

CHAPTER ONE

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Good? On the Structural Function of the Practical Idea in Hegel's Logic

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Introduction

If we take a look at the secondary literature, we could easily get the impression that in Hegel's philosophy the notion of "good" plays a much less crucial and controversial role than concepts such as "spirit", "absolute", or "truth".¹ But this would be misleading. There are two reasons for such confusion.

First, Hegel does not speak of "good" as extensively as he does with other seemingly more "structural" concepts. For example, the notion of "spirit" designates, along with those of "logic" and "nature", one of the basic forms in which the idea manifests itself, that is, the fundamental core of Hegel's system. A different but equally important role is played by the term "absolute", which

1 As a purely illustrative example, see Vieweg (2023), which collects 23 texts by leading scholars that summarize "the best of Hegel" and yet does not include any contributions on the topic of the good (while many are devoted to the notions of "philosophy", "idealism", "spirit", "knowledge", "concept").

recurs repeatedly in Hegel's philosophy, especially in the attributive form ("absolute idea", "absolute spirit", but also "absolute beginning", "absolute mechanics", and so on). A still different case is the notion of "truth", which serves a central function in the systematic path, as is evident from recurring formulas such as "the *truth* of *being* is *essence*" (GW 11, 241/Hegel 2010a, 337) or "mind is the *truth* of nature" (GW 20, § 381/Hegel 2007, 9), and so on.

The concept of "good" does not seem to have such relevance, since Hegel, in his late system, speaks explicitly of "good" on only two occasions: in the *Logic*, in the pages on the idea of the good (GW 12, 231-235/Hegel 2010, 729-734; GW 20, §§ 233-235/Hegel 2010b, 297-299); and in the *Philosophy of Right*, in the chapter "The Good and the Conscience" (or "Good and Evil", in the *Encyclopedia* version) in the Morality section (GW 14.1, §§ 129-141/Hegel 1991, 157-186; GW 20, §§ 507-512/Hegel 2007, 225-227).² Thus the good does not seem to denote "macrostructures" (as is the case with spirit), nor does it seem to serve a relevant function in the systematic process (Hegel never says that something is "the good of" something else, as he does with the term "truth"). It simply seems to refer to certain objects among others. And this therefore means that, while notions such as "spirit", "absolute", or "truth" must be investigated as much by those dealing with epistemological or ontological issues as by those addressing political, aesthetic, or religious questions, the concept of "good" seems instead to be relevant only to those concerned with a very specific problem in Hegel's practical philosophy (e.g., for those working on his ethics).

The *second* reason that may cause confusion regarding the meaning of the concept of "good" in Hegel's philosophy is due to the remarkable similarity among its occurrences. In both the *Logic* and *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel seems to use the same argumentative structure: to put it very roughly, he first criticizes the identification of the good with an abstract principle that subjectivity must realize; he then shows that the good must be conceived of as something actual and concrete, which in the *Logic* means transitioning to the absolute idea, which is then referred to as the "fulfilled good" (GW 12, 233/Hegel 2010a, 731), and in the *Philosophy of Right* shifting to the domain of the Ethical Life, which is therefore understood as the "living good" (GW 14.1, § 141/Hegel 1991, 189). This similarity has had two main consequences: first, that Hegel's conception of the good has been regarded by many interpreters as uniform and

2 Here and in what follows, I use regular font (*Logic*, *Philosophy of Right*, etc.) to refer to specific domains of Hegel's system, while I use italics (*Science of Logic*, *Encyclopedia*, *Elements*, etc.) to refer to the works in which these domains are examined.

one-dimensional, and as concerning, again, a very specific problem to which there is an equally specific solution; and second, that the two accounts of the good in Hegel's system have been regarded as overlapping, with the result that the account in the *Logic*, which is less well known, is frequently made to coincide with that in the much more popular and studied *Philosophy of Right*.

In this chapter, I will try to show that these arguments are actually the result of several misunderstandings. More specifically, I have two main goals: first, I will argue that the idea of the good in the *Logic* is different from the good in the *Philosophy of Right*; and second, I will show that the idea of the good in the *Logic* fulfils a *structural function*, that is, unlike the good in the *Philosophy of Right*, it is relevant to Hegel's overall account of reality and knowledge (and thus not only to issues related to his practical philosophy).

In order to make my case, I will proceed as follows: I will first outline some conceptual distinctions about the term "good" that will be useful for my interpretation; I will present Hegel's theory of the idea and then examine in more detail the chapter on the idea of the good in the *Logic*, illustrating its structure as well as its limits; in the light of this, I will clarify what I mean when I say that the idea of the good fulfils a "structural function" and what consequences this has for our understanding of Hegel's philosophy in general; in the concluding remarks, I will summarize my argument, thereby answering the question that gives the title to this contribution (inspired by a famous short story by Raymond Carver), namely: for Hegel, what do we talk about when we talk about good?

The Varieties of Goodness

The notion of "good" undoubtedly plays a central role in philosophy and elsewhere. But providing a precise analysis of it, not to mention a comprehensive definition, is a daunting challenge, to say the least. Leaving aside issues of a philological and historical nature, the main philosophical reason for such difficulty can be summed up with Aristotle's words that "good is spoken of in as many ways as being [is spoken of]" (EN I 1096a 23-24). Indeed, depending on the contexts, the term "good" has different functions and meanings. Following the classification of von Wright (1963), who called this phenomenon the "varieties of goodness", we can speak, for example, of *instrumental goodness*, when "good" denotes the suitability of an artefact to fulfil certain purposes (e.g., in the expression "a good hammer"); we can speak of *technical goodness*,

when “good” means “good at”, that is, it signifies the fact that an activity is carried out well (e.g., “she is a good chess player”); but the term “good” can also stand for *beneficial* (e.g., in the sentence “fresh air is good”); or we can speak of *hedonic goodness*, which refers to the pleasant feelings that an object can provoke in a subject (as in the expressions “a good perfume”, “good weather”, or even “a good joke”), and so on.

Faced with such a variety of meanings, uses and contexts, one can easily and legitimately be discouraged from attempting to analyse the notion of “good”. Drawing on some suggestions from the metaethical debate, it is possible to bring clarity to this tangle of meanings by starting with a distinction between three possible usages of this term, namely, between substantive, predicative, and attributive usage:

- a) in *substantive usage* “good” is taken as a noun, such as in the phrase “freedom of speech is a fundamental good”;
- b) in *predicative usage* “good” is taken as a predicative adjective, such as in the phrase “this book is good”;
- c) in *attributive usage* “good” is taken as an attributive adjective, such as in the phrase “this is a good car”.

In an influential 1956 article, however, Peter Geach questioned whether “good” can really be used predicatively, since its meaning always seems to depend on the object of reference. The term “green”, for example, is fully intelligible regardless of the object it connotes. This is shown by the fact that the proposition

(A) This apple is green

can be split into two different propositions:

(A₁) This is an apple

(A₂) This is green

where (A₁) and (A₂) also make sense separately. But this does not seem to be the case for “good”. In fact, if we take the proposition

(B) This apple is good

and we split it into:

(B₁) This is an apple

(B₂) This is good

the meaning of “good” in (B₂) becomes completely indeterminate and the proposition no longer makes sense. This is why, according to Geach (1956), the term “good” can only be used attributively: for example, in the proposition “this is a good apple”, the meaning of the adjective “good” is determined by its referring to “apple” (and means, for example, “tasty”); in the proposition “this is a good car”, the meaning of “good” changes completely (and means, for example, “fast” or “reliable”). In more formal terms, then, the meaning of “good” in propositions such as “*x* is a good *A*” depends on the meaning of *A* and is established by the possibility of a given *x* to instantiate properties that define *A*s being a member of a certain class of entities.³

These clarifications are important because – and this is the main thesis I will argue – *Hegel understands the concept of “good” primarily (though not exclusively) in an attributive sense.* More specifically, while in the Philosophy of Right he uses the notion of “good” mostly as a noun, in the Logic he means “good” mainly as an attribute of reality – and the reason for this is similar to Geach’s, namely that, *without any reference to specific objects, to speak of “good” is an abstract and empty exercise.* And it is precisely this difference that allows us to understand what I have called the “structural function” of the idea of the good. In order to clarify this point, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at Hegel’s theory of the idea.

Hegel’s Theory of the Idea

Hegel defines the idea as “*the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity*” (GW 20, § 213/Hegel 2010b, 282). To clarify what this means, it is first important to illustrate the terms involved, so as to avoid possible misunderstandings.⁴ Once this is done, it will be possible to examine in more detail the part of the Logic in which Hegel thematizes the idea.

Concept, Objectivity, Idea

The first issue to be made clear is that the term *concept* (*Begriff*), for Hegel, does not indicate a product or instrument of reason, but rationality as such. It represents the domain of meanings, rules and ends, that is, that normative space that makes the world and human existence intelligible and endowed

3 For more on this see Thomson (2008, ch. 1-2).

4 On Hegel’s theory of the idea see Düsing (1984, ch. 5), Nuzzo (1995), Siep (2018).

with meaning. In the words of a contemporary philosopher, it is what ensures that “the world is embraceable in thought” (McDowell 1996, 33).

But the concept is only the subjective side of the idea, which in order to realize itself must also include the other side, namely *objectivity* (*Objektivität*) (GW 12, 29-30/Hegel 2010a, 526-527). The meaning of this term also differs from its usual understanding, whereby it refers neither to external reality, as opposed to and independent from the human mind, nor to a property of our judgments or theories, in the sense that they do not convey subjective opinions. The idea is objective in that it presents itself “as a *totality*, as a *world*” (GW 12, 135/Hegel 2010a, 633) that develops rationally: it is the reality regarded not as an aggregate, but as a unity in which the parts realize themselves by having the whole as their own end, somewhat as in the human body the different organs, fulfilling their specific function, cooperate in the development of the whole organism.

As a *unity* of concept and objectivity, the idea is therefore “the totality’s self-determining identity” (GW 12, 172/Hegel 2010a, 669). It is the rationality that organizes the world in its various manifestations, from the most basic forms of the nature (physical, chemical, biological) to the most complex ones of the spirit (as both individual and social life-form and also as knowledge of these manifestations). As a consequence, the term “idea” for Hegel does not mean “the idea *of something*” (GW 20, § 213, R/Hegel 2010b, 283), nor does it refer to an abstract entity that stands in opposition to the empirical world, as in Plato, or the ought-being that opposes being, as in Kant.⁵ Rather, for Hegel the idea is the world, both natural and social, as a substance that realizes and knows itself (GW 20, § 237/Hegel 2010b, 299-300). It is thus both ontological and epistemological in scope, or in other words: the idea is the structure that organizes both reality and the knowledge of reality.

The Doctrine of the Idea

Despite its general scope, Hegel presents and develops the notion of “idea” in a specific place in his system, namely the Doctrine of the Idea, which, not surprisingly, is the final section of the Logic.⁶ This section is divided into three

5 For Plato there are “two kinds of beings”: that of visible, empirical things and that of invisible, non-empirical things, i.e., ideas (Phd, 79a 6-10). For Kant, on the other hand, ideas have exclusively a regulative function, since they are a mere “*focus imaginarius*” toward which reason must aim (KrV, A 644/B 672).

6 For a comprehensive and detailed analysis of this section cf. Siep (2018).

parts, reflecting different configurations of the relationship of concept and objectivity: Idea of Life, Idea of Cognition and Absolute Idea.

The first configuration is *life*, which is the immediate identity of the two sides of the idea, being the concept that “permeates” the objectivity “as self-directed purpose (*Selbstzweck*)” (GW 12, 177/Hegel 2010a, 675). It therefore expresses the unitary, processual and purposive nature of reality as rational, i.e., that the world is not only intelligible but also oriented to the realization of functions and ends.

The second configuration is the *idea of cognition*, which Hegel defines as “the *relationship of reflection*” of concept and objectivity and thus as “the differentiation of the idea in itself” (GW 20, § 224/Hegel 2010b, 291). Cognition is therefore the “rupture” of the unity of life and the consequent turning of the idea toward itself. This dynamic is therefore broken down into a “*twofold* [...] movement” (GW 20, § 225/ Hegel 2010b, 291), represented by the idea of the true, on the one hand, and the idea of the good, on the other. Hegel also calls the idea of the true “the *theoretical* [...] activity of the idea” and defines it as “the drive of knowledge to truth” (GW 20, § 225/Hegel 2010b, 291): it is the tension of the concept to know the reality external to it. Correspondingly, the idea of the good, which Hegel also calls “the *practical* activity of the idea”, “*willing*”, “*action*”, is described as “the drive of the *good* to bring itself about” (GW 20, § 225/Hegel 2010b, 291): it is the tension of the subjective concept to realize itself, that is, to shape the objective reality. The recomposing of this internal separation consists in the transition to the absolute idea, namely, to the accomplished unity of the rational and the actual.

As a synthesis of the previous moments, the *absolute idea* is thus “life, having come back to itself from the differentiation and finitude of knowing, and having become identical with the concept through the activity of the concept” (GW 20, § 235/Hegel 2010b, 299). It is, in other words, the reality that is in itself rational, and knows and realizes itself.

If on the one hand we therefore hold firm to the definition of the idea as “*unity of the concept and objectivity*”, and on the other hand the definition of the idea of the good as “the *practical* activity of the idea”, we can then understand the chapter on the idea of the good in the Logic as dealing with the practical relationship of the concept to objectivity – or more precisely: as a *philosophical analysis of the relationship between practical rationality and reality*.

The Structure of the Idea of the Good in the Logic

I now turn to examine in more detail the idea of the good.⁷ The starting point of my analysis is the following quote from Hegel:

[The idea of the good] is the *impulse* [of the concept] to realize itself, the purpose that *on its own* wants to give itself objectivity in the objective world and realize itself. (GW 12, 231/Hegel 2010a, 729)

This is certainly a rich and complex sentence. I will focus on two main aspects of the idea of the good that are emphasized here, namely:

- a) the active and rational nature of the concept;
- b) its teleological structure.

The first aspect is summarized by the characterization of the idea of the good as the “*impulse* [of the concept] to realize itself”. The second by Hegel’s emphasis on the purpose-oriented nature of this realization.

The Concept as “Impulse to Realize Itself”

The main picture outlined by the sentence quoted above is that the idea of the good consists of the attempt of the subjective concept to actualize itself and thereby determine “the world that it finds” (GW 20, § 233/Hegel 2010b, 297). This is summed up by the term “impulse” (*Trieb*),⁸ which makes it possible to clarify the three main premises of the idea of the good:

- a) the separation between subjective concept and objective reality;
- b) the drive to overcome this separation;
- c) the valuation of the concept and the devaluation of reality.

Being a moment of the idea of cognition, the idea of the good is also marked internally by the opposition between concept and objectivity, that is, between the two sides of the idea. At the same time, however, it also consists of the concept’s attempt to *sublate* this separation and thereby achieve the unity of the absolute idea. But while the idea of the true pursues this goal by “erasing” the concept in the passive reception of objective reality, the idea of the good proceeds in exactly the opposite way – that is, by shaping reality

7 On the idea of the good in the Logic cf. Hogemann (1994), Siep (2010), Manchisi (2019, 2021), Deligiorgi (2022).

8 On the meaning of this term in Hegel’s Logic see Wittmann (2006).

through the subjective activity of the concept. The reason for this structure reversal with respect to the idea of the true is that, in the idea of the good, it is the concept that is the “driving force”, so to speak, that is, what brings forth the self-realization of reason, while reality is understood as a neutral, shapeless space.

This conception is effectively summarized by Hegel through the picture of an opposition between two realms:

one a realm of subjectivity in the pure spaces of transparent thought, the other a realm of objectivity in the element of an externally manifold reality, an impervious realm of darkness. (GW 12, 233/Hegel 2010a, 731)

In this picture, objective reality is a “realm of darkness”, that is, a murky, fragmented space in which it is impossible to orient oneself. It is therefore the task of the subjective concept to shed light, bringing unity and rationality. The notion of “reality (*Wirklichkeit*)”, accordingly, is here meant by Hegel in negative terms, namely, as that which opposes subjectivity and limits it from the outside. As a consequence, if the concept is the space of rationality, reality is non-rational (and it is therefore the task of the concept to bring reason into it); if the concept is the source of good, reality is “rather either the evil or the indifferent, the merely determinable, whose worth does not lie within it” (GW 12, 234/Hegel 2010a, 732).

The account of rationality underlying the idea of the good in the *Logic*, then, is that of an active power that shapes reality, making it rational. As an “*impulse to realize itself*”, the concept must bring rules, ends and meanings into the objective world, which in itself has no evaluative or normative scope.

The Concept as “Purpose”

I now consider the second aspect of the idea of the good. As seen in the above quote, Hegel explains the drive of the concept by referring to its teleological structure: rationality strives to realize itself as a “purpose (*Zweck*) that [...] wants to give itself objectivity” (GW 12, 231/ Hegel 2010a, 729). This means that this realization is not “blind”, but is guided by a purpose. Such a purpose has a peculiar status: on the one side, it is found in objective reality, so that its pursuit involves a tension of the concept toward something external to itself; but on the other, it is posited by the concept itself, which by realizing it therefore only fulfils its own rationality.

In order to clarify this point, it is important to briefly address a question of an interpretive nature. The explanatory account underlying the teleological structure of the idea of the good seems to be what Hegel calls “*external purposiveness*” (GW 12, 156/Hegel 2010a, 653), and which in the Teleology section in the *Logic* he identifies as lacking in that it is based on the opposition of subject and object. This opposition is removed in the transition to the idea of life, in which the concept no longer has its own end outside itself, but is itself such an end.⁹

The problem that arises with the idea of the good is thus the reappearance of a teleological account that has already been overcome. Hegel himself mentions the problem, but immediately points out that, compared to the Teleology section, here “the content constitutes the difference” (GW 12, 232/Hegel 2010a, 730). On the one hand, in fact, the idea of the good does represent a “step backward” from the idea of life: as a moment of the idea of cognition, it contains that “opposition [of] the one-sidedness of subjectivity together with the one-sidedness of objectivity” (GW 20, § 225/Hegel 2010b, 291) that is the condition of possibility of external purposiveness, and that life had sublated. On the other hand, however, this opposition is nothing more than the “pure differentiating [of the idea] *within* itself” (GW 20, § 224/Hegel 2010b, 291): the separation of concept and reality remains internal to the unity of the idea.

In light of this, it is then possible to say that the purposiveness of the idea of the good is *external and internal at the same time*: it is external insofar as it is a relation between two opposites, but it is internal insofar as these opposites are but “sides” of *one* logical-speculative determination.

The Limits of the Idea of the Good

The source of these fluctuations and ambiguities in the idea of the good lies in its core premise, namely, the separation between concept and reality. This is what dooms this philosophical account to failure and calls for its overcoming. In particular, there are two main negative consequences to which the idea of the good leads: *self-referentiality* and *ineffectiveness*.¹⁰

9 On these topics see Kreines (2015, ch. 3). See also what Goran Vranešević writes in this volume: “The final end does not end the work of the concept, since it is not an end (*Ende*) and ends are a matter of nature, which is its own end without the need to establish a relation to will or sense. The final end is, on the contrary, something realised that has no end” (2024, 78).

10 On the limits (or “aporias”) of the idea of the good see Menegoni (1988), and more extensively Manchisi (2019).

Self-Referentiality

The idea of the good is self-referential insofar as the concept is understood as practical rationality, and thus as normative source, in contrast to reality, which is instead regarded as a neutral, value-free space. As I have already mentioned, the concept has an active and reflexive nature: for example, Hegel writes that, in the idea of the good, it “is now *for itself* determined in and for itself”, (GW 12, 230/Hegel 2010a, 729) or that “the concept [...] is its own subject matter” (GW 12, 231/Hegel 2010a, 729). Being the subjective side of the idea, the concept is able to reflect on its own contents and determine them, that is, give them objective form and value. With respect to this activity of self-determination, reality plays no role: it is an inert material that exerts no normative constraint. This leads Hegel to conclude that:

the certainty of itself that the subject possesses in being determined in and for itself is a certainty of its reality and of the *non-reality* of the world. (GW 12, 231/Hegel 2010a, 729)

The only reality that matters is that which the subject acknowledges its own contents: since they are the result of its self-determination, they are rationally justified. These contents are therefore also the only reality of which it is possible to have “certainty”, since it is the subject itself that has produced it. In contrast, with regard to the “world” – which possesses no value or rationality in itself – it is not possible to establish anything relevant, so from the normative point of view of the concept we can only claim its “*non-reality*”, that is, its utter insignificance. The idea of the good is thus self-referential insofar as its subjective side is completely locked on itself and does not acknowledge any value or meaning outside of itself.

Ineffectiveness

This self-referentiality of reason is also the cause of its ineffectiveness, i.e., its inability to actually determine the external world. The assumption that the only source of norms and values is the subject makes the process of realization of the good consist in a “transition” from the ideal and rational space of the concept to the real and indeterminate space of the world. It is thus a kind of “projection” from inwardness to outwardness. Hegel sums up this point as follows:

The realized good is good by virtue of what it already is in the subjective purpose, in its idea; the realization gives it an external existence, but since this existence has only the status of an externality which is in and for itself

null, what is good in it has attained only an accidental, fragile existence, not a realization corresponding to the idea. (GW 12, 232/Hegel 2010a, 731)

Hegel's critique, then, is that given his starting assumption, namely the devaluation of external reality, the realization of the good does not consist in a true unity between concept and objectivity, but in an imitation of it. To the extent to which it is viewed as a mere expanse of neutral facts, i.e., having no normative meaning or scope, the world turns out to be impermeable to practical rationality, since everything the latter produces loses its value the very moment it "enters" external reality. What is achieved, in other words, is merely a fragmented ("accidental, fragile") good, since it no longer has anything of its original value.

This is why Hegel claims that "the idea of the fulfilled good is indeed an *absolute postulate*, but no more than a postulate" (GW 12, 233/Hegel 2010a, 731). To speak of an "*absolute postulate*" means this: the concept produces an ideal, rational good, which nevertheless does not affect reality ("*absolute*" here means, in a literal sense, "unbound" from external constraints). But to conceive the good apart from the conditions of its realization, that is, the possibility of its being effective for concrete action and evaluation, is to give up a fundamental aspect of the very notion of "good". Practical rationality outlined in this way is thus a normative demand without a connection to reality, and what results are contents that merely "float" over the world without actually changing it, that is, principles and values that exercise no power over concrete subjects or contexts.

The picture of the good provided here is thus that of an architecture that is perfectly designed but cannot be materially built. The practical idea, which at first was the "the *impulse* to realize itself", ultimately proves to be the structural impossibility of realization.

The Attributive Meaning of the Good

The Transition to the Absolute Idea

The recognition that the idea of the good is bound to contradiction by its very structure implies a final, fundamental step in the Logic, namely, the transition to the absolute idea. This step has a threefold significance (at least for the issues I am dealing with in this contribution):

- a) it is the “turning back to *life*” (GW 12, 236/Hegel 2010a, 735), i.e., the reinstatement of internal activity and purposiveness;
- b) it is the overcoming of the one-sidedness of the idea of cognition and thereby the unification of the subjective concept and objective reality;
- c) it is “the *truth* of the good” (GW 20, § 235/Hegel 2010b, 299), i.e., the good finally realized.

Hegel summarizes these points as follows:

the previously discovered reality is at the same time determined as the realized absolute purpose, no longer [...] [as] a merely objective world without the subjectivity of the concept, but as an objective world whose inner ground and actual subsistence is rather the concept. This is the absolute idea. (GW 12, 235/Hegel 2010a, 734)

In the account that Hegel outlines in the final step of the Logic, then, reality is no longer an empty space that subjectivity must shape according to its own ends, but a “world” that, having the concept as its “inner ground and actual subsistence”, is intrinsically rational and good.

The Attributive Meaning of “Good” in the Logic

To clarify this last statement, the conceptual distinctions we saw above about the different usages of “good” are relevant again. But a clarification is first necessary: here I mean these distinctions not linguistically but philosophically. To put it another way, I am interested in illuminating the theoretical function that the *concept* (not merely the term) “good” has within Hegel’s philosophy.

In order to understand what it means that the world is good in its “inner ground and actual subsistence”, or that it is the realized good, it is necessary to hold together all three components of the transition to the absolute idea indicated above: the “turning back to *life*”, the unification of concept and reality, and the fulfilment of the “*impulse* to realize itself” of the practical idea. On this basis, we can summarize Hegel’s account of the good in the Logic by pointing to two central features of the absolute idea, namely: (a) *rationality* and (b) *purposiveness*.

- a) To speak of “realized good” means, first of all, that *reality is value-laden* and can therefore be conceived according to value criteria, that is, it can be understood as better or worse, desirable or repulsive, worthy or unworthy, and so on. And this is to say, as a consequence, that we can use “good” *in an attributive sense*: it is only because of the analysis of the idea of the good and its

realization that it is possible to speak, in the context of Hegel's philosophy, of a "good action" or a "good State", but also of a "good oak", a "good body", or a "good poem". The good, as conceived in the Logic in the transition to the absolute idea, constitutes a property of reality and of everything within it, insofar as rationality is manifested in it to some degree. This is explained clearly by Hegel himself:

In the concrete things, together with the diversity of the properties among themselves, there also enters the difference between the *concept* and its *realization*. The concept has an external presentation in nature and spirit wherein its determinateness manifests itself as dependence on the external, as transitoriness and inadequacy. Therefore, although an actual thing will indeed manifest in itself what it *ought* to be, yet, in accordance with the negative judgment of the concept, it may equally also show that its actuality only imperfectly corresponds with this concept, that it is *bad*. Now the definition is supposed to indicate the determinateness of the concept in an immediate property; yet there is no property against which an instance could not be adduced where the whole *habitus* indeed allows the recognition of the concrete thing to be defined, yet the property taken for its character shows itself to be immature and stunted. In a bad plant, a bad animal type, a contemptible human individual, a bad State, there are aspects of their concrete existence that are defective or entirely missing but that might otherwise be picked out for the definition as the distinctive mark and essential determinateness in the existence of any such concrete entity. (GW 12, 213-214/Hegel 2010a, 712)

This quote thus summarizes the normative and evaluative role of the concept in the realization of both natural and spiritual things, and thereby explains why I referred to the *structural function of the good*. Like notions such as "absolute", "spirit", or "truth", the notion of "good", as outlined in the Logic, also plays a role that does not terminate with its direct thematization (i.e., in the chapter on the idea of the good), but has repercussions for Hegel's *whole* system. In this case, it is only by considering the good as an essential feature of the absolute idea, i.e., of the principle that organizes the whole of reality and knowledge, that it is possible to evaluate particular entities and thus to speak of a "good plant" or a "good State" (or, as Hegel seems to prefer, a "bad plant" or a "bad State").

b) There is a second meaning that is related to the attributive usage of the concept of "good" in Hegel's philosophy. It has to do with the definitions of the idea of the good as "*practical* activity of the idea", "action", and "impulse to realize itself", as well as with the "turning back to *life*" in the absolute idea. In this respect, the last step of the Logic allows Hegel to conceive of reality not

only as value-laden, but also as *a teleologically oriented process*.¹¹ This has two main implications: one ontological, the other epistemological.

The first is that, in Hegel's account, the world both natural and spiritual is not something static and merely given, but is essentially dynamic. This does not just mean that things change over time. To say that the world is "practical", for Hegel, means that reality is a process oriented purposively toward the realization of reason. This process is also evaluative in nature, so the more an entity or relation realizes its rational potential (i.e., its concept), the more good it is, meaning that it is a good representative of its kind.

The second implication is that for Hegel philosophy is not (at least not primarily) concerned with static "things" but with events or processes, which can be adequately described only when grasped within the dynamic in which they occur and that cannot be reduced to other entities, such as states of affairs. Moreover, this makes the philosophical enterprise constitutively evaluative, since knowing something philosophically means knowing its concept and determining to what extent it is fulfilled, i.e., formulating statements such as "*x* is a good *A*" or "*x* is not a good *A*".

The transition to the absolute idea, as the realization of the practical idea and turning back to life, thereby sets the possibility for Hegel to accord teleological-evaluative nature to both being and knowledge.¹²

The Non-Attributive Meaning of "Good" in the Philosophy of Right

These explanations should finally have also clarified the difference between the good in the Logic and the good in the Philosophy of Right. In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes morality as the "opposition" (GW 14.1, § 109/ Hegel 1991, 138) between the authority of abstract norms and values and the reflective activity of the moral subject. Central to this analysis, then, is the attempt to build a relationship between these two extremes, so that the normative space constitutes the ground of subjective agency. The good examined here is thus an abstract moral principle that finite consciousness tries to pursue. In the same way, Hegel defines the living good in the section on Ethical Life as "the *concept of freedom which has become the existing*

11 On the importance of the notion of "life" for understanding the processual and purposive character of Hegel's philosophy cf. Illetterati (2019) and Ng (2020).

12 On the practical nature of reality in Hegel see Quante (2018b). On the teleological-evaluative (and essentialist) structure of Hegel's philosophy cf. Quante (2018a, ch. 1).

world and the nature of self-consciousness” (GW 14.1, § 142/ Hegel 1991, 189): that is, it is the set of norms, practices and institutions through which human beings organize the social and political reality they participate in and in which they recognize themselves.¹³

As we have seen, things are different in the Logic. The idea of the good does not address the problem of normativity from the point of view of the finite individual, nor does it concern particular instantiations of the good. As a speculative analysis, the chapter on the idea of the good in the Logic is also not directly ethical or political in scope, as is the case with the Philosophy of Right. It concerns – as I have tried to show – the conditions for the realization of practical rationality, as much in the realm of spirit as in one of nature.

This difference is captured, again, by the different function of the concept of “good” in the two contexts. In the Philosophy of Right, Hegel uses this concept with a primarily substantive meaning, that is, to qualify certain objects, principles, or settings as “goods”. In this view, the family is a good, education is a good, the State is a good, and there is also of course *the* good, meaning the abstract principle of morality, or *the* living good, meaning the *Sittlichkeit*.

Of course, in the Logic, too, Hegel understands the good as a noun. After all, he speaks of “idea of *the* good”, “realization of *the* good”, and so on. But the central task of the chapter on the idea of the good is to set the conditions for the attributive usage of this concept. This attributive usage, on the other hand, is absent from the Philosophy of Right, in which, moreover, it would not make much sense, since the good there refers either to an abstract moral principle, which therefore does not determine anything good apart from itself, or, in the case of the living good, to a specific dimension, namely social and political reality. As such, a limited (or regional) attributive usage of the good with respect to the domain of ethical life could be admitted. However, there is no need to introduce this assumption, since the possibility of considering the practices and institutions of the *Sittlichkeit* as valuable is already established by the absolute idea as the general principle of Hegel’s system and realized good.

Final Remarks

The problem I have addressed in this paper is the meaning of the good in Hegel’s philosophy. For this purpose, I have provided an interpretation of the idea

13 On the good in the Philosophy of Right see Moyar (2021).

of the good and the transition to the absolute idea in the Logic. The reason for this choice is – as I have tried to show – that there Hegel does not analyse the good as a moral or political principle, but as a constitutive attribute of reality as rational.

As a result, the idea of the good in the Logic can be understood as Hegel’s attempt to answer the question: *what do we talk about when we talk about good?* And this means: what do we mean by the concept of “good” in our judgments, in our descriptions of reality and in our practices? And on the basis of what, as a consequence, can we say that something is “a good” or, as is more often the case, that something is “good” or is a “good specimen” of its kind (a good jacket, a good theory, a good friend)?

The thesis I have tried to argue is that in the Logic Hegel provides a possible explanation of this phenomenon, according to which:

- a) the good is an essential property of the world, both natural and spiritual;
- b) it is only because of this property that we can have value experiences and make value judgments;
- c) these judgments can be more or less correct according to their ability to grasp properly the degree of development of what we evaluate.

What do we talk about, then, when we talk about good? Not simply of a moral principle, nor of the end that should guide political life, but of the fact that – to use Hilary Putnam’s words – “experience *isn’t* ‘neutral’, [...] it comes to us screaming with values” (Putnam 2002, 103). One of the main tasks of philosophy for Hegel is to listen carefully to these screams.¹⁴

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Abbreviations

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- GW 11 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1978: *Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 11, Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band. Die objektive Logik (1812/13)*

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