

# Thinking Nothing

*Sebastian Rödl*

## *1. Absolute Knowledge*

It is a commonplace that the tradition of German Idealism, and specifically Hegel, recognized self-consciousness—the character of thought by which, in thinking what it does, thought thinks itself—to be the principle and the medium of philosophy. The medium: philosophy is the endeavor to express in language what is understood in self-consciousness, in thought's thinking itself. The principle: what is understood in philosophy is understood to have no ground outside that very understanding of it and in this sense to be its own principle.

Hegel presents philosophical understanding—the exposition of the self-consciousness of thought, of thinking thinking thinking—as absolute knowledge. While it seems to me that this is a commonplace in broad strands of the tradition of philosophy, it is not easily received today. Knowledge, people say, is fallible, reversible, forever transforming, a dynamic interminable process. Moreover, knowledge is pluriform, local, embedded. And it is shot through with blind spots, blurred with impurities, muddled by uncontrollable external conditions. Hegel did not appreciate this and hankered after an eternal, uniform, and self-transparent system of knowledge.

It seems to me that the conception of knowledge as reversible, situated, and intransparent, and its alleged superiority to the

idea that allegedly animates Hegel's philosophy, manifests a lack of familiarity with the idea of knowledge, namely, with the idea of absolute knowledge. This lack of familiarity is the deed of a pervasive naturalism, a naturalism by no means confined to the Anglo-American mainstream discourse. As it is pervasive, it is hard to remove. I think a good way to begin with the task of removing it, a good way to provide an opening for absolute knowledge and thus for philosophy and thus for Hegel, is to explain what it means and why it is that absolute knowledge is not knowledge of something, but knowledge of nothing. When it is seen that what is known in absolute knowledge is nothing, it will be a little more difficult to get the debunking discourse going, according to which it should be fallible, embedded, and blind to itself.

Nowadays, the main obstacle to the comprehension of the idea of absolute knowledge is naturalism. While naturalism is pervasive, there are tendencies today that reject it. It seems, however, that these are still too much in its thrall in order fully to break free from it. The tendencies I speak of are philosophical quietism, often presented as a radical realism, and formal idealism, a tendency in the wake of Kant and Kantianism. My exposition of the idea of absolute knowledge as knowing nothing thus will proceed by way of a passage through naturalism, formal idealism, and quietism.

## *2. The Absolute Abstraction*

It is hard to introduce the self-consciousness of thought. For it is everywhere. Let us catch it somewhere. Suppose I think snow is white. Indeed, I do think that. Now, in thinking snow is white, I understand myself to think that. No further act of the mind, specifically no further thought, is needed on the part of her who thinks snow is white in order for her to be conscious of thinking that snow is white. Thinking that snow is white is thinking oneself to think that. We may put this by saying that the thought

expressed by *snow is white* is the same as the one expressed by *I think snow is white*.

Now, when we say what we just did about *snow is white* and *I think snow is white*, we are not interested in what is expressed by *snow is white* specifically. Any sentence other than *snow is white*, as long as it expresses something capable of being thought, will do equally well. Thus, we may present our concern as one with *I think p* and *p*, using *p*, as is customary, in order indeterminately to indicate something thinkable. Then our thought is: thinking something, thinking *p*, and understanding oneself to think it, thinking *I think p*, are but one thought; *p* and *I think p* signify but one thing thought. Now our thought neither employs the idea of snow nor that of whiteness. It considers what is such as to be thought and the thinking of it. The only idea that figures in our thought is that of thought.

I said I would use the letter *p* in order indeterminately to indicate something thinkable. This is a familiar use of that letter. Let us consider the idea expressed by the letter so used.

Thinking something, we use concepts, concepts of something about which, using these concepts, we think. For example, we deploy the concept *white*. Such a concept has a content: it is determinate and so determines what we think through it, thinking it to be so. Here, the term “so” indeterminately signifies the concept’s content.

A concept’s determinacy may be considered from two sides: the concept is determinate, and it is determining. As a concept is determinate, it differs from *other concepts*: being white is not the same as being heavy; being snow is not the same as being grass. As a concept determines, namely, what is thought through it, it is a capacity to distinguish *one thing* from *other things*: what is heavy, in being heavy, differs from what is not heavy. Thus the determinacy of a concept is a double difference: the difference of the concept from other concepts, the difference of one “so” from other “so”s; and the difference of what is thought through

the concept from what cannot be thought through it, the difference of what is so from what is not so. The consciousness of this double difference is but one consciousness; it is the determinacy of the concept, the consciousness of it as determinate and thereby determining, or as determining by being determinate. A concept not understood to differ from other concepts—a concept that is not determinate—would not be a capacity to distinguish what is thought through it from other things—it would not determine. Conversely, a concept that did not provide for its use to distinguish something from something—a concept that did not determine—would therein prove not to be a consciousness of it as different from other concepts—it would not be determinate.

A determinate concept, a concept with content, may be more or less general. We ascend from a given concept to a more general one as we strip away determinations that the former contains; we abstract from these, as it may be put, or, perhaps better, we abstract (*abziehen*) the more general concept from the less general one. Just as the concept from which it is abstracted, the abstracted concept has a content. Its content is thinner. Yet it has a content: it differs from other concepts and is a capacity to distinguish one thing from another. Abstraction moves from content to content.

We may contemplate stripping a concept not of certain of its determinations, but of all determinacy. Call this the absolute abstraction. It may seem that the absolute abstraction is an especially thorough form of abstraction: it carries abstraction as far as it is at all possible. However, precisely because it takes abstraction to its limit, the absolute abstraction is no abstraction. Absolute abstraction annihilates all content and thus all difference of one concept from another. Hence, it does not proceed from any particular concept. It does not use, and therefore does not require, anything that a particular concept would give. On the contrary: it repels any determination that would be so given.

The absolute abstraction abstracts from any determination and thus annihilates all difference of one concept from another.

Therefore, in contrast to an abstracted concept, the absolute abstraction has no content. It is not a concept differing from other concepts. Hence, it does not distinguish one thing from another; thinking something through the absolute abstraction is not thinking it not to be otherwise than therein it is thought to be.

The absolute abstraction is not a particularly thorough form of abstraction. It is no abstraction at all. It is not an element, and therefore not the last element, in a series of concepts of ascending generality, developed by abstraction. It is not more general than concepts falling within such a series. Indeed, the absolute abstraction is not general at all. It cannot be introduced by examples, presented so as to draw attention to something they have in common. For it abstracts from all determination and thus from everything that something could have in common with something. In this way, the absolute abstraction is unique. I shall mark its uniqueness by calling it not “general” but “universal.” The absolute abstraction is the universal idea.

The universal idea does not arise from a particular concept. If it did arise from a particular concept, then any concept, no matter what its content, would give rise to it in the same way. Hence, what is thought in this idea is not this or that content. What is thought in this idea is content überhaupt, content as such. Content, here, is content thought. In the absolute abstraction, embracing the universal idea, thought turns to itself.

The letter *p*, indeterminately indicating something thinkable, signifies the universal idea; it expresses the absolute abstraction. Ordinary language supplies expressions that serve the purpose that *p* is called upon to serve in philosophical writing: “so it is”, “it is so”, “things are so”, “things are thus-and-so”. We can present the self-consciousness of thought by means of that ordinary locution: thinking that things are so, and thinking oneself to think that they are, is but one thought; there is but one thing thought in this thought. So the expression that, in ordinary language, gives voice to the absolute abstraction is “what is” or “being”, or, in

Ancient Greek, *to on* or *einai*. The absolute abstraction is the idea of being. Aristotle asserts that being is not a *genos*. This is the point I made above: the absolute abstraction is not a general concept. It is unique.

The absolute abstraction is thought thinking itself. Hegel describes Parmenides, who announces that being alone is and not-being not at all, as expressing the excitement of thought's embracing itself in its absolute abstraction. The idea of being that Parmenides announces is the universal idea. Hegel says this idea is thought embracing itself; it is thinking thinking thinking. Parmenides does not present himself, in so many words, as speaking thought's thought of itself. Yet that is what he does.

### *3. Naturalism, Formal Idealism, Quietism*

I want to distinguish three ways of understanding the turn of thought to itself, which can be encountered in the history of philosophy, as well as in today's discourse. These are three ways of understanding philosophy and the understanding it seeks. Thus they are three ways of understanding knowledge and thought.

It may seem that thought as it turns to itself turns to a certain thing. Thought is one among the many things that may be thought. Then, the idea of concept, thought, judgment has a content: it is determinate, differing from other concepts; and it determines, distinguishing what can be thought through it from what cannot. Thought thinking itself is not the absolute abstraction. It is an abstraction. It is a general concept, which isolates something that is common to many things (processes, states, acts, whatever term is felt to fit best). Accordingly, it makes sense to contemplate the possibility, or assert the actuality, of a special science whose object is circumscribed by this concept. One may want to call it thought-science, knowledge-science, cognition-science. Further, insofar as philosophy is different from science and is called, in order to

mark that difference, metaphysics, there will be a special branch of metaphysics that treats of thought: a metaphysics of thought or the mind. I refer to this conception of thought as naturalism, for it places thought among the objects of theoretical knowledge and in this sense in nature.

The second understanding of thought turning to itself recognizes that this turn is an abstraction from all content. Consequently, and in contrast to naturalism, it does not understand thought to be one among the many things that may be thought. Yet that second understanding of thought turning to itself maintains that something survives the abstraction in which thought thinks itself: as we abstract from all content of concepts, we are left with the form of a concept. There is something for thought to think as it thinks itself: its form; there are concepts deployed in thought thinking itself: formal concepts. So while the absolute abstraction remains an abstraction, a discontinuity is marked between the concept of thought and any concept that has content. A formal concept is not a general concept: it cannot be placed within a series of concepts of ascending generality, and it cannot be introduced by judiciously chosen examples. I call this understanding of thought thinking itself formal idealism. In contrast to naturalism, formal idealism does not allow for a science of thought. The form of thought is a necessary form of all knowledge and thus of any science. But the mere form of a science is not a science. Nor does formal idealism have room for a metaphysics of thought. It does allow for metaphysics, for the formal concept may acquire a content, which will be a pure content, pure, because it does not reflect any particular content, but a mere form according to which content is given. The exposition of that content then is metaphysics, of nature and of morals. Yet neither of these is a metaphysics of thought.

The third response to the idea of thought thinking itself is to deny that there is such a thing; it is to assert that the idea of absolute abstraction is incoherent. The absolute abstraction is said to

abstract from everything. Hence, nothing remains to be thought in this abstraction, not even a form. The absolute abstraction thinks nothing. This means that what presents itself as the absolute abstraction is an illusion of a thought and no thought at all. This response may be elaborated in the claim that the appearance of an absolute abstraction is generated by a misuse of language. In this misuse, expressions are presumed to say something, even while the conditions under which alone these expressions have a content are rejected. What they are then presumed to say is bound to be a queer sort of content. In the face of this, the task of the philosopher is to provide neither a metaphysics of nature and morals nor indeed a metaphysics of thought. Rather, the work of the philosopher is to dissolve the illusion that there is an intellectual activity that answers to these incoherent notions by unmasking the forms of expression used in the service of the imaginary task as saying nothing at all. I shall refer to that stance toward the universal idea as quietism, for it wants to heed what it understands to be Wittgenstein's injunction in the *Tractatus* and be quiet.

Hegel rejects all of these notions of thought thinking itself. Hegel rejects naturalism in the broadest possible sense: he rejects any conception that treats thought as one among the manifold objects of theoretical knowledge and in this way places thought in nature. For thought thinking itself is the absolute abstraction. Hence, the idea of thought is not a general concept. Therefore, there is no such thing as a science of thought, nor is there a metaphysics of thought.

Hegel equally rejects formal idealism. Formal idealism appreciates that thought thinking itself expels all content. Yet it conceives the absolute abstraction as an abstraction: it isolates something that all thoughts have in common. This is to be not a content, but a form. That form is a determination that thought possesses independently of all content. Laying out that form in a table of judgments or categories, we describe the intellect. Thought

thus appears to be a determinate power, its determination being captured by these tables. However, the absolute abstraction is no abstraction. Hence, thought is not a power distinguished from other powers. It transcends the concepts of substance, power, act.

Hegel insists that thought thinking itself thinks nothing. This does not mean he embraces quietism. For he rejects the notion that thinking nothing is not thinking. Seeing nothing is not seeing. This reflects that seeing needs something: something it sees. For that reason, seeing nothing can only be being without what one would need in order to see. Now, it happens that people think nothing in this way, that is, because they lack something that they would need in order to think. But this is not the absolute abstraction. The absolute abstraction thinks nothing not because it lacks content, but because it has shed all content. The absolute abstraction, precisely in thinking nothing, is so far from lacking something that it is the knowledge that thought does not need anything at all. This is to say that the absolute abstraction is absolute knowledge. Consequently, while there is not *a* metaphysics, no metaphysics of *something*, there is metaphysics: the absolute abstraction—thought thinking itself—is knowledge of being as such. And while there are sciences, there is no science of thought. For thought is understood through itself, which understanding is not a science, but philosophy.

These three responses to the universal idea along with Hegel's rejection of them can be represented as four ways of understanding self-consciousness. For the "itself" in "thought thinking itself" is the indirect reflexive that appears as prefix in "self-consciousness". The first response understands the self-consciousness of thought to be a consciousness with a determinate content: *I think* is a consciousness of, a reference to, a certain object, signified by *I*, applying to it a certain concept, signified by *think*. Its peculiarity as self-consciousness resides in its being a special form of reference to that object, which provides a special perspective on it, allowing a special manner of applying the predicate. The second response

understands self-consciousness to be a mere form and thus empty. *I think* does not represent anything and thus is not knowledge of anything. Rather, it is the mere form of a representation or of knowledge. The third response warns against understanding the first-person pronoun, insofar as it signifies the subjectivity of thought, to refer to a particular object and insists on its difference from any thought of an object. Yet it holds that there is no positive specification of the difference, which might constitute knowledge. Statements that present themselves as providing such a specification will at best have a therapeutic value. Absolute idealism, in contrast to all three of these responses, shows self-consciousness—thought thinking itself—to think nothing, therein thinking the whole. Absolute idealism understands self-consciousness to be absolute knowledge.

#### *4. The Determinacy of the Universal*

Thought's thought of itself thinks nothing: it is not a general concept, something that particulars may have in common and which distinguishes those that have it from those that do not. It may seem that, as nothing is thought in the universal idea, the exposition of it as absolute knowledge is meaningless. We fall silent. Yet the opposite is true. Philosophy thinks nothing. This means that it does not think this or that. It does not mean it does not think. Precisely not. Philosophy is thinking. It is not thinking this or that, but thinking. Equivalently, we may say, philosophy does not say this or that; rather, philosophy says. So far from being mute, philosophy is the opening up of speech as such. Therefore there is, in philosophy, not speech and counter-speech, *dictio* and *contra-dictio*. There is speech. Aristotle assigns to philosophy the office of expounding the law of non-contradiction, because that law is a principle of what is insofar as it is. When he engages the attempt to deny the law of non-contradiction, he does not refute

that denial. Rather, he shows the one who denies the law of non-contradiction to be mute, indeed, to mute himself. And Plato, in the *Sophistes*, is horrified by the idea of a loss of language on the ground that the loss of language would amount to the loss of philosophy. This is peculiar, for one might want to come up with a lot of other things that are lost as language is lost. When Plato mentions none of these, but does mention philosophy, this suggests that he considers philosophy to be wherever language is.

Quietism is the notion that what I said philosophy is is not: there is only thinking this or that, the quietist submits, there is no such thing as thinking. Now, the quietist cannot be refuted. Nor need they be, as long as they speak. This requires further elaboration. But we can say provisionally why it is an error to hold that the absolute abstraction is incapable of articulation, why it is an error to hold that there is no such thing as thinking, which is not thinking this or that, but thinking. The absolute abstraction is thought's turn to itself. Now, this turn, and here we return to our starting point, is the opening of a difference; it opens up the difference of I think p from p. This difference is not a difference of contents thought; it is the difference that thought, judgment, knowledge is. It is the difference of the universal idea, the difference that the universal idea itself is. The universal idea is difference and therewith determinacy: this, I submit, is Hegel's *Grundgedanke*. We encountered it above, when we observed that thinking something is thinking oneself to think it: the determinacy of thought, or its thinking something, is its universality, or its thinking itself.

Thought thinking itself thinks nothing. This rejects naturalism. Yet thinking nothing is not, precisely not, not thinking. The universal idea is determinacy. This rejects quietism. The determinacy of the universal idea is not provided from outside it, through its being given a content in the exercise of a separate faculty, sensibility. It is itself determinacy. This rejects formal idealism. Philosophy is the determinacy of the universal.

What I said here is not, not yet, anyway, an introduction to the idea of absolute knowledge. Perhaps it qualifies as the introduction to an introduction. For it may serve us in this way: when we encounter assertions that Hegel is a degenerate metaphysician of a bygone age, or, conversely, that he can provide us with the conceptual means by which we shall comprehend and overcome the travails of our present times, we should probe these assertions by asking whether, by their own understanding of themselves, they say something, or nothing. If they say something, we know they have nothing to do with Hegel, nor indeed with philosophy.