

Goethe, Hegel and Marx*

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Hegel's philosophical system rested on an appropriation of the concept which lay at the heart of Goethe's scientific work, the *Urphänomen*. In a sense, the *Urphänomen* is the *Urphänomen* of Hegel's philosophy: Hegel transformed and expanded this idea in his *Logic*, in which the place of the *Urphänomen* is taken by a Concept rather than a phenomenon. Marx in turn took this idea as the foundation for *Capital*, with the practice of commodity exchange being the *Urphänomen* of bourgeois society, but changed the relationship between conceptual and practical development. Each link in this chain turns the *Urphänomen* "inside out" in the act of appropriating it.

It is hardly controversial to point to a rapport between Hegel's philosophy and Goethe's scientific work. Indeed, Hegel repeatedly praised Goethe's *Theory of Colours* and cast himself and Goethe as comrades in the fight against Philistinism. Goethe's naturalistic Pantheism, his emphasis on development, his antipathy to Newtonian natural science and his holistic approach are widely recognised as attributes shared with Hegel. Indeed, in the words of Daniel Robinson: '[Hegel] and Beethoven were born in the same year. One set Goethe to music, the other to philosophy' (Robinson 1995, p. 287). But whereas Beethoven's admiration for Goethe was reciprocated, Goethe was far more measured in his appreciation of Hegel's philosophy. Indeed, if Hegel's idealism is contrasted with Goethe's 'delicate empiricism', the poet and the philosopher seem poles apart.

But the claim of this paper is that the key concept of Goethe's scientific work is the *Urphänomen* [archetypal phenomenon], and that the *Urphänomen* was appropriated by Hegel and transformed in such a way that it could be said to be the *Urphänomen* of Hegel's philosophy. Once this connection is made explicit, a reappropriation of Hegel's *Logic* suggests itself, highlighting the continuity of critical, holistic science extending from Goethe through Hegel to Marx.

Although the *Urphänomen* can be traced back as far as 1787 in Goethe's thinking, and the first trace of it in Hegel's writing appears in 1802/03, an exchange of letters in the last decade of their lives provides evidence of a recognition of this relationship by the two writers.

On 24 February 1821, Hegel wrote to Goethe highlighting the importance he attached to the *Urphänomen* and its place in Goethean science:

"This spiritual breath – it is of this that I really wished to speak and that alone is worth speaking of – is what has necessarily given me such great delight in Your Excellency's exposition of the phenomena surrounding entopic colours. What is simple and abstract, what you strikingly call the *Urphänomen*, you place at the very beginning. You then show how the intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates

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the concrete phenomena, and you regulate the whole progression so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite, and so that the complex now appears in full clarity through this decomposition. To ferret out the *Urphänomen*, to free it from those further environs which are accidental to it, to apprehend as we say abstractly – this I take to be a matter of spiritual intelligence for nature, just as I take that course generally to be the truly scientific knowledge in this field” (Hegel 1984, p. 698).

Hegel goes on to speak of his philosophical appropriation of the *Urphänomen*:

“But may I now still speak to you of the special interest that an *Urphänomen*, thus cast in relief, has for us philosophers, namely that we can put such a preparation – with Your Excellency’s permission – directly to philosophical use. But if we have at last worked our initially oyster-like Absolute – whether it be grey or entirely black, suit yourself – through towards air and light to the point that the Absolute has itself come to desire this air and light, we now need window placements so as to lead the Absolute fully out into the light of day” (Hegel 1984, p. 699).

Here Hegel recognizes that in Goethe’s hands, the concept escapes the airless depths of the philosopher’s study, into the light of day where it connects up with Nature and the everyday life of the people. And he observes:

“the two worlds greet each other: our abstruse world and the world of phenomenal being. Thus out of rocks and even something metallic Your Excellency prepares for us granite, which we can easily get a handle on because of its Trinitarian nature and which we can assimilate”(Hegel 1984, p. 699).

By “Trinitarian” Hegel refers to granite “as a compound of quartz, felspar, and mica” (2009/1830, p. 288). Hegel rejected the geologists’ view of granite as an arbitrary compound of different matters, and saw within the formation of granite the action of a logical triad which comes to fruition in the moments of the Subjective Concept, viz., Universal, Individual and Particular. Thus Hegel is here indicating, albeit obscurely, that he assimilates the *Urphänomen* by means of the three moments of the abstract concept which acts as the subject and starting point of a science. Notwithstanding the delicacy and obscurity of this criticism, it is fundamental, for Goethe’s *Urphänomen* is a product of the kind of “intellectual intuition” which Hegel was dead set against.

Goethe responded to Hegel’s letter on 13 April, sending him the gift of an optical prism and an opaque stained glass wine glass which Goethe had referred to in the *Theory of Colours*, with a note saying:

“Seeing that you conduct yourself so amicably with the *Urphänomen*, and that you even recognize in me an affiliation with these demonic essences, I first take the liberty of depositing a pair of such phenomena before the philosopher’s door, persuaded that he will treat them as well as he has treated their brothers” (Hegel 1984, p. 693).

and dedicating the wine glass as follows:

“The *Urphänomen* very humbly begs the Absolute to give it a cordial welcome.”

In this way, Goethe acknowledged the compliment Hegel had paid him and gave recognition to this lynch-pin connecting their work.

First let us look at Goethe's idea of the *Urphänomen*.

GOETHE

As he described in his *Italian Journey* (1787/1962), in discussion with his friend Johann Gottfried Herder, Goethe arrived at the concept of *Urphänomen* by observing the variation of plants at different altitudes and latitudes in Italy. He studied the plants by making botanical sketches of them and sensuously familiarising himself with all the variations of what he took to be the same basic archetype. Each plant, he believed, was a realization according to conditions, of an underlying form which he called the *Urpflanze*. This idea was inspired by Herder's *Schwerpunkt* – the 'strong point' of a people, their defining experience or industry, which (in Marx's words) "is a general illumination which bathes all other colours and modifies their particularity" (Marx 1973/1858, p. 107; c.f. Herder 2004/1774; Berlin 1976, p. 186).

Goethe's emphasis on sensuousness rather than reason stands in stark contrast to Hegel, something which Hegel acknowledges with polite approval in his letter, referring to the need for philosophy to have a seat by the window. But the idea is not in fact totally foreign to Hegel. In his *System of Ethical Life* (1799/1804), written in Jena in 1802/3, Hegel sketches the development of culture in terms of people acquiring concepts through the creation and use of crops, domestic animals and tools, which are at one and the same time, both products of human labour and norms of labour, and which human beings acquire as subjective thought forms by working with them. Although emphasising *activity* rather than contemplation, this does connect with Goethe's claim that we can acquire the idea of the plant by sustained observation. Equally, one is reminded of Goethe's report of his meeting with Schiller in Jena in July 1794 in which he showed Schiller a sketch of a plant, and over Schiller's objections observed 'that I have ideas without knowing it, and can even see them with my own eyes' (Goethe 1988b/1809, p. 20).

This practical side of working with artefacts is invisible in Hegel's later works, and Hegel belittled the use of likenesses as signs for concepts, for example, in his comments (1971, §459n) on hieroglyphics and Chinese characters. Further, Hegel is concerned with products of labour, whereas Goethe is concerned with products of nature. Nonetheless, both writers recognized, and indeed began from, material objects as universal representations of a concept. For Hegel, "the tool is the persistent norm of labour ... speech is the tool of Reason" (1803-4/1979, p. 113), so Reason is as rooted in human practical activity as it is in speech.

But whilst insisting on the sensuous character of the *Urphänomen*, Goethe was also adamant that the *Urphänomen* represented the *idea* of the genus, *not* its contingent attributes, and was *not* arrived at by the *abstraction* of common attributes, but on the contrary by the *discarding* of everything accidental. So when Hegel observed in the above letter that Goethe begins with what is 'simple and abstract', we see that the *Urphänomen* is indeed abstract in the Hegelian sense of the word.

Goethe took the *Urphänomen* to be the starting point for a science, but it is a beginning in a special sense. The revelation of the *Urphänomen* is the outcome of a protracted period of 'delicate empiricism' leading up to its discovery. The discovery of the

Urphänomen marks a nodal point in the development of the science, an *aperçu* which makes possible a leap from contemplation of exemplars to representation of the whole by means of a simple archetype. After this leap, the science develops by the unfolding of what is already implicit in the *Urphänomen*. For example, Goethe boasted (1962) that he could *invent* an infinite variety of plants from the *Urpflanze*. Hegel gives recognition to this aspect of the *Urphänomen* when he praised Goethe for showing “how intervention of further spheres of influence and circumstances generates the concrete phenomena, ... so that the succession proceeds from simple conditions to the more composite.” It is *this* which attracted Hegel’s admiration, rather than Goethe’s Empiricism.

The *Urphänomen* provides an authentic conception of a whole complex process. Although a word such as ‘Nature’ will accumulate connotations and associations which contribute to it becoming a more concrete representation, it remains just a word. But in itself, the word ‘Nature’ or any other word offers no royal road to a conception of the whole. “On its own, this is a meaningless sound, a mere name” (2010/1807, p. 19). Further, a concept defined as the set of all those objects sharing some common attribute simply shifts the problem from the noun to the adjective without advancing understanding of the entity. The concept of a complex process may also be approached through the connection of the thing to the social practice in which it arises, or by its subsumption under some already-known genus, but such approaches only bring us to the threshold of the concept. Something more is needed.

Goethe’s brilliance was his demonstration that the whole can be conceived as an integral *Gestalt* (a ‘shape’ or ‘formation’), only by finding a particular in which the essential properties of the complex whole are exhibited, and accessible to the human mind because it is given immediately to the senses. This conception is directly opposed to the Newtonian approach of making the whole process a production of some hypothetical ‘vibration’ or ‘force’ which is in principle unavailable to the senses. As Hegel explained in his critique of the Newtonian notion of force in the *Logic* (1969/1816, pp. 178ff; 2009/1830, pp. 297ff), the concept of a force merely displaces the problem from a form of motion given to the senses to a suprasensible metaphysical cause, redescribing the problem rather than solving it. Goethe’s approach is also in direct opposition to the analytical method which aims to assemble the whole system from the disparate elements composing it, rather than unfolding the whole from that one unit which already has the *essential* properties of the whole.

Despite being a particular, the *Urphänomen* is the viscerally apprehended principle which allows us to conceptualize a complex whole as a *Gestalt* – not as an empty symbol, nor as the product of an external metaphysical cause, nor an arbitrary common attribute externally uniting a collection of objects.

The *Urphänomen* is the idea of the complex whole, but as a really-existing form accessible to the human imagination because it is given to our senses. It is not a stereotype or typical in any sense, because it is stripped of everything inessential, an archetypal phenomenon. It is not the first in time, like the Darwinian original of a species, but that which is *logically* the most primitive. The discovery of the *Urphänomen* crowns the pre-history of a science, after which realizations of the *Urphänomen* follow by *necessity*.

Goethe died shortly before microscopes developed sufficient power to reveal the microstructure of plants and animals and the cell was discovered. Goethe could never

have imagined what the microscope would reveal, but the *Urphänomen* anticipated the cell, which, alongside evolution by natural selection, laid the foundation of modern biology.

To those who are familiar with Goethean science, all this is old news. Those who are familiar with Hegel's *Logic* will already see echoes of Hegel's concept in Goethe's idea. But let us trace how Hegel appropriated the *Urphänomen*.

HEGEL

Although it is Hegel's earliest works which are most explicitly concerned with human activity and culture, it is in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2010/1807) that the connection between the Logic and life is demonstrated.

In order to resolve the contradictions in Kant's transcendental philosophy, Hegel examined the self-development of thought as it is manifested in the development of real forms of human activity, in particular in the history of philosophy and in the development of states and religion. The *Phenomenology* includes *Bildungsromane*¹ on various themes, but what was epoch-making in the *Phenomenology* was that rather than thought being the activity of an individual subject reflecting on a natural object, subject and object are taken together in a definite form of activity, mediated by its own constellation of cultural artefacts (art, literature, architecture, tools, land, etc.).

Each of the subject-objects whose *Bildungsromane* are being told here are *Gestalten* (*Gestalten des Bewußtseins*, formations of consciousness), which can be taken to refer to a project with shared norms (c.f. Pinkard 1996, p. 48). According to Terry Pinkard the *Gestalten* can be looked at as:

“forms of life that have come to take certain types of reason as authoritative for themselves” (1998, p. 5) so that “The *Phenomenology* offers a dialectical-historical narrative of how the European community has come to take what it does as authoritative and definitive for itself.” (1998, p. 13)

The point was: how to conceive of each *Gestalt* as an integral *whole*, as a ‘shape’ or ‘formation of consciousness’ rather than a contingent set of properties.

As was mentioned above, there are a number of competing ways of conceptualising a complex entity such as those formed by the collaborative activity of people en masse. The most well-established means of conceiving of what Hegel calls a formation of consciousness is through some attribute shared by all the individual participants (citizenship, place of residence, religious affiliation, language, occupation, income group, etc.). This is the well-known method of abstract empiricism, practised in sociology departments to this day.

Alternatively, the study of individuals deemed to belong to the formation may proceed on the basis that every individual is a *microcosm* of the formation of which they are a part – the light of the whole being reflected in every one of the parts, and study of a concrete individual allows a deeper understanding of the whole. But this can only be a part of the process of investigation, as it does not answer the question as to what constitutes the whole, its extent and unifying characteristics. Alternatively the whole

¹ *Bildungsromane* is the plural of *Bildungsroman*, a novel of cultural-development or personal growth.

may be broken up into elements or parts – industry, politics, population, and so on. But the selection of parts already assumes much of what is to be discovered.

Other approaches include the structural and functional methods, but these, like the conceptions of Newtonian physics, ascribe the behaviour of the whole to metaphysical entities which themselves require explanation. Hegel subjected such methods to critique in the *Logic*, but it was essentially the solution suggested by Goethe which he adopted as his own. This was made clear in the letter quoted above in how Hegel describes Goethe's use of the *Urphänomen* in such a way that it is clearly recognizable as identified with the abstract concept in Hegel's *Logic*. Goethe's idea of the simple, archetypal form arising from contemplation of the subject matter, followed by the unfolding of the science out of this simple concept is reflected in the structure of the *Logic*, and each of the books of the *Encyclopædia*.

Although Goethe's concept of *Urphänomen* is turned inside out by Hegel, and again later by Marx, I will henceforth use the word 'Urphänomen' despite the changes in meaning; so for Hegel, the *Ur*-phenomenon is really an *Ur*-concept.

Hegel approached the problem of conceiving the *Gestalten* as a complex of shared thought-forms (i.e., forms of activity). Hegel's idea was that the *Gestalten* have a tripartite structure in which the forms of life, ways of thinking and constellations of culture mutually constitute one another. This he had already settled in his earlier systems. In order to grasp such *Gestalten* as wholes, he had to determine the *Urphänomen* which expressed the concept of the *Gestalt*. His solution was that within the terms of any such project, there would be an ultimate, authoritative concept of truth, its founding principle or court of last resort, so to speak, and that forms of activity and disputes could freely unfold until 'the buck stops' at that touchstone concept, that ultimate criterion of what is right. Such a 'foundational' concept, however, will inevitably reach the limits of its applicability and fail, and ultimately must be transcended. Consequently, any given *Gestalt* will at some point fall into crisis, because no principle can avoid at some point falling into contradiction with its own implications. All such concepts are relative, and at some point reach their limit. Unless a people subjects their own laws and practices to sceptical self-criticism, a level of coherence which can generate such contradictions could not develop, and nor could the kind of crisis which ultimately leads to the demise of a formation and opens the way to its replacement by a new concept of truth. When this kind of sceptical internal critique is not present then the culture is effectively dead and it stagnates. (Pinkard, 1998, p. 12)

Thus we see that in every formation of consciousness there is one concept which lies at its heart. This *abstract* concept is the *Urphänomen* of the given *Gestalt*, it is the simplest, most abstract and logically most primitive or archetypal concept of the complex form of life. The *Gestalt* develops through the immanent critique of its concept, the effect of which is to transform the initially abstract concept into a concrete concept, which has merged with its object and actualised itself in a real, elaborated form of activity. We can think of the *Gestalt* as a project (Science, America, Socialism, Family, ...), which can be taken as a realisation of a concrete concept of its own *raison d'être*, the concept which ultimately determines what is right and true according to the lights of the given project.

The linking of Hegel's conception of the place of an abstract concept within its *Gestalt*, with Goethe's conception of the place of the *Urphänomen* in its *Gestalt* still leaves a

number of questions unresolved, but these issues can be clarified if we move to Hegel's mature system as first presented in the *Science of Logic*.

The Phenomenology and the Logic*

Although Hegel never updated the *Phenomenology* and maintained it unchanged as representative of his early work, he never refuted it, and it remains a unique record of his view of the development of formations of consciousness, that is, of *manifest spirit*, and the *Logic* is to be interpreted as the *truth of manifest spirit*, or the *pure essentialities* of the *Phenomenology* (1969/1816, p. 28). This observation clarifies the oft-disputed question as to what the *Logic* is the logic of. At the completion of the development of manifest spirit, when Spirit arrives at absolute knowledge and is able to look back on itself, Spirit can abstract the truth of its own development in the form of the logic of these *Gestalten*. This it is able to do because there are people who have arrived at (what Hegel counted as) philosophical thought and are capable of reflecting on the history of thought and understanding the *Logic*. Without people capable of thinking critically in concepts, and the institutions, words and forms of knowledge which make this possible, it is not possible to have a *Logic*. (See Kaufmann, p. 44).

An abstract concept is a unit or 'cell' of a 'formation of consciousness', and so, like the *Phenomenology*, has its three aspects which mutually constitute one another. Only in this sense is a concept something given in experience rather than a subjective thought-form existing in some phantom world. The common trope of describing the content of the *Logic* in terms of concepts which 'move' makes no sense so long as the content of the *Logic* is taken to be subjective thought-forms (for example, Stephen Houlgate (2005) uses eleven different psychological or metaphysical metaphors to describe how concepts 'move'). It makes sense only if the content of the *Logic* is understood as the pure essentialities of *manifest spirit*. For all its abstractness and obtuseness, the *Phenomenology* speaks of an empirical domain in which the *Logic* can be validated. The idea of the *Phenomenology* is that movement and change in Spirit is constituted by rational criticism of the norms, laws and customs prevailing in the given formation of consciousness. Consequently, the appropriate form of exposition of the science of its pure essentialities is *logical argument*. This makes sense of the form and content of the pure essentialities of the *Phenomenology* as the *Logic*.

Further, Hegel indicates that at least in the initial stages, the concepts of the *Logic* also constitute *Urphänomen* of corresponding *Gestalten des Bewußtseins*, i.e., concepts which express the view of certain figures in the history of philosophy. The concepts of the *Logic* are therefore not laws or principles standing aside from Spirit, like Newtonian forces, but are themselves also forms of manifest spirit. This makes it possible to see the sense in which the thought-forms which make up the content of *Logic* are themselves also manifest as ideal phenomena.

So Goethe's demand that a science must begin with a *phenomenon*, albeit an abstract and ideal phenomenon, and not a metaphysical principle, can therefore be met even in this most abstract of Hegel's works, the *Logic*. This is provided that the tripartite

* I have set out my approach to the *Logic* at length in the form of a review of Houlgate's *Introduction to Hegel*, entitled *The Subject Matter of the Logic* (2007), and in a Foreword to a publication of the *Shorter Logic* (2009) and the argument here can only be schematic.

understanding of *Gestalten des Bewußtseins* is carried over into the *Logic*. The truth of Spirit does not stand outside Spirit, but is one of its shapes.

The *Logic* therefore begins with the concept of Being, marking the historical beginning of philosophical reflection, the concept whose only presupposition is the existence of a community of people capable of philosophical reflection. The concept of Being is subjected to immanent critique, that is, subjected to logical criticism within the scope of arguments inherent within the concept of Being itself. This critique of Being constitutes Hegel's Ontology, the First Book of the *Logic*, elaborated as a *critical science*.

The Circles of Philosophy

Hegel's Ontology is a science which is elaborated entirely by an immanent critique of the concept of Being. But the concept of Being, and consequently the *Logic* itself, does not arise from within the science, but arises out of the *Phenomenology*, as its truth.

The whole form of movement which Hegel discloses in the science of Being – seriality, in which one concept passes away and is replaced by another – is unique to and characteristic of this science, and arises out of the *Urphänomen*. Ontology develops by a rational critique of the concept of Being, but the concept of Being itself arises from the history of philosophy, as a problem of manifest spirit. There is nothing inherent in these five letters of the alphabet, B-E-I-N-G, that can provide a subject for critique; the word 'Being' derives its content from the history of philosophy.

As Hegel famously said:

“Science exhibits itself as a circle returning upon itself, the end being wound back into the beginning, the simple ground, by the mediation; this circle is moreover a circle of circles, for each individual member as ensouled by the method is reflected into itself, so that in returning into the beginning it is at the same time the beginning of a new member. Links of this chain are the individual sciences, each of which has an *antecedent* and a *successor* – or, expressed more accurately, *has only the antecedent* and *indicates its successor* in its conclusion.” (1969/1816, p. 842)

Ontology is one of these circles. It is a circle because it is contained within the closed circle of deductions from a single abstract concept, and in its conclusion creates its own ground. It does not deduce its successor science, but merely indicates the *Urphänomen*, or abstract concept, for the starting point for the succeeding science. It is not solved within the circle of the former science.

This is an aspect of the *Urphänomen* which Goethe had not identified: although it is part of a self-reproducing *Gestalt*, the archetype arises from a deeper level of reality, and undergoes a transformation in the formation of the *Gestalt* of which it is a unit – the single cell differs in important respects from the cell of an organism.

The *Logic* is itself a circle of circles containing three sciences: Ontology (the science of Being), Essence (the science of Reflection) and Notion (the science of the Concept). Each of these sciences begins with a simple abstract concept (Being, Reflection, Concept), a concept which is posed but not formulated or deduced by the preceding science. The word which is to form the abstract starting point of the new science gains its semantic content from the preceding or underlying science. In order to make the starting point for a new science, the word must be identified with a concept, and it is this simple concept which is the *Urphänomen*.

Two things need to be taken note of here. Firstly, the form of movement is not the same in each science. Every science unfolds the content of its concept in its own unique way. In Being, each concept passes away and is replaced by its successor, and the form of movement is *seriality*. In Essence, the former relation does not pass away but remains, although pushed to the background, and the form of movement is *diversification*. In the science of the Concept, the form of movement is *development*, with each new relation incorporated into the concept and merged with it. The form of movement is implicit in the *Urphänomen* and is not fixed.

Secondly, the science of the Concept is not just an exemplar but also an exposition of the development of a science from its *Urphänomen*, whereas the sciences of Being and Reflection together describe those phases of a science culminating in the discovery of the *Urphänomen*. So, we expect to find Hegel's conception of the *Urphänomen* in the first section of the science of the Concept. Every concept is itself (the central norm or ideal of) a project, a form of human activity centred around a corresponding sign arising from its conditions and reproducing those conditions. The movement in each circle begins from a concept which is abstract (in the sense of being immature) but concrete (in the sense that it is given immediately from the foregoing science), and ends with the same concept but concrete (in the sense that it has been fully worked out and 'concretised') but abstract (in the sense that it is now very remote from its immediate beginning). Hegel applies this principle consistently throughout the *Encyclopaedia*.

The *Philosophy of Nature* for example, is unfolded out of the concept of *Space*. In this way Hegel sought to demonstrate the intelligibility of Nature. At first sight, this may appear absurd, and like Goethe's *Theory of Colours* would nowadays be subject to ridicule. But the great achievement of twentieth century natural science, Einstein's theory of relativity, was, much as Hegel required, unfolded out of a critique of (the practice of measuring) distance and time, with Newton's forces reduced to the status of appearances. In fact, much as industry, observation and experiment have played the leading part in the ever-expanding activity of the natural sciences, it is only insofar as its concepts can be *logically* derived from simple premises that Nature can be said to be intelligible. But Hegel did not foresee how, as scientific and technical activity developed, new contradictions would be brought to light and a *Philosophy of Nature* would in turn be subject to fundamental revision. He hoped by ideological critique alone to be able to construct a *Philosophy of Nature*. "Each individual is the son of his age," (1953/1831) and so is his *Philosophy of Nature*.

Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* for example, is unfolded out of the concept of private property (abstract right, in Hegel's terminology), which arose as a resolution of problems in Subjective Spirit. The *Philosophy of Right* takes in economics, the state and world history, all to be unfolded from the concept of private property. The experience of past centuries lends plausibility to the claim that modern history is intelligible only insofar as it can be seen to unfold from private property.

In summary, having turned the *Urphänomen* inside out, Hegel adopted the model of science proposed by Goethe, the model in which the essential properties of an entire complex of phenomena is revealed in its simplest particular unit. He differed however by 180 degrees on the question of the origins of this archetypal concept; for Hegel such a concept could not be formulated by 'intellectual intuition' and passive contemplation of a phenomenon, as in Goethe's 'delicate empiricism', but arose from critical reflection on the historical development of human activity.

The Logic

Whilst Goethe showed how an authentic *Gestalt* is conceivable only through the apprehension of its simplest particular phenomenon, the basic principle discovered in the *Urphänomen* still remained to be developed. It is one thing to be able to arrange a collection of natural phenomena in sequence (as Goethe would do), but to reveal the *logic* of the *morphology* is possible only if the *Urphänomen* is transformed into a true concept. Goethe's *Urphänomen* is after all a phenomenon, not a true concept. In itself it is insufficient for the development of a true science. This brings us to Hegel's unique development of Goethe's idea which marks his science off from that of the great naturalist and poet.

Whereas Goethe relied upon the intuitive grasp of a process arising from sensuous apprehension of the *Urphänomen*, Hegel had to work out the structure of a *concept*. He first developed his idea in terms of the acquisition of concepts and the construction of culture by using tools and language, the raising of children and participation in institutions. The tripartite structure of the *Phenomenology* expressed the ideas which were given finished expression in the *Science of Logic*, but now in an abstract, logical form, as the truth of the *Phenomenology*. The Logic progresses by disclosing the limits of a class of propositions of the form: "Everything is C," where C is some concept. The resulting *categorical logic* discloses the limits of a concept and thereby produces the basis for a new concept.

In the first section of the Science of the Concept, Subjectivity, Hegel presents the concept as having three 'moments': Universal, Individual and Particular. Each of these moments can be understood as moments of a syllogism; but the *Logic* is the truth of the *Phenomenology* which concerns concepts as identities of a way of thinking, a way of living and a constellation of culture; so we must read the moments of the syllogism in a corresponding way.

Reading the *Logic* as the logic of development of formations of consciousness (such as sciences), a Universal indicates an artefact such as a word or sign or artefact, but more precisely an ideal. The Individual indicates an immediate single thing or event (or the thought of it: Hegel does not rely on an inside/outside distinction), an instance of what may be signified by the Universal.

The Particular indicates an instance of human practice by means of which the Individual is connected to the Universal and vice versa, whether that be pointing, signification of any kind or using something in the course of an activity signified by the Universal; more precisely, *norms*, not actual practices. The Logic is concerned only with what is rational in human activity, so the categorical logical relations between these norms and ideals form the substance of the Logic.

So a concept is the identity or 'unity' of these three moments. This is a far more active conception of *Urphänomen*. Rather than being taken as a moment of immediate, passive contemplation, from which the development of the complex whole is intuited, Hegel's abstract concept is self-mediated, and by means of the analysis modelled by Hegel in the Science of the Concept, an entire science can be elaborated from it by rational development. Hegel claims to elaborate the Logic by logical analysis alone and there is no appeal to history or observation in the *Logic*, or even in the *Philosophy of Right*, except by way of illustration.

Goethe insisted "that everything in the realm of fact is already a theory" (Goethe 1988, p. 307), but he was not able to give positive expression to this insight in his conception

of the *Urphänomen*; he still saw the *Urphänomen* as something given to experience, independently of human activity. Hegel provided the solution to this contradiction. The *Gestalt* can be grasped in a single concept only insofar as the *Urphänomen* is taken as a concept.

Hegel demonstrated that an entire science may be generated out of the abstract concept of its subject matter, and it should be clear that Goethe's general idea of the *Urphänomen* is insufficient for this task. The unit of a formation of consciousness is a concept, and only when the *Urphänomen* is rendered as a concept, may Goethe's original intention be realised. The entire *Gestalt* is reflected in its every concept, and may be generated out of its *Ur*-concept. This is true of any *Gestalt*, whether we take that *Gestalt* to be an entire social formation, a science or a practical project.

Clark Butler put it this way in his commentary on the letter quoted above:

“Goethe's *Urphänomen* became for Hegel sensory actualizations – or at least analogues – of the abstract schemata of his *Logic*. And Goethean ‘natural science’ is thus transformed into Hegelian ‘natural philosophy’. Hegel is aware that the shadowy world of pure imageless thought in the *Logic*, which grounds Goethean natural science just as Goethean science in turn lends tangibility to the same logical abstractions, is considered inaccessible by Goethe. But he requests the poet's indulgence for philosophy” (1984, p. 693).

Although Butler accurately perceived the relationship, he rated Goethean science as worthless and sees only a “shadowy world of pure imageless thought” in the *Logic*. In fact, Goethe's conception of science deserves to be taken seriously. Two hundred years ago, before the discovery of the cell and Darwin's theory of natural selection, he could not have fully work out his idea. But Hegel did see how to give the *Urphänomen* real substance, and how a concept understood as the unity of individual, particular and universal moments as outlined in the *Logic*, has the internal resources to found a science.

In appropriating Goethe's *Urphänomen*, Hegel turned Goethe “inside out,” making his starting point an archetypal concept rather than an archetypal phenomenon. This is why I say that the *Urphänomen* is the *Urphänomen* of Hegel's philosophy, and not simply its starting point.

Taken together, what Goethe and Hegel have to say for science is this: in order to conceptualise a complex phenomenon as a *Gestalt*, it is necessary to form a concept of its simplest *archetypal* phenomenon; this archetype is not to be a principle or force or structure which is in principle outside of and beyond experience, but on the contrary, is *given in experience*. The semantic content of this archetypal phenomenon is drawn from an underlying level of reality, and exhibits all the properties of the complex whole, while being simple and elementary. Marx continued this tradition of holistic science and made it the *Urphänomen* for his critique of political economy.

MARX

In his first draft of a critique of political economy, *The Grundrisse* (1858/1859), Marx committed himself to a research program modeled on Hegel's *Logic* in the passage “Method of Political Economy,” and by 1859 he had settled on the commodity relation as the *Urphänomen* of bourgeois political economy, and realized this idea in the

completion of Volume I of *Capital* (1996/1867). But before tracing this development, we must note the philosophical basis on which Marx would critically appropriate Hegel's Logic.

Activity and Concepts.

In the very first words which belong to his mature views, Marx (1976/1845) criticises philosophical materialism for accepting the standpoint of natural science: that of an observer contemplating an independently existing object. Objects exist, distinct from thought; however, it is only thanks to 'practical-critical' activity that the object is perceived and reconstructed in thought. Marx insisted that neither abstract thought nor sensuous perception form the subject matter of science, but *activity*. By 'activity' (or 'praxis' or 'social practice') is meant not an outer manifestation of inner thoughts, but rather a *whole* from which thinking and behaviour may be abstracted. But a form of social practice may exist for centuries before anyone has formulated a concept of it, and likewise, utopian concepts may exist without any real basis in social life.

So Marx explicitly substituted *social practices* for Hegel's *Gestalten des Bewußtseins*, real activities rather than their shadows.

In "The Method of Political Economy" (1973/1858), Marx asks why, more than 2,000 years since Aristotle first puzzled over the concept of exchange-value, it was only in the 19th century that the secret of the formation of exchange-value and its ramifications were disclosed. According to Hegel, the growing understanding of economic categories such as exchange-value, was a result of the theoretical work of political economists who scientifically developed the content of the concepts of political economy. Most people would understand the progress of natural science in much the same way: as a long train of problem-solving, each building on the solutions of those before them. But this doesn't stand up does it? Human activity develops in its own way. Gradually, over millennia, all the aspects of the concept of exchange-value were actualised as real relations, ultimately in the form of money and capital. In modern bourgeois society, the concept of exchange-value has reached its ultimate development, and the theorist has only to reflect on what is *before her or his eyes*, through the development of activity itself – science appropriates concepts which have already been 'worked out' in practical life.

To make sense of Hegel's idea, concepts have to be understood as in the first place forms of activity, not as the product of theoreticians. Theoreticians can only study what is to be found in practical activity, at least implicitly if not explicitly. So even though Hegel may have lost sight of this, and mistakenly taken social progress to be the work of theoreticians, his *Logic* retains its validity, provided only that concepts are interpreted as forms of practical activity, and not solely as subjective thought-forms or figures of categorical logic.

Hegel himself repeatedly warns us that Philosophy "cannot consist in teaching the state what it ought to be; it can only show how ... it is to be understood" (1952/1821, p. 11) and advises us that "the Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk" (p. 13), but he never stops finding wisdom in thought alone. Marx took Hegel's warnings to heart far more consistently than Hegel ever did.

The Method of Political Economy

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx explained the history of any science as being made up of two phases as follows:

“It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, ... However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed... Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations.”

and then:

“From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. ...

“The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.” (1973/1858, p. 100)

This passage describes the structure of Hegel’s *Logic*. The starting point of a science is the mass of measurements abstracted from the flow of data. This phase is represented in Hegel’s Doctrine of Being, a phase of observation and measurement which precedes scientific reflection as such. The journey begins when these measurements are worked over, reflected on and worked up into patterns and laws and a theoretical description of the data. The first phase of the development of a science (“the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins,” p. 100) is complete when it arrives at the ‘simplest determination’, the singular entity which exhibits the essential relations of the whole process. This first phase is accomplished in the history of the science by means of *immanent critique* of the concepts abstracted from Being, and is represented by Hegel in the Doctrine of Essence.

The second phase is reconstructing the whole, now not as a chaotic conception, but as a systematic whole, a whole which exhibits in developed form the essential features with which we are familiar in the unit from which we began. This second phase – *systematic dialectic* (“obviously the scientifically correct method.” p. 101) is represented by Hegel in the Doctrine of the Concept. For Marx, this *Urphänomen* would be not a phenomenon or a concept, but an inter-action observable in social practice, a familiar social act which we can viscerally understand, an *Ur-praxis*, in the case of political economy – the exchange of commodities. In each stage of the reconstruction, the concepts logically derived from the *Urphänomen*, are validated by their objective existence in social practice. The resulting concrete reconstruction (which in the Logic Hegel represented as ‘Nature’) differs from the data with which the analysis began

(‘Being’) because it is a *systematic whole* rather than a mere succession of abstract qualities.

Marx realised this plan of work, his own part in the history of political economy, through many years of immanent critique of the rival theories of political economy, followed by a systematic reconstruction of bourgeois society in *Capital*.

The Commodity

In the first Preface to *Capital*, where Marx is talking about the problem of value in political economy, he says:

“The human mind has for more than 2,000 years sought in vain to get to the bottom of it, whilst on the other hand, to the successful analysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation. Why? Because the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society, the commodity form of the product of labour — or value-form of the commodity — is the economic cell-form.” (1996/1867, p. 8)

Marx’s use of the metaphor of “cell” cannot but remind us of Goethe’s *Urphänomen*, which the science of biology realised in the cell. The first chapter is devoted to an exposition of the commodity relation. §3 of Chapter 1, shows how the practice of comparing qualitatively different products generates the concept of value, objectifying it in money and the social practices of measuring value. Marx derives the concepts of value in the first three chapters of *Capital*, unfolding from the exchange of commodities, the concepts of Quality, Quantity and Measure, paralleling the first book of Hegel’s *Logic*.² By beginning with the abstract concept of commodity and then unfolding from this concept a concrete conception of value in bourgeois society, Marx followed the structure of *all* of Hegel’s books.

In particular, Marx set out from the discovery that the commodity relation is the unity of two independent actions represented by two forms of value: the use-value of the commodity entailed in the consumption of the object (its social quality), and the exchange-value of the commodity entailed in the production of the object and realised in the market (its social quantity). The homology between the categories of Hegel’s Ontology and the early chapters of *Capital* reflects the fact that money has been doing the work of reducing all the products of human labour to a single measure, carrying out the work of logic, but as a real process, rather than a logical process. Given the social nature of Hegel’s categorical logic, it is to be expected that the categories of the logic should have a real existence in corresponding social processes. I do not accept the suggestion that, as suggested by Chris Arthur (2015), this homology is a result of Hegel’s study of the British political economists, however. It was the Soviet philosopher Ilyenkov who highlighted this process of *objective abstraction* in his works on *Capital* (1982/1960) and the ideal (1982), which is the basis for this homology.

² I have set out my own position on the relation between Hegel’s *Logic* and Marx’s *Capital* in a review of 12 different positions on this relationship presented by Smith & Moseley (2015).

Unit and Germ Cell

It might strike us as odd to begin from commodity exchange. Although as Marx says in the opening words of *Capital*: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’,” exchange of commodities is a rare occurrence in modern bourgeois society; generally, we *buy* and *sell* commodities. In the third section of Chapter 1, Marx sketches an historical genesis of exchange from its earliest appearance in exchanges between tribal peoples, leading up to the use of gold as a universal equivalent and later the issuing of paper money by states. In this way, he showed that money is *essentially* a commodity and that wage-labour is a commodity bought and sold on the labour market and used by capitalists purchasers.

This exhibits one of the aspects of the *Urphänomen* which I drew attention to above. The *Urphänomen* arises from problems at a lower level of development, and with the formation of the self-reproducing *Gestalt* it generates, the *Urphänomen* itself is transformed.

Urphänomen as Ur-praxis

In his *Notes on Adolph Wagner* (1989/1881, p. 544) Marx says: “I do not proceed from the “concept of value” ... What I proceed from is the simplest social form in the which the labour product presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity’.”

The commodity is a *form* of value, but ‘value’ is an intangible, neither ‘a geometrical, a chemical, or any other natural property’ (1996/1867, p. 47) – it is a suprasensible quality of commodities. Value is in fact an artefact-mediated *social relation* which can therefore only be grasped conceptually. Nonetheless, the commodity is a form of value which, thanks to everyday experience, *can be grasped viscerally*. This means that the critique of the concept of commodity works upon relations which can be grasped viscerally by reader and writer alike. By beginning with the (concept of) commodity Marx mobilizes the readers’ visceral understanding of commodities, and as he leads us to each successive relation, so long as that relation exists in social practice, then not only is the writer’s intuition validated by the *existence* of that relation, but it also allows the reader to securely grasp and verify the logical exposition.

Marx’s decision to begin not with ‘value’ but with the ‘commodity’ illustrates Marx’s debt to Goethe, and is crucial for his praxis implementation of Hegel’s *Logic*.

I am not aware of any evidence that Marx even knew about Goethe’s *Urphänomen*, far less set about appropriating it; Marx worked at a certain cultural and historical juncture and placed himself in a particular social position in the unfolding social crisis. If any philosopher is the proximate source of Marx’s turn to praxis, then it would be the follower of Gottlob Fichte, Moses Hess (1964/1843). Equally, much of what Marx had to say about Hegel is far from complimentary. The triadic relationship between these three holistic thinkers, Goethe, Hegel and Marx, is real notwithstanding that Marx never set out to make any kind of triad. All Germans, Hegel and Goethe included, were raised in the long shadow of Goethe, whose impact of Goethe on 19th century German culture cannot be overstated. However, Goethe’s natural scientific ideas were probably the least-known of his ideas, and were largely discredited by mid-century. But the impact of Goethe (who Marx listed alongside Dante and Shakespeare as his favourite poet) is undeniable.

Both Goethe and Hegel were one-sided in their method; the further development of science and culture, made it possible for Marx to transcend both Goethe's Empiricism and Hegel's Idealism.

Further, by making the *Urphänomen* of his science a real act of social practice, not an imagined social practice, but one whose norms had already been produced by the development of bourgeois society and could be the subject of observation and intervention, Marx turned Hegel's *Urphänomen* inside out, recovering an important element of Goethe's *Urphänomen*.

'Everything' vs. a *Gestalt*

In Marx's view, bourgeois society was essentially a market place. But Marx did not believe he could explain *everything* about the modern world on the basis of the commodity relation. The state and family life were not (yet?) market places.

Marx was drawn into political activity by his outrage at press censorship, inequality, aristocratic privilege and the slow progress of liberal reform in Germany, but he came to see that it was not the nobility or the state which was at the root of these social problems, but the *market*. By taking an exchange of commodities as the *unit of analysis* (see Vygotsky 1987/1934), he had chosen a unit which already contained what he saw as essential to bourgeois society. Thus the complex whole which Marx set out to understand was to be taken as just thousands and thousands of commodity exchanges. *Capital* provided a concrete analysis of the commodity and capital markets, but it did not pretend to provide an analysis of the state and world history. Hegel, by contrast, took private property rather than *exchange* of commodities as the 'germ cell' for the *Philosophy of Right*, and claimed to unfold from private property the entirety of the state and world history. Marx's aims were rightly more modest.

Commodity and Capital

But *Capital* is a book about capital, not petty commodity production. In Part I of the book, the first three chapters, Marx is analysing the circulation of commodities and money, but from this analysis he demonstrates the emergence of a *new* relation, that of capital, a new type of commodity. C–M–C (commodity exchange mediated by money) is transformed into M–C–M', production of commodities mediating the accumulation of money. Thus Marx derives a *new* 'molar'³ unit of analysis, a second *Urphänomen* – the capitalist company or unit of capital, and demonstrates the emergence of the modern forms of capital. Beginning from Chapter 4, Marx unfolds from this second *Ur-praxis* a dialectical exposition of the movement of capital.

This theme in holistic science, where there is a micro unit or *Urphänomen* (cell, quality, commodity) and a molar unit (organism, concept, capital) was first identified by the Soviet activity theorist, A. N. Leontyev (2009/1981). It is actually the molar unit which is the subject matter of the study, the key to understanding which lies in the micro unit. What homology is there between Part II and the succeeding chapters of *Capital*, and Hegel's Concept Logic? Very little. The very general homology which can be found arises from homology between the subject matters (accumulation, competition). Fred Moseley (2015) is correct I believe in identifying a homology between the three

³ 'Molar unit' comes from chemistry where it means that quantity of a substance which contains as many molecules as 12 gm of carbon-12, i.e., 6×10^{23} molecules.

moments of the Concept in Hegel's Logic, and Marx's explanation for the equalisation of the rate of profit through competition between capitals. But again, I believe the homology arises from homologies in the subject matter itself, based on money as a real abstraction of human labour. Concepts after all are social formations not figments of the imagination. The structure of *Capital* is not a mirror of any work of Hegel's. The concepts of political economy unfold according to their own logic, and it would be a mistake to try and match *Capital* concept-for-concept with any of Hegel's books.

Summary

In summary, there are two phases in the formation of a science (the two volumes of Hegel's *Logic*, the two processes outlined in Marx's "Method of Political Economy"); firstly, a protracted period leading up to the point when a theorist has the abstract starting point for the science properly so called, and then the concretisation of that abstract concept in the development of the science. Equally there are two phases in the *formation* of a social formation like capitalism: first the protracted period of history leading up to the point when its germ cell emerges, followed by the concretisation and universalization of that concept, entailing the transformation of all other relations in the social formation.

Hegel did not discover the *Urphänomen* – he appropriated it from the poet-naturalist John Wolfgang von Goethe and turned it inside out. It provided the abstract beginning of his philosophy, and each of the sciences he worked out began with an abstract concept appropriated from the preceding science. This was the same idea which the communist Marx appropriated from the idealist philosopher, Hegel, and made the starting point for his critique of capital.

For Marx as for Hegel, a concept is a (normative) form of social practice, but whereas Hegel suffered from the illusion that a theorist could unfold from a conceptual ideal everything that was implicit within it, Marx consistently held to the view that the logical development had to follow the development of social practice at every stage, making intelligible what was given in social practice. Marx further took the simple concept to form the starting point for elaborate social formations to represent a finite *artefact mediated action*, rather than an universal like 'value'.

CONCLUSION

The history of a science and the history of the subject matter itself together provide the theoretician with the material to identify the abstract concept which can be a starting point for an analysis of the phenomenon. As Goethe said: "The history of science is science itself" (1988a/1810, p. 161). The point of studying the history of Goethe's Romantic Science, Hegel's idealist critique of Romantic Science and Marx's critique of Hegelian idealism is to develop an *holistic* approach to understanding the economic, social and environmental crisis of today.

It is this aspect of the Marx-Hegel relation which is brought into relief by mediating the relation through Goethe; this does not exclude the validity of mediating Marx's appropriation of Hegel via Feuerbach or Hess, which are noted explicitly by Marx himself. Likewise, mediating Hegel's appropriation of Kant via Goethe is not to exclude the mediation of his appropriation of Kant via Fichte and Schelling, which is noted explicitly by Hegel. Each mediation sheds a unique light on what is appropriated.

A true concept, as Hegel showed us, is the unity of three moments: the Individual, Universal, and the Particular. As Hegel was fond of demonstrating, concepts have a way of finding their Avatar, and in the history of holistic science, Goethe was the Immediate (=Individual) moment, Hegel was the Universal moment and Marx the moment of praxis (=Particular). But Marx did not give us yet another one-sided science, a kind of vulgar historicism (as Carrera 2015 would have it), but sublated both Hegel and Goethe within his Marxist science, as exhibited in *Capital*.

The point, however, is not to re-write *Capital*, but rather to learn from this how to analyse the great social crises of our times, crises which go beyond political economy, but nonetheless are subject to the kind of analysis of which *Capital* is the paradigm.

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