itself if we accept Quintilian's famous definition of irony as that rhetorical trope in which "*contrarium ei quod dicitur intellegendum est*".<sup>28</sup> Thus irony betrays an implicitly dialectical character which is explicated in the confutation, where it reveals the actual meaning of a given linguistic expression as being, in fact, the contrary of its usual meaning. But let us read the whole quotation: Socrates drew from each determined proposition or its consequence the contrary of what the proposition expressed; that is, he does so not

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<sup>24</sup> TW, 18, 457.

<sup>25</sup> TW, 18, 464.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b 17–18.

<sup>27</sup> TW, 18, 458.

<sup>28</sup> Quintilien, *Institutio oratoria*, 9, 2, 44.



against the proposition or definition itself, but assumes this determination while showing that its contrary is contained within it. Sometimes from a concrete case he infers its contrary. He makes men extract the consequences of what they hold to be true, and recognize that they contradict their own strongly held principles.<sup>29</sup>

This perfectly dialectical way of proceeding represents, to Hegel, the true start of philosophy: having lost faith in what they thought they knew, in the principles they believed to be true but which have proved to be contradictory, Socrates's interlocutors must admit their ignorance and so to find the truth in themselves. Anyway, remarks Hegel as he concludes his explanation of "negative side" of the Socratic method, usually philosophy must begin by upsetting consolidated representations; "everything must be doubted, and all presuppositions abandoned in order to regain [truth] as a product of the concept".<sup>30</sup> Here the *an allem zweifeln* (the doubting of everything) must be understood as the phenomenological *Verzweiflung* (despair): only by despairing of the validity of one's own principles and finite knowledge can one start on the path to true knowledge. (Modern) doubting is only the swinging between two possibilities for the solution of a problem, which are already presupposed and which you do not doubt. That is why Hegel can state that scepticism "does not doubt"; he does not intend to concede any room to dogmatic attitudes. To doubt everything is a sceptical attitude only when this means practicing *epochè*, a generalized suspension of judgement on our sensuous and intellectual representations. That is how the *an allem zweifeln* can represent the true start of philosophy.

That Hegel did not mean the doubt generated by irony (or, more generally, by Socratic dialectics in the modern sense of swinging between two or more possible solutions), but rather meant more radically the precipitating of our conviction when it is impossible to proceed further (*i.e.*, in *aporia*) is proven by how he explains a famous quotation from the *Meno*. The passage is an excellent example of Socrates's capacity to create turmoil in the educated consciousness and compel it into acknowledging its being in contradiction with what it had believed to be well known. Socrates asks Gorgias's pupil what virtue is, and pretends, ironically, to accept his answers; soon, however, he has shown their contradictoriness. The *Lectures* have an almost literal translation of *Meno* 79e-80b:

Even before I knew you – says Meno – I had heard that you pose yourself in the doubting position and that you confuse others. And now you bewitch me too, but also enchant me, such that, if I am allowed a joke, I compare you to a stingray. He who touches it is numbed. That is what you did with me; I am unable to answer anything, although you have offered many discourses – and good ones, too, I thought – on virtue. Now I find myself knowing nothing.<sup>31</sup>

Hegel translates "confuse" both as *zweifeln*, doubt, and as *verwirren*, the *aporia* of Plato's text. Socrates's philosophical position, the principle of his philosophizing, is thus the *aporia*, to be understood not in the limited meaning of modern philosophy

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<sup>29</sup> TW, 18, 458.

<sup>30</sup> TW, 18, 466–467.

<sup>31</sup> TW, 18, 466.



as mere doubt, but as the destruction of presumed knowledge: *Jetzt weiß ich nichts mehr*, “Now I know nothing” is the true, negative result of Socratic dialectics and irony.

One more element of structural homology with the sceptical destruction of finite, intellectual knowledge must be noted: just as scepticism turned the ten “ancient” tropes against naïve knowledge and the natural representations of uneducated consciousness, and turned the five “recent” tropes not only against these, but above all against the intellectual determinations of educated science, so too does Socratic irony address itself against both the former and the latter, against the representations of Athenian youths and citizens as well as the apparent knowledge of the sophists. Therefore irony has the double task of getting philosophy started: in fact, it induces citizen and sophist alike to acknowledge that what they used to know is not true knowledge, and that they now know nothing. It certainly is the “negative science developed through *all forms* – naïve and educated – of finite knowledge”.<sup>32</sup>

We can now turn to answering the second question: whether in Socratic irony the meaning (S2) of scepticism is realized – whether the “now I know nothing” anything else follows, or merely the quiet of *ataraxia*. Differently from scepticism, however, Socratic irony and dialectics are not meant to remain in *aporia*, but to answer the young person’s “need for knowledge” [*Bedürfnis nach Erkenntnis*] – an expression very close to the “need for philosophy” [*Bedürfnis der Philosophie*] already theorized by Hegel in his *Differenzschrift* as a fundamental impulse to go beyond divisions [*Entzweiung*] and build a speculative knowledge. Those who happened to converse with Socrates would emerge with lost faith in their presuppositions, uncertain about what they had until then believed true, but also “pushed to search what is in themselves”.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, as Hegel wrote in the passage quoted above from *The Philosophy of Right*, “Socrates applied [irony] in a personal dialogue, against the pretensions of uneducated and Sophistic science, to the advantage of the idea of truth and justice; and yet he treated only that consciousness ironically, not the idea itself”.<sup>34</sup> Hence ironic destruction is turned only against the *consciousness of truth and justice*, not against truth and justice themselves; against the pretension to know the truth, not against the ideas of the true and of the just.

The answer, then, appears inevitably negative. But Socrates’s philosophy does, in fact, have a positive side: “the good as a goal of the world, and of the individual”. The good is “in itself a concrete principle”; however, in Socrates “it is not yet exposed in its concrete determination; and in this abstract attitude lies what is missing in Socrates’s thought” – which latter has no further development. In assigning to the good only the formal determination that “consciousness finds and must find in itself what is true,” Socrates assumes “the principle of subjective freedom”.<sup>35</sup> This statement reveals a second and deeper meaning of the subjectivism of Socrates’s

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<sup>32</sup> GW, 13, 34.

<sup>33</sup> TW, 18, 457.

<sup>34</sup> TW, 7, 277.

<sup>35</sup> TW, 18, 468.

philosophy, and which is another way in which it seems akin to the various historical forms of scepticism: they are all “philosophies of crisis” in which consciousness claims its own freedom from a world in which it cannot recognize itself. Indeed, Hegel inscribes his wide discussion of Socrates’s destiny into the tragic framework of the crisis of the Athenian *polis* and the Greek *polis* more generally, in which the city’s laws and customs and the verdicts of the judges who followed those customs, mindlessly considered just and true by the citizens, are dragged before “the tribunal of [Socrates’s] moral self-consciousness [*Gewissens*]”.<sup>36</sup> Such a complex and suggestive argument cannot be dealt with here for lack of space; suffice it to say that Socrates’s point of view is that of *Gewissen*, the reflection of the individual, who, in assuming for himself the right to judge with his own mind what is traditionally thought to be just and true, necessarily enters into contradiction with himself. A conflict is thus produced between the ethical [*sittliche*] conscience of the people, who accept contemporary laws without trial or research, and the moral [*moralische*] conscience of the philosopher that wants to be convinced of the validity of the laws to be able to find itself in them.<sup>37</sup> Thus Hegel writes that “Socrates is the hero who claims for himself the right – the absolute right of the spirit certain of itself [*seiner selbst gewissen Geistes*], of the conscience that decides in itself”.<sup>38</sup>

### 3 Romantic Irony and the Triumph of Modern Subjectivism

Hegel never thought of raising Socratic irony to a rank equivalent in his philosophy to that of scepticism, despite the strong analogies between the two forms of dialectics. Why not? The main reason is certainly that Socratic irony is a dialogue strategy, and philosophy in the form of dialogue appears to Hegel not only as too subjective, given that it is marked by the personal relationships which set the agenda, but also because of its tie to a bygone era, classical Greece. We must also remember that with Socrates we are still at an initial stage of Greek philosophy, as proven by the fact that his critical examination was practiced with young persons who were inexperienced in philosophy, or even for its being practiced against the sophists, who represented a much poorer philosophical culture than the dogmatic schools that sceptical philosophers had to face later. We can also hypothesize that another reason why Hegel might not have wanted to raise Socratic irony to the level of scepticism was because he sought to differentiate his position from that of Romantics like Friedrich Schlegel, who regarded irony as the highest spiritual activity.

Schlegel, in fact, took irony to be the activity of unifying oppositions while dissolving them – irony in the higher meaning given to it by Socrates not as rhetorical

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<sup>36</sup> TW, 18, 510.

<sup>37</sup> TW, 18, 469.

<sup>38</sup> TW, 18, 511–512.

deception, but “absolutely involuntary, yet absolutely meditated, fiction [*Verstellung*]”. Irony and criticism go hand-in-hand. Indeed, irony is “sparked by the union of the artistic sense of life with the scientific spirit, by the meeting of an accomplished philosophy of nature and an accomplished philosophy of art” – yet at the same time it turns against itself, being “a continuous self-parody” and “the freest of licenses, because it puts us above ourselves; and yet it is also the most legitimate because it is absolutely necessary.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, only philosophy and poetry are capable of irony. The most authentic meaning of irony lies in the production and enjoyment of the work of art, as well as in philosophical reflection; in the unceasing movement between penetration of the object and detachment from it:

Philosophy is the true homeland of irony, which we could define as logical beauty; because wherever philosophy is pursued in written or oral dialogues, and in a non fully systematic fashion, irony must be produced and expected... In this respect only poetry can raise itself to the heights of philosophy [...] We have ancient and modern poems that continuously breathe, as a whole and everywhere, the divine breeze of irony. In them, a true transcendental *buffoonery* lives.<sup>40</sup>

By emphasizing the negative and destructive – in a word, *sceptical* – character of Schlegel’s irony, Hegel resolutely denies that it can be raised to the highest degree of spiritual activity: it could have represented, but in fact does not represent, the act with which to *start* philosophical investigation, like in the exemplary case of Socrates, but could not represent the act, which in the Romantics is at once both philosophical and poetical, that permits us *to realize the task* of the present age, namely the conciliation of necessity and liberty, finite and infinite, ideal and real, the divisions of the modern world.

Hegel’s critical confrontation with Romantic irony is thorough; despite concerning in particular the esthetical and ethical ambits, it is also reflected on other aspects, among which philosophical historiography. In his *History of Philosophy*, Hegel opposes the idea that Romantic irony originates within, or is akin to, Socratic irony. He criticizes the distorted interpretation put forward by as important an historian of philosophy as Friedrich Ast (the Plato scholar and translator, and author of the fundamental *Lexicon platonicum*), which was evidently influenced by Schlegel: “in recent times,” Hegel writes, “we made of irony, broadening it to a universal principle, something completely different from what originally was in the Athenian philosopher.” If Socrates’s irony consisted in accepting the answers that were given to him in order to dissolve them from inside, Friedrich Schlegel’s irony must instead

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<sup>39</sup> F. Schlegel, “Kritische Fragmente”, in E. Behler (ed.), *Friedrich Schlegel – Kritische Ausgabe seiner Werke: Band II, Charakteristiken und Kritiken I (1796–1801)*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1967, [108], p. 160. About Hegel’s interpretation of Schlegel’s irony see at least: K. Vieweg, 1999, pp. 183–206; and now E. Millán, Searching for Modern Culture’s Beautiful Harmony: Schlegel and Hegel on Irony, in “Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain”, 62, Autumn/Winter 2010, pp. 61–82 (by a point of view very different from the present essay)

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, [42], p. 152.

be “the supreme way for the spirit to behave, and has been made into the most divine thing.” Thus Ast, reiterating Schlegel’s theses, has misunderstood Socratic irony:

‘The most vibrant love for everything that is beautiful, in the idea as well as in life, animated his [Socrates’] dialogues, as an internal, inexhaustible life.’ Such life should be irony! ‘He used irony above all against the Sophists, to destroy the obscurity of their knowledge’.<sup>41</sup>

But there is an impassable rift between Socratic and Romantic irony; in fact, they are completely different matters:

This irony is a use of Fichtean philosophy, from which it comes, and is an essential point in the understanding of the concept in recent times. It pertains to coping with subjective conscience: ‘It is I who, with my educated thought, can reduce to nothing all determinations, of right, customs, of the good, etc.; I know that if something looks to me, and is valid as good, I can also invert it [into its opposite]. I know that I lord over all these determinations, I can use them or not; everything is valid for me as true in that now I like it.’ Irony makes fun of everything; this subjectivity takes nothing seriously, and annihilates again serious things, and can transform everything in appearance. Every superior and divine truth is dissolved in nothing (vulgarity); every serious thing is just a joke.<sup>42</sup>

For Hegel, then, all that Romantic and Socratic irony have in common is the term “irony” itself; they are otherwise quite different attitudes.

Already in the above-quoted *History of Philosophy* we find the core of Hegel’s critique of Romantic irony: the hostility towards the objective, its reduction to nothing, and the ensuing raising of subjective consciousness to a supreme principle. I would like to emphasize first of all that in this new life Romantic irony returns, in Hegel’s eyes, to the connection with scepticism, because, as we read in the quotation given, not only irony is one of the most important employments of Fichte’s philosophy, but also it reveals its sceptical character. Such sceptical character can be clearly seen when we relate romantic irony to Fichtean philosophy: if the I assures to be any reality (Fichte), then nothing will be solid before the I, and everything must be dealt with ironically (Schlegel).

Hegel’s criticism of the subjectivism of Fichte’s philosophy, a criticism present from his earliest published writings (*Die Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie* (*The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*), 1801) and which he reiterates often thereafter (especially in *Glaube und Wissen* (*Faith and Knowledge*), 1802, and in the *History of Philosophy*), is, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an explicit equating with scepticism: transcendental idealism “is right like Scepticism”, with the difference that the former “expresses itself positively”, while the latter is “expressed negatively”.<sup>43</sup> Just as scepticism is “the real experience of what freedom of thought is”, a freedom

<sup>41</sup> TW, 18, 460. Cf. F. Ast, *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie*, [1807] Landshut, J. Thomann, 1825<sup>2</sup>, §86, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> GW, 9, 136.

that identifies itself with the “total inessentiality” of what is other from thought, and therefore with the annihilation of the world,<sup>44</sup> likewise does idealism affirm freedom of thought by affirming “that abstract and empty word, that everything is ‘its own’” – that is, that everything is its own representation. In sum, for scepticism and idealism both, what must be stated is not the being, but rather merely the *scheinen*, the appearing. What being is, such as it appears in consciousness, is told by scepticism; idealism “enunciates things as feelings and perceptions”.<sup>45</sup> Scepticism and idealism, therefore, each express “the *immutable* and *veritable certainty of itself*”<sup>46</sup> while denying any truth-value to the object.

Romantic irony has developed this side of Fichtean philosophy. In the *Aesthetics* Hegel points out that if “what is” is the working of the I, if the I is “lord and master of everything”, then there is nothing that cannot be eliminated by the I, either. “Therefore, every being in itself and for itself is only *appearance* and is nothing true and real by its own working, but mere *appearance* operated by the I, and completely in the hands of its power and will.” The properly aesthetic aspect lies in the fact that such theoretical position is translated in “giving *artistic* form to one’s life”<sup>47</sup>: the I is an individual that lives as an artist – *i.e.*, without taking seriously any content, since no content has any substantial value, and so practicing irony about everything, making and unmaking it according to the artist’s will. It is only “appearance of itself, produced and destructible”. The artist conceives of himself as a “free creator that knows he is free and exempted from everything”, and of his “ironic-artistic life [as] a divine geniality”.<sup>48</sup> In doing so he takes the “*aristocratic* position” of the genius, who has not only “understood the thing [*Sache*]”, but “is at the same time *above it*”.<sup>49</sup>

The “*contrappasso*” of such an ironic dissolution of what is objective is the fact that subjectivity, after having made everything null and void – even the most important ethical relationships such as love and friendship – “itself becomes null and *void*”. In fact the I does not feel satisfied with enjoying its own creative and annihilating activity, but “feels a thirst for what is substantial and solid, of determined and essential interests”; hence its “unhappiness” and the “yearning” of the Romantic subject, which is torn between the pretentious enjoyment of its own geniality, divine but simultaneously empty, and its nostalgia for a substantial content. From this contradiction is born “the malaise of the beautiful soul”.<sup>50</sup>

But the proper ground for the polemic confrontation between Hegel and Romantic irony is that of morality, because the fault of the ironic subject is primarily moral: its raising of its own particular subjectivity to an absolute value is its debasing of every ethical objectivity, every law and duty. In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel’s criticism

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<sup>44</sup> GW, 9, 119.

<sup>45</sup> GW, 9, 136.

<sup>46</sup> GW, 9, 122.

<sup>47</sup> TW, 13, 94.

<sup>48</sup> TW, 13, 95.

<sup>49</sup> TW, 11, 233.

<sup>50</sup> TW, 13, 96.

of Romantic irony occurs within his discussion of moral self-consciousness [*Gewissen*]. Such *Gewissen* had appeared for the first time, as we have seen, in the thought of Socrates, who had wanted to judge in the light of his own conscience what is just and what is ethical, criticizing the laws and customs of his people from the point of view of his own subjective convictions. Romantic irony exasperates this Socratic attitude, and indeed constitutes a distortion of it: it is an extreme – and negative – form of subjective self-consciousness, one that, by being *Gewissen*, wants to know “in itself and by itself what its rights and duties are”.<sup>51</sup> Although this is a legitimate need, a true constitutive principle of modern age, it translates into a moral distortion [*Verstellung*] when subjectivity absolutizes itself, separating itself from the content that it is called to realize. Irony is “the highest form” of this negative tendency. It should be clear by now that it is a hypertrophic subjectivity, unable to accept ethical norms, which it nonetheless knows, and to act according to them, because it is incapable to do without itself, for it comprehends itself as the “ultimate thing”.<sup>52</sup> Given that the supreme principle is the arbitrariness of subjectivity, nothing and nobody is above me, but I am above, and lord over any law and thing, and I joke with them, so that “in this ironic consciousness, in which I let the Highest above perish, *I rejoice only in myself*.” Produced here, then, is not only “the vanity of every ethical *content* of rights, duties, and laws”, but indeed also “the subjective vanity of the subject”.<sup>53</sup>

As it had in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel’s discussion of Romantic irony concludes in *The Philosophy of Right* with by “the beautiful soul” (the figure which, as is well known, follows the *Gewissen* in the *Phenomenology*). If, in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel had had the beautiful soul originate from the contradiction between the emptiness of one’s own genius and the nostalgia of the content, here he has it arise when the fatuous subjectivity does not remain a “solitary cult of itself”, but rather goes to form a “community” whose members reciprocally congratulate themselves about their purity, thoroughness, and good intentions. The beautiful soul is then that “noblest subjectivity” which remains confined in the enchantment of its own interiority, so to speak, to which it forbids any action that could stain the purity of intention, leaving it a determined content, necessarily in contrast with the absoluteness that it arrogates to itself. Therefore the beautiful soul “consumes itself in the vacuity of every objectivity, and therefore in the unreality of itself”.<sup>54</sup>

In a note by Hegel himself that refers to this paragraph, we read: “... a) vacuity – resist, b) yearning for objectivity – in the other extreme – to become a Catholic”.<sup>55</sup> Here I think he refers to Schlegel’s conversion to Catholicism. Thus do we reach the last point of our discussion of Romantic irony, in which the vacuity of the beautiful soul is inverted in its opposite, seeking to give satisfaction to its own nostalgia of a content by means of the immediate (hence by faith) assumption of objectivity. It is this very inversion that we find in Hegel’s brief

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<sup>51</sup> TW, 7, §137A, 255.

<sup>52</sup> TW, 7, §140A, 278–279.

<sup>53</sup> TW, 7, 279.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> TW, 7, 284.

discussion of Schlegel's philosophy in *The History of Philosophy*. The interest of this passage is not in the confirmation of the tie between Fichtean idealism and Romantic irony, but in its individuating of the outcome of the process that leads the Romantic subject to irony by means of the yearning of the beautiful soul, and leads the religious faith along a process not dissimilar from the one in the *Phenomenology* that leads the sceptical self-consciousness to pass into the unhappy consciousness. The text as edited by Michelet does not allow us to understand whether Hegel presents several thinkers under the two forms of ironic subjectivity and religious subjectivity, or rather, as I think he does, two different phases of the thought of Schlegel. What is clear either way is the continuity between each form – between irony and positive religiosity. In the former, as we already know, “the subject knows itself in itself as the absolute, and all the rest is useless to it; it knows it is always destroying all determinations of the just and the good that it is giving to itself”.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, it throws itself into the opposite of religious subjectivity. “The despairing [*Verzweiflung*] of thought, of truth, of objectivity in itself and for itself, and the incapacity of producing a firm and autonomous basis, have led a noble soul [*edles*] to trust feelings and find in religion something solid”.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not Hegel is referring to Schlegel with his mention of Catholicism, superstition, and miracles,<sup>58</sup> is ultimately unimportant. What matters is that an exemplary trajectory is shown here, one that had already been followed by late ancient spirituality: the one from scepticism to the unhappy consciousness, the figure that sums up in itself the certainty of a strong and objective truth to which the changeable and subjective consciousness tends to join in an effort that can never reach its objective.

Sceptical consciousness, which makes every content vacillate, incapable of holding such negativity firmly, itself vacillates and winds up entrusting itself to faith in the Unchangeable. Such has been the outcome for scepticism many times in its 2,000-year-old history.

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<sup>56</sup> TW, 20, 416.

<sup>57</sup> TW, 20, 417–418.

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