

# SPIRIT AS OPERATING SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

## 1

I speak English. You speak English. Both of us speak idiolects, personal *versions* of English. Either of us may create a new word that catches on.

There is no English *apart from* such idiolects. In the same sense, a 3D object given visually does not exist apart from its aspects.

## 2

I take the term “Spirit” from Hegel. This term is appropriately suggestive of a “ghost in the machine.” While Spirit *can* be understood in terms of *all* aspects of culture, it’s helpful here to focus not only language but more exactly on concepts that can be translated between languages.

For example, a monolingual English speaker can participate in the same “Spirit” as a monolingual French speaker, which is of course made possible by translators.

Concept use is a normative affair. While I can occasionally innovate, I must typically follow the rules to get myself understood. To innovate is to bend the rules, sometimes in a way that catches on. Just as English evolves through its users, so does Spirit evolve.

## 3

Spirit is to the individual as an OS<sup>2</sup> is to its hardware. It is in this sense that Spirit is “a ghost in the machine.” The individual

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<sup>1</sup>This is an old idea, but I think that it’s valuable, so I am trying to present it in a clear way.

<sup>2</sup>operating system

as thinker is ghost, or (an “idiolect” of) Spirit. The individual as flesh is machine, its mortal host.

Spirit depends on hosts in general but on no host in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Spirit is “time-binding”<sup>4</sup> or accumulative. It is also self-referential. We talk about our talk about our talk. We eventually talk about Spirit itself. Or Spirit talks about Spirit.

#### 4

Another name for Spirit is “the Conversation.” For instance, we can imagine, stretching over the centuries, the ontological Conversation of Western philosophy. Individual philosophers, viewed as mortal hosts, come and go. But viewed as a progression of versions of idiolects of the Conversation, they fuse together into one relatively immortal philosopher or ontologist.

We can understand particular philosophers, understood as idiolects, to cooperate adversarially. In a rational tradition, criticism and synthesis result (hopefully) in the improvement of a set of hypotheses. The Conversation contains not only an abbreviation of its own history but especially its finest products so far, which nevertheless remain subject to further criticism and synthesis. It remains creative, though we should not rule out something like the approaching of a limit, as dreamed of by C. S. Peirce.

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<sup>3</sup>In books, however, spirit can lay dormant, like a spore. For our purposes, Spirit is only fully present when embodied and active.

<sup>4</sup>Korzybski :

I mean the capacity to summarise, digest and appropriate the labors and experiences of the past; I mean the capacity to use the fruits of past labors and experiences as intellectual or spiritual capital for developments in the present; I mean the capacity to employ as instruments of increasing power the accumulated achievements of the all-precious lives of the past generations spent in trial and error, trial and success; I mean the capacity of human beings to conduct their lives in the ever increasing light of inherited wisdom; I mean the capacity in virtue of which man is at once the heritor of the by-gone ages and the trustee of posterity.

T. S. Eliot uses “tradition” for this Conversation, and he focuses on poetry, but his remarks are helpful.

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

Switching back to our context, a philosopher or ontologist is only strong now by incorporating progress already made — by “downloading” more from the Conversation than others, where “more” is not intended only or even primarily in a quantitative sense.

It involves a depersonalization, which might be better described a re-personalization. As Schopenhauer might put, “genius” is like a “parasite,” in that it steals from time and energy spent on more “selfish” matters.

What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality..It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science.