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## Disembodied idealism? A new reading of Hegel

### 1. Starting from the “own body”

Long-standing has been the prejudice according to which the idealist tradition did not credit any philosophical dignity to bodiliness within the process of knowledge. Yet, already for Kant – as various studies have shown<sup>1</sup> – thought cannot be given separately from the body: In order to manifest itself, the idea must be embodied.

Although this is also true for Hegel, attention has been given mainly, starting from Kojève’s well known study, to the value of corporeity in the intersubjective dimension, in particular in the relationship between master and servant<sup>2</sup>. In the process of subjectivation that develops in the struggle for recognition, the body would come out defeated, translated into its speculative dimension (as *corpus*). It would in fact stand as the last bastion of resistance in the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment: Kant’s Theory of Sensibility*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2008; A. Ferrarin, *Lived Space, Geometric Space in Kant*, in «Studi Kantiani», XIX (2006), pp. 11-30.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on The Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by R. Queneau, ed. by A. Bloom and transl. by J.H. Nichols, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 1980.

<sup>3</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, Butler identifies, however, in the body a possibility of liberation and of subtraction from the dominion of the other, namely in the relationship of gratefulness. Cfr. J. Butler, *Subject of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1987), Columbia University Press, New York 1999. On the interplay of hetero-affection and self-affection between body and soul, see the recent contribution by J. Butler, C. Malabou, *You Be My Body for Me. Body, Shape and Plasticity in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, in S. Houlgate, M. Baur (eds.), *A Companion to Hegel*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2011, pp. 611-640.

Not much attention has been paid instead to the role of what later twentieth-century phenomenology will define as “animate organism” (*Leib*)<sup>4</sup>. This latter, as we shall see in some detail, is however explicitly thematized in Hegel’s account on anthropology. Unlike the dead body of natural objects, for which he uses the term *Körper* (“body”), Hegel sees the animate organism as a necessary condition for becoming human<sup>5</sup>.

The key role granted by Hegel to the anthropology of the body is not surprising if one takes into account the context within which Hegel elaborates his system. In the years between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasing attention is in fact paid to the body by empirical sciences<sup>6</sup>. A significant shift takes place in physiology. Drifting away from explanation models of the functioning of the body based on the – for centuries prevailing – humoral theory, physiologists turn to galvanic stimuli as key explanans. This paradigm shift not only disrupts medical traditions – from treatment based on bloodletting and emetics to treatment based on animal magnetism<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See: N. Mowad, *Meaning and Embodiment. Human Corporeity in Hegel’s Anthropology*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2019, ebook; C. Malabou, *La chambre du milieu. De Hegel aux neurosciences*, Hermann, Paris 2009. Some recent studies have attempted to apply Hegel’s theory of recognition to the neuroscientific field, showing how his ideas on the other as necessary requirement in the development of one’s self-awareness find application in today’s research on the brain. See: I. Marchetti Igor, E. Koster, *Brain and intersubjectivity: a Hegelian hypothesis on the self-other neurodynamics*, in «Frontiers in Human Neuroscience», 8 (2014), available on: <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00011> (last access on: 05.11.2020).

<sup>5</sup> Hegel takes up Fichte’s distinction: cfr. J.G. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre (1797)*, § 5, in Id., *Fichtes Werke*, ed. by I.H. Fichte, De Gruyter, Berlin 1971, here Bd. III, p. 61. Fichte calls *Körper* the physical body, *Leib* the living one, to whom also the characteristics of *Geist* and life are credited. The use of *Körperlichkeit* appears instead to indicate, in the section on art and religion, the representation or depicting of the body. On the natural body see the entry “Körper” by Annette Sell, in P.G. Cobben, P. Cruysberghs, P.H.A.I. Jonkers, L. de Vos, *Hegel-Lexikon*, Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2006, pp. 224-225.

<sup>6</sup> As shown in the volume by M. Henn, H.A. Pausch (eds.), *Body Dialectics in the Age of Goethe*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2003, the problem of the body is a key issue in eighteenth-century literature. Body and soul, nature and intellect, enter a space which was previously the prerogative of metaphysics alone; and in this space, from their encounter, a new understanding of the human is shaped.

<sup>7</sup> The German physician Franz Anton Mesmer believed in the existence of a fluid similar to the electric fluid and accumulating in the human organism; diseases were therefore seen as caused by blockages or difficulties in the flow of this fluid in the human body, and the therapy would accordingly consist in the application of magnets on the interested parts, but also in hand impositions to transfer magnetism and collective baths in special magnetized tanks. Presented by Mesmer as animal magnetism, in consequence of the fame he achieved, his theory became also known as “Mesmerism”. See: F.A. Mesmer, *Mémoire*, 1799; F.A. Pattie, *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism: A Chapter in the History of Medicine*, Edmonston Publishing, Hamilton 1994.

and Brownian theories<sup>8</sup> – but also affects the overall perception of the human body, no longer seen as mere receptivity and passivity but rather as activity and reactivity.

In the realm of the incipient human sciences, one sees the birth of physical anthropology which, on the basis of morphological and physiological characteristics, approached the study of humans from a naturalistic point of view. Geographical origin, racial identity, morphological features are seen as key to understanding the spirituality of people as well as individuals. At the end of the eighteenth century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's studies on human physical variations, based on "eyeball" observation of the shape of the skull<sup>9</sup>, Lavater's foundational work on physiognomy, the retrieval of his ideas in Goethe's morphology, and Gall's phrenology are all examples of an urge to acknowledge the role of the bodily component in human knowledge<sup>10</sup>.

To this widespread interest one has traditionally contrasted the disembodied spirit of idealism, whose structure would have been perfected only by dismissing any reference to the body, becoming emblematically "thinking of thinking", as evidenced by Hegel's long quotation from book Λ of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (XII, 7), placed at the end of the *Encyclopedia*.

Many elements, however, lead us to believe that this conclusion needs to be reassessed. In Hegel's remarks on the soul-body relationship, it is clear that the body is not understood only as a body-object, that is to say, an external determination one should get free of, but rather as something which contributes to the spirit manifesting itself. Human self-reflection on the body not as external objectivity – to be referred to in the third person – but rather as the own body is for Hegel also one of the elements that distinguishes humans from animals and which stands for the first degree of self-knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> The Scottish physician John Brown regarded excitability as the quality or principle upon which the phenomena of life are based. The exciting forces were seen as external (heat, diets, etc.) or internal (muscle contraction, brain energy, etc.). Diseases would then result from a local or general increase or decrease in excitability. Therapy was accordingly quite simple: sedatives or stimulants. Cfr. J. Brown, *Elementa Medicinae*, 1788.

<sup>9</sup> The German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach is one of the founders of physical anthropology. Based on the observation of different human skulls, he divided humanity into five major races. He is also considered to be the initiator of craniometry. Cfr. J.F. Blumenbach, *Decas collectionis suae craniorum diversarum gentium illustrata*, 1790-1828.

<sup>10</sup> Last but not least, at social level the body becomes the subject and object of production. Cfr. A. Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte*, Acta Humaniora, Weinheim 1989, p. 1. To the process of industrialization is connected the idea of production or sociogenesis of the modern body, cfr. B. Duden, *Geschichte unter der Haut. Ein Eisenacher Arzt und seine Patientinnen um 1730*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1987, p. 14.

## 2. *The methodological critique of the Menschenerkenntnisse*

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while critically reviewing the emerging sciences of his time, Hegel provides an account of the relationship between soul and body. These remarks fall within the wider thematic field of observational, scientific reason. In these pages, in line with his overall plan to describe the process of self-deployment (*Manifestation*) of the spirit<sup>11</sup>, Hegel deals with how sciences interpret the constitution of the human and the transition from naturalness to spirituality. The main disciplines reviewed here are the nascent biology, which describes humans as natural beings accounted for by the laws of the organism; psychology, namely empirical psychology, which focuses on the given of interiority and self-awareness only; human sciences, including physiognomy and phrenology, which instead interpret the essence of humans based on their exterior, that is, the body<sup>12</sup>.

Hegel's criticism of these forms of knowledge is not aimed at disavowing the importance of the body, but rather at criticizing the way in which it is handled by these sciences.

The first reason for criticism concerns their methodological approach. They are built in fact on a *petitio principii*. These sciences assume what they must explain, that is to say, matter, and draw from this element their explanatory principles. Material nature is, in other words, assumed as the basis of spiritual being, but also as the principle of its explanation. This method, Hegel clarifies, does not take into account that knowledge, when applied to humans, is a process that modifies the object itself. With the addition of knowledge – of spirit – the body is no longer the same. This does not imply that a supernatural element intervenes on matter in the evolution toward the spirit; what it means is that human animals differ from other animals in their ability to reflect upon themselves and on their own body.

Translated into current language, Hegel seems to intuit what recent re-

<sup>11</sup> As Mowad points out, in English the term *Geist* is translated both as *Spirit* and as *Mind*. He prefers *Spirit*, because «“mind” is often understood in opposition to the body – especially in philosophy – but Hegel's anthropology is devoted to showing that Geist is not limited by the body, so the use of “mind” to render Geist invites persistent misunderstandings. It is better to use a term like “spirit”, the precise meaning of which the average reader is initially not quite sure about» (N. Mowad, *op. cit.*, p. 853).

<sup>12</sup> On the role of embodiment in Hegel and in particular on the function that the body plays not only in anthropology but also in psychology, see E. Magrì, *Hegel e la genesi del concetto. Autoriferimento, memoria, incarnazione*, Verifiche, Trento 2017, in partic. pp. 187.

search in neuroscience has shown, that is to say, that self-aware individuals are not only able to process internal/external stimuli, but also to actively reflect upon themselves, and create a network of information related to the self, made of, for instance, attributes, beliefs and defining traits. In neuro-cognitive terms this means that self-awareness is the product of the interactions between embodiment and mentalization, and that higher functions cannot be causally inferred from lower functions<sup>13</sup>.

This reading is close to Hegel's dialectical vision, inasmuch as it takes into account non-linear interactions between phenomena, that is to say, interactions that can give rise to new structures or new behaviors that are not found – not even in primitive forms – in any of the preceding elements. In this respect, the underlying aim of Hegel's account in this section is to expose the limits of the modern rationalist perspective – be it scientific or philosophical – which instead tends to base knowledge on a linear principle of causality, losing sight of the whole and of the process that constitutes it. The living being cannot fall within the scope of causal explanations alone. For Hegel, this does not mean to side with spiritualist explanation models – an example of which could be found in Georg Ernst Stahl's<sup>14</sup> proposal for an animist vitalism. He maintains instead that, as one of the most sophisticated expressions of the living, human beings must be understood in the terms of a dynamic and non-dualistic relationship between their parts – matter and spirit, body and soul, intellect and sensibility, etc.

This complexity appears to the observing reason as an insoluble contradiction. For these sciences the human being is on the one hand freedom and self-awareness, but on the other hand also bodiliness and being immersed in a determination that has not been chosen. Whereby the interior is marked by operativity, the body stands for the effectiveness defining each individual. Within the perspective of these sciences, the body is invariably affected by what today we would define as *epistemic opacity*. They cannot, in fact, explain in what terms the body mediates information. The relevance of the body is either ignored or becomes the only element of explanation without any critical reflection. Therefore, Hegel argues, it is not clear what these

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. R. Baumeister, *The Unity of Self at the Interface of the Animal Body and the Cultural System*, in «Psychological Studies», 56, 1 (2011), pp. 5-11.

<sup>14</sup> According to Stahl, without the soul, which supports biological processes, the body would remain passive, inert, without any strength to move. While giving maximum emphasis to the spiritual side, seen as the soul, he considered the study of matter as completely secondary and knowledge concerning anatomy and chemistry as negligible if not harmful. Cfr. G.E. Stahl, *Theoria medica vera*, 1708.

sciences mean when they argue that the body is the «*expression* of the inner, of the individual posited as consciousness and as movement»<sup>15</sup>. This aspect is what Hegel sets out to thoroughly investigate.

### 3. *Signs and bones*

The pages of the *Phenomenology* on physiognomy and phrenology attempt therefore to show the limits of the approach of human sciences to the internal–external relationship.

First of all, Hegel clarifies that understanding is required of the different functions of the body. Based on its immediate relationship with the interior, the body is *an organ* in which the internal intention is immediately displayed (e.g. walking in the legs; gesturing in the hands; etc.). Furthermore, this organ can also establish a mediated relationship with its own interior as well as with the exterior. In the first case, it becomes a *shape*, that is, it expresses an external intention through signs and semiotic traits only; in the second case, the intention comes in contact with the external world and becomes what can be defined as *act*. How do the *Menschenkenntnisse* deal with this complexity?

Physiognomy claims that «this *being*, the *body* of the certain individuality, is its *primordality*, its own “what-it-has-not-done”», but also recognizes that «the individual is at the same time only what he has done, so is his body also [...] a *sign*, which has not remained an immediate matter but is that in which the individual only makes known what he is, in the sense of putting his original nature into practice»<sup>16</sup>. Even if physiognomy is aware of the complexity of this relationship, the body is overall understood as a «semiotic field»<sup>17</sup>, that is, as expressing the interior through signs, even though it is unable to do it fully. Once this has been established, laws can hardly be

<sup>15</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. and ed. by T. Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, New York 2018 (henceforth *PhS*), p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> *PhS*, p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> Lavater’s physiognomy, to which Hegel devotes an investigation, is a pseudoscience that infers psychological and moral characteristics of a person from their physical appearance, especially from the features and expressions of the face. Cfr. J.C. Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, Leipzig, Weidmann, Steiner & Co, Reich 1775-1778. For a detailed discussion of this section, see M. Anzalone, *Forme del pratico nella psicologia di Hegel*, il Mulino, Bologna 2012, p. 26. I also refer the reader to this text for a full account on the debate in the field of phrenology and physiognomy in Hegel’s time (cfr. *ibidem*).

outlined, inasmuch as everything is fundamentally ambiguous. Humans can intentionally pretend; at any rate, the expression can fail to be authentic on several grounds. Within said ambiguous framework, according to physiognomy, what matters is the intention<sup>18</sup>.

Despite Lavater's effort to establish a necessity-based science<sup>19</sup>, that is to say, one that establishes universal laws accounting for the connection between interior and exterior (universal and particular), the outcome of his science does not hold true of this premise. Hegel specifies that there is no *necessary* correlation between facial expression and interiority; therefore it cannot be defined in terms of laws. Physiognomy delivers judgment based on intention regardless of the act; its judgment is therefore based on a subjective opinion and not on an objective manifestation, as what is seen in the body is not its outward movement, but rather what it represents of that interior. If, for instance, a gesture of disappointment appears on the face of someone caught in the act of committing a crime, while evaluating the person, greater value will be credited to that grimace than to the criminal act.

Regarding this method, Hegel critically remarks: «It is not the murderer or the thief who is supposed to be known; rather, it is the capacity to be a murderer, a thief»<sup>20</sup>. Within the physiognomic framework, the observer establishes what is deemed essential in the external manifestation to describe the interior. The laws that this science establishes are therefore empty opinions, inasmuch as they fail to establish any compelling correlation with how the body effectively implements an intention. While the ensuing knowledge claims to have to do with effective reality, in actual terms its object is spirit deprived of its concrete dimension, deprived, that is, of what happens in the passage connecting corporeity to the exterior. As a result, the laws that are drawn from this knowledge have no effective foundation; they are nothing but opinion, «or they only amount to saying what is on one's mind»<sup>21</sup>. The

<sup>18</sup> As Koschorke writes: «Physiognomy is one variety among the many eighteenth-century techniques attempting to give the body a symbolic death. Inasmuch as physiognomy goes beyond the outside as expression of the inside – which is the same fundamental thinking approach of idealistic systems – it works on the transfiguration of human beings. It [...] goes beyond the body in the form of a visual deciphering process. To the extent that it allows the gaze to radiate from one spirit to another without empirical reduction and falsification, it participates in the creation of an ideal community bond» (A. Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Fink, München 1999, p. 151; my transl.).

<sup>19</sup> Lavater contrasts his scientific physiognomy to the natural one based on the observer's intuition. Cfr. J.C. Lavater, *Von der Physiognomik*, Leipzig 1772.

<sup>20</sup> *PhS*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> *PhS*, p. 187.

formulation of these laws is just a «*vermeinte Wissen*», presumed knowledge.

Hegel then goes on to review the main claims of phrenology. While physiognomy considers the body as the language of interiority, the body as speaking, according to phrenology «the outer is finally an entire motionless actuality which is not in its own self a speaking sign but which, separated from self-conscious movement, presents itself for itself and is as a mere thing»<sup>22</sup>. Phrenology refers to the skull as the place through which the interior would make display of itself<sup>23</sup>.

First, Hegel takes up an age-old problem, previously solved by Descartes with reference to the pineal gland, namely, that of how to establish a relationship between a material and a spiritual element. The idea of cerebral localization, which finds in Gall one of its first formulations, would lead to nothing, for no correlation can be proven between a change in the brain – seen as the organ of interiority – and the external part of the skull. As Blumenbach had come to argue in his craniometric studies, phrenological analyses had to be based in part on innate characteristics; but as soon as the dynamic nature of spirituality is taken into account, the only solution to establish a relationship between brain and skull is to resort to pre-established harmony. Granted that human nature is procedural and operative, the skullbone as the object of attention of phrenology is not able to express this activity, for it is not a sign field:

The skullbone is not an organ of activity, nor is it even a speaking movement. Neither theft, nor murder, etc., is committed by the skullbone, nor does it even in the least make a change in countenance such that it would thereby become a verbal gesture. – Nor does this *existent* even have the value of a *sign*<sup>24</sup>.

Unlike the face, on which physiognomy focuses, or the gestures or, Hegel adds provocatively, «even a post hammered onto a deserted island»<sup>25</sup>, which refer to something other than their immediate giving, the skull does not refer to anything else. Of course, the subject changes if we talk about Yorick's

<sup>22</sup> *PhS*, p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Reference goes here to Gall's studies. F.J. Gall, *Anatomie et physiologie du système nerveux en general, et du cerveau en particulier, avec des observations sur la possibilité de reconnaître plusieurs dispositions intellectuelles et morales de l'homme et des animaux par la configuration de leurs têtes*, 1810. Gall actually uses the expression organology and only his pupil Spurzheim will introduce the expression phrenology: cfr. S.J.C. Spurzheim, *Observations sur la phrénologie, ou la connaissance de l'homme morale et intellectuel, fondée sur les fonctions du système nerveux*, Paris 1818.

<sup>24</sup> *PhS*, p. 194.

<sup>25</sup> *PhS*, p. 194.



skull, but the *thing* represented by the skull does not refer to anything other than itself. Also for phrenology, then, the main issue is that it is impossible to establish a law-like correlation between the two parts, interior and exterior, brain and skull, so that work is limited to «possibilities»; however, on these latter, based on the Hegelian scaffolding, no science can be built.

Yet, what Hegel refers to as *Schädellehre*, craniology, with clear reference above all to the material element, nevertheless brings the inquiry one step forward. In fact, it shows clearly that the spirit needs concrete existence. This is a first – although still limited – attempt made by reason to reconcile the subjective dimension and the objective one.

Although Hegel critically remarks that for those scientists «the *being of spirit is a bone*»<sup>26</sup>, he nevertheless acknowledges a seed of truth in those forms of knowledge: through them one sees the *category* coming to the fore in the form of *being*; this amounts to saying that those sciences are aware that the subject needs to be taken into account not only as thought but also as determined being, as corporeity, in fact. However, they remain naive, their naivety being the same of nature, which makes the highest moment of procreation coincide with the lowest one of urinating; in the same way in fact these sciences make the spirit coincide with a bone. This perspective ensues from the still representative and non-speculative ground of their approach.

#### 4. *Soul in a vat? Subject as embodied mind*

The investigation of corporeity is developed differently in the pages of the *Encyclopedia* devoted to anthropology. Anthropology is the last science to find a complete development in the system<sup>27</sup>. It coincides with the first moment of the subjective spirit, that is, with the moment in which humans free themselves from their bond with nature and the spiritual dimension emerges.

Here the reader is not, as in the *Phenomenology*, provided with a methodological account, for what interests Hegel now, is to investigate the becoming spirit of nature, the dawn of subjectivity, the originating of the human dimension – what found its place in the pages of the *Phenomenology* devoted

<sup>26</sup> *PhS*, p. 201.

<sup>27</sup> Hegel inserts anthropology into his system in Nuremberg, but it is not certain that he includes this part in his lectures, as its final outline seems to belong to the end of his following stay in Heidelberg. Still, in the Nuremberg years, some topics such as sleepwalking, madness etc. are already classified by Hegel under the subject of psychology.

to the struggle of master and servant in the transition from consciousness to self-awareness.

Along the lines of phenomenological criticism, the entire subjective spirit is defined by an anti-dualist intent, and exposes the mistakes of all those approaches which separate the soul from the body (in anthropology), consciousness from self-consciousness (in phenomenology), and will from thought (in psychology<sup>28</sup>).

Here, our focus is exclusively on the first dualism, which recalls the metaphysical dualism of Cartesian derivation. It should however be clear that Hegel does not even accept Kant's critical reformulation drawing a separation between sensitivity and intellect. Nor he accepts that of empirical psychology, which develops a dualistic ground in the direction of a theory of faculties<sup>29</sup>. The mistake common to all these dualistic views is the ontologization of separation. Although Hegel recognizes that body (*Leib*) and soul (*Seele*) are not the same, he considers it a mistake to hypostatize their disjunction<sup>30</sup>. Hence the need, even before going into the analysis of the soul in its various configurations, to make a digression on the relationship between soul and body – which one finds developed at § 387.

The philosophy of nature concluded on the acknowledgement that the idea needs a transition to spirit – understood as a form of understanding and self-reflection. The first pages of the chapter on subjective spirit therefore start from the natural dimension which tends to keep the spirit in a state of sleep. A clash between the natural and the spiritual dimension is then described in the first pages of the section in the following terms:

<sup>28</sup> H.F. Fulda, *Anthropologie und Psychologie in Hegels "Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes"*, in R. Schumacher (ed.), *Idealismus als Theorie der Repräsentation?*, Mentis, Paderborn 2001, pp. 101-125, here p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> Here the reference is to empirical psychology, which would consider the soul as a thing, breaking it down into faculties, forces or activities seen as separate entities – hence the need to find a point of connection between them, failing to grasp the relationship between finite and infinite, and missing the idea of the living unity of the spirit. As it has been pointed out, on this ground Hegel could be seen today as an opponent of the theories of the modularity of mind. See J.A. Fodor, *The modularity of Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1983.

<sup>30</sup> It should be clarified that Hegel does not intend to brush off the Cartesian theory, but rather feels the need to integrate it in his perspective as a necessary point of transition. «The Cartesian paradigm is not superseded by a purely monistic theory, but it is rather maintained in regional, gnoseological (*wissenschaftstheoretisch*) terms, that is to say, limited in its validity» (Ch. Asmuth, "Die Seele ist dasselbe als ihre Leiblichkeit in sie eingebildet". *Leib und Seele bei Hegel*, in «Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia», t. 72, Fasc. 2/3, Percepção and Conceito 2016, pp. 281-298, here p. 287 (my transl.).

The outcome of this conflict is the triumph of the soul over its bodiliness, the process of reducing, and the accomplished reduction, of this bodiliness to a sign, to the portrayal of the soul. The ideality of the soul thus emerges in its bodiliness and this reality of the mind is posited ideally, but still in a bodily manner<sup>31</sup>.

Although Hegel seems to suggest that the process leads to the liquidation of the body, if things are seen from the viewpoint of what kind of overcoming is achieved here, it becomes clear that he is talking about a realization of the spiritual in corporeity. But what is this soul that, by winning over the body, allows us to reach the spirit?

A simple way to describe the soul in its most basic state is to say that it is «immersed» in nature. The soul belongs to this world but cannot be grasped through the natural category of extension. Rather, «the soul is a symbiotic feeling or dim awareness that is projected into and pervades the natural world»<sup>32</sup>. It potentially animates every natural form but can only be expressed in a concrete way if linked and limited to a particular body.

This means that thought and determined being are intrinsically co-extensive, and that the *body-mind problem*, that is to say, the question of how to combine soul and body, is, according to Hegel, only the result of a perspectival mistake. As one reads in the *Encyclopedia*,

if we presuppose them to be absolutely independent of each other, they are as impenetrable to each other as any piece of matter is to another, each being assumed to be found only in their reciprocal non-being, in the pores of the other<sup>33</sup>.

In this respect, their communion (*Gemeinschaft*) stands for an *unfathomable mystery*. The only way to overcome this mystery is to realize that from the beginning soul and body are co-present and intertwined.

Despite this ontological assumption, Hegel does not dismiss the problem without discussing it, but rather devotes a long investigation to it, carrying out an essential refutation of the dualist attitude. In order to prove the groundlessness of the mind-body separation, and therefore to show the uselessness of the discussions regarding their unification, he approaches the problem from two angles and develops a refutation of the two corresponding standpoints, that of the immateriality of the soul and that under-

<sup>31</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, transl. from the 1830 Edition, together with the *Zusätze* by W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, revised with an Introduction by M.J. Inwood, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007 (henceforth *PhM*), § 387, Remark, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> N. Mowad, *op. cit.*, pos. 1532.

<sup>33</sup> *PhM*, § 389, remark, p. 30.

pinning the issue of the *communion* between the body and the soul.

Concerning the immateriality of the soul, Hegel emphasizes that given that it is impossible to distinguish between psychic and somatic, soul is neither understood as a thing, nor as Schelling's world soul, but rather as the internal purpose and essence of the material organism. What is at stake here, is a matter of processes, activities and purposes, for which this distinction does not apply. On this ground he concludes that the question of the immateriality of the soul is of no real interest<sup>34</sup>.

Regarding the question of their communion, Hegel believes that the living individual is at the same time soul, as «the identity of the subject, the ideal unity», and body, insofar as «the diversity of determinations» is expressed<sup>35</sup>. There is therefore a bijective relationship between soul and body; there is no soul or *mind* without the self; and the self is not articulated outside the body. Hegel's solution could therefore be read in the terms of what today is defined as *embodied mind*<sup>36</sup>.

This inspires Hegel to go beyond the reductive understanding of the mind-body relationship in terms of causal relationship, and rather see the action of the soul on the body as the reflection of a living embodied subjectivity.

In this respect, Hegel's solution deviates from Spinoza's proposal to take soul and body as modes of a single substance – deprived of independent existence – which reduces them to externally determined phenomena in the infinite causal chain of conditioned events. Furthermore, Hegel's theoretical investigation of their relationship also leaves behind the idea of a soul pre-existing to the body. Thus, the soul is radically linked to the material existence of the body: from the most elementary, the sentient one, to the highest forms of the mental functions of the spirit. In other words, a link can be established with bodily sensations, which are the material of even the most sophisticated functions of the spirit<sup>37</sup>; this amounts to saying that this latter

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. *PhM*, § 389 ann.

<sup>35</sup> G. Cantillo, *Dalla natura alla storia. Gli stadi dell'esistenza naturale e la vita in Hegel*, in Id., *Natura umana e senso della storia*, Luciano, Napoli 2005, pp. 9-22, here p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> See R. Bonito Oliva, *Introduzione a G.W.F. Hegel, Lezioni sulla filosofia dello spirito 1827-1828*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2000, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> As Hesse wrote, «if the soul remains linked to the functions of the body, the teleological conception of the concept of soul, on the other hand, excludes thinking of this as a mere result of a determined link with matter» (F. Hesse, *System und Funktion der Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes*, in F. Hesse, B. Tuschling (eds.), *Psychologie und Anthropologie oder Philosophie des Geistes. Beiträge zu einer Hegel-Tagung in Marburg*, Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1991, pp. 490-521, here p. 497 (my transl.).

can become what it is only by integrating what comes from corporeity<sup>38</sup>.

Therefore, Hegel's attitude toward the soul–body relationship hinges upon a unitary understanding on the model of the idea of life, taken at the same time as cognitive capacity and biological expression<sup>39</sup>. The division between soul and body is only an abstraction of categories from the plane of reality. On this ground, more than a *solution* to the soul–body dualism, Hegel proposes its *dissolution*<sup>40</sup>, which means to look at this relationship with a holistic and not intellectual or reductionist approach.

Perceptions, feelings and inclinations, moreover, everything that derives from the body, are not an obstacle to overcome, but rather elements that the soul must reconcile with its understanding of totality and universalize according to its own project. «The body thus remains the material basis of consciousness and spirit»<sup>41</sup>. Not only the soul expresses itself through the body, but it is also forged according to the corporeal constitution and through the feedback of the body. What is at stake is therefore a reciprocal relationship of in–formation; that is to say, they reciprocally form each other.

In contemporary terms, Hegel's account can be equated, with a little stretch, to the stance of radical emergentism<sup>42</sup>. This latter does not only advocate continuity but also jumps in the physiological processes, as what determines the emergence of increasingly complex spiritual functions face to increasingly complex elements and challenges. Thus, the soul–body relationship replicates at microcosmic level the same ideas that at macrocosmic level account for the relationship between nature and spirit. Only against the

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. *PhM*, § 379.

<sup>39</sup> For more on this point, I refer the reader to S. Achella, *Pensare la vita. Saggio su Hegel*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2020.

<sup>40</sup> As Michael Wolff points out, with respect to the soul–body relationship, Hegel does not seek to resolve it but rather to dissolve it, while exposing the ill–conceived perspective from which it originates. Cfr. M. Wolff, *Eine Skizze zur Auflösung des Leib–Seele–Problems*, in *Psychologie oder Anthropologie. Analytischer Kommentar zu § 389 der Enzyklopädie (1830)*, in F. Hespe, B. Tuschling (eds.), *Psychologie und Anthropologie*, cit., pp. 188–249, here p. 188.

<sup>41</sup> F. Hespe, *System und Funktion*, cit., p. 503 (my transl.).

<sup>42</sup> According to emergentist claims, what we call mental states or processes are actually states and processes in our brain. These psychic events exist – in relation to the cellular elements of which the brain is made – as phenomena of ascending emergence, just as the primitive life processes emerge in unicellular organisms above the macromolecules of which they are made. The “psychic” facts are materially founded. From basic relationships they can, from the standpoint of strong emergentism, emerge as new events that are “irreducible” to the material ones, but where initial material qualities remain nonetheless. Cfr. M. Bunge, *The Mind–Body Problem*, Pergamon, Oxford 1980; P. Clayton, P. Davies, *The Re–Emergence of Emergence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; A. Beckermann, H. Flohr, J. Kim, *Emergence or Reduction?*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1992.

background of this overall vision one can fully understand the solution that Hegel gives to the problem (or, better, the non-problem) of the mind-body relationship.

### 5. “*Everything is in sensation*”

By placing anthropology at the origins of the subjective spirit, Hegel stresses that the process of subjectivation finds its roots in that «dark region» entirely immersed in naturalness, in which a still natural soul, translating bodily contents into symbolic forms, transitions gradually to the sentient soul up to the effectively real soul. Having clarified the original interweaving that binds the body to the soul, the rest of the anthropology section is devoted to understanding how the body acts in the process of subjectivation.

Subjectivity in its germinal form finds first of all in the body the tools for its initial expression.

The immediate relationship with nature, which is prefigured in the natural soul, and which Hegel indicates as a *Mitleben mit der Natur*, expresses the moment in which the soul, although not yet self-conscious, begins to take its first steps toward the human. This moment expresses the more «passive» dimension of the soul with respect to the stimuli coming from the body, so that in principle it is subjected to them and *undergoes* them. This is the *natural* soul where, «the mind [*Seele*] takes part in the universal planetary life, feels the difference of climates, the changes of the seasons, the periods of the day, etc. In the mind this life of nature emerges only in occasional dark moods»<sup>43</sup>. Here the body is more powerful than the still dormant consciousness. Hegel defines this as «the *sleep* of mind – the *passive nous* of Aristotle, which is *potentially* all things»<sup>44</sup>. However Hegel is adamant that, as Kant had already shown in his anthropology, there is no zero degree of one or the other; it is never the case that the bodily or spiritual dimension prevails in absolute terms.

From the natural soul a transition is accomplished to the sentient soul. Here Hegel shows how through the senses the body introduces into the soul multiple and indistinct contents that build up that treasure, that night of safekeeping (the *Nacht der Aufbewahrung*, of which he speaks in the Jena writings), from which consciousness will progressively draw in the structur-

<sup>43</sup> *PhM*, § 392, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> *PhM*, § 389, p. 29.

ing of subjectivity. At this stage, Hegel writes, «everything is in sensation, and, if you like, everything that emerges in the conscious mind and in reason has its source and origin in sensation (*Quelle und Ursprung*)»<sup>45</sup>. Sensation is at the origin of reason and consciousness.

In this part, Hegel shows how, through the body, external stimuli are transformed and give rise to a «natural bodiliness», («*natürliche Leiblichkeit*»)<sup>46</sup>, the first step toward the *principium individuationis*<sup>47</sup>. The process of somatization or embodiment (*Verleiblichung*) now allows the internal content of the soul to flow outwards – reference goes here to the whole phenomenological account Hegel provides on how feelings such as modesty, fear, etc. are translated into bodily expression. At the same time, however, the body is also the medium through which the external world enters the subject and is transformed into ideal images and content recollection (*Verinnerlichung*).

In this way two distinct spheres of sensation emerge. One type of sensation is at first a determination of bodiliness (e.g. of the eye or of any physical part whatever), which becomes sensation by being driven *inward*, *recollected* (*erinnert*) in the soul's being-for-self. The other is the sphere of determinacies originating in the mind and belonging to it, which, in order to be sensed, in order to be as if found, become *embodied* (*verbleiblich*)<sup>48</sup>.

Thus, Hegel concludes, determinacy is established in the soul. And this gives rise to the system of organs in which spiritual determinations find concretization in the various parts of the body.

In the process of anthropological individuation of the bodily, a double movement is therefore at play, with the system of the senses establishing a relation to the world, and with their spiritual relapse as manifestation in which the body is animated and becomes alive.

With this reinterpretation of *anthropology*, Hegel shows the strength of the natural in the determination of the spiritual dimension, and how the soul «presupposes a world that affects it, no matter whether external or internal to it»<sup>49</sup>; in this way, the natural core is preserved yet without falling into a

<sup>45</sup> *PhM*, § 400, remark, p. 400.

<sup>46</sup> *PhM*, § 401, p. 72.

<sup>47</sup> L. Siep, *Leiblichkeit, Selbstgefühl und Personalität in Hegels Philosophie des Geistes*, in L. Eley (ed.), *Hegels Theorie des subjektiven Geistes in der "Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse"*, Königszburg & Neumann, Würzburg 2007, pp. 203-226.

<sup>48</sup> *PhM*, § 401, p. 72.

<sup>49</sup> F. Chiareghin, *L'Antropologia come scienza filosofica*, in *Filosofia e scienze filosofiche nell'"Enciclopedia" hegeliana del 1817*, Verifiche, Trento 1995, pp. 429-454, here p. 434.

form of naturalism. This not only provides Hegel with a way out of the discontinuity idea, the rupture, that is, between nature and spirit, and into an idea of nature as the place where the subject is embodied; but it also allows him to overcome a conception of nature as exteriority devoid of freedom.

## 6. *Embodied Idealism*

To sum up, for Hegel the body is not a mere instrument of expression, a semiotic field. The physical nature of corporeity is instead the key to the self-expression and self-realization of the soul. In the relationship with the soul, therefore, «the body is not abstractly denied, but rather concretely idealized»<sup>50</sup>. The process of emancipation from nature to spirit is possible only if the bodily element is integrated and read in its indissoluble unity with the soul<sup>51</sup>; in other words, spirit is possible only if ideas do not remain disembodied.

While the soul is *forma corporis*, that is to say, a substantial form, the body is *Bestimmung*, in the double sense of determination and destination, thanks to its ability to receive impressions, contents, sensations from the outside and to non-consciously retain them within itself, then allowing the spiritual part to develop its power. This process also presupposes an essential difference between humans and animals. The self-appropriation developing in the anthropology, starting from an all-natural dimension of humans and reaching the achievement of self-awareness, demonstrates the distinctiveness of humans with respect to animals. In fact, only humans, unlike animals, perceive themselves as other than themselves. This awareness requires the awareness that the soul has an irrepressible material side. For Hegel, therefore, what is at stake is not thinking the body as a place occupied by the spirit, but rather taking into account the bodily existence of the spirit<sup>52</sup>.

One should see, in this regard, that the process of subjectivation does

<sup>50</sup> Ch. Asmuth, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>51</sup> Angelica Nuzzo draws attention to the fact that a soul without a body would make no sense to Hegel. Although this aspect is already included in the third Kantian critique, Nuzzo underlines how Hegel makes it more inclusive, extending the dimension of thought to all living beings and including mechanism and chemistry as moments in the dialectic. Cfr. A. Nuzzo, *Leben und Leib in Kant und Hegel*, in «Hegel-Jahrbuch», 2007, pp. 97-101. On the link between the actualization of thought and embodiment, see also Ch. Halbig, *Objektives Denken. Erkenntnistheorie und Philosophy of Mind in Hegels System*, Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2002, pp. 125, 126.

<sup>52</sup> N. Mowad, *op. cit.*, pos. 830.



not follow only the path of idealization, that is to say of the subordination of the soul to the body. The process of somatization also shows in fact that subjectivity is the result of the developing action of the body in the direction of the soul. The subject is a living body. The body ceases to be a mere material substrate, also in response to its concern to keep the soul – a term with recovered dignity since disconnected from metaphysical connotations – safe from the excessive interference of the bodily mechanisms. While taking up these needs – which are typical of the anthropological and psychological accounts of his time – Hegel opposes the whole tradition built on the contrast between the ego – as immediate ego, soul or consciousness – and the body. As Aristotle had already understood in *De Anima*:

the soul is in the primary way that by which we live and perceive and think, so that it will be a sort of organization (*logos*) and a form, but not matter and a substrate. [...] Those to whom it seems that the soul is neither without body nor some kind of body understand things rightly. For it is not a body, but is something belonging to a body; and because of this it is present in a body, and in a body of this sort – not as our predecessors supposed when they fitted the soul into the body without additionally specifying in which body or in which sort, even though it appears that whatever happens to show up does not receive whatever it happens upon<sup>53</sup>.

Hegel retrieves this Aristotelian idea<sup>54</sup>, but also shows the ability to interact with the scientific theories of his time. This intense dialogue is no longer visible in the idea of the absolute spirit reached at the end, as the system is completed. It is instead prominent in the subjective spirit, inasmuch as it qualifies as a moment of transition, unfinished, and is based on a mutual exchange between the procedures of the sciences and the questions of philosophy. The openness of this dimension allows the development of a reflection on what remains enigmatic and never resolved once and for all: the being subjects of human beings.

In Hegel's view, the body is, in this respect, a threshold, a place that separates but also at the same time unites nature and spirit, me and you, subject and world, science and philosophy. The exceedance of the body with respect to the concept, in other words its reluctance to be caged and forced

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, transl. with an Introduction and Commentary by Ch. Shields, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2016, here book II, 414 a12-27, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> See *PhM*, § 378. On this point see A. Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001, in partic. chap. 8: *Aristotle's De anima and Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, pp. 234-347.

into the grid of a logical scheme, finds indeed in the Hegelian dialectic a possibility for full expression through the elements of contradiction and conflict. The body's resistance to its dissolution within a one-sided perspective, be it spiritualistic or naturalistic, is thoroughly articulated by Hegel's account – which, in this respect, can still today indicate a terrain for discussion concerning all forms of eliminativism or mentalism.

The active role of the body in the constitution of the spirit allows us to overturn the prejudice which sees Hegel's philosophy as a disembodied philosophy. Once returned to the body with its physical needs, its physiological connotations, its habitual attitudes, and the importance that Hegel acknowledges to it, the ultimate outcome of the system is then not the spirit that mortifies and sacrifices the corporeity but rather, in a total overturning, humanity in its tragically finite dimension, which all knowledge can but reckon.

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### Abstract

*Based on a new reading of some passages of the Phenomenology of Spirit and of the section on Anthropology of the Encyclopedia, the essay aims to provide a comprehensive account of the soul-body relationship in Hegel's philosophy. While dealing with the mind-body problem, on the basis of his dialectical understanding of the relationship between nature and spirit, Hegel presents a solution that has still largely remained unacknowledged. By reviewing the most significant passages of his proposal, the essay challenges the traditional interpretation of Hegelian philosophy as a disembodied idealism and reassesses its relationship with the sciences of the time.*

Keywords: Mind-body problem; Embodiment; Physiognomy; Phrenology; Dialectics.

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