The force of dialectics
Glimmerveen, Cornelis Harm

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
1992

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

Copyright
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): http://www.rug.nl/research/portal. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.
Introduction

History flows from yesterday to tomorrow, yet the reconstruction of this flow must take its course upstream. And, since the reconstruction of history is itself a part of history, this entails that the course of history is, at least in part, opposed to itself. But this very opposition makes out of the flow of history every day to that which is called "today".

The only way in which one can understand history, if at all, is by conceiving of it as a continuous whole (1). If one regarded history as a collection of unrelated events, there would be nothing to understand; one could only count and recount those events, but even their sequence would remain meaningless. This way of looking upon history seems to have the advantage of unprejudiced objectivity, but it leads to nothing – and what sense could there be in considering something to have an advantage if it does not advance to anything at all?

Relatedness, on the other hand, is not simply presented by history itself; it is constructed by thought, and as a consequence, even if it may have a legitimate claim to objectivity on account of its presentation of its object, it is undeniably always subjective and prejudiced. Indeed, the assumption that history is inherently related is the very prejudice which enables the understanding of history.

The subjectivity of this assumption appears from the fact that it implies the reversion of the sequence in which historical events occur. Events are historically related in the sense that they are supposed to determine each other; historical determination is thought to be parallel with the course of time, but in fact tracing this determination means looking back in time. In the case of the history of philosophy, this is obvious; there can be, for instance, no other reason for claiming that Leibniz anticipated Hegel than finding Leibnizian influences in Hegel, that is, finding Hegel’s reception and transformation of Leibnizian concepts. The concept of anticipation is, indeed, delusive; I do not think that anyone would seriously claim that Leibniz actually foresaw or otherwise predicted Hegel’s concepts – in fact, anticipation is only the way in which the result of the subjective reversion of the course of history which discloses its presumably inherent relatedness is presented.

This reversion is a part of history. It is with the writings of philosophers as it is with the writings of poets: neither of them have a virtue for themselves, their quality and their significance depend on their readers, that is, on what the readers do with them. If today Shakespeare would not be read anymore, and therefore would not influence contemporary literature anymore, he would, for our time, cease to be a great playwright. Aristotle has been worshipped as well as decried, therefore his writings have influenced philosophy – but only insofar as they were read and, therefore, interpreted by other philosophers than himself. It is the subjective activity which transforms the material of the past into the material of the present and which thus is shaping history.

Subjectivity is inevitable, but it is not the only aspect of
the subjective construction of history. The historical material determines the shape it assumes in those transformations, and this establishes their objectivity. For instance, Hegel could only transform Leibnizian concepts by adapting his own ideas to them, and in reconstructing this transformation which would disclose the historical relation between Leibnizian and Hegelian concepts one must make similar adaptations. These adaptations constitute the historical reliability of subjective construction of history, that is, they determine the measurement of objectivity of this construction. The constructing subject is free, but its freedom is qualified.

The freedom of the subject in constructing the history of philosophy entails a problem regarding the qualification of the subject’s product which is not dissimilar to the problem of the qualification of the products of literature. In transforming historical material, the subject contributes to history itself, that is, it makes new history. The degree of novelty of this contribution determines the degree of its understandability and acceptance, for understanding is to a great extent determined by the amount of established concepts it can fall back on, and acceptance is to a great extent determined by understandability. If something is too novel, it is hard to understand, because it invokes too many new concepts; as a consequence, it is easily rejected. The subject is free to form new concepts, but if it uses its freedom too lavishly, it will also be free from readers and, as a consequence, its contribution to history will be negligible. This is a historical fact, yet one may challenge its reasonableness. One may, for instance, find it too hard a task to read and understand the novels of James Joyce, but this is not sufficient reason to conclude that his books are utterly unreadable or that his kind of literature cannot be understood at all. For, still working on the assumption that history is inherently related, nothing can be completely severed from history, nothing stands absolutely for itself, isolated; history has no gaps — it is always possible to find relations to other historical products which are better known and, therefore, provide a means for understanding the new.

Nothing is completely novel, for the subject is not completely free; the subject must always use historical material, however novel the forms of its transformation may be.

It appears, then, that the reconstruction of historical relations enhances the understanding of historical novelties. However, it also appears that this reconstruction is always a construction too, therefore historically novel and more or less in need of a reconstruction of its own historical relations; which obviously implies an infinite series of reconstructions, since each reconstruction is a novel construction. One is forced to conclude, therefore, that a reconstruction may enhance understanding, but that it also does the opposite. In short, a reconstruction of historical relations reconstitutes the contradiction of history flowing both upstream and downstream respectively. The resulting whirlpool is just another day in the turbulent and often confusing existence of the flow of historical events.

It seems to me that, if one succeeded in not only presenting
yet another whirlpool but in doing so also expounding its whirling nature, this would be an interesting contribution to history indeed. The general problem with explaining the flow of history is that one cannot actually sit in the reeds on the river’s bank and contemplate its flow from a distance, muttering philosophically that everything flows and nothing remains unchanged; one is always part of it. In this sense, history must explain itself, if at all.

With regard to metaphysics, i.e. philosophy of nature (which is the field of interest of this thesis), the history to be explained is, of course, a history of ideas; or, more precisely put, a history of systems of concepts. If this kind of history is to explain itself, it would be very convenient to find a concept the structure of which signifies the whirling nature of history itself. It would be even more convenient if the history of this concept would expound this nature. For in that case, expounding its history would mean expounding its structure. In other words, it would be very convenient if the structure of the concept would coincide with the course which its history actually took.

Actually, the metaphysical concept of force in the mature works of Leibniz, the pre-critical works of Kant, and the mature works of Hegel meets these requirements. And this is what I intend to demonstrate in this thesis.

The central overall question of this thesis is, therefore: how can the concept of force be understood? The way in which this question is dealt with, will be explained below.

Force has been the subject of a number of philosophical treatises, especially as a concept of natural philosophy, but not in the way it is dealt with in this thesis.

Firstly, this thesis offers a description of the concepts of force of three philosophers. These descriptions are presented in the so-called historical parts. As such this is, of course, not novel at all, but the historical parts do offer some new insights. In the part on Leibniz it is argued why one should derive his concept of force from the published texts of his mature period only, and this derivation of his concept of force is presented. The presented interpretation is not a completely new one, but it reveals dialectical aspects which have been hitherto insufficiently recognized.

In the part on Kant the concept of force of the pre-critical period is presented in a similar way. This period of Kant has been more or less ignored compared to the large amount of attention given to his critical works; this historical part, which shows that the Kantian system of this early period is indeed a conclusive system, proves that this lack of attention is undeserved.

The part on Hegel may offer no real historical novelties, but the systematical interpretation of Hegel’s natural philosophy in terms of his Science of Logic is crucial to the approach of this thesis. This leads to the second component of the method used in this thesis.

Secondly, each historical description is used as the material for and the starting point of a subsequent systematical analysis. This analysis offers new perspectives for the interpretation of the concepts which have been presented in the historical parts. Limiting itself strictly to what has been
established in the preceding historical part and what may be, therefore, considered historically reliable, the systematical analysis discloses the ontological structures and relations of the presented concepts and proceeds to establish their logical structures and relations.

I have to point out that with "logical" I do not refer solely to what is commonly known as 'formal logic'. With "logical" I refer to those abstract relations and structures which remain if concepts or groups of concepts are stripped of everything except their function in the system they are part of. For example, if with Leibniz a monad is said to contain the entire universe but also to be the smallest constitutive part of the universe, this entails logically that what is universal is contained in what is singular — this is a logical relation which formal logic would not call a logical relation at all, but a contradiction. The reader who at this point might conclude that he had better lay this thesis aside, because anything which defies formal logic is not worth reading, may be persuaded to read on by my assurance that contradiction is not the basic relation this thesis is built on; but I must also ask for his patience, because he will long be held in suspense and the final answer is only presented in the last chapter, where it belongs. This leads to the third component of my method.

Thirdly, each of the three divisions (which consist of a historical part and a subsequent systematical part) is as such a part of the ultimate analysis carried out throughout this thesis. Herein lies, I think, the true novelty of the thesis. For the three divisions are not only related in the sense that they deal with the same subject matter, and not only in the sense that each division is presupposed by the subsequent division, but also in the sense that only together and only in this specific succession (2) they furnish the answer to the central problem of the thesis, viz. how can the concept of force be understood. This form of the thesis is requested by its contents, as I have tried to make clear in the first part of this introduction, and it has been my intention to make form and contents one.

I hope that I do not sound presumptuous if I say that I feel there is something akin to art in the final result, that is, in the thesis as a whole.

As a consequence of this unity of content and form, there is something which might be felt as a disadvantage of the thesis. There are no separate conclusions concerning the whole of the thesis. Of course, each chapter, and each part ends with conclusions. But these are conclusions concerning the elements of the overall question which have been dealt with in that chapter or that part. Naturally, each division has a concluding chapter in which the just presented specific part of the overall question is discussed and related to the next division. But the very last chapter of conclusions, although it indeed offers what can be called the answer to the overall question, actually refers back to everything which has preceded it, in such a way that it explains this as one interrelated whole which expounds as such the final answer. Therefore, the final conclusion, although it can be found in a series of
forms for itself in all the subconclusions and in the last conclusion, actually is the entire exposition.

One may conclude, then, that the scientific justification for the appearance of this thesis lies in three things: (i) the new presentation of concepts in the historical parts, (ii) the new perspectives of interpretation of these concepts in the analytical parts, and (iii) the new form in which this content is presented.

Of course, the thesis has its limitations. Strictly speaking, the conclusions concerning the understanding of the concept of force can only refer to the concepts used in the presented systems of Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel. I am convinced that they have a wider range of application, that this range even stretches into parts of contemporary physics, but convictions do not count for themselves, and it is a fact that this thesis offers no proof for such a wider range of application. But limited as it is, the thesis does offer a contribution to the description and the understanding of the history of metaphysics.
Notes.

1. If I am not mistaken, the current tendency is to stress the discontinuity in history rather than its continuity. I think this has something to do with the present economic and political situation. There is a strong opposition against totalitarian socialist societies and against their ideology. The philosophy of Hegel, with its teleology and its totalitarian implications, is viewed as downright suspect at the very least. But any school of thought in which history is viewed as a process which leads with necessity to the everlasting dominance of a certain type of society should be criticized. To disregard the historical tendency of continuous development and to declare capitalism to be the final peak of civilization is as irrational as to stress historical development and to regard socialism or communism as its necessary outcome.

2. The idea that the systems of Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel are in fact successive stages in a certain kind of development is not a new one.

J.C. Horn (Monade und Begriff. Der Weg von Leibniz zu Hegel, Hamburg, 1982, and Die Struktur des Grundes: Gesetz und Vermittlung des ontischen und logischen Selbst nach G.W. Leibniz, Wiesbaden, 1983) claims that the line Leibniz-Kant-Fichte-Hegel provides science with a new paradigm which has as its core the structure of self-reconstruction (i.e. the process of development by self-perception). However, Horn’s interpretation of Leibniz is very Hegelian, among other things in the fact that he seems to take a rather classical idealistic point of view; his analysis of Leibniz’s concepts is, therefore, different from mine. Furthermore, in his treatise he does not incorporate the pre-critical writings of Kant, but Kant’s critical period.

König (König, J. Das System von Leibniz. In: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; Vorträge der aus Anlass seines 300. Geburtstages in Hamburg abgehaltenen wissenschaftlichen Tagung., Hamburg, 1946) and Holz (H.H. Holz, Dialektik und Widerspiegelung, Köln, 1983; also Holz, H.H., Bartels, J., Lensink, J., Pätzold, D., Dialectiek als open systeem, Groningen, 1985; and id., Dialectische constructie van de ‘totaliteit’, Groningen, 1983) take the view that the logical/ontological structure implied in Leibniz’s concept of the monad is further developed in Hegel’s logic. As I will point out, there is good reason not to agree with this view either.