

Depersonalization of Absolute Knowledge?

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Abstract: This article is divided in two parts which are dealing respectively with Fredric Jameson’s idea of depersonalization and Hegel’s concept of absolute knowledge. Jameson developed this idea mainly in contrast to the modernist narratives centered around categories of subjectivity. Following the exposition of this idea in broad strokes, the article will lay a claim that the Hegelian concept of absolute knowledge could be, in principle, reframed as an experience of rupture of subjectivity. Hegel’s methodology leads philosophical inquiry towards the dismantling of finite self in the element of pure thinking, which is then attentive only to its own historical development.

Keywords: Jameson; Hegel; philosophy; subject; depersonalization; absolute knowledge

“Today, ignoring the absolute bone in the throat of knowledge, everyone has become a Hegelian.”¹

This article is divided in two parts which are dealing with Fredric Jameson’s idea of depersonalization and Hegel’s concept of absolute knowledge respectively. Jameson developed this idea mainly in contrast to the modernist narratives centered around categories of subjectivity. It proposes a different interpretive pattern, that arises from conjunctural historical material, focused on the literary and artistic

¹ R. Comay, and F. Ruda, *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge and London: The IMT Press, 2018), 2.

expressions of longing for a revolutionary transformed world. The concept of absolute knowledge, however, presupposes Hegel's monumental interpretation of historical and philosophical continuity of the narrative of "grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."² Following the exposition of Jameson's idea in broad strokes, this article will lay a claim that the concept of absolute knowledge could be, in principle, reframed as an experience of rupture of subjectivity. Being polemical in its nature, the article is an attempt to assess the fruitfulness of such a discussion.

I. Jameson's idea of depersonalization

Fredric Jameson attacked postmodern culture of late capitalism for its lack of narrative faculty. Those immersed in the postmodern culture are drowning in postmodern present without meaningful relation to the narrative past and future. But the logic of capitalism brought about with time postmodernist condition. This structure came about in the ever-vanishing transitional moment of the birth of modernism and gradually effected the new consumer society.

In his essay *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson gave his analysis of that pivotal moment which philosophers usually take as a breakthrough of modernity. He claims:

Descartes was so often taken to be the inaugurator of that subject-object split which constitutes modernity as such (...) which is to say that in some fashion, with Descartes, we should be able to witness the emergence of the subject (...) the modern subject as such, the subject of modernity.³

Jameson starts from this philosophical trope only to cast doubt

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

³ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 43.

on it. In his opinion, we could witness the emergence of the subject if this subject could be represented. He claims: "There are any number of reasons why consciousness should be pronounced to be unrepresentable."⁴ After recollecting the objections toward representation of consciousness already put out by numerous philosophers, like Kant, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Jameson concludes that this pivotal moment, as a narrative regarding the beginning, functions as a (philosophical) myth of origin⁵ and not so much as actual historical evidence.

However, if we follow the consequences of the thesis that consciousness simply evades each and any representation, we must conclude that every theory of modernity in terms of subjectivity becomes obsolete. However, there are three distinct motives that persevere seemingly through such criticism: 1. a type, as Jameson puts it, of Western freedom that is defined in connection to subjectivity and consciousness; 2. the idea of individuality as "an illicit representation of consciousness;" 3. and self-consciousness in a Western philosophical sense. His negative attitude towards the perseverance of these motives is expressed via negatively formulated (third) maxim of his essay: "The narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity."⁶ Nevertheless, he acknowledges how hard it is to break with old habits to draw from the categories of consciousness, reflexivity, subjectivity (intersubjectivity as well). "Only situations of modernity can be narrated" is one of the most important maxims that Jameson developed in this essay and based on it we could understand his own approach to modernity.

He opts for Sartrean term "situation" to accentuate conjunctural nature of his account and to escape the allure of falling back on well-known narratives premised upon subjectivity.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

⁵ Ibid., 45: "But *muthos* in Greek means narrative or story; and I would therefore prefer to conclude that this version of modernity's absolute beginning is also a narrative that to fall back on the sceptical and unproductive formula that it is simply a myth."

⁶ Ibid., 54.

These narratives have had two dominant ideological axes: “Either modernity becomes an idealist tale of the rise of freedom, individuality and self-reflexivity, or a mournful narrative of Spenglerian decline, Weberian disenchantment, or some more pervasive ‘alienation.’”⁷ Regardless of the side one could take up in the philosophical argument, the subjective and reflexive categories of ‘private,’ ‘individualistic’ or ‘personal’ remain culturally dominant liberal *ideologeme* under capitalism.

“Privacy and elbowroom of Western middle-class society” is a rather privative way of defining a person, starting from the delineation from others, by psycho-physical border and an ethereal “cushioning void”⁸ between the members of society. On the other side from the private stands the “public sphere.” Following Marx’s analysis in *On the Jewish Question*, we could say that dualism “private – public” stands in leu of his “bourgeois – citizen” categories. Marx claims:

[M]an as a member of civil society is held to be man *in the proper sense*, *homme* as distinct from the *citoyen*, because he is man in his sensuous, individual, *immediate* existence, where as *political* man is only abstract, artificial man, man as an *allegorical, juridical* person. The real man is recognised only in the shape of the *egoistic* individual, the *true* man is recognised only in the shape of the *abstract citoyen*.⁹

In the last sentence Marx is underlying that monadist, egoistic individualism, which forms the conceptual basis of modern liberalism, represents reductionist view of the ‘real man.’ And the category of the ‘true man’ presupposes the idealist divide between the concept and reality of human being, framing the

⁷ Daniel Hartley, “The Jamesonian Impersonal; Or, Person as Allegory,” *Historical Materialism* 29, no. 1 (2021): 176.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 305.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 167.

question of human political agency in terms of abstract principles.

Having an immediate private space or a “cushioning void” around individual existence seems so undeniable concrete that it is hard to see it as, according to Marx, ‘a fictitious phenomenon.’ How do I view myself? As an individual and multidimensional person with lively inner life and many meaningful relationships and unalienable rights. However, my individual outlook, according to Marx, is fictitious in the sense that it is only a formal reflection that remains outside of the world of economy and labour. Expressed negatively, under capitalistic mode of production, I as an individual – a ‘real woman’ or ‘real man’ and all in between – is an abstract unit of labour power.

Furthermore, I as a person, according to Marx’s claims, represents the ‘imaginary membership’ of an ‘illusionary sovereignty’ and being a *citoyen*, *juridical person* or *subject* endows us with nothing other than ‘an unreal universality.’¹⁰ The precise meaning of Marx’s phrase ‘unreal universality’ can be understood with the help from Pashukanis’ analysis, according to which *juridical person* or *subject* is a legal counterpart to the commodity-form.¹¹ Juridical categories, as any other social form, are the product of the historical development, therefore they are explainable in their materiality, that is, regarding the historical conditions of their formation. Seemingly, Pashukanis’ insight is very simple. If acknowledged fully, the relational form of the concept of ‘subject’ would need a counterpart, i. e. an object. Historical development of the ‘subject’ should relate to the historical development or conditions of objectivity. He states:

¹⁰ Ibid., 154.

¹¹ “And this idea of separation, the inherent proximity of human individuality, this “natural condition”, from which “the infinite contradiction of freedom” flows, entirely corresponds to the method of commodity production in which the producers are formally independent of one another and are bound by nothing other than the artificially created legal order.” Evgeny Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pashukanis/1924/law/ch04.htm#f28>.

A commodity is an object; a man is a subject who disposes of the commodity in acts of acquisition and alienation. It is in the exchange transaction that the subject first appears in the full totality of its definitions (...). Only in the conditions of a commodity economy is the abstract form of a right created, i.e. the capacity to have a right in general is separated from specific legal claims. Only the constant transfer of rights taking place in the market creates the idea of their immobile bearer (...). Thus, the possibility is created of abstracting from the concrete differences between these subjects of legal rights, and of putting them under one generic concept.¹²

We are now able to understand why the subject is, in Marx's opinion, "an unreal universality," because we have the historical development in mind: the category of the subject had, in actuality, very little to do with the immediate existence or an abstract essence of an individual human being, or her individual outlook. Rather, its connection to the individual was always already mediated by the social relationships and it represents a fixated abstraction of those relationships.

Furthermore, this is also the reason why we should not fall back to the "private" and the immediate, for we would only be switching one "abstract artificial man" for even more powerless and fictitious "natural condition" of an "independent" individual agency. When forced to consider the 'monad' of society, we tend to exclude the collective perspective or make it harder to reimagine it politically. To transcend the dominant ideological framework and articulate collective political perspective or action is, therefore, naturally in "suspicion" of trespassing and invasiveness, since it goes against the grain of "fetishism of individual isolation."¹³ Therefore, if we succumb to allure of modernist narratives centered around the subject, we find our-

¹² Pashukanis.

¹³ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 305.

selves inevitably entrenched between the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘citoyen,’ ‘private’ and ‘public’ etc. “But the fate of the bourgeois subject is by no means and adequate framework in which to tell the story of that global ‘situation of modernity,’”¹⁴ Jameson repeats his warning. Nevertheless, it could be taken as an “allegorical” of the modernist literary and artistic longing for the transformation of the world, and revolution:

The forms of this allegory are multiple; yet all the anecdotal psychologies in which it finds itself dressed – in their stylistic, cultural and characterological differences – have in common that they evoke a momentum that cannot find resolution within the self, but that must be completed by a Utopian and revolutionary transmutation of the world of actuality itself.¹⁵

And he cites such explosive fragments in the poetry of Rilke, D. H. Lawrence, Arthur Rimbaud. Misleading character of the “older ideologies of the modern,” as Jameson puts it, is best seen in their insistence on “some ‘inward turn’” or its increasing subjectivization of reality. At best, there stirs here everywhere an apocalyptic dissatisfaction with subjectivity itself and the older forms of the self.¹⁶ The allegorical focus of Jameson’s interpretative endeavor should pick up multifaceted “situational” historical evidence of the process of dissolution or ‘ossification’ of the subject that has revolutionary underlining.

Jameson proposes a “coordinated model” of interpretation, which utilizes, on the one side, the insights of Frankfurt School’s depiction of historical process of desubjectification and depersonalization by socio-economic factors, and, on the other, elements of poststructuralist emphasis on the “death of the subject” as an event of upstaging the bourgeois individualism. The way to bridge the gap, however, Jameson sees in figure

¹⁴ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 134.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

of Lacan, who articulated self and ego psychoanalytically as a defense mechanism:

In which modern individuals (most often bourgeois individuals) tended to entrench and immure themselves, thereby cutting themselves off from the world and from productive action at the same time that they sheltered themselves from it.¹⁷

This model would, therefore, be able to catch the glimpses of modernist experiences of depersonalization of the subject, as a way of escaping the passivized, silenced, traumatized self, and as a way of liberation from the condition of its reproduction.

Of course, it must be said that the notion of depersonalization gets more frequently used with a negative connotation and tone in contemporary political discourse. Jameson's polemical framing of depersonalization is, far from any totalitarian praxis, an interpretative strategy of following the trail of "ossification of subject" to indicate narrative continuity with our "postmodernist" present. These interpretative tactics also have a political goal to give a more progressive scope for the political actions in future. His intention is to show

[E]verything, that is energizing and active about depersonalizing tendency that has too often been discussed in terms of loss and incapacitation: in demonstrating how such a renunciation of subjectivity, far from amounting to some resignation to an impossibly 'alienating' condition, stands on the contrary as an original and productive response to it.¹⁸

II. Absolute knowledge and depersonalization

After the exposition of Jameson's concept of depersonalization, we will turn our attention toward Hegel's concept of ab-

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 132-133.

solute knowledge and try to assess could it be understood as a part of Jameson's refocused modernist narrative. The first clue is a rather negative one. In the book *The Hegel Variations*, which elaborately deals with almost every part of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the chapter concerning the absolute knowledge is only a couple of pages long. This chapter is titled 'Narcissism of the Absolute' and only renames "what may sometimes be felt to be repulsive in the Hegelian system as such."¹⁹ It is not the overreaching ambition of Hegel's philosophical project to grasp totality. Nor it is its idealistic translation of the world into consciousness. Jameson writes: "No, the most serious drawback to the Hegelian system seems to me rather the way in which it conceives of speculative thinking as 'the consummation of itself' (namely, of Reason)."²⁰ The reason why he called Hegel's notion of the absolute "narcissist" lies in a such circumstance that it, almost, does not let us get away and escape ourselves:

We thereby search the whole world, and outer space, and end up only touching ourselves, only seeing our own face persist through multitudinous differences and forms of otherness. Never truly to encounter the non-I, to come face to face with radical otherness.²¹

This charge of being a philosophy of narcissism, or of identity, rests on the many philosophical voices from Kierkegaard to Adorno and onward, and therefore, it is not something new. However, could something as a Jamesonian argument of de-personalization be formulated to defend Hegel's philosophy against such accusations?

We could safely say that, however otherwise understood Hegel's philosophical system was, it was almost always understood as a philosophy of the becoming, movement and development.

¹⁹ Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

²¹ *Ibid.*

His way of thinking was very keen on grasping historical nature of institutions, laws, and ideas. They are susceptible to change, and their development must be viewed against the background of the complex historical development. However, Jameson repeats the argument that Hegel's accent on development is obfuscating the fact that it is development of the same – what was in the beginning, so shall be in the end. What develops is one and the same, without the way to find any escape and relief from self in something other. It seems that, to the detriment of Jameson's otherwise sympathetic vision of dialectics, Hegel's sensitivity to historical change means little if this change does not bring something new or radical. According to this general character of Hegel's way of thinking, depersonalization should be envisaged as a phenomenon in movement, but, more importantly, it should allow the possibility of the relief and escape. The true question is should this escape be conceptualized only as a transcendence, or is there a way to escape "immanently"?

Monty Python's *Gospel of Brian* had a wonderful scene in which a revolutionary movement announce the struggle for the recognition of their male member's right to have babies. Their male member, acted by Eric Idle, reveals his wish to be a woman and to have babies. It is quite telling that his female comrade suggests, after other male members protested that such a thing is not possible, to actively support him and struggle for his *right* to have babies. Woman in this sketch is in a diabolical position to advise, from the position of experience, on a struggle for a formal right that might historically mean little in terms of actual political power. Somehow, the moral of the story is articulated by the play of retorts: (by Michael Palin's character) that this struggle is in case "a struggle against the oppressor," and that this is in effect "a struggle against reality" (noted by John Cleese's skeptical character). Of course, the "right" in question is probably chosen to render greater comical effect, but it could very well be taken to present how formalistic the political position of a "revolutionary" is: to go against the reality or *Sein*, and invoke what *ought* to be, or *Sollen*. That means to go against

all that is ingrained by education and social conditioning and exclaim: “This is how things *ought* to be!” Hegel famously criticized this position of “rebellious” voice that demands, as a unilateral affair, the change of historical and political status quo. He criticized it for its lack of necessity: “If it builds itself a world *as it ought to be*, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his opinions – a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases.”²² The content of *right* understood only from the standpoint of *Sollen*, therefore, could be any content, which does not amount to much if bereft of any means to enforce it.

Much more interestingly, therefore, this “rebellion” is, in Hegel’s view, politically ineffective. It presupposes a certain brake with political actuality and the historical “present,” and it seems that the most immediate response is to “escape” inwards, not from but towards the self:

The tendency to look inwards into the self and to know and determine from within the self what is right and good appears in epochs when what is recognized as right and good in actuality and custom is unable to satisfy the better will. When the existing world of freedom has become unfaithful to the better will, this will no longer finds itself in the duties recognized in this world and must seek to recover in ideal inwardness alone that harmony which it has lost in actuality.²³

This escapism, however, Hegel allows only as a temporary measure or a transitional phase: “Only in ages when the actual world is a hollow, spiritless, and unsettled existence [Existenz] may the individual be permitted to flee from actuality and retreat into his inner life.”²⁴ Furthermore, this brake or retreat of moral subjectivity into

²² G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

itself, caused by the fact that it no longer recognizes itself in the existing world of *Sittlichkeit*, should be an impetus or “stimulus” to create an adequate moral and political order.²⁵

Even though historical development as such cannot be arrested, Hegel diagnoses the moments of inertia and ossification of historical social societies. The existing order, be it a social system, a form of consciousness, or a dominant culture (*Bildung*), resists change, ossifies, and persists longer than the fount of its vitality. Even though it seems like a straightforward expression of longing after the different reality, subject’s rebellious retreat inward is not the escape we are trying to sketch. This has its reason in the serious doubt whether it can amount to the movement that will change anything:

Every regime not only tolerates but even requires for its own maintenance a reserve of thuggish negativity to absorb or overcome: capitalism’s need for crisis; liberal democracy’s need for (at least a show of) contestation in order to prove the resilience of the system; the ‘totalitarian’ need for a steady supply of dissidents that it can demonstrably suppress by a show of force. Resistance thus seems to be parasitical on what it opposes. It is caught up in the repetitive cycle of action and reaction – the circle of reciprocal solicitation described by Hegel in the third chapter of the *Phenomenology* and elaborated in his exposition of reflexive determinations in the *Logic* – the reciprocal binary logic of inside and outside, position and opposition, thesis and antithesis.²⁶

It turns out that this retreat, with its parasitic and obstinate nature, precisely represents the ossification of the modern subject from which we should find a way to escape.

²⁵ Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and Freedom of Moderns* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 243.

²⁶ Rebecca Comay, “Afterword: Antinomies of Resistance,” *Hegel and Resistance* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 198.

Hegel gave an ambiguous account of rebellion or resistance. This is the reason why some saw him as the philosopher who “favors obedience over resistance.”²⁷ However, it is not truly the question of preference. On the contrary, he targets precisely the ambivalent and oscillating nature of the resistance. Too often the position of perennial *Sollen* offers no positive agenda and rather immobilize than gives a decisive stimulus towards the action. Too often, furthermore, it can promulgate reactionary commitment: “[I]t invests everything in its own powers of contestation, conveniently obscuring its own unwavering commitment to the status quo.”²⁸ No. The much-needed relief from the potential enclosure into oneself and subjectivity is precisely the escape to the realm of immanence, that of “absolute knowledge.” For those who have heard the calling of philosophy, the urgent and dissatisfied voices of multitudes of individuals, those who are oppressed and those who are colluding with the oppressor, should abate “in the dispassionate calm of a knowledge dedicated to thought alone.”²⁹

Hegel’s early idea that reason is one, and that, therefore, it could only be one philosophy,³⁰ is not the repulsive, narcissistic trait of his philosophy. On the contrary, it could be envisaged as an ecstatic and liberating dissolution of finite thinking and subjectivity:

The essence of philosophy (...) is a bottomless abyss for personal idiosyncrasy. In order to reach philosophy, it is necessary to throw oneself into it *à corps perdu* – meaning by ‘body’ here, the sum of one’s idiosyncrasies. For Reason, finding consciousness caught in particularities, only becomes philosophical

²⁷ Losurdo, 83.

²⁸ Comay, 199.

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22.

³⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, Band 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971-1979), 172.

speculation by raising itself to itself, putting its trust only in itself and the Absolute which at that moment becomes its object. In this process Reason stakes nothing but finitudes of consciousness (...). Reason, therefore, does not view the philosophical systems of different epochs and different heads merely as different modes [of doing philosophy] and purely idiosyncratic views. Once it has liberated its own view from contingencies and limitations, Reason necessarily finds itself throughout all particular forms (...). The particular speculative Reason [of a latter time] finds in it spirit of its spirit, flesh of its flesh, it intuitively itself in it as one and the same and yet as another living being.³¹

It could be argued that the rising of limited and finite subjectivity into the element of speculative reason is not driven by the desire for narcissistic enjoyment. On the contrary, it is driven by the desire to be recognized by the universal and collective as its own. To leave *corps* behind, to relinquish yourself to the immanence of “absolute knowledge” is a choice to effectively relinquish each and every choice: “[A]ll that we have to do to ensure that the beginning will remain immanent to the science of this [pure – N. J.] knowledge is to consider, or rather, setting aside every reflection, simply to take up, *what is there before us.*”³² Therefore, those who heed the calling of philosophy will choose to relinquish the choice altogether, since there is no ambition anymore to posit oneself as the one who one-sidedly *demand*s his choices to be acknowledged and gratified. Subject’s renunciation of itself must be the absolute abandonment to “pure knowledge”: “Relinquishing all foundations and every transcendental guarantee, including even the power of its own conviction, thinking abandons itself to the contingency of its own unfolding.”³³

³¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 88-89.

³² Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 47.

³³ Comay, and Ruda, 24.

It is an old wisdom that philosophy needs the calm element, a moment or two of “peace” to engage with its object. We could trace it to the times of Descartes. He did not like to read books, although he was compelled to say that reading meant conversing with the best minds of bygone eras.³⁴ Descartes uses the metaphor of traveling. Reading is like traveling, as in leaving your own place and situation to visit and experience something different, to lose yourself in a way. However, this reading induced a “fugue state,” an amnesiac immersion in the historical element, and it bears a danger of estrangement from oneself or of complete loss of oneself. To get as close to his own self as possible to find that solid ground, *fundamentum inconcussum*, Descartes stopped reading and broke off his ties with the historical element of thinking. Here, the danger seems to be a methodological one. Having an opposite direction, Hegel’s methodology leads philosophical inquiry towards the dismantling of finite self in the element of pure thinking, which is then attentive only to its own historical development. Saying himself that the explication of *Phenomenology* is the “path of despair,”³⁵ Hegel urges philosophers not to get attached to any particular outlook and ideological investment. In the world that has subjectivity as its principle, to head the calling of philosophy means to resolve yourself from the purely subjective perspective. Finally, interpretation of this episode as fragmental evidence of Jamesonian longing for a different world could follow as soon as we acknowledge the implicit ideological charge of any such “universal” and “disinterested” claim and philosophical position.

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³⁴ René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7-8.

³⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49.

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