

“The Other Half of Hegel’s Halfwayness: A response to Dr. Morelli’s
Meeting Hegel Halfway”

Ben Suriano

I enjoyed reading Dr. Morelli’s essay and found that it helpfully clarifies and elaborates Lonergan’s intimate and complex relationship to the thought of Hegel. I would like to focus on the objection that Lonergan raises, according to Dr. Morelli, that while Hegel does acknowledge a pure desire with an unrestricted objective he nevertheless ends up restricting this objective to the Absolute idea, which leads to his conceptualist, closed, and necessitarian system. I agree with this objection, but I would like to supplement Dr. Morelli’s analysis of why Hegel restricted the objective of knowing to a reified conceptual field. To suggest that Hegel’s restriction came about due to an inadequate turn to the interior dynamics of the operational field seems to possibly offer only half an answer. This is because within Hegel’s predetermining framework, no matter how much deeper he turns to the interior of the operational field, he will always be led immediately back to the reified conceptual field and its myth of determinate negation. In other words, it is not a matter of simply attending to and getting clearer about the operational dynamic of thought and its directive methods,

but also a matter of focusing on the unrestricted objective that draws the pure desire of thought through certain directive methods. Yet, to focus on the self-transcending subject in terms of a pure desire with an unrestricted objective is to also deal ineluctably with philosophical theology in a foundational way.

This is something Hegel knew and never shirked from. Philosophy was for Hegel a form of God-service, a knowledge of the truth of the Absolute, an attempt to account for the intelligibility of all of reality within a comprehensive infinite, all of which entailed that philosophy and theology shared the same content. Indeed for Hegel the revolutionary turn to the subject and finitude was itself occasioned only by a greater turn to the infinite as that unrestricted object of the pure desire, especially as triggered by the Protestant Reformation. And Hegel shows with great insight how the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-appropriation became obstructed and divided precisely by an inadequate pursuit of knowing the infinite. To understand the infinite as an abstract beyond set over against the finite was to remain within an alienating reification of the understanding, likewise for the bourgeois subject who restricted the objective of thought to mere finitude. Both positions arbitrarily bind knowledge to the untruth of a part rather than directing itself toward the absolute whole, the true infinite. Thus

for Hegel the self-transcending subject can only be rationally founded through an intrinsic and constitutive relation to the infinite as the true unrestricted object of thought. So within the very task of self-knowledge Hegel finds an essential conjunction with divine science, a conjunction that cannot be simply reduced to a matter of hubris or even a residual concentration on some outdated metaphysics, unless we are still beholden to a Kantian dogmatism about the finite understanding.

The problem however is that Hegel's Absolute Idea of the infinite, understood as Absolute Spirit in the vein of Aristotle's thought thinking itself, presupposes a convertibility of being and nothing in order to uphold the primacy of thought (Scotus or Eriugena? The meontology suggests a Neo-Platonist/Eriugenian twist). Since being is then predetermined as entirely empty rather than the fullness of what is to be known it is immediately disqualified from directing and being intended by thought as its unrestricted object. So thought has only itself as its own object and is forced, to use Lonergan's language, to "pour everything" into the conceptual field since the concept is its determinate form and highest objective over against the indeterminate emptiness of being. Yet, the elimination of the fullness of being from the unrestricted objective of the pure desire not only confines the object of thought to its own conceptual field but also distorts the eros of the

pure desire to know. This can be seen in Hegel's animation of the conceptual field within the horizon of a fundamentally gnostic emplotment (an influence which Dr. Morelli seems to brush off in a footnote; but beyond the shrill and somewhat superficial charges of Gnosticism leveled by the likes of Voegelin, which should be rightly brushed off, I think Cyril O'Regan's study in *The Heterodox Hegel*, has more carefully and definitively shown the deep influence of Valentinian and Boehmian structures upon the main lines of Hegel's thought). The Gnostic logic resides in the fact that concepts are moved not by the dynamism of the operational field intending being, as Dr. Morelli has rightly pointed out, but according to the force of their own inner contradictions, or, in other words, by way of a necessary fall since reality as such is inherently contradictory. Absolute Spirit is then the comprehensive form of self-conscious knowledge that recognizes itself despite the negation of every conceptual content – (a problem more clearly visible in the representational form of Hegel's Trinitarian theology whereby death on the cross is necessary and its determinate negation of the particular body gives immediate rise to the resurrection of the spirit). That is, the Absolute Spirit of thought thinking itself, because of its fundamental emptiness, necessarily falls into the conceptual field whereby it is destined

to comprehend itself through a tragic self-consuming eros that requires the continual negation of every determinate content.

When accounting for Hegel's restriction to the conceptual realm therefore it is not so much due to Hegel's incomplete transition to the interior realm or his inadequate method, but rather that the intrinsic and constitutive relation to the unrestricted object for which the subject is self-transcending is inadequately understood. That is, within Hegel's philosophical theological framework he is locked into a position in which a deeper turn to interiority will always be distorted and necessarily lead back to his conceptual reification and vice versa. And what is needed is not a rejection of philosophical theology itself, or its rigid split whereby we simply separate out and set aside the theology. Rather a higher viewpoint afforded by an intellectual conversion would be needed that entailed a shift in the metaphysical presuppositions and philosophical theological horizons altogether wherein a deepening gnoseological turn to interiority can take place according to the true unrestricted object of knowing as the fullness of being. But then this would strongly qualify any talk of meeting Hegel halfway as well as presenting Lonergan as the completion of what Hegel began. For it is within the presupposition and horizon of complete intelligibility comprehended not only by perfect intelligence but also by

perfect infinite love without lack that the self and world are set free from any necessitarian logic whereby they would be moments negated and comprehended within a closed whole (such presupposition and horizon is the other theological framework that I find directs Lonergan's entire project, not in an unfortunately outdated or pious way, but as the conditions of possibility for his deep inward turn to the subject as subject). That is, to truly know oneself and the world beyond the extroversions of consciousness or the reifications of conceptualism is to know oneself as gift, since only as gift can one actually know oneself and her world of existing beings as neither necessary nor arbitrarily contingent, but contingent yet meaningful – which is to reach the subject as subject.

Maybe this assessment inappropriately jumbles and mixes up the philosophical and theological, the intellectual and the religious, but that is part of the point, since I do wonder whether the philosophical and theological have been inappropriately separated. And such an undue separation is especially problematic when dealing with two thinkers who, while providing nuanced distinctions between various disciplines and realms of meaning, nevertheless presupposed the inextricable connection or non-separation between philosophy and theology (though in very different ways): that true knowledge of self is always already true knowledge of God, that

cognitional theory always presupposes a theological context concerning the pure desire of knowing and the unrestricted object that draws it.