Human Finitude and the Dialectics of Experience

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for an Honours degree in Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2016.

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I will argue that human experience is characterised by temporality and that it is specifically this temporal dimension that we need to appreciate when thinking about the relationship between experience and the structure of knowledge. I will argue that the concept of experience can only be adequately understood if we situate it within finite human existence. The concept of experience has been an important component of modern philosophical attempts to understand the structure of knowledge. In my dissertation, I will engage with this tradition and show that since Immanuel Kant experience and knowledge have been historically related but that only recently has the concept of experience become important in its own right. My overall claim is that the concept of experience can only be adequately understood if we situate it within finite human existence. In order to show that this is the case, I will explore the historical trajectory of the concept of experience in the work of three important philosophers in this tradition: Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and Hans-Georg Gadamer.
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Introduction

The concept of experience has been an important component of modern philosophical attempts to understand the structure of knowledge. In my dissertation, I will engage with this tradition and show that since Immanuel Kant experience and knowledge have been historically related but that only recently has the concept of experience become important in its own right. My overall claim is that the concept of experience can only be adequately understood if we situate it within finite human existence. In order to show that this is the case, I will explore the historical trajectory of the concept of experience. In particular, I consider the work of three important philosophers in this tradition: Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

A vast amount of literature has been written to address the modern theories of knowledge. Instead, in this dissertation, I will address the concept of experience and its relation to the modern idea of knowledge. I will review some of the literature dealing with the conceptual changes to the notion of experience, using it as the specific background against which I write. The main contribution is to rethink the concept of experience with specific focus on its temporal nature.

The method employed is a combination of historical and critical analysis, paying attention to the works of Kant and Hegel and the rethinking of their approach by Gadamer.

In the first chapter, I will investigate how Kant rethinks the empiricist and rationalist traditions by claiming that they overlooked the role of experience in the structure of knowledge. I will explore Kant's understanding of experience and the important role it plays in grounding his epistemic project. I argue that Kant’s understandings of experience stems, in part, from his attempt to ground knowledge objectively. At the same time, Kant maintains that experience is necessary to ground knowledge. I consider an analysis of Kant important because he stresses the active human participation in the constitution of knowledge and the central role of experience in this constitution.
In the second chapter, I turn to Hegel’s thought. Hegel rethinks the Kantian position and stresses the temporal nature of human experience. Specifically, Hegel rejects the Kantian recognition of the limits to human cognition. Unlike Kant, Hegel’s understanding of experience is characterised by movement. In order to overcome Kant’s position regarding knowledge and its limitation to human cognition, Hegel formulates a new understanding of consciousness that begins from an absolute standpoint. As such, knowledge for Hegel is not to be grounded upon the finite postulates of the understanding. For Hegel, knowledge and experience are not subjective postulates constituted by a finite intellect. Instead, they are constituted by the unfolding of an absolute consciousness or Spirit. Thus, for Hegel, knowledge and experience are characterised by movement and mediation, the unfolding of the absolute Spirit. Accordingly, as Hegel claims, experience is essentially temporal. Hegel contends that the ground of experience and knowledge is the unfolding of the absolute Spirit itself. Experience is the movement of this unfolding. I will explain this movement and stress the temporal nature of experience in Hegel’s system.

In the last chapter, I will problematise Hegel’s temporal account of experience. In particular, I suggest that while Hegel starts with the important acknowledgement that experience is temporal, his ultimate aim is to ground knowledge absolutely. Following Gadamer, I claim that Hegel’s pursuit of absolute knowledge eliminates temporality. I contend that in Hegel’s philosophy the temporal nature of experience is soon undermined by this larger goal. As Gadamer claims, although Hegel is interested in demonstrating the temporal movement of experience, temporal experience is only a stepping stone along the Hegelian path to absolute knowledge. As we will see, not only temporal experience but also individual consciousness is not adequately accounted for in the movement toward absolute Spirit.

I then turn to Gadamer in order to make use of his appropriation and critique of Hegel. Gadamer refers to the finitude of human existence as hermeneutical experience. I argue that Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutical experience retains the temporal dimension so important to Hegel’s work without subordinating this insight in the pursuit of absolute knowledge. Gadamer’s work serves as a helpful platform for acknowledging that human experience is characterised by temporality and offers us an alternative way of understanding the importance of experience for the structure of knowledge. Hegel’s proposed program of absolute knowledge, in the end, cannot account for finite human
experience. It is this that Gadamer brings to the forefront in his notion of hermeneutical experience.
Chapter One:
Kant – The Critical Limits of Knowledge and Experience

The concept of experience has been an important component of modern philosophical attempts to understand the structure of knowledge. In my dissertation, I will engage with this claim to argue that since Kant experience and knowledge have been historically related. Only recently the concept of experience has become important in its own right. My overall claim is to argue that we need to rethink the concept of experience as related to finite human existence. To do so I will show the historical trajectory of this concept.

In this chapter, I will investigate how Immanuel Kant – in response to Hume’s challenge – rethinks the empiricist and rationalist traditions that preceded him by claiming that they overlook the role of experience in relation to knowledge. I will explore Kant's understanding of experience and the important role it plays in grounding his epistemic project. I will argue that Kant's understandings of experience stems from his attempt to ground knowledge objectively. For Kant, experience is necessary to ground knowledge, and, in fact, knowledge must be limited by experience.

In his attempt to establish a sound scientific basis on which to ground philosophy, Kant maintains that all knowledge must adhere to experience. It is through experience, Kant claims, that human reason itself must be limited if we are to secure knowledge regarding the empirical world. According to Kant, it is only by determining the very nature of our experience that we can establish a secure ground for our knowledge. As Martin Heidegger has stated, it is to this end that “the Critique of Pure Reason could be taken as a science or theory of experience, a theory about what experience is.” It is ultimately Kant’s prerogative to secure a foundation for philosophical knowledge and to this end he regards experience in terms of its result, rather than its process. Experience is, for Kant, a means by which universal and objective knowledge can be substantiated.

1 Experience, for Kant, is of course not needed in order to substantiate the claims of logic and mathematics. However, the concern of this chapter is to explicate Kant’s understanding of experience and thus the knowledge I refer to is always knowledge of the empirical world.

In this chapter, I will begin by giving a very brief overview of Kant’s critical project, beginning with his attempt to overcome the old dichotomy of the subject-object relation that Kant believes had not been adequately accounted for in either philosophical empiricism or rationalist metaphysics. I will provide a brief explication of Kant’s conceptualisation of experience, which consists of both the understanding’s active constitution of objects and its receptivity of presentations given through sensible intuition. Thus, I will briefly discuss the broader aims of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and his attempt to find in the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’ a unified ground for experience and knowledge. Finally, I will address Kant’s critical conclusion regarding the use of pure reason in determining a ground for knowledge.

**Kant’s Critical Idealism**

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant examines the legitimate use of pure reason by and for human cognition. He is reacting to what he regards as the dogmatic claims of naive realism, whether by empiricist philosophy or by rationalist metaphysics. He is particularly concerned with the way in which these philosophies attempted to ground knowledge. Or, put another way, Kant is concerned with what these philosophies assumed in their attempts to establish the relationship between subject and object.\(^3\)

In the late 18\(^{th}\) century, as Kant sees it, both philosophical empiricism and rationalist metaphysics were facing a crisis of legitimate grounding related to their claims to knowledge and truth. This crisis most notably came to a head in the work of David Hume with his critique of *a priori* propositions and his doubt regarding whether those propositions could actually be said to comply with the natural world, and, further, whether and how *any* rational *a priori* propositions could be substantiated starting from experience.\(^4\) Hume famously concludes that there could be no rational ground found in experience for the substantiation of *a priori* principles. According to Hume, these kinds of claims stem from the imagination or the habits of the mind, and therefore could not

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3 In contemporary philosophy the terms subject and object carry a lot of baggage with them, even in the time Kant was writing. Kant, himself, would also address this issue and call into question the meaning of these terms. For the sake of this dissertation, however, I will simply be referring to these two terms in the broad sense of, on the one hand, subjective representation, presentation or understanding i.e. the activity of thought, and on the other, the content of what is thought i.e. the objects of thought.

4 His famous charge being that there is no legitimate ground for precise causality (*principium causalitatis*). Given that precise causality cannot be experienced directly how is it possible to ground or substantiate such a principle? Hume would of course declare it a habit of the mind rather than any actual occurrence taking place within the natural world. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, New York: Dover, 2003, 111-124.
establish an exact causal relation with the natural world. Hume bases this claim on his contention that consciousness is empty and is not organised or unified but is merely a "bundle of perceptions." Accordingly, any knowledge regarding the natural world must come from experience, which Hume regards simply as sense perception, or, the way in which objects impress themselves upon the subject. Yet, as Kant claims, Hume had not seen through the consequences of such a statement, he had not recognised the universality of his claim, which would in fact undermine all mathematical, metaphysical and scientific claims. If he had, Kant claims, “his good sense would surely have saved him.”

Yet, the claims of rationalist metaphysics offered Kant no legitimate alternative. Rationalist metaphysicians, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza, and René Descartes, had stated in various ways that claims to truth could be substantiated by the intellect alone, independent of experience. As Descartes states, the sensations often deceive us and that knowledge cannot be grounded upon something so unreliable. However, if the intellect restricts itself in matters of judgement to only that which it conceives of “clearly and distinctly,” then it can hardly go wrong. According to Jaspers, Leibniz contends that it is the constructive operations of the mind that the intellect conceives of clearly and distinctly. Consciousness, in accord with what it perceives clearly and distinctly (or rationally), need only attend to its own operations in order to obtain knowledge of reality. Therefore, *a priori* principles could be substantiated regarding matters of universal knowledge.

Kant, however, could not accept these rationalist conclusions. For he asked, how is it that the intellect could provide its own content, and its own measure, independent of experience? Kant did not believe that reason could constitute its own objects in this way. As Kant states, prior metaphysics was unable to substantiate anything beyond conjecture. Neither the claims made by rationalist metaphysics nor Hume’s empiricist

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11 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xv.
conclusions satisfied Kant. Thus, his task was to establish the necessary conditions for certainty of knowledge.\textsuperscript{12}

Kant begins with the philosophy that had preceded him. A new way of approaching the matter of thought was needed; one that addressed the relational nature of thought, that is, the relations between subjective cognition and the content of what is thought (or, the objects of cognition). This rethinking of the passive understanding of knowledge is what Kant called the Copernican turn, the importance of which is to establish the objective validity of our experience, or put otherwise, whether what we experience can be known with certainty.\textsuperscript{13} As noted above, Kant contends that certainty regarding matters of experience could not be achieved either by empirical philosophy or rationalist metaphysics. The empiricists maintained that no certainty regarding experience could be substantiated, because it could not be found amongst sensible impressions. By contrast, the rationalists claimed that certainty could be substantiated, however, only in accord with the operations of the intellect, which ultimately rely upon God, and not sensibility or experience.\textsuperscript{14} According to Kant, then, the dichotomy between subject and object remains. In order to overcome both these approaches, Kant claims that the objects of our experience, if they are to be established with certainty, must conform to the way we cognise them. For Kant the “mind” is not simply an aggregate of perceptions;\textsuperscript{15} rather, it actively constitutes the objects we experience. Furthermore, if the objects of our cognition are to be more than mere thought, they must refer to objects as they are given to us through sensible intuition.\textsuperscript{16} By maintaining that the objects we experience are actually constituted by the understanding in accord with the way in which they are given through sensible intuition, Kant is able to establish a reliable relation between subject and object. The understanding provides the concepts that allow objects to be thought and intuition provides the content.\textsuperscript{17} Further still, by recognising that it is the concepts of thought that constitute the nature of the objects we experience, Kant is able to establish a method that he believes can secure the certainty of such objects. Given that it is the activity of the understanding that constitutes its objects, we only need to look to

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid}, B 14.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid}, B xvi.
\textsuperscript{14} Jaspers, \textit{Kant}, 17.
\textsuperscript{15} As Hume believed.
\textsuperscript{16} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B 146, B 147.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}, A 51, B 75.
the principles of thought, as opposed to the principles of the object itself,\textsuperscript{18} to establish with certainty the objects of our experience.

For Kant, the problem with empiricist and rationalist accounts of knowledge was precisely that they did not take into account the human participation in its constitution. Hence his attempt to ground our knowledge in terms of the understanding and sensible intuition, constituting the objects we experience. However, as will be explained in chapter two below, Hegel takes issue with Kant’s account of the understanding. Hegel thinks that Kant, in fact, unjustifiably limits the role of the understanding. In order to make clear how Hegel reworks and critiques Kantian philosophy, I will first briefly outline some of the key aspects of Kant’s philosophy. Hegel’s philosophy regarding experience and knowledge will be easier to explain once I have looked at Kant’s thought.

**Synthetic Unity of Apperception**

Kant recognises the necessity of establishing the \textit{a priori} principles of understanding that constitute our experience. He must, then, demonstrate how these \textit{a priori} principles relate to substantiations of empirical knowledge. That is to say, Kant must show how \textit{a priori} cognition can lay claim to the objects of our experience, which can be expressed in judgements. Judgements, for Kant, always refer to the concepts of understanding and their combination,\textsuperscript{19} which presuppose three distinct aspects of synthesis: the synthesis of apprehension or pure intuition, i.e. space and time; the synthesis of reproduction or the imagination; and the synthesis of apperception of the understanding.\textsuperscript{20} For the purposes of my overall dissertation and the further elaboration of Hegel’s take on the Kantian concept of experience, here, I restrict myself to explaining how objects are necessarily unified in apperception. To ensure the binding and universal nature of our experience, apperception, as I will show, determines its objects according to pure concepts or categories.\textsuperscript{21} Of course, Kant’s project is too complex and detailed for me to


\textsuperscript{19} Which indeed they must if the understanding is to comprehend anything whatsoever. Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B 126.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}, B 194, A 155.

\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to discuss Kant’s understanding of the categories in detail. However, it is necessary to state that, for Kant, the categories or pure concepts of understanding (i.e. substance, causality, community, etc.) determine the \textit{a priori} possibility of unified experience. In this way, Kant is able, according to his argument, to overcome the modern [problem of determining substance, causality etc. with certainty, by referring not to objects in themselves (which is impossible,
exhaustively explain in this dissertation. However, there are two important Kantian positions I wish to flag here and that I return to in the following chapter. The first is Kant’s contention that “thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind”; and the second is “the schematism of pure understanding”, which is, “in itself, always only a product of the imagination”. In other words, sensible intuition becomes meaningful only through the concepts supplied by the understanding. Sensible intuition can never present to us objects as such. It is only through the concepts of the understanding that the experiential object is given to us. Moreover, only through the synthetic power of the imagination, as di Giovanni writes, objects of experience are given to us. Objects are not given through sensations only. It is by “the syntheses that the imagination…constructs for thought with its rule” that we can experience those objects.

Furthermore, another step is required to give unity to the schematisation of the imagination grounding the unity of knowledge and experience. This step is the transcendental unity of apperception. This principle of transcendental unity, Kant argues, explains the very possibility of unified experience and is the ground of all other synthetic activity. As Robert Pippin points out, this principle relies upon three important factors: identity, unity and self-consciousness. Synthesis must in the first instance belong to a subject, a conceptual “I” or “I think”, identified as the same throughout different presentations. If this were not the case, and various modes of cognition did not belong to a subject, then it would be impossible to even thematise such experiences. Secondly, the experience of a subject must be unified. That is to say, the various sensible representations presented by intuition must be ‘brought together’ or synthetically unified by the understanding in apperception. And thirdly, the subject must be aware of this process of unification in order to be able to account for it. If this last point were not the case then one would not even be able to say that they have knowledge of their own experience. It is further important to note that, for Kant, these factors, attributed to the synthesis of apperception, must stem from a transcendental

according to Kant) but by referring to the way in which they are determined by the understanding. Frederick Beiser, German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 120–121.
Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B75, A51.
Ibid, B179/A140.
Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A 130.
principle. This means a principle that can account for the unity of our understanding prior to the actual combination of presentations and concepts. This is because only a principle that transcends the contingency of these moments of combination can ground them necessarily. While the possibility of combination of cognition can be attributed to the synthesis of apprehension, the synthesis of reproduction, and the synthesis of apperception, all these in turn are possible because of the transcendental synthesis of apperception. Thus, in order to explicate the unity of these three aspects necessary for our understanding and experience, Kant formulates the transcendental unity of apperception from which these three aspects can be derived. In this way, Kant is able to demonstrate the necessity and universality of our experience upon which all empirical knowledge must rely.

**The Limits of Pure Reason and Its Use**

Kant’s demonstration that the transcendental unity of apperception is the *supreme principle* determining the coherence of experience is, however, only one step in his attempt to legitimately justify claims to knowledge of such experience. Kant’s second major step deals with the use and limitation of pure reason itself. As I will discuss in the following chapter, this splitting of reason is what Hegel challenges. Yet, according to Kant, the determination and use of reason depends on a fundamental distinction regarding its transcendental and objective validity. Kant argues that the lack of such a distinction has led to much confusion and too many errors. In the first instance, pure reason is transcendental, that is to say, it is not derived from experience and does not pertain to anything empirical. As Kant states, “Pure reason is in fact occupied with nothing but itself.” Reason is a transcendental idea, a principle that can necessarily provide unity and coherence to thought, but does not apply directly to the objects of our experience. This is because as a transcendental idea reason never actually confronts objects but only the concepts we have of these objects in our understanding. Reason, as a principle has its purpose, for us, in unifying the concepts of our understanding. This is not to say that pure reason itself cannot be regarded in an absolute sense, one that governs the processes of nature similar to a supreme being. However, pure reason of

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27 Furthermore, this explanation also pertains to Kant’s assertion that he is not simply dealing with empirical consciousness. For Kant, empirical consciousness is only a presentation of this transcendental principle and cannot itself possibly provide the unity of its activity. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 140.


30 Ibid, A 665, B693.
this kind, according to Kant, cannot possibly be encountered by us. As finite beings determined by the finite categories of our understanding, we cannot grasp the absolute, whether that be reason, God, absolute nature, etc. (I will address this further below).

This leads to the second understanding of reason, i.e., reason in its objective sense. When pure reason is taken in an objective sense, that is to say, as actually pertaining to objects of experience, it cannot avoid contradiction and error. For Kant, this error actually stems from the nature of human experience and judgement, and not reason itself.31 Pure reason in itself is not contradictory. For Kant, this would be impossible, because reason would simply cancel itself. Contradiction occurs when reason is mistakenly taken to actually constitute the objects we experience. As stated above, reason can apply to concepts only, to give unity to understanding. Its power does not extend to the objects of our experience. It is the categories of our understanding taken in synthesis with intuition that constitutes the objects of our experience. Reason cannot constitute anything, it can only provide unity or coherence in thought. In this sense reason is a regulative principle; it directs experience by way of inference but can never actually constitute it.

If reason has no power of constitution, and if the constitution of our experience actually stems from our cognition of sensible intuition by way of the categories of our understanding, then – as a consequence of this line of reasoning – human cognition cannot go beyond what is presented to us in experience.32 This is in fact Kant’s conclusion. Human cognition is finite and cannot ever know anything as it is in-itself independent of our understanding (as outlined above). Here, Kant makes a necessary distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. *Phenomena* are objects that are positively constituted by the categories of our understanding in synthesis with sensible intuition. *Noumena*, on the other hand, can only be thought in a negative or regulative sense. For Kant, the *phenomenal* world is the world we experience, one about which, with the use of reason, which regulates our thought, we can attain empirical knowledge. Although it cannot be known, the *noumenal* realm still has its place it the Kantian system. It acts as a boundary, i.e., it illustrates the limits of our cognition.33 For Kant, by

32 Regarding this issue, Kant, in fact, makes a distinction between thought and cognition. Thought is the possibility of thinking as such, cognition, on the other hand, is thought pertaining to a sensible object. *Ibid*, B 146.
using reason as a systematic principle we can logically conceive of *noumena* and the transcendental ideas, but we can never substantiate them positively or objectively.\(^{34}\) Reason itself establishes the unity and coherence of thought, as noted above, and in this way is indispensable to logic, mathematics and morality.\(^{35}\) Here the power of transcendental ideas is important for Kant. With the use of reason we can logically infer the systematic unity of nature, that nature is teleological, and that a supreme being provides the absolute unity and harmony of nature. For Kant, these inferences are entirely permissible, and in fact must be presupposed if the coherence of experience is also to imply the coherency of nature. Of course this can never be objectively substantiated, but we can take these principles *as if* they were the case.\(^{36}\) It follows that a systematic unity of nature can be logically inferred in agreement with the coherence of our empirical experience, but only if taken as a transcendental idea and not as one actually pertaining to the world of our experience.

**Conclusion**

In order to elucidate Kant’s account of experience, it was necessary to consider a number of aspects of his project. First, I showed the importance of combining the understanding and sensible intuition for the constitution of objects. Then, I considered the power of imagination conceptually leading up to the synthetic unity of apperception. The synthetic unity of apperception provides unity and coherence to experience and knowledge. As I also showed, Kant was challenging the claims of rationalists and empiricists, both of whom understood knowledge as passive. The Kantian Copernican turn amounts to a recognition of the active human contribution to the constitution of knowledge. Part of this Kantian project involved recognising that human knowledge and reason is limited by experience. Hegel rejects this Kantian recognition of the limits to human cognition. For Hegel, the ground of experience and knowledge is the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit itself. Experience is the movement of this unfolding. I will take up Hegel’s account of this unfolding of Absolute Spirit in the following chapter.

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\(^{34}\) Unfortunately, I do not have the space to go into further detail regarding Kant’s distinction of *noumena* and the transcendental ideas. Suffice to say, for the purposes of my argument that *noumena* is, for Kant, a boundary concept that limits empirical knowledge, whereas the transcendental ideas are taken as regulating experience.

\(^{35}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 878, A850.

Chapter Two: Hegel – The Dialectic of Spirit, or the Experience of Consciousness

To continue my investigation of the role of experience in relation to knowledge, in the previous chapter, I addressed the concept of experience as it appears in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant maintains that experience is necessary to ground as well as limit our human claims to knowledge. However, given Kant’s endeavour to secure a universal ground for knowledge by limiting it with experience, G. W. F. Hegel suggests that Kant ultimately objectifies experience, overlooking its temporal nature, one characterised by movement. Part of this critique I will take up in this chapter. It was important to address certain aspects of Kant’s project – like his concepts of the understanding and sensible intuition – as these are themes that also feature heavily in Hegel’s work. The previous discussion allows me to clarify some of Hegel’s ideas in the present chapter. Here, I will show how Hegel problematises the Kantian role of experience in regards to knowledge to rework the concept of experience as one characterised by movement.

Like Kant, Hegel maintains that knowledge must be grounded upon experience. However, as Hegel contends, knowledge and experience are not subjective postulates constituted by a finite intellect. They are constituted by the unfolding of an absolute consciousness or Spirit. Thus, for Hegel, knowledge and experience are characterised by movement and mediation, the unfolding of the absolute Spirit. Accordingly, as Hegel claims, experience is essentially temporal.

In order to understand the Hegelian endeavour, I will begin by addressing Hegel’s argument in his early work *Faith and Knowledge*. There he claims that Kant’s conclusions regarding the limits of reason and human knowledge are plagued by irreconcilable difficulties. Hence, I will discuss Hegel’s understanding of the productive imagination that, I suggest, is Hegel’s reworking of the Kantian concept of imagination. For Hegel, imagination is not a part of the transcendental unity of apperception, as I discussed in the previous chapter, but it is the primary synthesis of understanding and intuition. I will then address the role of reason in Hegel’s early work, which, he
contends, is the absolute ground of subject-object or being-thought relations. Hegel’s claim is that his concept of reason overcomes Kant’s limitation of human knowledge and reason. Finally, I will unpack Hegel’s account of the absolute consciousness in his work the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is in this work that Hegel draws out the conclusion of his absolute standpoint as the mediated experience of consciousness. To put it differently, in Hegel, Kant’s “formal unity of consciousness [as] the synthesis of the manifold of the presentations”\(^{37}\) becomes the Absolute Spirit. In order to understand this change, first, I will address Hegel’s critique of Kant’s concept of finite understanding.

**The Productive Imagination**

Given the discussion of the last chapter, pertaining to Kant’s claim that the understanding is finite and that reason and knowledge are limited, Hegel finds Kant’s position problematic. In his attempt to overcome those Kantian limitations, he arrives at radically different conclusions about knowledge, reason and experience. In one of his early texts, *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel addresses Kant’s broader aims concerning these issues. While stating that Kant remains true to the aims of his critical idealism, Hegel argues that Kant ultimately limits his project to a formal subjectivism, foregoing the ultimate reconciliation of subject and object.\(^{38}\) As Hegel claims, Kant is only able to substantiate knowledge of the empirical world by limiting its scope to *phenomena*, while denying that we can ever know the empirical world as it is in-itself, i.e., *noumena*. By doing so, Hegel believes that rather than reconciling the two realms of subject and object (or thought and being), Kant simply shifts the problem by making the subjective intellect absolute, thereby denying the existence of anything beyond its cognition.\(^{39}\) Kant may be able to establish a unity of experience free of contradiction but only at the expense of foregoing anything that exists beyond the subjective postulates of the understanding. This is the problematic Hegel seeks to overcome. Hegel questions what he sees as the Kantian ground of finitude and ultimate subjectivity. Instead of the finite intellect, Hegel seeks to ground his philosophy in *Faith and Knowledge* in the conception of productive imagination. Hegel questions whether Kant does in fact ground his philosophy in the finite intellect. Instead, Hegel contends that – contrary to

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Kant’s claims – Kant’s philosophy is grounded in the productive imagination.\textsuperscript{40} In opposition to what Hegel sees as the Kantian productive imagination, he claims that productive imagination must be the ground that unites intellect and intuition, which secures the relation between subject and object, thought and being, and is thus not alienated from the \textit{noumenal} realm. Hegel’s aim, then, is very similar to Kant’s, in as much as he seeks to reconcile the duality of subject and object or thought and being, albeit with a much larger scope.

To recall the previous discussion, Kant wanted to ‘bracket out’ empirical content in order to avoid the contingencies of experience, thereby allowing him to establish a unified ground – the transcendental unity of apperception, which can secure the relation of subject and object.\textsuperscript{41} This being the case, however, it becomes difficult to see how Kant is then able to reconcile the empirical content of sensible intuition with the pure concepts or categories of the intellect, in other words the relation of object and subject. As George di Giovanni points out, this difficulty remains precisely because Kant insists that sensible intuition is blind, providing no conceptual form, as I discussed in the first chapter. Accepting Kant’s position, we must rely upon the categories to provide that conceptual form.\textsuperscript{42} To secure the application of the categories to appearances given in sensible intuition, Kant then claims that the two realms are synthesised by the schematisation of the imagination.\textsuperscript{43} Only by way of this schema provided by the synthetic activity of the imagination can the categories apply to the content of sensible intuition. This means, however, that intuition – if it is to “be brought within the circle of consciousness”, and indeed it must – is actually idealised.\textsuperscript{44} The categories have no direct reference to intuition and intuition no direct reference to the categories: the two only apply to one another with recourse to the synthesis of the constructive imagination. On Hegel’s account, Kant himself is thus unable to move beyond the ideal structures of the imagination.\textsuperscript{45}

In order to elucidate the relation between subject and object, Hegel takes consciousness as his original standpoint of enquiry, which he claims is the Kantian move. That is to

\textsuperscript{40} George di Giovanni, “The Facts of Consciousness,” 6–7.
\textsuperscript{41} Although it is important to point out that by ‘bracket’ Kant does not mean negate. Robert B. Pippin, \textit{Kant’s Theory of Form: An Essay on the Critique of Pure Reason}, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 153–154.
\textsuperscript{43} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B 179, A 140.
\textsuperscript{44} di Giovanni, “The Facts of Consciousness,” 8.
\textsuperscript{45} Hegel, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 79-80.
say, he follows Kant in recognising that consciousness constitutes experience and the objects that we experience. However, Hegel maintains that Kant’s explanation of consciousness is problematic, because, in attempting to secure a universal foundation upon which experience and knowledge can be grounded, he unjustifiably limits consciousness to its most abstract form – the transcendental unity of apperception – empty of content. As Hegel claims, Kant absolutizes the finite intellect which allows him to establish a unified ego, one that can ensure a unity of experience and knowledge, but foregoes the particular or empirical content of experience.

Consciousness, then, as Hegel contends, is better understood as the productive imagination. However, against Kant, Hegel takes imagination to be not simply the synthesis of reproduction, but the primary or original synthetic unity of intellect and intuition. I mentioned in the last chapter the Kantian notion of imagination as the synthesis of reproduction, here I take up Hegel’s critique. For Hegel, the activity of imagination proves to be the ground of the intellect and intuition, or, in Hegelian terminology, the abstract ego and the manifold of sensibility. Like Kant, Hegel’s primary concern is to secure the identity of the subject-object relation. Hegel contends that this can only be approached adequately from the primary principle of identity, or unity (which I address in more detail below).

Hegel asserts that the imagination must be the original identity of which intellect and intuition are simply two aspects. The imagination does not synthetically combine the intellect and intuition as though they are primarily opposed or isolated aspects in need of unification; rather, the identity of both precedes their antithesis, which is apparent in judgement. This, Hegel claims, is how Kant is able to account for the possibility of synthetic \textit{a priori} judgements. Although Kant does not acknowledge it as such, the identity of subject and predicate are already to be found in the imagination. Judgement is simply the appearance or the product of the antithesis presented as intellect and intuition. To put it a little more simply, in order for Kant to be able to claim that synthetic \textit{a priori} judgements are possible, he must recognise the identity of subject and predicate given in intuition and thought respectively. Given that judgement is finite and

\begin{itemize}
\item[47] Hegel, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 71.
\item[48] Hegel, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 72.
\item[50] Hegel, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 72.
\item[51] Hegel, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 72.
\end{itemize}
reflective, for Kant, we can only think subject and predicate as determinate or particular, we do not have access to the objects presented in reflection as they are in-themselves. However, Hegel charges that this means we can never know anything beyond the finitude of our subjective understanding. Yet given our experience of the empirical world, we plainly do have such knowledge. This is why Kant had to presuppose the *noumenal* realm, without which there would be nothing to appear in the first place. As Hegel claims, this *noumenal* realm is not something beyond our cognition, but is subsumed in and as the productive imagination, which makes judgment, cognition and experience possible.

**Reason and Identity**

Taking the productive imagination to be the original synthetic unity of the intellect and intuition, however, only goes part way in explaining the relation of our finite subjectivity to the objective world. To secure this relation, Hegel turns to the postulates of reason in order to further develop this idea of identity and synthesis. Following his previous line of argumentation, Hegel claims that the essence of the productive imagination is reason. Just as the imagination is the synthetic unity of the intellect and intuition, reason is the synthetic unity or middle term, which makes possible the identity of subject-predicate, subject-object, particular-universal. As Hegel claims, Kant recognises that reason makes this identity possible, but in maintaining the absolute finitude of the intellect, one that must rely upon sensible intuition, he relegates reason to a transcendental idea, only to appear as a regulative principle in reflective judgement. According to Hegel, this poses a problem. If we cannot know anything beyond the finite particulars we are presented with in sensible intuition, how can we know this regulative principle of reason? According to Kant, reason as an ideal principle of unity provides coherence to thought and judgement, but, at the same time, it is limited to judgement, which can only know determinate particulars and not universal totalities. From Hegel’s perspective, Kant is ultimately unable to give a concrete account of the relation of our subjective understanding to the objective world. Reason, the middle term or bond

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53 Which he also calls in his early work, intellectual intuition, and in his later work Spirit (discussed later in this chapter). Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 73.
of our judgement with nature, is presupposed, yet unaccounted for, relegated to a
transcendental beyond. Hence, Hegel thinks that we must rethink reason, if we are
able to suspend the antithesis of subject and object or thought and being.

In response to Kant, Hegel seeks to give a positive account of reason as the absolute
ground or identity, which can account for and overcome the dualities of the subject-
object relation. Again, as I have just noted, Kant argues that this is impossible, because
we are limited by sensible intuition, hence, we cannot possibly have absolute
knowledge. To have this kind of knowledge, we would have to have the *intellectus
archetypus* or to be God. However, this is, in a way, what Hegel hopes to achieve.
Hegel wishes to demonstrate that the antinomies of reason that Kant highlights in his
discussion of illegitimate use of reason regarding the possibility of knowledge are only
apparent because Kant limits philosophical knowledge to reflective judgement, as
pointed out above. Hegel argues that if we are to overcome these apparent antinomies,
which Kant claims are the result from thinking reason outside of its limits, we must
rethink reason. For Hegel, reason cannot be limited. We must reconsider reason from its
own ground; a ground that is the synthesis of subject-object, subject-predicate, and so
on. It is this ground that constitutes all reality from which the subject and object
originate and are experienced as appearances brought to light in reflection. Yet, this
does not mean that we can bring reason ‘out into the open,’ as it were; as if the
individual person could somehow contemplate reason in its totality. To do so would
consider ‘reason in its objective sense’, as Kant had, of course, already made clear. It
would mean to limit reason with the present or finite moment of reflection. As Hegel
claims, we must recognise that reason cannot be contemplated in its totality from
subjective postulates; rather, it must be acknowledged as the absolute ground. As Hans-
Georg Gadamer points out, once we recognise this, we are then able to see that reason

59 Although it is important to keep in mind, as I highlighted in the introduction of this chapter, that Hegel
does not mean the reason of the individual but the possibility of human reason itself.
60 H. S. Harris, “Skepticism, Dogmatism and Speculation in the Critical Journal,” in *Between Kant and
61 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S.
is, in fact, thought and reality. The dichotomies of intellect and intuition, universal and particular, appearance and essence, are eliminated.  

The Phenomenology of Spirit

Up until this point I have discussed Hegel’s notion of the productive imagination and the role of reason in his early work. However, it is in the Phenomenology of Spirit that he offers his most developed philosophical account of consciousness or Spirit. I do not have the space required to adequately explain Hegel’s entire system of Spirit. I will, however, address those aspects of this system that allow me to support my overall thesis, the role of experience in relation to human existence.

It is in the Phenomenology of Spirit that Hegel attempts to establish an account of absolute consciousness or Spirit. As I highlighted above, in his early work, Hegel had already given an account of reason as the absolute ground of the relation between subject and object or thought and being. However, in the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel extends his account of the possibility of the absolute as reason, to also include the movement of consciousness or Spirit. 63 Hence, Hegel wants to give a rational account of the absolute Spirit as well as individual consciousness, which can contemplate the absolute in its totality as long as we recognise the absolute Spirit’s movement throughout its unfolding. Thereby, he postulates that we can think absolute Spirit from individual consciousness. 64 Thus, three points must be made clear. First, Hegel is primarily concerned with giving an account of consciousness as absolute Spirit, as the infinite or eternal, of which the individual is part. 65 Secondly, Hegel seeks to give an account of the movement of the absolute Spirit as it unfolds through the individual, to demonstrate its presence in our everyday experience. And third, once he demonstrates the temporal movement of the absolute Spirit through the individual, the possibility of absolute knowledge can be realised. I will discuss this last point further in the next chapter.

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64 Such as were the conclusions of Fichte and Schelling respectively. Cf. Stanley Rosen, G. W. F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom, New York: Yale University Press, 1974, 59–62.
For Hegel, it is important to rationally demonstrate the movement of absolute Spirit as embodying the individual. Hegel is not content in simply stating that the absolute is the universal or the infinite ground of being and thought, in which all finite perspectives, determinations and dualities must be dissolved. As he states, we cannot say that “single insight” is lost in “in the Absolute” reduced to “everything [as] the same”, otherwise it would be like saying that the Absolute is “the night in which all cows are black”. If that was the case, then all “cognition” would be “naively reduced to vacuity”. That is to say, cognition, emptied of all particularity, will simply be a mere formality.\(^66\) Accordingly, Hegel contends that in order to account for more than merely an empty formalism, the absolute standpoint must also be able to account for each individual consciousness.\(^67\) As Frederick Copleston reminds us, “The unification of the Many within the One without the former’s dissolution can be achieved only by living it.”\(^68\) This rethinking of absolute Spirit as encompassing the many within itself without dissolving their individuations but preserving them is important for my thesis, because Hegel in this move accounts for experience characterised by temporality. This temporal movement of experience is the mediation of individual consciousness with the absolute Spirit; or, put otherwise, the temporality of experience is characterised as the mediation of absolute Spirit with itself manifested in and through individual consciousness. “The thinking self must destroy an immediate, existent unity”, i.e., to negate the immediate, “in order to arrive at a unity which includes mediation, and is in fact mediation itself”.\(^69\) The absolute differentiates itself into each individual consciousness, only to sublate the individual consciousness within itself.\(^70\) Hegel is thus able to account for the absolute ground of our finite experience without simply negating the experience of the individual. He is able to secure the relation of subject and object, or thought and being, without simply collapsing the two into one and the same thing. Of course, once this is established, Hegel must elaborate the relation of particular to universal, of subject to object, Hegel cannot be satisfied with an account that leaves the absolute in opposition with itself.

In order to secure the reconciliation of subject and object in the absolute, Hegel develops his method of dialectic. With this method he is able to unite the subject and object (thought and being) by means of sublation. Sublation means that both sides of the

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., 8–9.


\(^{70}\) Rosen, *GWF Hegel*, 61.
Both sides, the subject and object, cancel each other out, pushed to a point of contradiction, but both are preserved in their reconciliation. This is a rather abstract way of explaining sublation. In order to clarify, Hegel is trying to show with the concept of sublation that consciousness is characterised by movement. Consciousness as the absolute – which means the absolute totality of subject and object or thought and being – is the movement of the relation of subject and object or thought and being within itself. Hegel describes this movement by means of their determinate relation to one another. This can be better illustrated by an example of experience. Whenever we actually experience something, we at first simply take it to be the case. We know what to expect from it. When this occurrence becomes problematic for us, however, we call it into question by rethinking it. This, for Hegel, is a process of negation. Then through a process of contemplation we can make sense of this new experience by reconciling our old experience with the new one. Our initial understanding, at first sure of itself, is then negated by something unexpected, and then, at a third step, it is reconciled with the new object of our experience. The crucial point is to show how Hegel rethinks the Kantian notion of experience to take into account how we experience something new. We do not simply discard the old experience supplanting it with the new, but preserve both. In other words, the possible reconciliation of the old object with the new one is due to the context of our understanding; i.e., through dialectical movement, consciousness preserves both new and old and on a higher level produces the new object.

Consciousness progresses through its different forms, it transcends itself, when its understanding proves inadequate to account for the objects it experiences. On Hegel’s account, the movement of consciousness is constituted by the dialectical mediation within experience. For Hegel, all that remains left is to give a ‘scientific’ account of this dialectical movement in order to grasp absolute Spirit in its totality and thus secure absolute knowledge, which I will discuss in the next chapter. However, to give a full account of Hegel’s endeavour, which he provides in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is outside of my discussion. My focus was to show how, in opposition to Kant, Hegel

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accounts for individual experience albeit as the part of the movement of absolute experience. Given this illustration of the dialectical movement of Spirit we can see how Hegel understands experience as the movement of consciousness itself. The movement of consciousness overcomes the seemingly finite particulars it encounters on its way to a more comprehensive knowledge.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I began by giving an account of Hegel’s understanding of consciousness as the productive imagination, which, as the original synthesis of the intellect and intuition overcomes the dichotomy of subject and object in Kant’s work. Then, I unpacked Hegel’s understanding of reason as the absolute ground of the subject-object and thought-being relation. According to Hegel, this account of reason allows him to overcome Kant’s notion of understanding as finite and limited by sensible intuition. Finally, I explained the meaning of the absolute standpoint in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is the unfolding of absolute Spirit as dialectical mediation. This dialectical mediation of the absolute is, as Hegel argues, the experience of consciousness itself characterised as its temporal movement. The point in this chapter was to show how Hegel accounts for experience as the temporal movement of the unfolding of absolute Spirit in and through individual consciousness, in other words taking up the individual into itself as the mediation of experience with itself.

In the following chapter, I will take up again this mediation of experience by Hegel to problematise it. I will address the notion of dialectical movement and his claim that the dialectical movement of absolute Spirit encompasses individual consciousness within itself. Using Gadamer’s discussion, I will argue that Hegel is not interested in the individual. In his project, Hegel wants to secure the ground for absolute knowledge. Despite his attempt to account for the individual, individual experience is in the end only important to ground knowledge. Temporality ceases to be important, only the infinitive remains.
Chapter Three:  
Gadamer – Experience and Finitude

To further address human experience as characterised by temporality and the need to rethink its importance for the structure of knowledge in a different way, in the previous chapter, I discussed G. W. F. Hegel’s attempt to overcome the critical limitations of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy by problematising the Kantian role of experience in regards to knowledge. Hegel achieves this by establishing the absolute ground for reason. He then further explicates this absolute ground as the unfolding of absolute Spirit or consciousness that encompasses the individual as well as the absolute, which is characterised by temporal movement or the mediation of consciousness with absolute Spirit.

In this chapter, I will discuss the importance of the absolute in Hegel’s philosophy and its completion in absolute knowledge. Second, I discuss some of the seemingly unresolvable tensions in Hegel’s attempt to reconcile the infinite and the finite, the absolute and the individual. I then consider those aspects of Hegel’s philosophy that help us understand human experience. I suggest that there are aspects of Hegel’s thought that elucidate human experience in key ways, however, Hegel is ultimately interested in securing absolute knowledge and not account of individual experience. Following this, I will turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s appropriation of Hegel’s understanding of experience in his own hermeneutic philosophy. Specifically, I consider Gadamer’s understanding of experience as temporal mediation from a finite hermeneutical perspective rather than the absolute perspective, which Hegel provides. Gadamer allows me to problematize Kant and Hegel’s insights, as discussed in the previous chapters, by thinking anew the notion of human experience.

Science of the Absolute

In the last chapter, in order to elucidate Hegel’s explanation of the temporal nature of experience, I discussed the nature of absolute Spirit as Hegel conceives it in the Phenomenology of Spirit. To put it otherwise, the nature of absolute Spirit is the temporal unfolding of itself through the determinate particulars of experience. Or, put otherwise, as the identity of opposites. However, as I noted at the end of the last chapter,
Hegel’s primary intention is to give an account of absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge, for Hegel, is achieved at the point in which the absolute is completely reconciled with itself. Dialectic mediation does not simply entail negation but also sublation, that is, as I showed in the previous chapter, it preserves within itself the individual moments of experience. However, this unfolding of the absolute must be a determinate and necessary movement in which it always comes back to itself as absolute. As Martin Heidegger suggests, Hegel articulates the distinction between relative and absolute knowledge as the movement of the unfolding of the absolute Spirit. It is important to note, that Hegel’s discussion at every point of this movement actually presupposes the notion of the absolute Spirit. Hence, the beginning of the absolute Spirit, for Hegel, is consciousness that has not-yet come to itself. As Hegel repeatedly stresses, the absolute Spirit is present at every moment within consciousness, yet unrecognised. He characterises this consciousness as a relative standpoint only capable of relative knowledge. Yet, as a moment of the absolute, this relative standpoint or relative knowledge is only relative because it is not-yet recognised as absolute. It is the absolute recognised abstractly, as one side divided against itself. According to Heidegger, Hegel considers this kind of position as the finite, reflective standpoint of philosophy; which is the Kantian position. The important point is to stress that, for Hegel, the unfolding of the absolute Spirit is not simply an indeterminate mediation or movement with no direction; this unfolding is the movement of the absolute coming back to itself. In fact, as Stanley Rosen points out, Hegel regards all philosophy prior to his to be relative systems, of which Hegel regarded his own system as the culmination. Hence, for Hegel, all that is left for philosophy is to recognise the absolute standpoint.

Furthermore, because the absolute Spirit is absolute consciousness, this means that the absolute unfolds itself through thought. And because it is us who partake in the absolute, as finite moments of the absolute, it is through our rational cognition that

75 Rosen, GWF Hegel, 273.
76 Heidegger, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, 32–33.
77 Ibid., 33.
78 Ibid., 33.
79 Ibid., 15–16.
80 Rosen, GWF Hegel, 267–268.
81 Hegel’s account of the absolute can be apprehended in many different ways, as a logical totality, as the culmination of consciousness’ historical movement, as rationally comprehended God, or as Gadamer elaborated, as the culmination of the Ancient Greek concept of Nous or Logos with the modern Cartesian perspective of self-consciousness. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hegel’s Philosophy and Its Aftereffects Until Today,” in Reason in the Age of Science, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981, 35.
Hegel believes the absolute can and must necessarily be thought. Of course, the absolute Spirit is not thought by any one of us individually; rather, it is thought as the absolute thinking itself in and through us. All that is necessary is to acknowledge absolute Spirit as absolute totality and its culmination in absolute knowledge. The way to this absolute knowledge, which is the unfolding of absolute Spirit, is through science. As Hegel states,

In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of ‘other’, at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of the absolute knowledge itself.

It is necessary, to offer some clarification as to what Hegel means here by authentic science of Spirit. Science in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is not simply a method, methodology, a field of research, or an attempt to lay a foundation. Rather, science is and must be, for Hegel, the essential unfolding of the absolute, which is already the ground or foundation of itself. Thus, science is an account of the way the absolute comes back to itself through mediation. Science is the recognition or recollection of absolute Spirit in and by us. Hence, Hegel’s concept of science differs from the way in which science is generally understood in modern philosophy, including in Kant’s critical Idealism. Science is not the attempt to establish or erect a firm ground upon which we could then build knowledge. The absolute already is the ground. Science is the recognition of the absolute ground which culminates in absolute knowledge.

**Eternity and Temporality**

Having discussed further and elaborated Hegel’s notion of the absolute and the manner in which it comes back to itself by way of science culminating in absolute knowledge, I now return to Hegel’s concept of temporality to account for Hegel’s notion of experience. However, Hegel’s notion of experience is problematic, as I already indicated, and as I will return to below. As Heidegger points out, if we accept that Spirit is an absolute totality, it would mean that time and therefore temporality is annulled.

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84 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 56–57.
85 Heidegger, *Hegel’s Concept of Experience*, 142.
87 Heidegger, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 146.
According to Heidegger, Hegel understands time as belonging to nature. Nature, which for Hegel is space and time, is simply an abstract manifestation of Spirit, one side of Spirit.\(^8\) In order for Spirit to know itself in-itself as totality it must annul the abstraction of nature. Once this is achieved it would mean the culmination of Spirit as absolute knowledge. However, this means that overcoming nature as an abstraction opposed to Spirit leads to the annulling of time; therefore, as noted above, only the eternal or infinite time remains, with the implication that the temporality of experience is annulled as well since the absolute knowledge of Spirit has overcome it. As infinite, absolute Spirit cannot be inside time, the differentiation of the absolute is an already substantiated absolute, which will be actualised once accounted for in its totality as absolute knowledge. In short, Spirit actually overcomes the temporal. Hence an account of individual experience as temporal movement becomes problematic as individual experience is overcome by the culmination of absolute Spirit.

Furthermore, another difficulty arises. As noted above, absolute Spirit must be recognised as culminating in absolute knowledge. This entails a rational account of Spirit in and through individual consciousness. Absolute Spirit does not unfold itself over against us, or behind our backs as it were; the absolute unfolds itself in and through consciousness, and must be thought in and through consciousness.\(^8\) The culmination of absolute Spirit is then the complete apprehension of absolute Spirit in and through rational thought. However, as Rosen points out, a problem then arises. If absolute Spirit is only completed in the recollection of the absolute by us in and through consciousness, how can we possibly give any account of the absolute until it has been completed? Seemingly, any account we could give would not be complete.\(^9\) Either the absolute is already completed, which allows for its manifestation in and through consciousness, or, the absolute is not yet complete.\(^9\) Furthermore, how could it be possible that an absolute recollection could ever culminate from a finite perspective? For the absolute Spirit to complete itself, it would have to subsume and overcome all finite perspectives, and thus all individual experience. However, absolute Spirit is the very culmination of these finite perspectives; it is constituted by these finite perspectives. So the problem remains, either, given our finite standpoint of experience, the absolute is incomplete and its possibility of ever being completed remains uncertain, or the absolute is already

\(^8\) *Ibid*, 146.
completed in which all individual experience becomes superfluous. It seems that Hegel in accounting for the culmination of absolute Spirit in absolute knowledge must forego the temporal nature of experience. The temporality of experience must be annulled if absolute knowledge, that is, absolute reconciliation with itself, is to be achieved.

**Gadamer: Hermeneutical Experience and Finitude**

Gadamer’s critique is similar. He also discusses Hegel’s substantiation of knowledge and points out the tension in Hegel’s position. According to Gadamer, Hegel’s ultimate goal – although recognising the significance of experience and its dialectical movement – is to see that the temporal movement of experience is overcome in absolute knowledge. As I discussed above, for Hegel, the experiential dialectic was always a way to account for the ultimate culmination of consciousness in self-certitude. Although Hegel’s starting point is the indeterminacy of experience or its dialectical movement, this movement is just a step required to account for absolute knowledge and its absolute certainty. As Hegel claims, in its movement, consciousness will in fact progress towards absolute self-knowledge, ultimately coming to know its past in its totality. Likewise, Jerome Veith suggests, “With all his emphasis on negativity, limitations and unpredictability, Hegel still takes consciousness to accrue in the course of history.” Ultimately, in coming to complete self-knowledge through knowing its past, Spirit can know itself absolutely. This does not mean that history would come to an end in the sense that it would cease to exist, as so many of Hegel’s detractors have claimed. Yet, it does mean that consciousness could attain complete self-transparency. In comprehending its past in its complete determinate movement, Spirit could then grasp the present in its totality. Knowledge as grounded in experience would culminate in the absolute self-transparency that consciousness holds of itself in its present form. Absolute Spirit could come to know itself through knowing its historical development. This, however, would be an ongoing task, a movement that does not cease. absolute Spirit would continue in a futural direction, whilst at the same time grasping its past in

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its absolute totality. This is the progressive nature of consciousness that Hegel develops. Through a mediating integration of the past with the present we can come to know history in its totality, and come to ground knowledge absolutely.

Nevertheless, Gadamer thinks there is some merit to Hegel’s claim that experience is characterised by dialectical movement. From Gadamer’s perspective, negation does adequately account for the movement of consciousness and its temporality, and becomes the starting point for Gadamer’s own explication of hermeneutical experience. However, he does not accept Hegel’s account of determinate negation as the process of history and as a means of securing the absolute certainty of consciousness coming to know itself. As Gadamer claims, this would preclude the open process that characterises each new experience. For Gadamer, the process of experience does not simply entail that one has experience, or has had considerable experience, but that one is also open to further experience. Gadamer thus accepts Hegel’s explication of experience as dialectical movement, but cannot follow him on his way towards the absolute that characterises Hegel’s overall project. Gadamer seeks to explain his notion of experience not from the standpoint of absolute knowledge, but rather, from within the finitude of human existence as constituted by an open dialogue with tradition. Gadamer refers to the finitude of human existence as hermeneutical experience, and it is this that I will explain below to return to my overall thesis that human experience is characterised by temporality and thus we need to rethink its importance for the structure of knowledge in a different way. Hegel’s proposed program of absolute knowledge, in the end, cannot account for finite human experience although he begins with it. It is this that Gadamer brings to the forefront in his notion of hermeneutic of experience.

Gadamer, following many of Hegel’s critics and going back to Kant, argues that human experience is fundamentally finite and therefore cannot have access to absolute knowledge. He highlights this point by using the work of Aeschylus as an example. For Aeschylus, learning is “learning through suffering”, it is coming to terms with the fact that not only do we not know, but, as finite human beings, we cannot ever know absolutely. We are not Gods. We cannot ever have access to divine knowledge. Gadamer explains this human limitation by considering the situatedness of all

97 Veith, Gadamer and the Transmission of History, 111.
100 Ibid, 365.
understanding in language (Sprache). For Gadamer, understanding is an event that takes place between the finite individual and the world (what Gadamer refers to as the whole of that-which-is). Gadamer contends that understanding is the medium in and through which the world reveals itself. According to Gadamer, this process is constituted by language. This is so because anything that reveals itself in and through understanding, or anything that is communicated to another is expressed in language. This does not reduce understanding to language, but means that all understanding takes place or is articulated in and through language. Furthermore, the horizon of language in which understanding takes place is infinite, it cannot be comprehended in its totality. Understanding is already embedded within the medium of language, which circumscribes reflection. Thus, for Gadamer, any attempt to reach something like absolute knowledge is impossible. It is precluded by an infinity of dialogue. In Hegel, this notion of infinity is termed the “bad infinite”: a problematic point that Hegel claims could be overcome by the use of dialectical method. Gadamer, however, adopts the point of the “bad infinite”, in order to make the opposite point. Gadamer holds that any attempt to reconcile the past with the present in absolute knowledge is not possible. For Gadamer, this is because language reveals certain aspects of the historical horizon in which we find ourselves – the fusion of past, present and future – while simultaneously concealing other aspects of this horizon. Hegel’s notion of the infinite is transformed in Gadamer’s thought. The infinite does not reside in and through the comprehension of reason, but in language. The movement of language precedes and transcends finite human experience. Furthermore, for Gadamer, in order to come to a clearer explanation of human experience we must also recognise its constitution in the historical horizon of tradition.

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101 Here, Gadamer’s use of the word language is not limited to only a formal system or science of language (Sprachwissenschaft), but also includes speech or dialogue (Sprachlichkeit).

102 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 473.


104 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 386.


106 As Veith makes clear: Gadamer augments Hegel’s notion of “bad infinity”. Gadamer’s use of the term “bad infinity” does not entail an “external” force that could somehow preclude the internal development of reason as Hegel claimed, but is rather the path we already find ourselves on, a “path of language” that “can never be lifted into total presence”. Veith, Gadamer and the Transmission of History, 113.

107 As many have pointed out, including Pippin, Gadamer is here borrowing Heidegger’s demonstration of the unending interplay of “revealing and concealing” regarding claims to truth. Pippin, Gadamer’s Hegel: Subjectivity and Reflection, 84–85.

Tradition

For Gadamer, tradition is the fusion of past, present and future; it is always historical. The historical happening, where we find ourselves, is characterised by the medium of language. It is the task of finite human experience to reconcile itself with the horizon of this tradition. Here, Gadamer’s position is similar to Hegel’s position that experience can be thought of as the dialectical movement of individual consciousness that must reconcile itself with its historical situatedness as the movement of Spirit. Experience, for both Gadamer and Hegel, is characterised by dialectical mediation. Taking tradition as the medium of language, Gadamer is able to claim that “language speaks us, rather than we speak it”.109 In this sense, the relationship between experience and language in Gadamer is similar to the one Hegel establishes between individual consciousness and Spirit, in which individual consciousness is but a momentary fragment of Spirit.110 Where Gadamer diverges from Hegel, however, is in his claim that tradition cannot be known in its totality. It cannot become fully mediated or present to consciousness in itself. Gadamer describes the tradition we find ourselves in as a medium of language that we must take up and engage with, as though in dialogue, rather than an object that can be understood in its entirety within reflection.111 The latter would run the risk of reducing living tradition to self-conscious understanding that is already articulated, closing off the possibility of further dialogue. As he says, “The claim to understand the other person in advance functions to keep the other person's claim at a distance”.112 It means closing off the possibility of a dialogue. Likewise, for Gadamer, this is an error made also by the objective methodologies within the natural and human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and Hegel’s account of historical consciousness as dialectic. Both, Gadamer argues, pre-suppose and subsume the other’s understanding into one’s own.113 Instead, Gadamer’s dialectical mediation of experience attempts to account for the open process of tradition as it stands in relation to consciousness.114 Human existence, as finite, already finds itself within a meaningful horizon of tradition, and this constitutes the historical situatedness of all understanding.

109 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 479.
112 Ibid, 368.
113 Ibid. 367–368.
114 Again substantiating that truth arises in the Heideggarian sense of alétheia or disclosedness. See Pippin, Gadamer’s Hegel: Subjectivity and Reflection, 84–85.
Dialogue

In Gadamer’s work, the situatedness of all understanding in tradition, characterised by the medium of language, takes on a dialogical character. As Gadamer claims in *Truth and Method*, this is so because the horizon of tradition cannot simply be an object that is subsumed or understood absolutely by the subject.\(^{115}\) Rather, tradition reveals itself through the dialogue of question and answer. It is the movement of experience in and through this dialogue that the world is mediated and at first presents itself. Hence, tradition, and everything revealed in the mediation of understanding and tradition, must be kept at a distance and understood as though it were a partner in dialogue.\(^{116}\) This must be the case if we want to remain open and undogmatic in our attempt to grasp the world as it presents itself to us. We are both situated within tradition and engaged with it. It is our task to continue to reconcile ourselves with our historical situatedness. Tradition as characterised by language will always continue to address us. The infinity of dialogue and the primacy of questioning will always precede and supersede us. For Gadamer, understanding is an ongoing dialogue and not a Hegelian dialectical progression. Language, as a dialogue, will always supersede individual understanding. The best we can do is to listen to what is said and remain open to the dialogue of tradition within the realm of questioning. We can engage with the world as it presents itself to us in and through dialogue. The possibility of understanding remains open as an infinite horizon of language. This horizon is inexhaustible and never final. As Gadamer states: “The Hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma.”\(^{117}\) As he claims also, “A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light.”\(^{118}\)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by giving an account of Hegel’s description of the movement of absolute Spirit culminating in absolute knowledge. As I have shown, however, Hegel’s ultimate concern is to establish a science of knowledge. Or to put differently, Hegel’s project is to ground knowledge in absolute Spirit. This is the culmination of


\(^{118}\) Ibid, 369.
consciousness coming to know itself throughout history. I pointed out tensions in Hegel’s account. The problem is his concept of experience, whereby he starts with individual experience only to dissolve it into the movement of absolute Spirit’s mediation of itself with itself. Likewise, for Gadamer, this is an impossible task. To confront the problematic nature of Hegelian absolute Spirit and his notion of experience, the problem of experience is formulated differently by Gadamer. Gadamer formulates hermeneutical experience as the dialectic movement within tradition. As finite and embedded within a tradition that is constituted by the medium of language, consciousness cannot hope to achieve an absolute self-transparency. Hence, it becomes our task to remain open to tradition, to listen to what it has to say to us. Through an open dialogue, a conversation with history, consciousness can reconcile itself with new understanding and new experience. For Gadamer, this is the hermeneutic nature of consciousness. The possibility of reconciliation between traditional understanding and new experience is not subsumed under the overarching movement of the absolute Spirit, but remains an ongoing task if we wish to take it up.

For Gadamer, the “hermeneutical consciousness” is “the dialectical illusion” of accepting the prejudices of the tradition for the questioning attitude of a historically situated person. As he says, a “person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a vis a tergo”. To avoid dogmatism, it is our task to remain open to living tradition, to that which presents itself to us as other, to listen to what tradition has to say and to attempt to reconcile ourselves with it.

119 Ibid, 368–369.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that human experience is characterised by temporality and that it is specifically this temporal dimension that we need to appreciate when thinking about the relationship between experience and the structure of knowledge. Additionally, I argued that the concept of experience can only be adequately understood if we situate it within finite human existence.

In the first chapter, I reflected upon Kant’s critique of the empiricist and rationalist traditions. As noted, Kant claims that both traditions overlook the role of experience in the structure of knowledge. I considered Kant's understanding of experience and the important role it plays in grounding his epistemic project. I argued that Kant’s understandings of experience stems, in part, from his attempt to ground knowledge objectively. At the same time, Kant maintains that experience is necessary to ground knowledge. I began with Kant because he stresses the active human participation in the constitution of knowledge and the central role of experience in this constitution.

In the second chapter, I turned to Hegel’s thought. Hegel rethinks the Kantian project and stresses the temporal nature of human experience. Specifically, Hegel rejects the Kantian recognition of the limits to human cognition. Unlike Kant, Hegel’s understanding of experience is characterised by movement. In order to overcome Kant’s position regarding knowledge and its limitation to human cognition, Hegel formulates a new understanding of consciousness that begins from an absolute standpoint. As such, knowledge for Hegel is not to be grounded upon the finite postulates of the understanding. For Hegel, knowledge and experience are not subjective postulates constituted by a finite intellect. Instead, they are constituted by the unfolding of an absolute consciousness or Spirit. Thus, for Hegel, knowledge and experience are characterised by movement and mediation, the unfolding of the absolute Spirit. Accordingly, as Hegel claims, experience is essentially temporal. Hegel contends that the ground of experience and knowledge is the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit itself. Experience is the movement of this unfolding.
Finally, I raised a number of potential problems with Hegel’s temporal account of experience. In particular, I suggested that while Hegel starts with the important acknowledgement that experience is temporal, his ultimate aim is to ground knowledge absolutely. Following Gadamer, I claim that Hegel’s pursuit of absolute knowledge eliminates temporality. I contend that in Hegel’s philosophy the temporal nature of experience is soon undermined by this larger goal. As Gadamer claims, although Hegel is interested in demonstrating the temporal movement of experience, temporal experience is only a stepping stone along the Hegelian path to absolute knowledge.

Hence, I turned to Gadamer in order to find an alternative account of experience that stresses its temporal nature. Gadamer refers to the finitude of human existence as hermeneutical experience. I argued that Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutical experience retains the temporal dimension so important to Hegel’s work without neglecting this insight in the pursuit of absolute knowledge. Gadamer’s work serves as a helpful platform for acknowledging that human experience is characterised by temporality and offers us an alternative way of understanding the importance of experience for the structure of knowledge. Hegel’s proposed program of absolute knowledge, in the end, cannot account for finite human experience. It is this that Gadamer brings to the forefront in his notion of hermeneutical experience.
References


