

What is the subject matter of Hegel's Logic?

Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 3

Logic must be a logic *of something*

The question: what is the subject matter of the logic, should be rephrased as: what is Hegel's logic the logic *of*? If Hegel's Logic is a logic, then there must be some field in which its validity can be tested. Otherwise it is just subjective dreaming or some kind of art form.

Take for example Formal Logic. All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal. And so on. Formal logic is the logic of propositions, that is, the logic of deriving valid propositions from given premises. In general we learn this in our early years at school when we learn to argue by giving reasons for what we believe. Or to put it another way, it is the rules by means of which we formulate propositions which can stand up to critique.

Logic is not rhetoric or psychology. People say all sorts of stupid things in trying to justify themselves, but logic expresses what is *necessary* in arguing from premises if your conclusions are to withstand critique. And also, it turns out, Formal Logic is based on a formal conception of the concepts referred to in propositions. We'll have to come back to that later.

But Hegel's Logic is something quite different.

One of the features that many people observe when they study Hegel's Logic is that somehow Hegel has introduced *movement* into logic. But this observation raises the question of what is it that it that *moves* in Hegel's Logic. If it is the concepts which move, then what the hell does that mean? In what space do concepts move!?

To illustrate this problem I will briefly cite the words of Stephen Houlgate who is a well-known English Hegelian who endeavours to present a modern interpretation of the Logic which is true to Hegel's original intent. In attempting to describe the movement exhibited in the Logic he writes in the following terms:

“At the beginning of Hegel's logic **thought thinks** - or **tries to think** - the utter indeterminacy of *being*, but that thought is so utterly indeterminate that **it evaporates** in the very attempt to conceive it. The thought of pure, indeterminate being thus **slides into** the thought of nothing because of its sheer indeterminacy,”

“In Hegel's logic, **thought leads itself** from pure indeterminacy to the thought of bare determinacy. It is the process whereby - without taking anything for granted - **thought freely determines** the manner in which all determinacy, at least initially, is to be thought.”

“It is because being is conceived in such a pure and indeterminate way that **it leaves us nothing to think** and thus immediately **disappears into** - and so **becomes** - the thought of nothing at all.”

“What Hegel lays out in the opening chapter of his *Science of Logic* is the process whereby **thought**, which **tries to think** pure indeterminacy, is **led by its own intrinsic necessity** to the thought of becoming ...”

You see what I mean. Houlgate sees Hegel's Logic as the logic of the stream of consciousness which a rational person experiences once they think about being. And what is more, this necessity, he claims, will lead the thinker through the entire series of 204 concepts in the Science of Logic.

Further, Houlgate claims that any rational person can experience this movement, provided they open themselves to the self-movement of thoughts. Insofar as there is any truth in this at all, it is also wrong. As the Logic unfolds, understanding the concepts and their progression demands insight derived from the study of philosophy and plain life experience.

All that aside though, can we accept that Hegel's Logic is the logic of subjective thought forms, of streams of consciousness? I ask you, if Hegel's Logic is the Logic of subjective dreaming, what is the basis for transferring the Logic to the Sciences? In what sense was Marx using the Logic in the writing of Capital? What on Earth is the relevance of Hegel's Logic to the social sciences, or anything else?

In any case, believe me, thinking of, say, Becoming does not force anyone to think of (do you know what comes next?) Determinate Being or *Dasein* in German. This insight was the product of a person with broad life experience and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the philosophy and sciences up until his own time. And no one has tried to re-write or update the Science of Logic since.

Another point about Houlgate's reading of the Logic. Houlgate says that the Logic is presuppositionless. And he is repeating Hegel's words here. It means that Hegel does not claim a set of axioms or "clear ideas" as premises for his philosophy. If you were to set out from some axioms, then you have to answer question: where did *these axioms* come from, and this leads to an infinite regress. Houlgate hangs quite a lot on this claim, but Hegel did not *only* say that the Logic had to be presuppositionless, he also said: "There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation," and given that he wrote this in the introduction to the Logic, he obviously meant that it applied to the Logic.

So, contra Houlgate, according to Hegel, the Logic is *not* immediately given, but what is it mediated by? Hegel had answered this in the Preface:

"It is in this way that I have tried to expound consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Consciousness is spirit as a *concrete* knowing, a knowing too, in which externality is involved; but the development of *this object*, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests solely on the nature of the **pure essentialities** which constitute the content of logic."

The "pure essentialities" of the process outlined in the Phenomenology, the *logic* of that process, what is necessary rather than contingent or accidental or subjective.

So Hegel has told us that the Logic is the logic of the process described in the Phenomenology of Spirit, "the development of all natural and spiritual life."

Logic is pure essentialities of the Phenomenology of Spirit.

The Phenomenology of Spirit is the preface to Hegel's system of philosophy, though he wrote it *before* completing the Logic. It was an early work, and unlike the Science of Logic or the Encyclopaedic Logic, it was never revised. It was not reprinted during his lifetime and Hegel used to give copies away as gifts to friends.

But it is a very clever and typically Hegelian way of writing a preface. It tells the story, the experience of consciousness, as it comes to philosophy and Hegelian philosophy in particular. It tells this story along three axes. It leads the reader through the journey, schematically, of how an individual, naïve consciousness comes to a philosophical view of the world; and it tells the story of Western philosophy from its beginnings, as Hegel saw it, in the ancient Greeks; and it tells the story of consciousness through the history of forms of state. These are three objective

manifestations of how the modern reader has arrived at the Logic; in schematic form of course, but as Hegel says, a process in which externality is involved, that is, a *real* history which has been affected by contingency and can be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed.

The only presupposition for a Phenomenology is the existence of communities of natural human beings. But you see, if you have travelled that journey, if you have made the journey to philosophy, and you are familiar with the history of the sciences, art and literature of your community, if you are a person of the world who understands and participates in the affairs of the community in which you live, then you are in a position to understand the logic which is at work in these processes. And it is this which constitutes the content of the logic, according to Hegel.

If you have the necessary life experience, then the transitions in the Logic can make sense to you. But that is not the same as understanding what is actually going on there. Just like a fluent speaker of a language does not necessarily know the grammar or etymology of the language they are speaking.

So the Logic is not presuppositionless in this sense. It's presupposition is the existence of people who are products of the journey of spirit up to the present moment, and to a greater or lesser extent are at home in this medium. An educated public, in short, a public which does not simply take what is given to it but which is critical and tries to get to the truth of things, strives for Freedom. So you can see why Hegel's Logic is the logic for social movements.

As a first approximation, then, I will say that *Hegel's Logic is the logic of human activity*. I am by no means alone in this claim. Walter Kaufman, Charles Taylor and Robert Pippin all agree that the Logic is the logic of human activity. Pinkard and Brandom go a little further, and I will mention their view presently.

All well and good, but you will see that the text of the Logic, though slightly less so the explanatory notes from Hegel's students which have been inserted by his editors, has very little to say about history or politics and so on. The content is just abstract concepts like Being and Nothing, Form and Content, Subject and Object and so forth. So how do we find this real human content in the logic of concepts?

Logic is a concept logic

Hegel's Logic is a Concept Logic as opposed to a propositional logic. The Logic also includes the logic of the *formation* of concepts as well as the logic of the *development* of concepts. Imagine a man is arguing with his wife about sharing the housework. The man might say: "Housework is women's work, so you have to do it." From a formal logic point of view he has argued quite correctly, but his concept of "woman" is crap.

Gottlob Frege, the father of modern formal logic, entitled his major work the *Begriffsschrift*, the concept script, so he also claimed to have written a concept logic. Frege is a huge advance over the Formal Logic which Hegel knew 50 years before, but in reality, Frege's logic is also a formal, propositional logic. I say this because Frege shared with the mediaeval logicians the idea that a concept was a collection of *the necessary and sufficient attributes of its object*. This is not Hegel's view.

All the logicians up to and including contemporary writers on the psychology or logic of concepts in our time concur on this understanding of the meaning of "concept." They equate the primitive form of concept with a genuine concept. Primitive in the sense of childlike or corresponding to the early stages of formation of a concept, concepts which are not yet really concepts, pseudoconcepts, so to speak. For example, I might recognise Anthony Albanese by certain facial features, but it would

be wrong to say that the features by means of which I recognise him constitute a true concept of Anthony Albanese. And it would be doubly wrong to think that is by recognising such features I have the concept of “Prime Minister.”

This type of concept, made up of necessary and sufficient features, is called an “abstract general” concept. And this is, of course, the logic of a *certain kind* of human activity. In the third book of the Logic you can read the story of how contradictions in formal thinking of this kind lead to genuine, developed concept logic and you find in addition to the well-known syllogisms about Socrates being mortal also an array of other similar-looking syllogisms which are patently wrong. But they are in fact types of reasoning which in reality we find all around us, and which we are all guilty of ourselves when we have not yet quite grasped the nature of a situation or concept.

How does Hegel elaborate a concept logic, then?

Basically, he tests a concept X by examining the claim “X is absolute,” or “Everything is X.” Just as you might examine the claim “It’s all about the money,” the claim that everything a person does is determined by financial gain. Each of these universal claims represents a certain ideal kind of activity, a certain “formation of consciousness,” or institution in which the given rule is the norm. Hegel then subjects this regime to critique. The process of critiquing the claim “Everything is X,” the process of criticising a concept is to push the concept to its limits, and beyond. We all do this to the institutions we work in, our governments, and so on, and it leads to a new generalisation: “No, everything is really Y, X is just a special case,” or whatever. This is the form of movement we see in Hegel’s Logic. A succession of concepts arises through the process of critiquing a concept – showing its limits and taking it beyond those limits, showing that it is not absolute. It is the very process by means of which people learn, by means of which all the sciences advance and the way in which laws and governments fall and are replaced by others. It is the logic of this process of living critique.

When a concept comes under critique, Hegel refers to the outcome as the “truth of the concept.” If there is no critique, no struggle to go beyond the limits of a concept, a science or law, then there is no movement, and the truth of the concept is never exposed.

The process of critique entails digging out contradictions which otherwise lie dormant in a concept. The skilled critic can do this, but even if there are no philosophers around, insofar as natural living human beings are enacting a concept, there is an inevitable process which will do that work. Eventually, the truth will out; sooner or later, some accident, some turn of events will expose a contradiction and the concept is exposed and everyone can see its truth. So long as people are struggling for freedom, all forms of activity are eventually pushed to their limit. The logic exhibits this process of critique.

I will present a lecture on the Logic next week. For now I am just trying to introduce you to an ontology which makes Hegel’s Logic intelligible and useful. But you should know that this movement takes different forms in each of the books of Hegel’s Encyclopaedia.

In the first book, the Logic of Being, the form of movement is *seriality*. That is, a concept arises and passes away and has no more validity, it is then replaced by another, which in turn passes away. One damn thing after another, a transition from one to the next to the next.

In the second book, *Essence*, everything is relative and in the passage from one relation to another, the former relation does not pass away but remains, although pushed to the background, so the form of movement is *diversity*.

In the third, the *Concept Logic*, the movement is no longer either a transition into, or a reflection on something else *but development*, with each new relation incorporated into the concept and all the former relations merged with it.

(The word “sublation” is used throughout the *Logic*, and simply indicates that all that has gone before persists and is implicit in the new higher form).

The vital force within this movement is the contradictions which are successively exposed and resolved by critique.

All well and good. You’re getting the idea, I hope, of how the *Logic* originates from human activity. But I still haven’t explained what a concept is, for Hegel. And I need to explain how a sane person can talk of concepts as if they were subjects.

What is a concept?

Terry Pinkard says that the subject matter of the *Phenomenology* is “formations of consciousness.” What we understand by “formations of consciousness” are practices animated by a specific culture, a form of life. This includes religious orders, states, ethnic communities, scientific institutions, artistic movements and so on. Pinkard makes the point that it is not so much what people involved in such a community *do* which are important as the *reasons* they give for what they do, and which characterise the formation. In general, all the specific reasons are *special concepts* of the *self-concept* of the entire community, just as the concepts of a science are all special concepts of one overarching concept of the science as a whole.

Robert Brandom observes that philosophy, any philosophy, has for its subject matter *norms*, rather than actual behaviour. Institutions, practices, forms of activity are characterised by norms rather than being collections of actual actions.

I agree with both these authors and I will make a second approximation to the answer to our question: the subject matter of the *Logic* is the norms of human activity, rather than the activity itself, which as Hegel says, entails externality, is subject to accident and subjective whims. The *norms of human activity*.

Now, following Robert Brandom again, there are three kinds of norm: practical norms or norms of behaviour, what people are expected to do in a given situation; theoretical norms or norms of belief, such as a community’s metaphysics or scientific beliefs; and semantic norms, the meaning people in a community take to be attached to a word or gesture or event, and so on.

All the sciences are like this. When Galileo rolled steel balls down an inclined plane, and timed how long it took in each instance for the ball to roll a certain distance, and worked out the law governing its acceleration, he did not get the same result from every experiment. He understood that the “law” he was looking for was a kind of “norm” for balls rolling down a slope. He ignored the results when the experiment got messed up and averaged the rest to eliminate random effects. It is the same in understanding human activity en masse. We don’t try to explain every single action, we are just interested in the norm which is at work.

Now norms are funny things. They’re not mental in the sense of being phenomena of introspection, and they’re not material either, in the normal sense of the word. A spoken or written word is material, but the meaning of a word, the semantic norm, is something quite different, it is implicit in the way people use the word.

But it is these *norms* which Hegel is referring to when he talks about “thought.” They can be quite material: “A tool is a persistent norm of labour” according to Hegel, for example. And for any individual, the norms – especially but not only if they are written in the criminal code and enforced by the police – have a material force.

Concepts are in fact norms. The concept of a university, for example, entails a range of practices, people with certain skills and qualifications, certain relevant regulations, typical buildings such as libraries and lecture theatres and so on. And we expect people to act in a certain way in relation to a university, academics expect to be paid, people go to libraries to find books, and so on. The concept of “university” entails a whole range of special concepts which represent expected behaviours, the meaning of various things, the status of certain people and their rights, and so forth.

So when we’re talking about Hegel’s Logic being a Concept Logic, we can see that what this means is that it is the logic of the norms of human practices, and that in particular, we understand the logic of these norms through the logic of conceptual norms. *Conceptual norms*, concepts, embrace all the kind of norms mentioned earlier, semantic, theoretical and practical norms.

But this still doesn’t explain, for example, why Hegelians can talk about concepts as if they were subjects, subjects which do things, have intentions and volition. This still looks like some kind of mysticism. After all, norms are merely something which the keen observer can *abstract from observation* of human activity and often the people participating in those activities would not even be aware of the relevant norms – they are just doing what they do.

Further, we’re still left with a generalisation: the logic of norms of human activity, and this is still very vague. A useful tool for cultural criticism or law-making perhaps, rules for thinking some people say, but we are still lacking a way of conceiving of human activity such that this logic of human activity can have some purchase.

Why should a logic of concepts tell us anything beyond incidental insights about how people act beyond departments of philosophy? And how?

That will be the topic of the next lecture.