

On Negativity: Meaning and Concept between Hegel and Heidegger

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Abstract

This thesis maps out a debate between Hegel and Heidegger starting from the question concerning the constitution of meaning. The main interest of the project concerns the relation between meaning and conceptual comprehensibility – between ἀλήθεια and λόγος.

The thesis proposes a methodological notion of negativity, according to which a conceptual determination is characterized by the paradox of being simultaneously revealing and concealing. This means that the immediacy of an intelligible phenomenon conceals its constitutive dimensions. In other words, the concealment of that which constitutes is a condition for the immediacy of the constituted phenomena.

Against this background, the thesis argues that Hegel and Heidegger both understand their own philosophical project as a theory of λήθη – as an alethiology. An alethiology addresses the dimension of latency in the constitution of meaning. Heidegger considers latency in terms of an oblivion of the genesis of meaning. For Hegel, the latency stands for the implicit character of conceptual determinations contained in an immediate determination.

The tension between meaning and concept, reflected in the dispute between Hegel and Heidegger, arises from this conception of negativity. If the constituent of meaning is concealed, it is necessary to clarify how this dimension of latency can be revealed and articulated. And if conceptual determinations conceal what they reveal, if they abstract from what makes them possible in the first place, the question arises whether philosophical thought can become aware of this inherent tension and overcome it. Is the constitutive, latent dimension of meaning non-conceptual, or is the non-conceptual irrelevant in the semantic domain?

These questions define the bone of contention between Hegel and Heidegger. The dispute seems irreconcilable, particularly because Heidegger insists that conceptual thinking inevitably implies oblivion and obliteration. According to Heidegger, this shortage is manifest

in the way Hegel transforms negativity and finitude into the “energy of thinking”. Against this approach, Heidegger frames the question concerning the origin of nothingness. The nothingness refers, beyond the realm of determinate and mediated being, to the unfathomable emergence of meaning.

Despite his initial project in *Being and Time*, Heidegger abandons the concept in his late philosophy, by denying it the ability to do justice to the finitude of the human world. Heidegger’s arguments are a variation of the idea that the human being cannot decide its thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) – that the λόγος cannot decide over the historical paradigm in which it is entrapped.

This fundamental decision of Heidegger's late thinking motivates my critical approach. By criticizing the modern paradigm of autonomy, Heidegger paves the way for a view of a powerless humankind in the face of history. From Hegel's perspective, the fact that our understanding of the world is characterized by forgetfulness and one-sidedness does not mean that its constitution is incomprehensible. Moreover, the abstract character of conceptual determinations is not a sufficient reason to abandon the conceptual articulation of meaning. According to Hegel, to abandon the conceptual task of philosophy by invoking unconceivable, private experiences is a surrender to arbitrariness and indeterminacy.

Against this kind of defeatism, Hegel sets the unceasing task of unfolding the assumptions of our epistemic and normative claims. For this purpose, Hegel revises the Kantian conception of autonomy and binds freedom to the logical display of the constitution of meaning, i.e., to the articulation of the rich determinations implied in our most basic normative and epistemic concepts. Conceptual self-articulation is what confers freedom, despite the epistemological limitation, the historical predetermination and the ontological finitude of human beings.