

Concepts and activities?

Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 7

And now we get to the nub of the matter.

I have presented to you the idea of activities oriented by object-concepts as the substance and units of human social life together with the logic of development of activities from a mere potential to being taken for granted, integral aspects of everyday life.

And I have presented a synopsis of Hegel's Logic as a logical narrative of the development of concepts, from being nothing through to being an integral part of the self-concept of an entire social formation.

I have further suggested that concepts are norms of human activity.

It only remains to draw the logical conclusion. It is not that concepts are *related* to activities in some way but simply that concepts *are* activities and vice versa, and no meaningful distinction between them can be drawn. This provides a definite, meaningful and useful interpretation of the already widely held thesis that human activity constitutes the real subject matter of Hegel's Logic.

The Ideal

The first difficulty that confronts us in accepting this idea is the deeply ingrained prejudice embodied in the connotations of the words "activities" and "concepts." It is a habit of thought that we think of a concept as something which exists inside someone's head. Or if not inside the head – because after all, even Descartes knew that thoughts do not have a spatial reality – something with a merely implicit existence. And on the other hand, the word "activities" connotes behaviour, physical movements, something material rather than something imagined or thought.

These are real differences, but our use of the terms only demonstrates how deeply ingrained in us is the dreaded Cartesian dualism. And that's no surprise, we are born realists, after all. The difference between something I am merely imagining and something which exists outside my consciousness is the first and most basic distinction we learn to make and our lives depend upon it.

The way we use these terms is really a *synecdoche* (sin-EK-d'kee), that is, a figure of speech in which we refer to a whole by reference to only a part of the whole, here the ideal, or the material. But activities and concepts are essentially both material *and* ideal.

"Ideal" refers to entities and properties which attach to their social significance. The ideal includes both forms of consciousness and objective material processes. Ideal and material are not mutually exclusive categories. Ideals may also be material.

The moments of activities

The identity of activities and concepts is also obscured by the dualism that affects the three moments of concepts and activities. References to a concept usually fail to evoke all the three moments of the concept: the individual, particular and universal moments which are all essential to the existence of a concept. When we use a word to evoke a concept we may be referring to an individual instance or we might be speaking generally or even hypothetically. Likewise, when we talk about activities, we can obscure the fact that it is the normative or ideal object of an activity which transforms actions into moments of the activity, and that it is only the inclusion of a

artefact in such actions which give it meaning. That is, the ideal object, the constituent actions, and the included artefacts are all essential moments of an activity, even though in a given speech act we may be evoking just one moment.

My claim for the identity of concepts and activities relies on the tripartite structure of both activities and concepts. The identity further relies on the identity of the life-cycle of both representations, but I will begin by pointing out the identity of activities and concepts at that moment in the development of an activity when it is an *institution*. So, for example, let's look at how we talk about "**hospitals**."

Institutions

Suppose we are talking about an individual hospital, such as the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and whether the RMH deserves the name of "hospital."

We could make this claim only by affirming that a range of individual actions are indeed collaboratively oriented towards the restoration of patients to medical health. This is the normative conception of a hospital and observation of the actions of employees, patients and other people in various relations to the hospital should confirm this. But these individual actions relate to the normative object of the hospital in a variety of particular ways from the administrative actions of the Bursar, to the caring and supportive activity of the nurses and the medical work of the doctors. Whether the Hospital is a true hospital, as opposed to a poor or dysfunctional hospital, would depend on whether the patients do indeed leave the hospital in better health than that in which they were admitted.

So you see, there is an alignment between the individual, particular and universal moments of the activity in the concept of "hospital." The RMH is a real living instance of the concept of "hospital." An instance of a "hospital." By focusing on an individual hospital we can see the symmetry between the moments more clearly than if I were to simply address the "concept of hospital," which implies reference to the consciousness of everyone, whether or not their consciousness is directly engaged in the actual instantiation of a hospital. But the being of a hospital depends first and above all, but not only, on the actions which make up the hospital.

What is the situation then if we are talking about hospitals in general? Firstly, there is the universal moment, namely, that hospitals are health care facilities, part of a country's health care system. They play a particular role in that health system, which differs from that of GP clinics, pharmacies, and so forth. This draws my attention to the fact that the normative concept which orients the actions of all the employees of a hospital has to be made more concrete than I just indicated. The concept of a hospital differs from that of a GP Clinic or a Suicide Help Line. The various concepts differ in the scope, technology, methods and standards which characterise the normative concepts of the constituent actions. On the other hand, in talking of *hospitals in general*, the relevant actions are *more* those of patients, government and health service workers in general, which instantiate this or that activity *as* a hospital – attending it when they are sick, referring patients there, funding it and so on – treating it *as a* hospital in other words. The relevant artefacts include the hospital buildings, though no one would mistake a hospital building for a hospital as such.

In this context, it is the *actions* by which people relate to an activity as part of the larger activity, the *entire community*, which constitute the being of hospitals. If GPs never refer patients there, sick people never go there and governments never fund it, whatever the people engaged in the activity may think, they are not realising a hospital – maybe acting in an episode of ER?

I have used “hospital” to illustrate the identity of concepts and activities in *ideal* objects, processes and materials. It is easily seen, surely, that governments, fashions, theories, private businesses, families and so on are also ideal objects in which the identity of concepts and activities is equally straightforward.

Likewise, economic entities and attributes like “property,” “beauty” and “wealth,” are ideal entities or attributes which are instantiated by and *only* by human actions as part of various relevant activities, not by any physical or chemical properties. The connection of these ideal entities to material objects and processes is understood to be more or less remote, sometimes very remote, but in any case is entirely determined by social norms and laws. If I say: “*That* is my property,” I am speaking figuratively, so to speak. The relation of the relevant object to me is entirely ideal, that is, constituted solely by social norms.

Economic entities such as price and value are of particular interest because they manifest a difference somewhat similar to the difference between a true hospital and a poor hospital. The object-concept of an activity is determined by societal processes which set normative ideals. It is usually the case that these norms are not established by decisions of the Parliament or National Cabinet, but are the outcome of *spontaneous social processes*. Institutions and economic actors are then motivated by a complex of motivations to meet these norms but do so only imperfectly, not ideally, as the unintended outcome of many independent actions.

Aesthetic and legal entities are likewise ideal; there are material objects – documents, artworks, etc. – which play a role, but ultimately their status depends solely on the patterns of activity in which the relevant documents and artwork figure.

Reification

Now, the Cartesian realist in you might still insist: OK, so activities give you concepts of the world by means of which we understand things, but those things still exist outside of our minds in the material world, right?

What’s going on here is the mixing up of artefacts and activities and conceptual norms as if they could exist separately, independently of one another. To explain the problem here I need to introduce the concept of *reification*.

Reification has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it means taking the norms of some human action and making them into an artefact. Computer programmers do this all the time, but it has a long history. It can be supposed that at some point, a hominid who was cracking coconuts by using their own fist, found that a stone plucked from Nature could do the same very effectively and we can suppose that the hammer evolved in much the same way. A hammer is a material norm of human labour – norms can be implicit in actions *or* in artefacts. Without a detailed investigation of the real history of the cultural artefacts humans have fashioned over the millennia, it can be reasonably supposed that this is a process of reifications, of converting the norms of human actions into tools and signs, material artefacts, which function in turn more effectively than our own bodies and laws and customs as norms of human activity, human powers.

The other meaning of reification is the practice of *treating* something which is nothing other than a material norm of human activity *as if* it were an objectively existing material object, rather than an artefact that *is what it is* only thanks to being produced by and included in human activities. Take **chairs** for example. We commonly think of chairs as objectively existing material entities. They are what they are and anyone can recognise one if they see it. But it is not so simple. Sure, any

person raised in a modern society knows a chair when they see one, but they don't all have four legs, they don't all have a back, or soft seats and some are even quite dysfunctional for sitting on.

Chairs have not always existed and they do not exist in all societies today. Up until early modern times, you had thrones, but ordinary citizens had to stand or sit where they could. At a certain point, ordinary people started making their own "thrones" and chairs made their appearance. The people who make chairs know how to make them, they know the properties and forms which must be imposed on materials to make a chair; retailers know how to display them and market them; householders and building managers know where to place them about a room, around tables and so on, and when we go into room, we know how to sit in a chair.

If a chair is uncomfortable, or unstable, we don't say it is *not* a chair, we say it is a poor chair, but if it turned out to be made of tissue paper, we'd say it's a fake chair. Usually our concept of chair turns out to have a sound basis in practice. "Chair" is the norm of a whole array of activities, practices if you will. "Chair" is meaningless outside of a social formation in which the norms of chair use and chair manufacture exist. A chair is a reified norm of a human action – sitting – existing only as part of that action. Recall that I have said that in this ontology material objects and processes exist, but only as part of human activities, from which we are able to abstract them. But as such they don't have an objective existence. As Hegel said, "what is, is only the one concrete whole." Yes, of course, a chair is a material object, meaning that it does exist independently of human activity, but not *as a chair*. An unusually low hanging branch, whose form arose without human intervention or observation, would not *be* a chair however much it resembled one in its physical properties and usefulness.

The same synecdoche appears when we refer to the big building on the corner of Grattan Street and Royal Parade as a hospital. The building is not a hospital, it is merely a building currently being used by a hospital.

Whether we are talking about institutions like hospitals or artefacts like chairs, I hope that I have explained that in either case what is being referenced by means of a figure of speech is both a concept and an activity. *Any* of the activities we can identify and refer to in any our language, will necessarily *also* be an ideal which is *what it is* thanks to being an activity.

But in the case of many of the concepts we use, this is less obvious and clear-cut.

Concepts and Brains

If you think that there's some neurological formation which instantiates each concept in your brain somewhere, then that's a huge declaration of faith. All the neuroscientists have been able to do, beyond sensing different intensities of activity in various sections of the brain, is to identify the nerves actualising the various *motor functions* of the brain and how to stimulate them. They have been pretty successful in doing *that*, and that's interesting in itself, isn't it? It's feasible that the neuro people will be able to master the way the brain can cause us to pronounce a certain word or write it down or grab some object, but there is no chance whatsoever that they'll be able to tell us a set of neurological processes that corresponds to a concept. It is quite possible that the neuro-technicians could also evoke consciousness of a concept by manipulating the relevant sense and motor functions. Just showing someone a picture can do that. But the concept as such does not exist inside the head, but in the entirety of a person's connection to the world, particularly the social world.

And we know this because we know how concepts develop through childhood. Here I can draw on the work of Lev Vygotsky, the founder of Activity Theory. The first thing is that as children develop towards being able to form true concepts, their conceptions pass through a series of developmental phases, the most developed of which is learning to identify the word designating some artefact or action in the same way that adults use the word. This concept is called a *pseudoconcept*, because it is a fake concept. The adults around the child may be fooled into thinking the child understands the concept in the same way as they do, but in fact it does not. The child learns to identify the sensual features of an artefact or action, the necessary and sufficient features of an object, but they do not have the concept of it. One day they'll make some little mistake, and you'll suddenly realise that they didn't really have the concept at all. Like a kid I had once who referred to the "whack." What on Earth is he talking about? Until we realised that "whack" was the singular of wax, which referred to the dribbles covering a large candle stand we had. Or the difficulty the little girl had to work out the identity of her brother's sister.

Vygotsky was able to describe these pseudoconcepts and the more primitive and more advanced forms of conception not by using an MRI machine, but by describing the set of actions through which the conception was realised. He did this by putting children into situations where they were motivated to solve some problem and then he gave them words or written signs which they learnt to help them solve the problem. The thing is that our *concepts* are intimately tied up with the words and other signs used in communicating with others, *and* in commanding our *own* activity, *and* stimuli originating from the context in which the relevant actions are done. At a certain moment in their development children can be observed instructing themselves out loud on how to carry out some task. The concept and control of the motor functions which are required to act out the actions associated with the concept are intimately tied up with the speaking and hearing of the words for the action. Even as adults, faced with a difficult task we can sometimes revert to vocal self-command in this way.

The only coherent and consistent way of describing a concept is in terms of artefact-mediated actions and an ideal object-concept. So the idea of a concept as a bundle of features is actually a childish misconception. However, even an intelligent adult, when they haven't yet quite grasped a new concept, will have a pseudoconcept instead. It is in interacting in the larger world outside of the family home, in professions, politics, art and literature, the wide world of human culture originating *beyond* the horizons of everyday life, which creates the conditions for the formation of true concepts.

Emotions

We are raised in a culture, in concepts; they are our connection to the world. Speaking psychologically for a moment, *emotions* are action-readiness. An emotion is an embryonic action. This is true both in the formation of an actual action which in the appropriate context, grows out of an emotion, and when we merely think of doing something, before we actually do it, or without even intending to do it, then at the heart of that concept is a volitional moment, an emotional moment. Every concept has a corresponding emotional colour, though it will depend on the context, the particular light which the concept evokes. So a concept is not something other than emotion. Just that when we consider a concept under conditions very remote from its actualisation, then that emotional moment is hardly felt, and it is not carried through to action. But psychologically, concepts are intimately connected to action.

Historical development

So let us consider for a moment living in some relatively stable social or cultural formation. Most of the concepts which make up this culture are activities whose history has long since been forgotten as the original activity has become integrated into the entire cultural formation. The content of the concept has obviously changed during this process of integration into the social formation, because the entire social formation also changed, and kind of sucked the meaning out of any new concept as it was integrated into the activity of the entire community. The practical and emotional content of the activity has been integrated into the entire cultural formation, so that it takes on the form it is usually given in dictionaries – an infinite regress of references to other concepts, all of them drained of emotional colour, now merely knots in a network. Each concept, once it is established, becomes just one special concept of the great concrete concept which constitutes the social formation as a whole. A concept, in this sense, is the final destination of an activity when it becomes just one nuance in the activity of the whole community.

The content of a concept changes over time, and its original content is transformed by its integration into a social formation. As the social formation itself changes, its original content is obscured. To really understand a concept you have to look back at the circumstances in which it first arose, the contradiction which was resolved by the invention of a new form of activity and named by a word. The word continues, but its sense changes as the social conditions which originally gave rise to the new form of activity, the new concept, are gradually transformed around it, in part because of the intervention of the new concept itself. In general, to understand the concept and its place in the existing culture, you have to trace back to that origin and reconstruct the whole journey up to the present. This is part of understanding the present social formation, tracing back to its origins *one* of the facets of the formation and the conditions under which it arose, and then tracking forward again and following its changes as the conditions change.

An entire social formation can only ultimately be understood in this way, in the correlation between concepts and their conditions, informed by perception of the contradictions breaking out in the formation at the present moment.

Conclusion

I have tried to justify the claim that activities and concepts are one and the same thing. This is despite the differing connotations of the words, and the complex relations between the psychology of concepts and the psychology of behaviour and perception. It is impossible to talk about concepts and activities without allowing for the different connotations of these words, but nuances and connotations do not alter the fact that both words indicate the same entity.

So, Hegel's Logic is the Logic of activities; activities are units of the social life of a community, just as concepts are the units of a life-world and artefacts are the units of a material culture. In this formulation each term indicates one or another element of human activity, each term is meaningful only when it is understood as abstracted from a whole as one or another element of the same activities.