

Metamorphoses of the Absolute

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INTRODUCTION

DAINA TETERS

The linguistic space of the Western world is inhabited by some notions that have obtained the exclusive status of a kind of sanctity. They are either guarded by a ban on undisputed revaluation or interrogation, or belong to the field of non-disciplinary concepts, or, alternatively, too many disciplines regard them as concepts suitable for their vocabulary. Finally, due to some historical negligence or coincidence, these concepts have obtained the privilege of living their own lives and following their own laws. They seem to be self-evident; at the same time, nobody can claim to know for sure what they do, or how they dwell in our thought spaces, especially because they tend to change in both meaning and usage over time. Using word play, it could be suggested that one of the absolute leaders in this field is the word *absolute*.

It would be hard to imagine our life today without all kinds of *absolutes*. A cry for help, an expression of gratitude, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, or the formulation of some question will be accompanied by: *Oh, my God! Thank you! You are absolutely right! or It is absolutely impertinent! or Are you absolutely sure about that?* Someone who finds it hard to cope with their daily problems may be advised to put their trust in God: *Rely on God! God is **absolutely** powerful and all-mighty. He sees **absolutely** everything, and one day we will have to give an account for **absolutely** everything.*

Likewise, *absolute* can refer to an increase or growth in the degree of a quality (or qualities) characteristic of some object or phenomenon; moreover, it can occur in all directions of the scale of values, for example, *it was **absolutely** wonderful or it was **absolutely** awful.* *Absolute* can be used as an adverbial modifier, for example, *it is **absolutely** clear that...*; at the same time, it can be a noun denoting a subject or a condition – the *Absolute*. Both theoretical language and everyday speech are littered with a variety of seemingly impressive, but trivial, verbal decorations such as **absolute values**, **absolute needs** or **absolute altitudes**. *Absolute* has found its place both in lofty spheres – mathematical logic, physics or politics – and in more mundane manifestations as in the perfume *Absolute* or vodka under the *Absolut* brand.

God, the absolute primal origin once characterized by its inaccessibility to the human mind, incomprehensibility, incognizability and indescribability, has been replaced by today's **absolute** beginners, who themselves do not know anything. In other contexts, God as the absolute being beyond time, the cause of the entire existence and of values, has been replaced by a historically determined period or the political system "absolutism" based on the notion of concentration of power in the hands of one individual.

Usually, the usage of this word is positive, but this cannot be regarded as a universal rule: *absolute* can increase the degree of some quality on both a positive and negative scale of values. As to the latter, the transformation of *absolute* into a procedural term is mainly associated with the negative connotation, for example, *This is absolutization! Don't exaggerate!*

Thus, the neologisms derived from the root "*absol-*" reflect a whole spectrum of meanings that nowadays manifest themselves as the semantic diversity of these words or even a certain obscurity; therefore, when speaking or writing about the *absolute*, in most cases a strong tendency exists to return to the etymology of this word as the final recourse since it enables us to preserve some consistency of meanings. Initially, etymological study provides some help, but this does not last long because over time the concept has experienced many changes which have not always been interconnected. Each of these changes has left some traces.

Regardless of the spectrum of meanings and usages of the concept today, at first glance the word *absolute* seems originally to have perhaps been reserved for concepts referring to God. One might think that its golden age could be found in either cataphatic or apophatic theology, or even in both. Cataphatic or positive theology is the approach of the Western theologico-philosophical tradition that looks for attributes of God based on analogies. Its argumentation is quite clear: as the creator cannot be less important than the created, it follows that the qualities of the creator can be imagined as the ultimate embodiment of the properties and manifestations of the created. This strategy, involving a metaphorical approximation of the created and God, can often be found in the Bible; for instance, "God is love"¹ ("...because as He is, so are we in this world."²).

¹ The first Epistle General of John 4,16. In *The Holy Bible. King James Version*. USA: Thomas Nelson, 2010, p. 1550.

² The first Epistle General of John 4,17. In *The Holy Bible. King James Version*. USA: Thomas Nelson, 2010, p.1550. The first Epistle General of John 4, 17, p. 1226.

Thus, to speak of God cataphatically means to come to all God's principal attributes seen in the created, and enhancing them to the superlative degree. Following the *via causalitatis*, in cataphatic theology God is described as the embodiment of ultimate perfection,³ with the prefix *omni-/all-* added to predicates, producing words such as omnipotent, omnipresent, all-knowing, while God's essence can best be expressed in the form of a definition: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."⁴ Thus, God seemingly incorporates all things, all qualities. The concept we are interested in – the *Absolute* – can be explained in a similar way, for example, *God is Absolute*, provided the concept is used in the meaning of perfection introduced in the Latin tradition by Cicero or Seneca.

If the representatives of positive theology used verbal means to build an approximation to the essence of God, elevating or absolutizing his qualities or predicates, their opponents – the representatives of apophatic theology – emphasized the principal cognitively and verbally undefined nature of God. They were convinced that by defining what God is we limit the unlimited. Consequently, the *Absolute* would turn out to be something approximated to the human scale, some entity or even something that could be described as a thing rather than a being as such or in itself. As a result, God, reduced to thing-ness and based on objectivity, inadvertently becomes Non-God, whereas the *Absolute* transforms into its opposite: Non-Absolute, uncertain, incomplete.

Therefore, the solution proposed by apophatic or negative theology was to choose the opposite way; that is, since God is inaccessible to the human mind, ineffable and indescribable, the suggestion was to approach God by maintaining a distance, specifically through "purifying" properties accessible to us in thinking and in then negating those properties.⁵ By choosing the *via negationis*, God is separated from all properties and

³ Old Gr. καταφατικός – enhancement or completeness of attribute. See A. D. Veisman. *Grechesko-Russkiy Slovar/Greek-Russian Dictionary*. S. Peterburg: Greko-Latinskiy Kabinet Yu. A. Shichalina, 1991 (1899), p. 666.

⁴ The first Epistle General of John 1,5. In *The Holy Bible. King James Version*. USA: Thomas Nelson, 2010, p.1547.

⁵ Old Gr. ἀποφατικός – speaking off, denying. See A. D. Veisman. *Grechesko-Russkiy Slovar/Greek-Russian Dictionary*. S. Peterburg: Greko-Latinskiy Kabinet Yu. A. Shichalina, 1991 (1899), p. 188.

manifestations of time and space, and, since nothing affirmative could be said about Him, the attributes referring to Him acquire a negative prefix or suffix. For example, God is described as uncreated, immortal, infallible, imageless, nameless; generally, He cannot actually ‘be’ anything at all. As John Scotus Eriugena stated, God is outside being. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. He is *no-thing* because He transcends being.⁶ After all, the rules of the game concerning the creation of the world as described in *Genesis* envisaged that the Creator would dwell in a sphere inaccessible to human beings by rationally cognizable means. God’s appearance can only happen as a revelation, and the revelation of God, or the uncognizable *Absolute*, is a mystery.

Because of the inaccessibility and ineffability of God, all theological debates and attempts to approach God were labelled as pure brainteasers in the 14th century; therefore, it is expedient to leave the field of speculative reflections and return to the notion of *absolute*, considering at the same time whether its biography could be so simple, and whether the above expresses the whole truth. Most probably, it is not so. Although words containing the same root as *absolute*, such as *absolutism*, *absolution*, *absolve*, *absoluteness* are ubiquitous, the genesis of *absolute* is not quite clear.

In short, the biography of this word is the following: the appearance of a word of Latin rather than Greek origin within the horizon of theoretical concepts implies that both the word *absolute* and the phenomenon it describes originated rather late, that is, both the word and the phenomenon emerged in an environment that had already been conceptualized. This means that something previously existing had to be replaced, modified or re-interpreted; for example, the Latin category *absolute* is often *post factum* equated to Plato’s idea of the good or Aristotle’s immovable prime mover. It is not possible for a category created later and in a different cultural substratum to replace an earlier theoretical construction without any residue: they are not the same. It should be added that the problem involves not only adaptation of the word to existing constructions of thought, because contradictory solutions could also be observed in the

⁶ See Inglis P. Sheldon-William (Ed.) Iohannis Scotti Eriugena. *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972–1981; Michael A. Sells. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 34–62.

tradition of its further acceptance and use, which sometimes even leads to paradoxes. Let us try to focus on the most significant issues in this respect.

Apparently, the word *absolute* first appeared in Latin law and grammar books when the new word *absolutus* was derived from the verb *absolvere* by using the past participle form of the verb, meaning that someone is released from charges, conditions or obligations, liberated, dismissed, exonerated, or that something is accomplished or finished.⁷ Thus, this word form refers to a phenomenon characterized by a complete, finished wholeness or absoluteness resulting from some process and finally having attained independence. Initially, this word had a distinct legal connotation, that is, something that is free now but was not so in the past – it has been released; someone who was once guilty has been absolved. The legal navel-cord of *absolute* tends to reappear from time to time.

In Latin grammar books, however, the word *absolute* corresponded to “the idea of a syntactic construction or function where the term is not affixed to the rest of the phrase or the utterance. This term lacks a relation to the previous or the following, and its meaning is hidden inside it.”⁸

A broader and more general application of *absolute*, schooled in Latin legal language and grammar in the Western space of thought, resulted in the emergence of an idea about some definite whole that can exist by itself as a self-sufficient entirety. And therein lies the problem. Indeed, it is not the only one.

On the one hand, since the *absolute* is something that is self-sufficient and keeps its meaning inside itself, the implication is that, with regard to its content, *absolute* tends to “fall out” or dissociate itself from common linguistic or logical connectedness. In other words, the *absolute* tends to be either a non-linguistic and non-logical phenomenon, or at least a designation referring to a phenomenon of that kind: in a word, God.

⁷ See Joseph T. Shipley. *Dictionary of Word Origins*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1945, p. 4.; Robert K. Barnhart. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. Edinburgh: Chambers, 2008, p. 5; Émile Littré. *Dictionnaire de la langue française*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1876, pp. 21–22.

⁸ See Absolu. In *Encyclopédie de la philosophie de Garzanti*, Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2002, p. 5 / Orig. Gianni Vattimo (Ed.) *Enciclopedia garzanti di filosofia*. Milano: Garzanti, 1981.

For the time being, this conclusion was unchallengeable because of the anthropological privilege of human beings in terms of ability to draw a line between the existing and the non-existing, that what exists in time and outside it, the cognizable and the non-cognizable, the known and the unknown, as well as the ability to be aware of one's ignorance and "see" the *absolute* in the mind's eye. Awareness of our cognition, understanding and ignorance also forms an integral part of the Western paradigm of thinking. However, the new concept unwittingly strayed beyond the sphere of the accepted, by referring to a sphere that not only exists outside the zone of the human mind and human perception, but also outpaces human beings with regard to time and the logic of creation in accordance with the same paradigm of Western thinking underpinned by Christianity. If we logically continue this train of thought, it turns out that the created, who on the sixth day of creation was granted the divine privilege of naming things and creating them by giving them names, also labelled its Creator as *Absolute* and, consequently, "created" its own creator. Furthermore, the legal connotations of the notion *absolute* also imply letting the creator go and being the creator. It is hard to imagine a greater blasphemy.

On the other hand, the concept of *absolute* was created by human beings and belongs to human vocabulary and the universe of human things, and humans can attribute *absolute* to anything. Thus, the *absolute* acquired a dual nature at the very beginning of its emancipation, creating a contradiction difficult to overcome. That is not the only idiosyncrasy in the usage of this word. So, let us turn again to the history of the concept.

In fact, the *absolute* as a conceptual category reserved for God began to play a special role relatively late, only in the middle of the 15th century rather than in the era of theological disputes as one might think, and is associated with the appearance of "De docta ignorantia" by Nicolaus Cusanus. This was also the time when the point of view regarding the *absolute* began to change and was subjected to the specifics and conditions of the scientific discourse of the early modern period, making God step aside a little on the stage of abstract ideas or at least share the concept of *absolute* and the meanings hidden inside it with other new players.

The new science experienced a victorious march in the 17th century. The features of the new thinking could first be traced in the works of Pierre Gassendi but acquired a complete form and a new – contradictory and not universally accepted – concept of the *absolute* in Isaac Newton's physics.

Not delving into the progress of the generation of this idea and listing only the most significant innovations in the context of the *absolute*, suffice to note that the new science was a mathematical natural science in that cognition of nature was constructed concurrently with mathematics and adapted to mathematics as a new reality. The realistic understanding of mathematics at that time – perceiving mathematical objects as real entities – did not yield the possibility to see its fictional character. The same applies to several other abstract concepts. Gassendi attributed abstract concepts such as time and space to real, existing things. Gassendi’s successor, Newton, emancipated time and space, turning them into quantities suitable for the science of his time: universal and independent absolute space and absolute time. “True space” – or the more commonly used “absolute space” – is perfectly self-sufficient and independent of its content: it is an empty and rigid reference system: space is homogenous, isotropous and infinite. On the other hand, absolute time is a fluid reference to all changes. Apart from absolute space and time, Newton’s physics also introduces force as an attribute of the real physical existence of matter, and mass as the most important attribute of matter.

Apart from an excessively realistic perception of the world, 17th century physics involves another issue in that it has no “linguistic consciousness”; in other words, the research objects that the great physicists studied were nature and things, but their scholarly attention was not “focused on phenomena and their conceptual capture”,⁹ as was the case in 20th century physics. Pascal, Newton and other great thinkers were linguistically insensitive, if we may say so: they subjected only specific theoretical concepts to precision, whereas a number of other concepts – such as time, space, number, equality, place and movement – were accepted as self-evident, as those not to be problematized and explained further.¹⁰

⁹ See Albert Einstein. “Vorwort”. In Max Jammer. *Das Problem des Raumes. Die Entwicklung der Raumtheorien*. Darmstadt: Verlag von Robert Oppenheim, 1960, S. XI.

¹⁰ See Isaac Newton *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica, vol I*, Harvard: Harvard University 1972.; Blaise Pascal. De l’Ésprit géométrique et de l’Art de persuader. In *Logique de Port-Royal, suivie des trois fragments de Pascal sur l’autorité en matière de philosophie, l’esprit géométrique et l’art de persuader*. Paris: L. Hachette, 1854.

In an age of different physics and different ideals behind scientific thinking, mathematics would be regarded as usefully fictitious; corporeal objects would be replaced by fields, and attempts would be made to purify scientific language from metaphysical admixtures. In turn, in the scientific language of the 17th century, specifically in Newton's system, a number of empirically uncontrollable notions can be observed that had never been part of physics, such as *force*, *movement* or *absolute time* and *absolute space*.¹¹ In the physics of the early 20th century, they would only be regarded as imaginable abstractions that do not appear in experience. According to the physicist Mach, as a representative of the second Positivism, only relative qualities can be used in physics without any contradictions, whereas absolutely empty space and absolutely fluid time are meaningless notions.

Thus, for the sake of purifying language from metaphysical admixtures, the *absolute* is explicitly rejected for the first time as unfit for some sphere or discipline and proclaimed as something to be eliminated.

Returning to Newton's absolute space and absolute time, this involved a peculiar concept of the universe – a concept of his own creation – that is absolute and infinite, on the one hand, but concrete on the other, a concept of natural science, but not fully separated from theology. In this universe, heaven becomes part of nature; God becomes a spatial being in this space, while absolute time and absolute space become divine attributes.¹²

It would be wrong to imagine that this contradictory concept was not criticized by Newton's contemporaries. The fiercest critics of absolute time and absolute space were George Berkeley, who regarded both terms as fictions and absurd notions,¹³ and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who identified a series of tautological solutions in absolute time and absolute space and such contradictions as the absence of a point of reference in absolute space

¹¹ Ernst Mach. *Die Mechanik in ihren Entwicklung. Historisch-kritisch dargestellt*. 9. Aufl. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1933.

¹² See Max Jammer. "Der Begriff des Absoluten Raumes". In *Das Problem des Raumes. Die Entwicklung der Raumtheorien*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960, S. 102–137.

¹³ See George Berkeley. *De Motu*. In *De Motu and the Analyst*. Ed. by Douglas M. Jesseph. Springer-Science+Business Media, 1992 (1721), pp. 4–30.

and of a starting point in absolute time, as well as issues concerning the metrics of absolute time and absolute space and their units.¹⁴

The physical-philosophical debates of the 17th century remained unheard, but they challenged those of the 18th century. Leibniz's approach in particular found support in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the founder of German classical philosophy, which doubles as German absolute idealism – if we play a word game – where the differentiation between theological and philosophical interpretations and philosophical reflection on the *absolute* reached a peak.

Each of the German thinkers had an individual approach to the interpretation of the *absolute* that differed from that of others, but with one unifying element – the *absolute* is thematised rather than used as a means of thematising other concepts.

In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the *absolute* appears in a relatively peripheral place: in the system of transcendental ideas, where attention is focused on the mind in its narrower meaning or, more specifically, on the ability of the mind to create illusions.

To put it in a nutshell: no fundamentally new cognition can originate in the mind, but it can reflect notions and judgments that exist inside the mind. Through a process of regressive synthesis, the mind moves from everything conditional and relative to the unconditional, the absolute, that which has no cause and that should stand at the very beginning of the causal chain. In other words, the mind tries to reach some systematic unity. Kant refers to conceptualizations of this kind directed towards systematicity as transcendental ideas. They do not correspond to any object of experience, and have no empirical basis; according to Kant, there are three such ideas. The first is the necessary absolute unity of the thinking subject, or the idea of the immortal soul; the second is the necessary absolute unity of the causal chain of phenomena, or the idea of the world, and the third is the Being of Beings or the necessary absolute unity for the conditions of all objects of thinking, or the idea of God. Transcendental illusions appear

¹⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. “Cinquieme écrit de Mr. Leibniz.” In *Recueil de diverses pièces sur la philosophie, la religion naturelle, l’histoire, les mathématiques par Mrs Leibniz, Clarke, Newton & autres auteurs célèbres*. Tome II, Amsterdam: Chez Duvillard et Changuion, 1720, pp. 82–149.

when real existence is attributed to ideas created in this way. They are only the result of the generalization of our knowledge.¹⁵

Johann Gottlieb Fichte subjectivized the *absolute* by introducing the “Absolute I”. But the real modern thinker of the idea of the *absolute* and the modifier of the *absolute* was Hegel, who suggested the death of God in his early writings and was fascinated by the metaphor of an organism. As a result, Hegel came to a new interpretation of Being as an all-inclusive whole, whose key quality is coordinated self-development, the ability of self-revelation and self-thinking.

The starting position of Being is its undeveloped and unconscious state (the state of “Being-in-self”), but in the course of its development a new conscious and sensing unit awakes (the state of “Being-for-self”). This development is accompanied by a corresponding level of mental self-reflection until the duality of the subject and the object is cancelled (reaching the state of “Being-in-self and for-self”), which makes it possible to attain the state of Absolute Knowledge, which results from the self-referentialization of the mind or self-thinking processuality. Thus, Hegel’s *Absolute* is not present at the beginning, but comes into existence through the self-development of Being and self-thinking.¹⁶ It is sometimes overlooked that Hegel translated the idea of a triune God into the language of philosophy, a discipline that helps achieve the *Absolute* (*das Absolute*). As a result, the *absolute* acquired totally impersonal features.

The grand system created by Hegel became a kind of absolute philosophy in Western thought, so that when the period of classical German philosophy came to an end, the *absolute* began to experience a lack of opportunity for further development; having left the space of speculative thoughts, it seemed to be no longer in the realm of the possible. What a mistake! A new era had set in with new needs and new expectations of the *absolute*, beginning with the departure of the metaphysical *absolute* as propounded by some 19th century thinkers.

¹⁵ See Immanuel Kant. “Der transzendentalen Dialektik Erstes Buch.” In *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Zweite hin und wieder verbesserte Auflage, Riga 1787, S. 555–594.

¹⁶ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *System der Wissenschaften*, Erster Teil “Die Phänomenologie des Geistes”. Bamberg/Würzburg: Verlag Joseph Anton Goebhardt, 1807; *Absolute*, das. In Jürgen Mittelstraß (Hg.) *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*. Bd. 1. Stuttgart u. a.: J. B. Metzler, 1980–1996, S. 32–35.

In the second part of the 19th century, changes took place in the elements of classical metaphysics, while the departure of metaphysical categories was even celebrated. The first signs of this could be seen among the opponents of Hegelianism – among the new generation of scholars thinking in Kantian categories, or the camp of adherents of a new philosophy. Let us remember three different Kantian thinkers, at the same time critics of the idea of the *absolute*: the English metaphysicist Henry Longueville Mansel, who analysed metaphysical mistakes and contradictions in the conceptualization of the *absolute*, the German irrationalist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who pointed out some linguistic forms as unimaginable fictions, for example, *absolute necessity*, and Hans Vaihinger, a celebrity in his time, but now the largely forgotten author of *The Philosophy of 'As if'*, who fictionalized the *absolute*.

In 1858, in a series of Banton Foundation lectures on “The limits of Religious Thought” delivered at Oxford University, Mansel listed contradictions in the conceptualization of the *absolute* from the positions of Kantianism and metaphysical agnosticism,¹⁷ the essence of which are the following:

- Concepts of the *absolute* and its comprehension, or the possibility of cognition, should be fundamentally separated. If the concept of the *absolute* as an uncognizable sphere is possible, its cognition and the knowing of it are impossible.
- Cognizance of the *absolute* is impossible because the infinity of the *absolute* does not permit us to conceive it as the object of cognition. Strictly speaking, the *absolute* is an object of thinking that cannot be the object of thinking.
- Apart from the fact that the *Absolute* cannot be the object of thinking, it also excludes itself from conceptualization as an unconnected, independent entity free from any relation. In fact, the *absolute* destroys the subject-object relation, which is a necessary precondition for any cognition.

¹⁷ See Henry Longueville Mansel. *The Infinite as Absolute In The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (1867), pp. 32–46.

- Our perception and cognition of necessity are relative. Consequently, perception of the *absolute* should be the same, which is contradictory: partial knowledge cannot lead to the totality of the *absolute*.

The critique of the *absolute* proposed by Schopenhauer can be differentiated into three aspects: the *absolute* does not correspond to any subject or object; as a predicate it can only refer to matter;¹⁸ it cannot be conceived as the prime cause because no prime cause exists, nor can there be any; thus, what is *absolutely necessary* is merely an empty word,¹⁹ a notion whose usage is malicious, that is, the cosmological argument is concealed in the *absolute*. Finally, belief in *absolute* transcendence is childish.

Hans Vaihinger refers to the *absolute* in the 18th chapter of his once extremely successful work *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* [“The Philosophy of ‘As if’”]²⁰ and regards it as the ultimate and highest fiction,²¹ which is contradictory mainly due to its reference: what the *absolute* refers to cannot exactly be said: whether it is a thing in itself, a force, a substance, a cause, a principle, or something else. It must be a mere fictional visualization of mathematical infinity. All the usages of *absolute* such as *absolute value*, *absolute morality*, the *absolute ideal of the state* are new fictions with the value of practical usage, but without theoretical significance. Any attachment of *absolute* to other words or utterances can be used as an intensifier of the meaning of its bearer, that is, it intensifies another fiction.

Even before criticism addressed to the concept of *absolute* and its metaphysical burial had come to an end, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche appeared on the scene with innovations in this respect, and – not surprisingly – the *absolute* disappears as an idea in his philosophy.

With his well-known declaration of the death of God, Nietzsche set in motion the process of re-evaluating values, which also concerned the

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. I. Band, 3. Aufl., Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1859, S. 574.

¹⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer. *Parerga und Paralipomena*. 2. Aufl., Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1877, S. 199.

²⁰ Vaihinger’s famous work was published in 1911, but was written between 1876 and 1878.

²¹ See Hans Vaihinger. Kap. XVII “Das Absolute” In *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*. Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag. 1927 (1911). S. 114–116.

concepts of God and the *absolute* embedded in various social institutions and in language. If the latter seemingly ceased to be the focus of the topic, the situation regarding the word *absolute* was not the same: it was not so easy to part with this once-created artefact of perfection that remained inscribed in the hidden ideals of humankind – all ideal properties, ideal conditions and circumstances. Therefore, the word did not disappear, as asserted above. On the contrary, it multiplied, and the numerous new *absolutes* in Nietzsche's works²² were related to a new methodological approach. The fact that the concept of *absolute* is not thematised in Nietzsche's works means that he pretends "not to see" the *absolute* as a separate theme and uses it as a means of thematising other concepts. What Nietzsche had intended to criticize is blended into the linguistic material by this literary-minded philosopher. What matters for Nietzsche is no longer what is and what is not, but how it is expressed, and how something is spoken in a language. As a result of this approach, *absolute* obtained various linguistic forms, and the neologisms derived from it obtained the characteristics of syntactic ambiguity and subsequently inflated.

In fact, neither God nor concepts related to God were dead, but they had ceased to be the same as in previous linguistic forms: on the one hand, they were subjected to unexpected turnabouts and trivializations; on the other hand, they transformed and required a search for new models of perception and dispositions of mind, as well as new ways of thinking.

In the early 20th century, the slogan about purifying language from metaphysical admixtures appeared inspired by positivism. The *Absolute* – one of the most exemplary enemies of the new era and the target of former metaphysical debates – had found refuge not only in the language of philosophy, but also in the scientific language of physics, from which it had to be eliminated as soon as possible. However, the fervour of the adherents of scientifically correct language soon subsided because full implementation of a programme of that kind would have resulted in catastrophic cultural and social changes.²³

Apart from neo-positivism, several other attempts to grasp "matters" of scientific thinking and the "living conditions" of scientific terms could

²² See www.nietzschsource.org, where 544 versions with the root "absol-" have been identified in Nietzsche's works.

²³ See the reference in footnote 12.

be observed in the 20th century. Concepts that had previously referred to something, or that had been scientific tools, were smoothly and unnoticeably thematised as objects of research in the 20th century. Attention was no longer focused on phenomena or the conditions of their cognizance, but on specific features of the linguistic forms in which these phenomena are encompassed.

As to conceptualizing the *absolute*, we should not forget historical epistemology and metaphorology, both of which find the verbal world to be somewhat uncertain. Turning attention away from the unambiguousness of scientific terms and empirically – or at least logically – justified usage in scientific language, as was the case with positivism, historical epistemology focuses on scientific thinking and scientific language, and problematizes their scientificness as well as how they become scientific. In a period when models of linear thinking have been abandoned, science no longer seems to be developing in a linear progression, but rather reveals obstacles and breaks (*compures*).²⁴ However, this is not the key feature in the theory associated with Gaston Bachelard, one of the main experts of epistemology in the 20th century, underpinned by a style of thinking combining rationality and poetry.

According to this theory, imagination plays the fundamental and most profound role in cognition, which tends to invest reality in the products of imagination instead of relating them to reality. Imagination is not the ability to create images of reality; it is “the ability to create images that outpace reality.”²⁵

Image-like ideas that have originated in this way are not singular formations that could be expressed in one word. Ideas do not come alone; they reside in something like a cloud that allows ideas to replace one another in its matter, to duplicate themselves and to create something like a dramaturgy of dreaming. This dream is understandable in an intuitive dream-like state of mind. This method of thinking attempts to taste an idea and then let it flow into another taste or another word, or idea-image. The justification for this methodological approach lies in the notion that a

²⁴ Gaston Bachelard. *La philosophie du non. Essai d'une philosophie du nouvel esprit scientifique*. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1966 (1940).

²⁵ Gaston Bachelard. *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris: Librairie José Certi, 1942, p. 23.

rational train of thought involves “dreaming,” whereas thinking materializes by “tasting” and “touching” language.²⁶ As with food, where various tastes blend, inter-transforming meanings and mutually overlaying meanings meet here.

Bachelard is particularly interested in concepts that do not refer to a specific scientific discipline but that function in science in a semi-mythologized way. The *absolute* is one of those concepts. Starting to “dream” the *absolute*, Bachelard thematises one of its previously unnoticed edges: the temporal quality of the *absolute*. Smoothly flowing time transforms into another reality at some decisive moment.²⁷ Some event detaches time from itself at some instant of its duration; that event becomes different and emancipates itself as the beginning of something, or an *absolute*: “a new era always begins with an absolute,”²⁸ when it **begins** to last.

If we follow Bachelard’s argumentation in the “Intuition of the Instant”, this even seems rational until the moment when a seemingly casual sentence conjures up “the absoluteness of instants,” when something begins to last and is cultivated in the Western system of thinking; the very beginning, however, falls away from time as “released,” emancipated and qualitatively different – as the *absolute*: “...objective time is the maximum time, that is, it is that which comprises all instants. It is formed from the concentrated ensemble of all the acts of creation.”²⁹ In other words, the idea of the beginning concentrated in an instant was already incorporated in the concept of the seven-day creation. In its subsequent biography, the beginning only repeats itself in accordance with the same pattern, creating innumerable other beginnings.

The predicates of the *absolute*, however, have already changed their clothes. They appear in other ideas such as the metaphorical descriptions of the four elements – the inconceivability, unboundedness and infinite inexhaustibility of water, the elusiveness of air, and so on. All in all, the *absolute* can be “drawn” in many colours “painted” with many brush strokes, and “is spoken” in various words and ideas.

²⁶ A certain similarity can be observed in the name *homo sapiens*, where the word *sapiens* has two meanings – wise and discerning.

²⁷ Gaston Bachelard. *L'intuition de l'instant*. Paris: Stock, 1992 (1931), p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 48.

The absolute really made itself at home in the world of metaphors in 1960 with the publication of Hans Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*,³⁰ where *absolute* "works" as an instrumentalized concept: *absolute metaphor*. In this conception, *absolute metaphors* are fundamental elements of philosophy that take the place of the theoretically non-fulfillable. They cannot be conceptualized or analyzed or translated without residue. Thus, the language of philosophy consists of two different strategies of thinking – conceptual thinking, which results in concepts, and associative figurative thinking, which results in *absolute metaphors*. The latter perform a compensatory function: whenever some conceptually impenetrable areas appear, *absolute metaphors* can point to a broader and more global context of meanings due to their semantic ambiguity. If we remember the Allegory of the Cave or the Analogy of the Divided Line in Plato's work, it can be imagined in quite the same intuitive way as when and in what context *absolute metaphors* appear and work. However, what exactly absolute metaphors encompass compared to theoretical knowledge remains guesswork.

Blumenberg's metaphorology looks like the last serious appearance of the *absolute* in the form of some conceptual utterance or a composite term. Clearly, its potential is beginning to subside, and the real era of its reign seems to have come to an end, without of course taking account of the crowds of *absolutes* "residing" in language.

Nevertheless, in the second half of the 20th century, and especially in the early 21st century, *absolute* became interesting again – this time as the object of research due to the contradictions and paradoxes hidden in the concept, its simultaneous semantic plenitude and semantic imponderability, the conceptual history that had grown around it as well as its instrumentalized usage. Due to a new paradigm of thinking, a coincidence, or for some other reason, as of the 1960s, several theoretical schools or directions of thinking – often mutually unrelated – turned their attention towards cultural reflection. This form of reflection concerned philosophical hermeneutics, cultural semiotics, interpretative cultural anthropology, some directions of the theory of literature such as New Historicism or the new cultural strategy of Cultural Studies, for example. Several of the new theories or schools paid attention to research objects not yet thematised,

³⁰ Hans Blumenberg. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960.

which concerned both “high” and “low” spheres and characterized by a particularly creative approach. Unfortunately, this creativity was not matched by the methodological preparedness and maturity of these early developments: that took at least a quarter of a century. On the threshold of the new century, it was time to focus on the most difficult and complicated material.

Linguistics and semiotics turned out to be the most suitable disciplines for the *absolute* as a research object because they could replace historical and interpretative approaches as methodological alternatives because their approaches were focused on structural studies. Even though semiotics was still in the initial phase of its constitution and institutionalization in the 1970s, when it was still “developing its field of manoeuvre and exploring the use of the strategic possibilities of significations,”³¹ as well as trying to escape from the amorphous field of theories, methods and sometimes misunderstood interdisciplinary usage, in the early 21st century it finally transformed into one of the leading and most prospective disciplines with precise methods.

We made use of this situation without delay. In 2010, an international interdisciplinary conference entitled “Metamorphoses of the Absolute” was held in Riga, where semioticians, theologians, philosophers, communicologists, linguists, literature and arts scholars, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, lawyers and mathematicians talked about the *absolute* from sign-oriented and meaning-oriented perspectives. This collection comprises the papers delivered at the conference or inspired by it, created from 2010 to 2017.

Are you ready to follow us in the search of the *absolute*?
Absolutely!

³¹ Algirdas Julien Greimas. *Du sens. Essais sémiotiques*. Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1970, p. 17.

PART I

PHILOSOPHY AND SEMIOTICS
IN SEARCH OF THE ABSOLUTE

SEMIOTIC PARADOXES OF THE ABSOLUTE

WINFRIED NÖTH

Abstract

The idea of the absolute as something unrelated to anything else and free from any determination involves a semiotic paradox. The concept of the absolute and the word that represents it constitute the signified and the signifier of a sign, but as such they are both semiotically determined by the conventions of the English language. The general semiotic paradox of the absolute is thus the following: if we think of the absolute as something undetermined, our thought of the absolute is semiotically determined so that we are really conceiving of something determined and not of something free from any determination, – but if we conceive of the absolute as something determined, the absolute is no longer free from any determination.

The paper begins with a survey of the major ideas of the absolute in the history of Western philosophy and goes on to distinguish five semiotic paradoxes of the absolute: (1) the paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute (as an object of knowledge); (2) the paradox of the defined absolute; (3) the performative metaparadox of the undefinability of the absolute; (4) the structuralist paradox of the concept of the absolute, and (5) the paradox of the absolute from the perspective of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics.

1 A Brief History of the Idea of the Absolute

The idea of the absolute has seen a gradual decline in the history of Western thought. From its glorification in the Age of Absolutism, it passed to its utter rejection, if not actually derision, in the philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century. A brief encyclopedic survey may illustrate this development.

Some of the earliest philosophical definitions can be found in the writings of the Scholastics, as quoted in Rudolf Eisler's *Dictionary of Philo-*

sophical Terms of 1904. For the Scholastics, the absolute is *sine ulla conditione* (“without any condition”; “unconditional”) and *non dependens ab alio* (“not depending on anything”, “independent”). These criteria correspond rather closely to the etymology of the Latin word *absolutum*, which means “released” or “set free”. The etymologically derived semantic feature “lack of relatedness” is also in the focus of the eighteenth century philosophical dictionary by Johannes N. Tetens (1735–1807) quoted by Eisler (*ibid.*), which defines the absolute as “that which has no relation to anything else” or simply “unrelated”. The etymological root of the word is also the essence of Schopenhauer’s definition of the absolute as “that which is connected to nothing” (*Neue Paral.* §96), which radicalises the idea of unrelatedness by substituting “anything” for “nothing” as the correlate of the absolute. The absolute is not only without any relation to something in particular but it is simply related to nothing, which may logically be the same but sounds rhetorically more expressive.

Theological interpretations of the absolute begin with Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). With reference to God, he used expressions such as *absoluta maximitas*, *entitas absoluta*, or *unitas absoluta* (“absolute greatness”, “absolute entity”, or “absolute unity”) (Kuhlen 1971: 14). Five centuries later, we find Schelling calling God the “absolute all” or simply, “the absolute” (*ibid.*: 22).

In the Age of Rationalism, Baruch Spinoza, who sees himself as a “geometer of the absolute”, considers the idea of the absolute as well as its incorporation into the idea of God as a logical *necessity*, which no rational mind could reasonably question, ignore, or deny. The main characteristics and manifestations of the divine absolute, according to Spinoza, are infinity, indivisibility, and unconditionality (cf. Schwemmer 1995: 33). God is by necessity absolutely powerful, absolutely infinite and indivisible, absolute in his existence, and he is the first, unconditioned, cause of everything (cf. Kuhlen 1971: 15).

Leibniz extends Spinoza’s idea of the absolute by projecting the absolute from the macro-universe of the infinite into the micro-universe of the monads, which can be found in all substances and individual beings. The absolute is the perfect, and God is an absolutely perfect being (*Dieu est un être absolument parfait*), but the domain of the absolute is not restricted to God’s infinity because, according to Leibniz’s monadology and his doctrine of pre-stabilised harmony, monads are micro-universes serving

as living mirrors of the macro-universe (*un petit monde qui exprime le grand*). The absolute can thus be found within all of us (*L'idée de l'absolu est en nous intérieurement*) (quotes from Kuhlen 1971: 16).

In the Age of Enlightenment, Christian Wolff and Immanuel Kant transform the negativity inherent in the earlier definitions into the positive logical form of a universal proposition which ascribes the quality of *autonomy* to the absolute. According to Wolff, the absolute is that which “contains the cause of its reality within itself” (*Vern. Ged.* 1, §925), and from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Eisler (1904) quotes a definition which characterises the absolute as that which is “unrestrictedly valid in all respects”.

The philosophy of Idealism takes up and develops further the idea of the autonomy of the absolute. According to Hegel, the absolute is “the All conceived as a timeless, perfect, organic whole of self-thinking Thought” (quote from Long 1942: 2). Whereas the predicates of “perfection” and “wholeness” take up the well-known criteria from the past, Hegel’s characterisations of the absolute as something “organic” and “self-thinking” is novel in the genealogy of the idea of the absolute. The term “self-thinking” anticipates to two key notions which twentieth century cognitive philosophy defines as autopoiesis and self-reflexivity, although these contemporary terms have certainly no direct connection to Hegel’s idealism. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the idea of self-reflexivity, once a key concept of Romanticism, has drifted from the metaphysical idea of the absolute to the domains of cognitive philosophy and biosemiotics, in which autopoiesis and self-reflexivity are currently two defining characteristics of life (see also Nöth 2007).

Arthur Schopenhauer’s polemical comments on the idealist theories of the absolute of his century mark a first low of the idea of the absolute. In Hegel’s theory of the absolute, Schopenhauer saw nothing but empty verbal sounds (*leerer Wortschall*). Schopenhauer’s devastating verdicts on those who held that the human mind may have rational knowledge of the absolute include his famous characterisations of the idea of the absolute as a Cloud-cuckoo-land (*Wolkenkuckucksheim*) and his caricature of those convinced of having knowledge of the absolute as being endowed with the “sixth sense of the bats” (*sechster Sinn der Fledermäuse*) (Kuhlen 1971: 25).

Nietzsche finally denounces the ideas of the absolute as errors and superstitious beliefs of “badly informed theologians pretending to act the philosopher” (*Birth of Trag.*, §11). The ideas of absolute knowledge and

absolute value have their origin in nothing but mere fictions of human minds. The error of those who believe in the idea of the absolute is that they confuse their own mental fabrications with reality and existence. Philosophical and theological minds first created the idea of the absolute and then committed the error of attributing a fake autonomous agency to the idea created by their own invention (cf. Kuhlen 1971: 27).

In sum, the once glorified idea of the absolute became highly controversial. One of the reasons for the controversy about the idea is that rational discourse concerning the absolute must ultimately lead to unresolvable paradoxes. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of these paradoxes, first from general, then from semiotic perspectives.

2 The Paradox of the Inconceivability of the Absolute

Kant was the first to discover that any attempt at defining the absolute must result in a logical antinomy, but, although he knew that the absolute is inconceivable as an object of rational thought, he was not willing to give up the idea of the absolute. This contradiction led him to become entangled in *the paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute*. Evidently, if it is unthinkable, we cannot pretend to have any rational insight into the nature of the absolute. After all, rational discourse on the absolute is impossible without thinking about the absolute. Kant's thesis that the human mind cannot conceive of anything absolute may be summarised as follows: since all of our knowledge depends on our cognitive means of representing it to our mind, nothing absolute can exist in the sense of a known object (Schwemmer 1995: 33). If something absolute and unconditioned existed in the universe, our mind could neither think nor describe it since the human capacity of cognition and the human means of representation are too limited to conceive of the unlimited.

Despite these insights, Kant was unwilling to give up the concept of the absolute. He argued that "it has been of such great concern to reason" that "to abandon it would be a disadvantage to the system of transcendental philosophy" (Kuhlen 1971: 19). Kant also taught that there is no absolute totality in the phenomena but that absolute totality must be conceived of in the noumenal world (ibid.: 20), but the Kantian noumenal world is the one of the things as they are as such, so that this world is itself equally inaccessible to rational thought and human cognition.