

# The structure of Hegel's Logic

## Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 5

What I'll do in this lecture is present a synopsis of Hegel's Logic because many of you may not be already familiar with it.

There are a number of ways in which the narrative of the Logic can be told. It can be presented as a theory of cognition, it can be presented as a logic of human activity or it can be presented as a concept logic in which each successive concept arises from critique of the foregoing concept, taking for granted our knowledge of concepts as forms of thought. This last is the conventional way of reading the Logic, and is usually the way it is presented even by those who agree that the content of Logic is human activity.

I will present it here so far as possible in the conventional manner, but it is not possible to do so consistently from beginning to end. There are certain points in the Logic in which the transition from one concept to the next cannot be justified by conceptual critique, but relies on an overall plan which has a deeper foundation.

How do you see the world? Do you see it like Henry Ford, as one damn thing after another? Do you see it as a tangle of multiple threads, each meaningful in itself, but more tangled than woven into a coherent fabric, or do you grasp the world as a single, rational whole, each part, each event, a more or less necessary part of the whole. Well if you chose the latter then you'd have to be God, wouldn't you? No human being could claim to have such an infinitely concrete concept of the world, but you might think it is like that, even if you can't understand all the links.

Let's lay aside the question of whether any person has or *could have* such a comprehensive theory of the world. We can talk about such a concept of the world, *as if* it could exist. And imagine that the thinker of that absolute concept is not an individual but the world itself, the *human* world, but not any single head. So, you get the idea? We imagine the world as thinking *and acting* out a concept *of itself*. Now even this concept cannot exist because there is no world subject. But think of this world-concept as the product of the learning process of the coming-to-be world subject, as it comes to be. Now *this* concept is what Hegel calls the Absolute Idea. But it turns out that the Absolute Idea is nothing other than *the journey* which the self-concept of the world goes through to get there; no part of that journey is abolished. The destination is *only* the journey, and this journey is forever underway, unfolding.

So the Logic is the development process, the *Bildungsroman* of this world-concept, a narrative in which situations arise and are resolved, giving rise to new situations. It is intelligible in that sense, but not in the sense of some final destiny.

The structure of the Logic is three books: Being, Essence and Concept. This structure represents a concrete concept *reflecting* on the *unfolding situation* and developing a *new concept*, which then merges into the existing concrete concept. Each of the three books concretises one of the three processes at work here.

The issue is that the first lines of the one book are not given directly by critique of the last concept in the previous book. To understand *these* transitions you have to understand the overall structure.

In Being, the movement is indeed as Henry Ford said, one damn thing after another. This is the conception of the world in which it has no concept of itself, no self-consciousness. Each concept arises, and through criticism, is replaced by another. It

is the conceptual world of the sociologist who determines the state of the world through surveys, for example. The survey forms are designed so as to prejudice the response as little as possible. There is no consultation between respondents. Everything is double-blind so that the researchers' expectations cannot influence the results, and the results are reported in lists of numbers under different categories like we run general elections. It self-identifies as the dumbest method of cognising the world, formed without any reflection, in the belief that the results reflect an objective, unprejudiced picture of the world. A thoroughly unhegelian view of the world, of course. But truth comes from error. Hegel elaborates this book in the form of a critique of the concept of Being, that is, the concept of the world, just as it is, one damn thing after another. Hegel critiques the concepts which arise from this kind of thinking – qualities and quantities – by an immanent critique. The outcome represents a kind of almanac of the world, or rather, all the *concepts* required for such an almanac.

The second book is called Essence and it is a critique of the concept of Reflection. It is the formation process of a concept, any concept. The German word for Essence is *Wesen*; *gewesen* means “was” or “been.” So this book tells the story of the concrete existing concept, which is the result of *past* self-understanding, *reflecting* on present Being, as each new moment comes forward. Here the concepts come forward in pairs corresponding to the process of reflection. Essence is not, as it is in normal language, the end point, what something really is, deep down. Rather it is the endless *process* of going deeper, of peeling the layers off the onion. It is the development of a theoretical view of the world, a world of laws, patterns, processes and theories. And as each new theory comes forward, it does not abolish the preceding theory, but rather pushes it into the background.

The third book is the Concept Logic. This book is the development process of a concept which begins with a bare abstract concept, an Aha! moment, and concludes with the Absolute Idea.

The Concept Logic itself has a tripartite structure.

In the first part of the Concept Logic, the Subject, we have the *internal* development of a concept which means the interaction of the Universal, Particular and Individual moments of a concept. The universal is the simple idea which unites the entire concrete concept; the Individual is each and all of the finite, individual instances which are subsumed under the Universal; the Particular is the various means by which individuals are subsumed as part of the Universal, the various definitions of the universal. This is not an abstract general concept. Individuals do not fall under the universal simply because of a shared attribute; these are real, living concepts which have arisen out of the complex process of Reflection.

In its Second part, the Object, we have the interaction of the concept with all the other concepts, which are also Subjects, and the variety of ways in which concepts relate to one another, either mechanically or finding an affinity or adapting to one another.

The Third part of the Concept Logic is called the Idea, and here Hegel follows the process whereby every special concept merges with and penetrates every other, and they become in a sense, special forms of each other and develop together as a concrete whole like a kind of ecosystem. Here Hegel is considering no longer single concepts, but the development of entire self-conceptions of the world, subject-objects, which can only be understood as a self-conscious concrete whole.

So, to make sense of the whole of the Logic, you have to have this overall structure in mind. But the way each book unfolds is a little different. There is a brief preamble at the beginning of each book, before the overall tripartite structure of the book unfolds. The preamble is the analytical phase of the critique, in which Hegel addresses the abstract concept which forms the subject matter of the book and critiques it.

The first book is about Being, which he shows is an empty concept although it was the concept with which philosophy began in ancient Greece. He shows that the only meaningful way of grasping Being is as a One or unit. The concept of One forms the starting point for the synthetic unfolding of the Logic of Being. From One he goes through the various concepts of Quantity, each unfolding from the One before by pushing it to its limits and then going beyond. As Quantity goes beyond a certain point it becomes a new Quality and the unity of Quality and Quantity – so much of this and so much of that – is Measure. The development of Measure is just to proliferate into more and more measures, leading to a kind of image of the world which resembles an almanac. It is like the picture of a community which you get from a phone book, or the census, or for that matter, a general election – utterly lacking in theoretical or conceptual content, but nonetheless an accurate picture of the world. The systematic dialectic of Being arises out of critique of the concept of the One.

It is vital to understand the distinction between the analytical phase which concludes with the unit, and the synthetic exposition of the initial unit once it has been identified.

In the second book, he critiques the concept of Identity or self-reflection. It goes like this: Identity, only meaningful if there is *some* Difference, that is, actually, Diversity, but that can only mean some Specific Difference, that is, an Opposition, something which is the same and not the same, a Contradiction, but every contradiction must have its Ground. Ground is the truth of Identity which is determined by successive reflection. That is Hegel's analysis of Reflection.

To explain the concept of Ground. If there's a difference, that is, a contradiction, then there has to be an explanation for that difference. Every contradiction points to a contradiction at a deeper level, and that is its Ground. So Reflection is this process of endlessly searching for the ground of a contradiction in a deeper, more far-reaching contradiction.

From Ground Hegel identifies a series of pairs of concepts: Thing and Matter, Form and Content, Cause and Effect and more. Each pair emerges as a new problematic arising from critique of the foregoing problematic. The final outcome of this process of reflection is the array of concepts from which a theoretical view of some new development can be constructed, but always on the basis of an existing array of concepts. It is like a comprehensive text book of social theory as it is at one moment, or rather, the *concepts* utilised in such a text book. So it's a step forward from the almanac we got from the first book. But what it *lacks* is what you might find in a journal article when someone proposes an entirely new idea, and *new concept* of the problem being addressed. Essence is limited to reflection on the basis of an existing array of concepts. The transition to a *new* concept, the third book, is always a leap, an Aha! moment.

The Concept Logic begins with the critique of a simple concept. On one hand, it is merely a name, but instances fall under that *universal* name according to various *particular* criteria, such as their use, their connection with others, or whatever, but also it is nothing other than all those finite, concrete, *individual* instances, on

whatever bases they are united. Consider a union, for example; the union, its branches, committees, leaders, etc.; and its base membership. This three-sided conception of a concept differs from the positivist two-sided conception in which individuals fall under the universal solely as a result of a shared attribute, so that the universal has no content other than the shared attribute. If a concept was entirely captured as a common attribute, then it is a redundant concept. Hegel's recognition of the inadequacy of any definition of a concept allows him to represent concepts in their full concreteness.

The Subject unfolds through the synthetic exhibition of the three moments: Universal, Individual and Particular.

Frustratingly, it is only in the penultimate section of the Science of Logic, around page 801 of 844, that Hegel *explains* the *method* of the Logic, beyond endless repetitions that it is self-construing, and so on. Only in these last paragraphs do we get an explanation, and then in far from transparent terms. As a result, this distinction is largely unknown and even denied by Hegelians. Hegel claims, characteristically, that his dialectic is simultaneously both analytic and synthetic and not an alternation between the two. All well and good, but the Logic speaks for itself. Admittedly, approaching any subject matter anew, the critic must be equally synthetic and analytic. The critic must follow the movement of the object itself, and the object does not come with ready-made signage for the benefit of the cognising subject. But an understanding of the role of analysis and synthesis and an understanding of how Hegel conducts each method of critique is more than a little useful if you are going to learn how to emulate Hegel, rather than simply echo his results. Very often, the analytical moment of the dialectic is overlooked, because in studying the work of great writers of the past, the subject matter which the writer seized upon and conceptually reconstructed appears to be just given, as if obvious or chosen arbitrarily. For example, Marx begins *Capital* with analysis of the commodity and on the basis of the contradiction between labour time and use-value he is able to derive a dialectical concept of capital. But why did he seize upon the commodity? Why not the state, or money, or power, or something? 16 years passed between his first reflections on political economy in 1843 and the writing of *Critique of Political Economy* in 1859 *beginning* with the commodity. That process of identifying the One is the most arduous and least understood.

In the book, *Hegel for Social Movements*, I devote 90 pages to a step by step reading of the Logic. With a book, the reader has the capacity to take their time and read through the quotes from Hegel and my explanations at their own pace, and reflect. In the context of a lecture, I fear that you would all go cross-eyed if I were to try to emulate such a presentation here. So I will wind up and let's see what people make of it in the discussion.