CONCEPT AND FREEDOM: ON THE FORMS OF SELF-RELATION (SELBSTBEZIEHUNG) IN HEGEL

In what sense can it be said that the concept or freedom are self-related? In an ordinary speech at least, it seems absurd to say that the concept, say of a thing, is related to itself. A cup of tea is a cup, but what else? Only in logic or in philosophy do concepts and things seem to be expressible as being ‘themselves’. Furthermore, when the concept of freedom with its various negative and positive meanings is reflected upon, a kind of self-relation is indeed attributable to it. A self-relation, on the contrary, is in ordinary speech only attributable without difficulty to a speaker, one who uses such a self-reference to him- or herself. Problems arise in ordinary language and normal circumstances only in the speech of persons in certain functions. For example, when the king or president says or proclaims something, is he referring to himself as a person as such, or referring ‘only’ to his function? Can a state or a company or a family, on the other hand, be said to be either self-related, e.g. in proclaiming laws, or self-referent, e.g. in engaging the whole in some action?

Perhaps none of these examples presents a self-relation as such. Is thinking in concepts such a self-relation? Or is that only the case for thinking about thinking? This may be so, but it should be argued that this kind of speech is not meaningless. Hegel’s logic is just such a discussion, of a series of possible and perhaps real self-relations. Moreover, the concept and freedom are –for Hegel– the main topics of his overall doctrine of the concept. In Hegel’s own terms at least, subjectivity as self-relation is acknowledged to have a fundamental role. With the concept or subjectivity, the whole doctrine of what may be conceived, becomes a self-relation of the concept to itself. It is for Hegel the realm of subjectivity and freedom. This point seems quite clear, but in fact it is a continual source of possible misunderstandings and questions. How can a concept be said to open the possibility of freedom, if the concept elaborates formal systems? What sense of freedom could be present? Is attributing freedom to a system, which is fully understandable in its own terms, convincing? Why can and must such a systematic self-relation be called free? This last

1 See the theological problems with the Pope, who is only infallible when he speaks as magisterium, but who is quoted after every speech, as if he were infallible every week.