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Hegel's En-cyclo-pedia: A circular approach to system

“Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a *circle* that closes upon itself; but in each of them the philosophical Idea is in a particular determinacy or element. Every single circle also breaks through the restriction of its element as well, precisely because it is inwardly [the] totality, and it grounds a further sphere. The whole presents itself therefore as a *circle of circles*, each of which is a necessary moment, so that the system of its peculiar element constitutes the whole idea – which equally appears in each single one of them.” (emphases are mine)¹

The aim of this paper is to discuss this quote to present my argument on what Hegel means by “circles” and the role this has for the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. My paper has two main sections. In the first, I argue that Hegel's aim in the *Encyclopaedia* is primarily epistemological by looking at the term “*Erkenntnis*”. In the second section, I go through each of the three parts of the *Encyclopaedia* and outline their circular structure and their structure together as a circle of circles.

When Hegel presents the outline of his entire system in the form of three volumes under the title of “Encyclopaedia”, he is indicating that this work is not only a work of philosophy, but also a complete collection of knowledge. Furthermore, the term “encyclopaedia” is in part derived from the Ancient Greek word “ἐγκύκλιος” meaning “circular”. There is, therefore, an inherent connection between Hegel's statement about the “circle of circles” and the name of the work.

1. Circularity as epistemological: focusing on cognition

It will help to begin by explaining the epistemological nature of Hegel's “circles”. This will help us understand what he means in § 15 regarding the structure of the *Encyclopaedia* and the implications of this structure. I argue that we may understand Hegel's notion of “circularity” as epistemological if we take a careful look at his discussions of “cognition/*Erkenntnis*” and place

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris, Indianapolis, 1991, 39/§ 15.