

Dieter Schönecker, Easton

NO BEING, NO SINGULARITY. HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF SENSE-CERTAINTY IN THE »PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT«

It has always been a matter of great dispute what Hegel's philosophy is about. There is not even an agreement on what he is driving at; we simply don't know what he was talking about. To some he is a strict metaphysician with claims to ultimate justification and truth, to others he is more or less a cultural relativist. But almost all relevant books and papers discuss Hegel's philosophy in general terms; very few have tried a detailed true-to-the-text exegesis.¹

I will suggest such a close reading of Hegel's very first dialectical move in the Chapter on Sense-Certainty in the *Phenomenology*.² It is undisputed that there are three types of sense certainty (SC): For the first sense certainty (SC1), the object is the truth; for the second (SC2) it is the I, and for the third (SC3) the whole process of pointing. Here I will deal only with SC1, and in fact consider only one ›shape‹ it assumes, namely that of the ›Now‹.³

How is the Chapter on Sense Certainty structured?

In the first two paragraphs, Hegel describes sense certainty in general terms, without regard to the distinction between SC1, SC2 and SC3, or rather: SC and then SC1 describe themselves. That is necessary, for in accordance with his indirect method, Hegel must refer to the standard belonging to his object. This general self-characterization of SC in § 91 begins with the following: »It [SC] asserts about that which it knows, only this: ...« (§ 91; 69, 20); after the colon comes what SC asserts (namely, »it is«). SC ›asserts about what it knows only this‹ – that is a formulation worthy of note. For Hegel does not write »Sense certainty knows the following...« or »The knowing in which sense certainty consists is the following...«, or anything like that. Rather, Hegel refers to what SC ›asserts about what it knows‹. By *what* SC knows, is meant the »concrete content« (§ 91; 69, 10) of a sense certainty. In this sense, Hegel is referring already in the next paragraph to »an *actual* sense certainty« (§ 92; 70, 9; my italics), thus for instance to the certainty of night, of a tree, etc. ›Of‹ that, hence *about* that, or with reference to that ›which it knows‹ SC therefore asserts something.

The principal assertion by SC about what it knows is: »it is« (§ 91; 69, 21). Hegel explicates this further: »and its truth contains only the *being* of the thing« (§ 91; 69, 21); a few lines later this assertion is repeated: »the thing *is*, and it *is* only because it *is*; it *is*, this is the most essential thing to sense certainty, and this *pure being* or this simple immediacy constitutes its truth« (§ 91; 69, 35). As occurred already in the first paragraph (§ 90; 69, 5), this pure being is identified with the immediate. *What* is, is thus something immediate, or as it is also said, something singular. It is exceedingly important in understanding SC, that the unmediated object which is, is understood in its unmediatedness as the *absolutely* singular (§ 110; 77, 27; 78, 4). Sense certainty understands that which it comprehends as the true »as *actual*, *absolutely singular*, wholly *personal*, *individual* things, each of which no longer has anything else that is absolutely like it« (§ 110; 77, 27); *that* is what it says *of* the object. Hence one must understand SC as a *nominalistic* position: For it, what is is always and exclusively an individual being that does not fall under general categories. Accordingly, the main assertion of SC is twofold:

1. SC asserts about whatever object it takes up that it *is*; let us call that its *being thesis*.
2. SC asserts about whatever it counts as the essential, that it is something *absolutely singular* about which nothing general can be expressed, and which also in no way participates in anything general or universal; let us call that its *singularity thesis*.

The argumentative structure of the Chapter on Sense Certainty consists in Hegel's *refutation of the being thesis and the singularity thesis for all three variants of SC*. Hegel thus shows for SC1, SC2 and SC3 that the object, as it is asserted by SC (that is, as absolutely singular), is *not*; and that the object of SC is rather universal (mediated), and is *not absolutely singular*.⁴

Detailed analysis of SC1

In §§ 95 und 96, Hegel follows the method described in the *Introduction*. The individual steps of this testing process are easy to recognize:

- 1) SC1 is asked *what* the ›This‹ it has asserted *is*. Since this ›This‹ has a twofold ›shape‹ (the ›Now‹ and the ›Here‹), the initial form of the decisive question is: ›What is the Now?‹
- 2) SC1 answers with the sentence: ›The Now is night.‹
- 3) This sentence is written down and preserved.
- 4) At a later point in time (noon), this sentence is looked at again.
- 5) From this looking at the sentence again, Hegel infers that the truth asserted in it has ›become stale‹.

Now let us go through these steps individually.

Ad 1) SC itself has asserted something ›about that which it knows‹ (§ 91; 69, 21), essentially this: that its object is a ›pure This‹ (§ 91; 69, 25; 70, 4). The introduction of the expression ›pure This‹ in § 91 is not justified. But naturally the issue is what essentially constitutes SC1: the presence of something that refers to a subject by means of its sense. Since the ›This‹ was identified with the ›singular‹ (§ 91; 70, 4–5) (this also without any further justification), the first question, what the ›This‹ is, can also be stated as ›What is the singular?‹ Since the issue is sense certainty and the sense refers to objects in space and time, the ›This‹ has a double ›shape‹ or ›form‹. The singular that is temporally present is called by SC1 ›Now‹ (and correspondingly, the singular spatially present, ›Here‹). The question what the ›This‹ is or what the ›singular‹, or in fact what the ›Now‹ is, thus demands the explication of an expression that SC1 itself uses. The phenomenologist seeks an explication of what SC1 ›expresses [or asserts] about what it knows‹.

Ad 2) The phenomenologist does not seek to know, what night (or day, etc.) is. She seeks to know what it is that SC1 says ›of‹ its current object, namely, that it is a This. To the question, what the Now is, the answer is:

- (1) The Now is night.

Since it is said that the answer (night) is an ›example‹, and since in the case of the answer to the parallel question about what the Here is, the answer even is that ›The Here is *for example* the tree‹ (§ 98; 72, 7), apparently one may formulate it accordingly as:

- (2) The Now is, for example, night.

Yet if night is an example of the Now, then there are also other examples of the Now, and then night is precisely *one* Now, and *another* Now is day, and so on. Hence whoever says (2) can also say:

- (3) One Now is night.

Yet with this we arrive, so to speak, too quickly at the result. For if SC1 really gave (3) as its answer, then it would have to say also: One (other) Now is noon. Then, however, there would be several Nows, so that the current Nows could be ordered to a universal Now – and that, as we will see more precisely, is Hegel's chief critical point. Thus instead of understanding (1) and the talk about ›examples‹ in the sense of (2) or (3), we have to think of a situation in which the phenomenologist asks SC1 what the Now is and SC1 answers, at this point in time, when it is night, with (1). The foundation of the knowledge of SC1 is the sensibly given presence of something. If it speaks of night, then it refers in fact to a night that is sensibly given, *now* or *then*. The phenomenologist reports a conversation with SC1 and reports that a typical answer by SC1 is *for example* ›The Now is night‹. The characterization of (1) as an ›example‹ is not a mere reproduction of the self-understanding of SC1 regarding its answer. Thus (1) is not to be understood as if SC1 said (1) and meant (2) or (3); (1) is an example only for the phenomenologist who reports this answer and understands it as an example.

It is moreover no accident that Hegel says about the universal in § 96 (71, 26) that it »is indifferent over against what is beside it«, thus for instance indifferent over against night. For Hegel an ›example‹ is something ›alongside‹.⁵ In this sense, in the *Introduction* to the Philosophy of Religion, the term ›example‹ (Beispiel) is directly elucidated through the expression ›play beside‹ (Beiherspielen). »Here an intuition, representation or determination of thought is demanded, an example [Beispiel], something *playing alongside* [Beiherspielendes] of the content, which was previously given only in thought.« In the edition of this lecture by Hotho, it says: »Yet in the word ›example‹ [Beispiel], externality is already recognized as only ›playing alongside‹ [beiher Spielendes], but the pure thought is recognized as what is substantial« (both passages VPR, 35, my emphasis). Thus the night is, as Hegel also says, what ›plays alongside‹ (das Beiherspielende) of the ›Now itself‹, or precisely an example of it. But if an example, as Kant says, ›is only the particular, represented as contained under the universal according to concepts‹,⁶ then the singular is not an absolutely singular, but also something universal; yet, as we said, there will be more presently about this chief argument.

SC1 avoids (3) and hence the indefinite article (*a* Now). The definite article (*the* Now) should make clear that (1) is a singular, non-tautological assertion of identity. If one takes account of what SC says ›about that which it knows‹ – thus for example about night – then one can understand the term ›Now‹ in (1) as a ›something sensibly present, absolutely singular that is in time‹. From that we get (1*):

The sensibly present, absolutely singular being in time is night.

It will presently become even clearer that ›Now‹ in ›the Now‹, is *not* an indexical term.

Ad 3) In the *Introduction* Hegel »reminds us«, as he says (§ 82; 64, 10), of the determinations of the concepts of truth and knowing. Truth is accordingly that which is in itself, the object which *is* outside any relation of knowing. This seems to fit SC1 particularly well. For SC1 the object is indeed its truth, and this object is that thing that is itself, it »remains even when it is not known« (§ 93; 70, 33).

Although these ›recollected‹ determinations of ›truth‹ and ›knowledge‹ seem at first to fit SC1, the actual use of the term ›truth‹ in Hegel's ›truth test‹ is a different one. For when Hegel says that he wants to ›write down‹ ›this truth‹ so as to test it, then he is using the demonstrative pronoun ›this‹ to refer to the assertion (1): ›The Now is night‹. What is tested, therefore, is an assertion and its possible ›truth‹. In the context of the truth test, ›truth‹ refers not to the object that is in itself, but to an assertion about it. (Obviously that is much more plausible and natural, since one can write down an assertion about an object, but not the object.) But that does not mean that Hegel is speaking of ›truth‹ in a sense that does not correspond to the self-positioning of SC1. For night, as something that is in itself, is indeed the truth of SC1. But it refers to this object through a sentence that it takes to be true, and that it is true means, in the correspondence-theoretic sense, that there is something in the world corresponding to this sentence; in any case, the relation between knowledge and truth (understood as an object) is obviously understood in this sense.

Ad 4) At first glance we right away get the crucial point involved in this truth test: Sentence (1), expressed at a determinate point in time t_1 , is false when expressed again (or rather read) at a later point in time t_2 , when it is noon rather than night (where it is naturally presupposed that the sentence itself makes no assertion about the point in time at which it is expressed). – But the matter shows itself to be more difficult. First we have to see that in the context of SC1, ›Now‹ is applied in three different ways; then we can get to the bottom of the genuine truth test.

(i) The most obvious application of ›Now‹, the one with which we are all familiar, is the indexical: We apply the term ›Now‹ (or rather: ›now‹) in order to refer in a context dependent fashion to a present interval of time, of greater or lesser magnitude. Here the object of reference can change depending on the context (let us call this indexical meaning of ›Now‹ ›Now₁‹). The truth test that Hegel carries out can work only if ›Now‹ in the formulation ›Now, this noon‹ (§ 95; 71, 12) is applied – contrary to the confusing nominalization of the word – in this indexical sense.

(ii) A second application of ›Now‹ results from Hegel's reflections on the ›universal‹ in § 96; let us call this the *categorical* application. More precisely, Hegel speaks here of the ›Now itself‹ (§ 96; 71, 18; correspondingly, he speaks a bit later of the ›Here itself‹ § 98). It would be tempting, but false, to believe that this ›Now itself‹ is nothing different from the indexical expression ›Now₁‹. For the issue about the ›Now itself‹ (for short, ›Now_s‹) is not merely a linguistic form, but about a *being*, something that *is*. We can see this in several ways.

First, the ›Now_s‹ signifies something that *endures* (etwas ›bleibendes‹) (§ 96; 71, 23) or that ›preserves itself‹ (§ 96; 71, 18), and indeed it ›preserves‹ itself as distinct from ›night‹. For ›the Now which is night‹ (§ 96; 71, 15) which is given out by SC1 as ›a being‹ and yet shows itself to be ›not a being‹ (§ 96; 71, 17), is the Now_s, even in contrast to that Now ›which is night‹, something that is.

Second, Hegel understands Now_s as universal as the (new) ›truth‹ of SC1 (§ 96; 71, 32). But this ›truth‹ of SC1 is something that *is*, even when it is not known. Hence after concluding the first dialectical movement, it is said: ›This sense certainty, insofar as in itself it shows the universal as the truth of its object, thus remains pure *being* as its essence...‹ (§ 99; 72, 15).

In this sense, thirdly, the result of the first dialectical movement, both for Hegel and for SC1 itself, is ›the *universal this*; or: *it is*; that means, *being in general*‹ (§ 97; 71, 35) – yet this ›being in general‹ is Now_s.

Fourthly, this thought is also clear through a change from Now₁ to Now_s within Hegel's argumentation in § 96. Hegel writes in § 96 (71, 18–20) that ›Now itself preserves itself over against the day that it Now is, as something that is also not day‹. That is intelligible only if ›Now itself‹ and ›Now‹ are distinct, namely as Now₁ and Now_s. But then one must read this as: ›Now_s preserves itself over against the day that it (thus Now_s) is Now₁, as such a Now_s, that is also not day‹. Through the linguistic for Now₁ we refer to a present, singular interval of time of greater or lesser magnitude (e. g. the night), which as such in a limited sense is, and indeed, according to Hegel, falls under a universal being, thus under Now_s.

(iii) We find the third application of ›Now‹ in the question and answer from § 95: ›What is the Now?‹ ›The Now is night.‹ With a view to the fact that this Now is a form of the ›This‹, let us call this the individualizing application (for short, ›Now₁‹). The ›night‹ that is present in the conversation of SC1 at t_1 is, as something absolutely singular, identified by SC1 with the ›Now‹. This is especially clear in the formulation from § 96: ›The Now, *which is night*, ... is given out as a *being*‹ (71, 15). It is wholly obvious that in this passage ›Now‹ is *not* understood as an indexical expression (as it was in § 95; 71, 12), but rather as a designation for an absolutely individual object. But if in this passage (§ 96; 71, 15) ›Now‹ does not have an indexical signification, then it also cannot have this signification in (1), for ›the Now, which is night‹ is precisely that ›Now‹ in (1). ›Now‹ signifies (out of the sight of SC1) in this passage, as in general in (1), a sensibly present absolutely singular being in time, which no longer has anything absolutely like it: the night (*1). The distinction between Now₁ and Now₁ consists in the fact that Now₁ can, and also should, refer to arbitrarily many beings in time, while Now₁ can and should refer only to one such being, an absolutely singular one.

Ad 5) We said at the outset that SC1 asserts two things ›about that which it knows‹. First, that its object is (the being thesis) and second that its object is something absolutely singular (the singularity thesis); and we have said further that Hegel (the phenomenologist) refutes both theses through the indirect method: First, the object that SC asserted to be is not; second, the object of SC1 is not something absolutely singular, but a universal. Let us now consider these refutations somewhat more closely.

Refutation of the being thesis

The refutation of the being thesis results directly from the truth test. We can understand this more precisely in the following way: At time t_1 (thus at any time in which it is night) SC1 asserts (1) or (*1). At time t_2 (thus at any later time at which it is noon), SC1 asserts

(4) The Now is noon.

or in its reformulation,

(4*) The sensibly present absolutely singular being in time is noon.

In (1*) and (4*), SC1 identifies Now₁ as at one time night, at another time noon; since these are assertions of identity, we are caught in a contradiction.

It is noteworthy here that Hegel does not at first call this a contradiction. Instead, at first he simply indicates that when it is no longer night but noon, night no longer *is*: ›The Now, which is night, is preserved – that means it is treated as that for which it has been given out, as a *being*, but it shows itself rather as a *not*–

being« (§ 96; 71, 15–18). SC1 says of the night that it is, but thereby says at the same time that this is its truth, for the truth of SC1 is indeed what has being in itself (*das Ansichseiende*). But if one is referring to ›truth‹ as to the truth of a sentence – as happens in the truth test –, then one could say that SC1 asserts the truth of (1) in a correspondence-theoretic sense. What makes the sentence true is the object; if the object is not (or is no longer), then the sentence is not (or no longer) true. The being of the object of SC1 ›disappears‹, as Hegel says several times: nothing corresponds to the truth of the sentence ›Now is night‹. That which could correspond would be the *fact* that it was night, but such facts are nothing sensibly given (at least they are nothing ›in the world‹, as Strawson might say).

That one could say the assertion (1) is no *longer* true, lies close at hand in the formulation that (1) or the truth of (1) ›has become stale‹ (§ 95; 71, 14); for what has ›become stale‹ was perhaps at an earlier time not stale. But it would be strange if Hegel were to admit at time t_1 that (1) was true, for that's what SC1 itself gave out, at least at one time. But Hegel simply cannot say that night as Now in the sense of SC1 has been. Rather the proponents of SC1 must admit they are ›speaking of a thing that is not‹ (§ 100; 77, 40).

It is excluded that Hegel should admit the truth of (1) and thus the being of night at t_1 , because in the context of SC Hegel seems to make use of a concept of being that he neither explains further nor grounds in any way, but about which he seems to assume, and also has to assume, that SC shares it. According to this concept of being, only that *is* (is a being), which is constant. Hegel makes clear this idealistic concept of being with reference to SC3, but it holds just as much for SC1: ›The Now, as it is pointed out to us is [or as it is written down, D.S.] is something that *has been*; and this is its truth; it does not have the truth of being. This is also therefore true, that it has been. But what has been is in fact not a being [or an essence, *kein Wesen*], it is not, and yet the issue was about being« (§ 106; 75, 4). It holds also for the night that it *has been* (so of it ›being‹ has to be understood in a weakened sense); in any case it *is* no longer, and hence it never was a being. – Hegel says no more about this. But two sections from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* confirm this reading. Thus in a passage about the Megarian Stilpo, to whose example of cabbage Hegel refers, it says: ›The cabbage that is pointed to (sold) here, is not. For that cabbage was many thousands of years ago; thus the cabbage is not this that is pointed out, i. e. only the universal is, while this cabbage is not« (*Werke* 535). Stilpo says ›that the This is not at all [...], that only the universal is« (*Werke* 535, my emphasis). ›Cabbage‹, ›human being‹, ›I‹, etc. are always universal, and: ›The universal is; but even the singular is only universal« (*Werke* 537, my emphasis). In the text already mentioned from the lectures on medieval philosophy Hegel designates directly with reference to his time (›with us today‹, ›these days‹) the position of SC as ›realism‹. This position asserts that ›sensible things, as they are in their immediate existence, are something true, substantial, so that *genuine being* can be ascribed to them, and idealism stands over against this abstractly as the representation that the sensible, as it shows itself immediately in its singularity to the senses, is not something true«. The thesis therefore says that the objects of SC1 have no ›genuine being, even though they are asserted as ›beings‹; only the universal has ›true being« (*Werke*, 572, my emphasis).

Yet even if this ontological interpretation is held to be implausible, there cannot be any SC1 and consequently (1) also cannot be true. For as we shall now see, there is, secondly, no object at all such as SC1 *means* (namely, the absolutely singular one); the object it means *is* not, hence for example the night as an absolutely singular entity is not, and also never was.

Refutation of the singularity thesis

SC1 asserts (*1) and also (*4). In this there lies a contradiction, because Now_T cannot be both night and noon. SC1 cannot reply to this that (*1) and (*4) cannot be true at the same time, but can be true at different times. For aside from the fact that no system of co-ordination for points in time can be at the disposal of SC, the two assertions claim about different objects (night, noon) that they are absolutely singular and yet also that both objects are *each* sensibly present absolutely singular beings in time. Thus in truth both objects have something in common, or, as Hegel says, there is here a universal. At the very end of the chapter he makes this main point strikingly clear: ›If nothing more is said of something than that it is an *actual thing*, an *external object*, then it is only as the most universal of all, and thereby its *likeness* to everything is expressed as much as its distinctness. If I say a *singular thing*, then I say it just as much as something wholly universal,

for everything is a singular thing« (§ 110; 78, 7). The absolutely singular that is asserted (meant) by SC1, therefore *is not*. For the absolutely singular that is meant, »which is called the inexpressible, [is] nothing other than the untrue, irrational, the merely meant [or opined, Gemeinte]« (§ 110; 78, 5).

Prof. Dr. Dieter Schönecker
 Department of Philosophy
 Stonehill College
 320 Washington Street
 Easton, MA 02357
 USA
 dschoenecker@stonehill.edu

NOTES

- 1 On hermeneutical problems of reading philosophical texts cf. my »Textvergessenheit in der Philosophiehistorie«, in: Dieter Schönecker / Thomas Zwenger (eds.): *Kant verstehen/Understanding Kant. Über die Interpretation philosophischer Texte*, Darmstadt 2001, 159–181.
- 2 Hegels *Phänomenologie des Geistes* is cited according to the new edition published by Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont with an introduction by Wolfgang Bonsiepen, 1988. The numbering of the paragraphs refers to Miller's English translation, the page and line numbers to the Meiner edition. I also use the following abbreviations:
VGP: Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie. Teil 4. Philosophie des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit. Herausgegeben von Pierre Garniron und Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg 1986.
VPR: Einleitung in die Philosophie der Religion. Teil 1. Der Begriff der Religion. Neu herausgegeben von Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg 1993.
Werke: G.W.F. HEGEL: Werke. Auf der Grundlage der Werke von 1832–1845 neu edierte Ausgabe. Redaktion Eva Moldenhauer und Karl Markus Michael, Frankfurt/M. 1971, Vol. 19.
- 3 A much longer and detailed version of this paper has appeared in *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism*, 1, 2003, 241–269.
- 4 We see this besides in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. There Hegel briefly goes into the so-called ›universals‹ controversy, and makes the illuminating observation that in his time the term ›realism‹ means what was signified by ›nominalism‹ in the middle ages, and what Hegel and his time understand by ›realism‹ is unambiguously the position of sense certainty; cf. *VGP*, 40 f. and *Werke*, Vol. 19, 572.
- 5 Cf. § 92, 70, 10; § 93, 70, 21; § 95, 71, 7; § 96, 71, 26; § 102, 73, 18. Note that it is very difficult to render the meaning of ›beiherspielen‹ in English as well as the play on words between ›Beispiel‹ and ›beiherspielen‹.
- 6 Cf. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6: 479f note.

Hegel- Jahrbuch 2004

Begründet von
Wilhelm Raimund Beyer (†)

Herausgegeben von
Andreas Arndt
Karol Bal
Henning Ottmann

Glauben und Wissen

Zweiter Teil

Herausgegeben von
Andreas Arndt
Karol Bal
Henning Ottmann

in Verbindung
mit Klaus-M. Kodalle und Klaus Vieweg



Akademie Verlag

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der Gustav-Prietsch-Stiftung Hamburg

Redaktionelle Mitarbeit: Julia Brauch

ISBN 3-05-004026-2

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Lektorat: Mischka Dammaschke
Einbandgestaltung: Günter Schorcht, Schildow
Satz: Julia Brauch, Berlin
Druck: MB Medienhaus Berlin
Bindung: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin

Printed in the Federal Republic of Germany