

# The Concept in Hegel's Logic

## Chapter 7 of *Concepts. A Critical Approach*

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The *Logic* is Hegel's book on concepts, written as a book of logic, not psychology or sociology. How and in what sense is Hegel's *Logic* a book about logic?

### The Subject Matter of the Logic

For a logic to be valid it must have some empirical domain in which it can be tested and proved. Logic must be the logic *of* something, and stands or falls according to whether it expresses the necessary relations and laws of movement in *some* domain of reality. This is true of any scientific theory in fact, but it needs to be said in the case of logic because logic seems to be free of this requirement. To the extent that rational argument is institutionalised in a society, the truths of logic seem utterly compelling to us. Consequently, demonstration of the truth of logic in the material world seems to be irrelevant, or even a misunderstanding of the subject matter of logic, which after all, appeals to Reason alone.

Here we should distinguish between *formal logic*, meaning the kind of logic commonly used to generate propositions in mathematics, and Hegel's logic, which for want of a better word I will call '*dialectical logic*', a more general conception of logic, of which formal logic is a special case. Dialectical logic offers the only alternative rationale for categorisation to the method of sorting by attributes which is the basis for the formal understanding of concepts as the necessary and sufficient combination of attributes defining a subject matter.

Formal logic is the logic of *propositions*. As such, formal logic is indeed the logic of some domain of material reality, for whether spoken or written, propositions are material entities. The mathematical foundations of propositional calculus depend on treating propositions as strings of arbitrary symbols. Formal logic tells us the conditions under which if a given set of propositions are true, then some other proposition follows. It turns out that this is broadly the same requirement as for Set Theory. Set Theory concerns elements  $x$  and sets,  $S$ , in which  $x \in S$  means that  $x$  belongs to a set,  $S$ . We can visualise  $S$  as representing some distinguishing feature that  $x$  may or may not possess, and  $S$  is the set of all those  $x$  having the feature,  $S$ . This is the logic implicit in the approach of Cognitive Psychology, in which a concept was identified with some category of objects. The same logic was taken to apply to the definitions relied upon in their interpretation of the 'classical theory of concepts', in which concepts were defined as sets according to the necessary and sufficient features for being a member of the set. (Such concepts are called 'abstract general' concepts.) It is presumed that the world and its mental reflection are made up of elements which can be organised into sets, and the validity of all the propositions which can be made about these sets is given by Set Theory and Formal Logic. It turns out that this logic simply does not compute with concrete concepts, and the definitions which are supposed to rely on it cannot retain their validity in the real world outside of the narrow domain of mathematics which it models.

This is one of the problems which dialectical logic addresses: Hegel aimed to produce a logic which doesn't fall over as soon as it steps off the page, a logic which is geared to dealing with *concrete* situations, not mathematical abstractions. Rather than demanding that Logic be a series of eternal and universal truths, Hegel's logic is in essence a logic which *develops*. And rather than setting up the logic so that contradictions are eliminated and avoided, even while real life is saturated with contradiction, Hegel made contradiction the driving force of this development.

Just as formal logic is the logic of *abstract general* concepts — the logic of the type of concepts modelled by dropping coloured beads into boxes — dialectical logic is the logic of *concrete concepts*, the logic of concepts which I take as the basic units of a *formation of consciousness*. Hegel is able to develop such a logic on rigorous grounds by examination of a certain kind of proposition: "*c* is absolute," in which *c* represents some logical concept. Propositions like "*c* is absolute" exhibit relative truth, that is, they are true only up to a certain point, under certain conditions; but if pushed beyond a certain limit they become false. This is the basic substance of dialectical logic. A formation of consciousness is the instantiation of a claim of the form "*c* is absolute," or "everything is *c*" in just the same way that a set (or abstract general concept) is the

instantiation of a proposition from Formal Logic, like “all  $x$  are  $S$ .” So dialectical logic is the logic of formations of consciousness elaborated by means of sceptical critique of propositions of the form “ $c$  is absolute.”

This clarifies the domain in which dialectical logic must be validated, namely, the development of formations of consciousness in real social life and experience. So the substance of the Logic is purely logical in the sense that it concerns only the truth of propositions, but it finds its domain of application not so much on the pages of mathematics books, but in real life.

Perhaps I could make this clearer with an example. Take the proposition: “Everything is the same as itself.” It is not hard to show logically that this is true only up to a point, and in fact everything is different from itself.\* This can be seen for example, when a group of people sit down together for the first time in a committee set up for some purpose or cause. “We all came here for the same reason,” someone might say, a seemingly self-evident proposition since they all responded to the same invitation. “Let’s hear what everyone thinks,” and very soon it appears that everyone has some different idea of why it is we are all here ... and so it goes. Hegel confines himself to the categories of logic and examines them as such; he is not concerned with what people might say at a meeting, etc. But “We all came here for the same reason,” is read as “Identity is absolute” in the domain of propositions about “our collective aim,” which did after all bring this group of people together. Hegel’s Logic examines propositions like “Identity is absolute” in the sense in which it arises in this example, and he relies on purely logical critique of the concept of Identity itself, demonstrating its relativity, its limits, and takes it beyond those limits.

I will show that dialectical logic is *the logic of concepts*, understood as actions organised around some universal artefact, word or symbol of some kind. We will see that a universal principle may find the resources for such a developmental logic because concepts are not just empty words, but on the contrary, such universals exist in social life and the mind only insofar as the universal is particularised in experience through individual actions, that is, because they have meaning. Meaningless symbols cannot exhibit dialectical or any other kind of logic. But the subject studied in the logic is not social life or psychology, but concepts, concepts understood in such a way that they are meaningful in social life and their meaning may be manifested in social and psychological phenomena. That people called together for the same reason discover that they have different reasons arises *from the nature of the concept* of Identity, rather than simply being a manifestation of psychology or human behaviour. In fact, Hegel was very determined that the Logic would not be based on *any* assumptions about human nature.

## A Presuppositionless Philosophy?

Hegel makes quite a point of the Logic providing a presuppositionless starting point for philosophy. He would assume no axioms, make no assumptions, tell no foundation myth, presume nothing of human nature or anything else, but create a philosophy which pulled itself up by its own bootstraps, so to speak. So he made the first category of the Logic Being. This concept of Being with which Hegel begins the *Logic* is an entirely empty concept: “It is ...” nothing in particular. So Being provided a starting point from which the Logic could make an unprejudiced beginning. But this claim for the Logic as presuppositionless is not all that it appears to be.

Hegel says that the Logic begins from Being because “Being is the immediate” (1816/1969 §155), that is, it is *not mediated* by anything. But then he also says: “There is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation” (1816/1969 §92). So does this extend to the Logic? The answer is “yes.”

The beginning is *logical* in that it is to be made in the element of thought that is free and for itself, in *pure knowing*. It is *mediated* because pure knowing is the ultimate, absolute truth of *consciousness*. In the Introduction it was remarked that the phenomenology of spirit is the science of consciousness, the exposition of it, and that consciousness has for result the *Concept* of science, i.e. pure knowing. Logic, then, has for its presupposition

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\* When a logician writes “ $A = A$ ,” they might take it that both  $A$ s are symbols pointing to the same object. But they remain two different symbols, each on opposite sides of the  $=$  sign and are not identical.

the science of manifested spirit, which contains and demonstrates the necessity, and so the truth, of the standpoint occupied by pure knowing and of its mediation (1816/1969 §93).

So he says that the Logic is *not* presuppositionless at all, because it presupposes the existence of human beings who have participated in ‘manifest spirit’. Through the process of sceptical critique of their own form of life, such people have become conscious of the journey of consciousness to philosophy and are able to think philosophically. Along the way people construct the languages, communities, institutions and cultures which make philosophy possible. A Science of Logic is possible only on this basis. The “Phenomenology” is the *Bildungsroman* of humanity, the story of the succession of formations of consciousness through which humanity passes to come to consciousness of itself, and the result is the Logic, the “science of knowing,” the general rules of development of concepts. The Logic is the truth of the “Phenomenology.”

It is through this history that human knowledge is “displayed and stored in language” (1816/1969 §14). Only on this condition can it be manifested in the Logic. “Being” is meaningful for us only because it is a word in the language. It is only thanks to the nuances and semantic connections which philosophical terms have acquired in the course of the history of philosophy that they can contribute to the Logic.

According to Hegel, Being and the other concepts dealt with in the Logic have gained their philosophical meaning through the history of philosophical thought, specifically through formations of consciousness in which a concept represented the Absolute.

But the logic is presuppositionless in the sense that it has to prove itself without appeal to any prior or outside authority. Just as Hegel held that the system of philosophy had to begin without presuppositions, he observed that *philosophy itself*, historically, had to begin without presuppositions. According to Hegel, when philosophy emerged in ancient Greece: “It was the *Eleatics*, above all Parmenides, who first enunciated the simple thought of *pure being* as the absolute and sole truth: *only being is*” (1816/1969 §136). But as we have seen, in the beginning of modern European philosophy, Descartes also had to set out without presuppositions and made his beginning from “pure being,” that is to say, his own consciousness, cleansed of all prejudices, presuppositions and received knowledge.

So, taking Descartes for our example (the Eleatics are known to us only through fragments), modern philosophy had to begin without presuppositions (“I think therefore I am.”), but in reality, it still presupposed a person and a language and culture within which such philosophical reflection was possible. So this is the sense in which the logic begins both with no presuppositions and with very real presuppositions. The Logic then begins with an empty concept that requires no presuppositions, and proceeds by immanent critique, relying at each stage of the critique only on those concepts which have already been dealt with, without any additional content or further presuppositions.

By dealing only with the categories of Logic, Hegel develops a method which exhibits in ideal form the development of *any* science, any theory, any concept. In general though, a science does not begin without presuppositions. This is a stricture Hegel places only on philosophy as a whole. In general, a science begins with some concept, and a science is built through the critique of that concept. The result is a concrete concept of the subject matter of a science, a concrete concept of some complex process.

This is how Hegel developed his Logic, his science of the concept. Rather than being a rigid structure resting on the uncertain foundation of arbitrary axioms, we see that it is a developing process that rests solely on the presupposition of a readership capable of critical philosophical thought.

## Moving Concepts

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the nature of this movement that we see in Hegel’s Logic, and which is invariably referred to by commentators. In the way that ‘concept’ is normally understood, as an abstract thought-form, it seems nonsensical to talk about a concept moving. Some writers (for example, Houlgate 2005) see this movement as a psychological movement (if you think about a certain concept, you will be driven to think of a certain other concept) or metamorphosis (upon reflection, a certain concept turns into a certain other concept). Neither of

these conceptions, which rely exclusively on inward subjective phenomenological processes, are ultimately consistent with the idea of concepts as part of subject/objects which we have found in Hegel.

We should read it more like this: a social situation in which a certain concept is taken as the absolute, passes over into a certain other situation, *if* the concept is subject to critique. This can be verified through a study of history (and the history of philosophy in particular, since it is philosophers who express the spirit of their times by criticising concepts), and made rational by means of logical critique of the concept (as demonstrated in the Logic). So it is internal, logical critique of the concept itself, understood as the unit of a formation of consciousness, which provides the objective basis for the logic. This does not make a psychology of concepts or a theory of history. But a theory which demonstrates *what is logical* in conceptual change provides a very good foundation for a psychology of concepts, or *any* science. The replacement of the 'prototype theory' by the 'exemplar theory' is an example of how a concept moved when subject to critique by its adherents.

We see that an understanding of the vulnerability of all concepts to self-contradiction and passing over into other concepts provides an important foundation for all the sciences, since all sciences concern concepts. But it is especially important in those sciences whose subject matter is concepts and conceptual change.

The "Phenomenology" was explicitly concerned with the historical development of consciousness, but it is widely understood to relate to the development of a "formation of consciousness" taken to be a project or social movement, any system of activity organised around some ideal. The Logic is the 'lessons' of the development of these projects. Consequently, history, the history of ideas, especially the history of science, developmental and cognitive psychology, political science, social theory, ... all these sciences must benefit from an understanding of the inherent instability and self-movement of concepts themselves. So dialectical logic can be seen as an essential component of almost any science; but a concept makes sense only in the light of the history which brought it into being.

### The *Logic* concerns *Real* Situations

It should be evident by now that 'dialectical logic' is the kind of logic which reflects real life, rather than mathematical abstractions.

In modern life, social classes are defined by abstract general categories of age, employment and income; political categories are defined by voting choices in multiple choice elections; people qualify for welfare or sickness benefits by ticking boxes on a form; workers qualify for jobs by formal certificates. This tends to *bring about* the situation which these practices presume, that is, people are taken to be not personalities but bundles of detachable features. The applicant who ticks all the boxes gets the job. But we know that the mode of reasoning which depends on this kind of concept doesn't work. All *a* are *b*, all *b* are *c* and all *c* are *d*, therefore all *a* are *d*, usually doesn't work in reality. "Sport is good for your health; football is a sport; therefore football is good for your health." Sure. To make it work, all sorts of qualifications and hedges have to be introduced at each step until the line of reasoning becomes tautological. It suits our bureaucratic systems of government and our systems of information gathering and processing to categorise everything with multiple-choice forms and treat people like coloured beads dropped into boxes and counted. But this is not how human beings *really* are.

So we have a problem in that we have systems of social regulation which are based on abstract general principles, but human societies whose real social fabric is concrete universal, that is, structured like formations of consciousness with basic building blocks which are true concepts. Abstract general relations and concepts are inculcated in us as children when we go to school and then we go out to participate in paid work according to the certificates we have acquired, and participate in the political system by ticking boxes on ballot papers. In a certain sense then, abstract general logic is forced on to us by the systems of social control that have evolved. As a result there is always a perverse kind of validity to abstract general logic, because it is the logic of the legal system, the political system, the education system and the systems of business and economic regulation. Formal logic therefore retains its place as an important mode of forming and reasoning with concepts. But it is a very problematic logic.

For example, it is impossible to make any rational statement about social class and political ideals in terms which are consistent with abstract general logic. Any of the concepts of social class, such as working class, small business, big business, farmers and so on, are quite meaningless in abstract general terms until they have been “defined” in terms of income bracket, mode of employment, industry and ranking in the work hierarchy. Not only do these categorisations turn out to be problematic (Is a medical student earning less than his plumber apprentice friend really “poorer”? Is a labourer subcontracting on a building site really “self-employed,” etc., etc.?) but it is quickly found that they tell us nothing about political preferences or aspirations. A 55/45 split in voting preferences on these categories would be counted as statistically significant. So we get perversities like Obama referring to autoworkers in America’s rust belt as ‘middle class’. The conclusion can only be that a Liberal voter is someone who votes Liberal. Given that governments are elected and unelected according to an electoral system which is abstract general in its structure, there is no simple fix for these conundrums, and social science gets reduced to statistical analysis of survey forms. But *understanding* can never be achieved by statistical correlations between abstract general categories. And in the main, we don’t think about our lives in this way. This abstract general logic only exists in the bureaucratic and technical systems of control, not in ‘real’ life. We may be taught to find marriage partners who ‘tick all the boxes’, but we don’t actually behave this way.

But dialectical logic allows us to examine the concepts which we use to govern our lives: self, freedom, liberalism, democracy, career, family, job, happiness, friend, need, welfare, leisure, security, hope or whatever, and a critique of these concepts ought to be able to give some real insight into how we think and how we live. Concepts like these are subject to dialectical logic and cannot be squeezed into little boxes. A psychology of concepts has to deal with this.

Dialectical logic is about critique of a concept in its own terms, bringing out its limits and making explicit the conditions of its validity. It means exploring how a universal concept makes itself real, exploring its presuppositions and conditions. A shopping list of attributes can never be a substitute for this kind of exploration. This is because concepts are real products of social history, the solution of problems that have arisen in the past, and passed on to us through language and culture, new words and shades of meaning given to words because of real social experiences. Every concept contains within it some ideal form of life, some implicit system of real human activity, ... or an unresolved multiplicity of such settings. Concepts are irreducibly about people and their activity, their feelings and motivations, their needs and their relations to one another. The relation may be highly mediated and far from explicit but it is always ultimately about people and their activity.

By way of illustration: the abstract general interpretation of the ‘classical theory’ of the psychology of concepts fell into contradiction with itself. Things just weren’t as the theory said they were. The theory fell into contradiction because of its dualist character and the abstract general character of the cognitivist interpretation. The contradiction arose because of limitations within the theory itself which were brought to light when cognitive psychologists subjected it to experimental testing, simply following through what had been taken to be its implications, but which took the theory beyond its own limits. But wrong conclusions were drawn from this failure, rejecting altogether the idea that every concept is part of a system of concepts. As several cognitive psychologists have suggested, the ‘classical theory’ needed to be retained in some way, within the structure of a more general theory. But up till now, no-one has worked out how to do this within the framework of cognitive psychology. This is the typical story of a concept in the view of ‘dialectical logic’. The task now is to bring out what was wrong with the concept of the ‘classical theory’ and what needs to be retained, so that the virtues of the old theory can be *sublated* into a more explanatory and psychologically realistic theory.

In summary, Hegel described the necessary forms of movement of concepts. The forms of movement Hegel is describing differ from the objects of a psychology of concepts in two ways. Firstly, the concepts Hegel is describing include subjective thought forms as one moment of a concept, which also includes social practice and the products of that activity. It is not that Hegel is describing objective forms of which ‘concepts’ are the subjective image. Rather, the forms Hegel is describing are both subjective forms and objective. Secondly, the relation between the concepts Hegel is describing and the concepts known to psychology somewhat like how the laws of biology relate to medical science.

So much for some generalities about the logic. I will now briefly review the structure of the Logic, which not only gives us a more detailed insight into the material covered, but also suggests a general form for the development of any concept (or theory).

## Being is the Concept In-Itself

To begin with, we should put out of our minds for the moment, any preconceptions we may have about the meaning of the concept of 'Being', which we may have learnt from Marx or Heidegger or Husserl or someone else. For the moment, the same goes for any of the other of the concepts of the Logic. The subject matter of Hegel's Logic is quite unique, and to follow Hegel's argument we need to grasp just what he means by each of these concepts and how we can understand them in terms which make sense in our own times.

When Hegel began delivering lectures in philosophy at Jena, he presented *inter alia* a course on Ontology, the study of Being, and the lectures that Hegel developed as a *critique* of ontology became the first part of the Logic entitled 'Being'.

To make a beginning for philosophy, Hegel needed a concept for which there are no presuppositions. Other philosophers and scientists began their systems from hypotheses or axioms. These were unproven propositions expressing 'clear ideas' and defining the terms to be used in the theory and their relations to one another. But Hegel would not accept that an entire philosophical system could rely for its validity on unproven and arbitrary axioms. The concept of Being provided Hegel with just such a clean start for philosophy. In this sense the *Phenomenology* is not part of his philosophy, but is simply the Introduction, leading the reader to philosophy, by retracing the steps that thought itself has taken to come to philosophy. The Logic then presents itself as the truth or conclusion of that journey. The relation of the *Logic* to the *Phenomenology* is the same as that of conceptual knowledge to narrative rationality.

Unlike Descartes, who also set out to make a foundation for modern philosophy without presuppositions, Hegel did not turn to inward, personal contemplation in search of certainty, but simply took the *concept* of Being itself, as what is given to philosophy by its own history, and subjected that concept to immanent, logical critique.

All Hegel's major works have the same structure in fact: he identifies the simple, abstract concept of the subject matter of the given science, and then he applies the method, the model for which is given in the Logic, to elaborate what is implicit in the given concept: "the peculiar internal development of the thing itself."

So, the Logic begins with a critique of Being, to bring out what is contained in the concept of 'Being'. The truth of Being is a Concept, so the Logic turns out to be the science of concepts. But Being is the Concept still 'in itself'. 'In itself' means what the thing is independently of and prior to our knowledge of it, before its content is exhibited, which is by definition unknowable. But here we are talking about formations of consciousness, so we mean the concept under conditions where the formation of conscious has not *yet* unfolded and become conscious *of itself*. The "yet" implies that should the formation of conscious which is 'in itself' further develop, then it may become *self-conscious*.

What does it mean: a formation of consciousness (read 'social movement') which is not *yet* consciousness of itself? This only makes sense as an *observer* perspective, because if we are talking about a formation of consciousness which is not self-conscious, then the only terms we have in order to describe it are observer terms.

But what does it amount to? It is an idea or a form of social practice or a project which cannot yet even be described as emergent. People are acting in a certain way, but they are yet not conscious of acting in any such particular way. For example, a lot of women were having trouble managing the conflicting demands on them which emerged from increased access to the workforce in the late 1960s and early 70s. Social commentators noticed this problem and the phrase "work-life balance" entered the language in 1977 (OED 2006), though it was not until the 1980s that the phenomenon was fully described, and working mothers were generally conscious of themselves as people dealing with "work-life balance." During those early years when the phenomenon was either unnoticed or noticed only by observers, the problem of "work-life balance" was "in-itself"; it was the stage of Pure Being for the concept of "work-life balance."

To take an example from psychology: I went to the shopping centre today and it was only after 10 minutes that I noticed how many school-age children were about and a few minutes later, it dawned on me that it was school holidays. Prior to that realisation, the fact that there were lots of school-aged children around existed, but I hadn't noticed: that is the stage of Being. Once I'd put two and two together and realised that it was because it was school holidays, that was the stage of the Concept. So in psychological terms, Being is also a concept, but a concept which is so undeveloped that we are not even aware that it is there.

So this is what Being is, and we will see presently that Hegel is able to demonstrate the nature of Being by a critique of the concept of Being.

If there is to be some thing amidst the infinite coming and going, the chaos of existence, the simplest actual thing that can be is a Quality, something that persists amidst change. And if we ask what it is that changes while it remains of the same quality, what changes while leaving the thing still what it is, then this is what we call Quantity. But a thing cannot indefinitely undergo quantitative change and remain still what it is, and still retain the same quality; at some point, a quantitative change amounts to a change in Quality. The unity of Quality and Quantity, we call the Measure of the thing.

Thus there are three grades of Being: Quality, Quantity and Measure. We apply these categories to things that we regard as objects, the business of the positivist sociologist, the observer. Even a participant in a not yet emergent social change or sociological category, has to play the role of sociologist to be conscious of it.

So that's Being, existence which is *in itself*, not yet self-conscious, senseless, just one damn thing after another. We will see below how Hegel goes about demonstrating the dynamics of a movement which is in itself, through critique of the concept of Being.

## Essence is Reflection

The second division of the Logic is Essence. For Hegel, Essence is not quite what it means for other people. When feminists talk about "essentialism," for example, they are referring to the belief that women are defined and differ from men because of what is in their biological nature. Ancient philosophers debated what was the "essence" of this or that thing as opposed to what was contingent or inessential. For Hegel, Essence is this *process* of 'peeling the layers off the onion', of searching for what is behind appearance, of probing reality, but in no way did Hegel think that there was some fixed end point to that process, and certainly not some reified natural property. Essence is just that *process* of probing the in-itself and bringing to light what is behind appearances.

Essence is reflection. Suppose something is going on in the world, maybe some emergent project, some new form of social practice, or some news item that is attracting attention, some new art form, a new fashion idea. It may first come to light as meaningless observations, measurements of quantity and quality. But people try to make sense of it, people reflect on it. This process of trying to make sense of things, to figure out what it is, is Essence.

When people reflect on things, they do so only with the aid of what they already know. New forms of social practice arise only in and through existing forms of social practice. So reflection is a good term. It is new Being, reflected in the mirror of old concepts. It's like what Marx was talking about in the "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte":

"The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language." (MECW v.11, p. 103)

Essence is a process which begins with the simplest kind of reflection on quantitative and qualitative changes, the discovery of difference, and eventually leads to the formation of a new concept, an adequate concept befitting a unique form of social practice. The new concept emerges as a *leap*, because in Essence what is new is reflected in an *old mirror*. It can't be given by any kind of formula. But Hegel outlines the logical stages through which the genesis of a

new concept can pass: broadly, a series of counterposed propositions, a contradictory struggle of Fors and Againsts, 'on the one hand and on the other hands'. In the course of its genesis, the new phenomenon, if such it proves to be, penetrates and absorbs light from every other aspect of life.

The grades of Essence are as follows.

Firstly, we have Reflection. The process of Reflection is described as the dialectic of Matter and Form. This means that when a quantitative-qualitative change oversteps the bounds of Measure and announces itself as a new Thing. The question is: is this merely a new Form of the same material or a completely new kind of Matter, a material change? Have we just had a lot of extreme weather events this year, or is the weather changing?

At bottom, Form and Matter are the same thing. Matter means here a substrate that underlies different forms. Wherever you propose a different *kind* of matter, it could be reduced to the same old matter in a different form, but the question remains: is this a new form of the same old thing, or a really new thing.

The second division of Essence is Appearance. Appearance is the dialectic of Form and Content. This can be seen as the struggle of the new content to find a form adequate to itself, like a composer trying to find the correct instrumentation for the theme or a socio-economic system finding an appropriate political form for itself. It is manifested in a succession of a series of forms, each ultimately proving to be inadequate to its content while in turn, bringing forward new content.

The third division of Essence is Actuality, which is the dialectic of Cause and Effect. The entity arises as the effect of something, but then it is also in its turn, the cause of things. Each effect is also a cause, just as much as every cause is also an effect. The ramifications extend out in all directions until it feeds back on itself. This culminates in the notion of Reciprocity: that everything together forms a complex of mutually causing effects all inseparable from one another. A 'Gestalt' is beginning to emerge. Simple propositions turn out to have ramifications and come under criticism, simple proposals become concretized. But it still remains a form of reflection, and even the mutuality of cause and effect, and the increasing adequacy of form and content, do not yet constitute a concept of what it is.

This is the process of a new type of self-consciousness struggling to find itself, so to speak, still testing out all the old categories. This process of genesis is always the struggle between opposing propositions. In politics, the contending parties take opposing positions, but they still argue within the bounds of the *Zeitgeist*, and the *Zeitgeist* changes, supplanting old disputes with new ones. That's the nature of Essence: a series of oppositions which persist, but as one dispute moves into the limelight it pushes others into the background. "Old ideas give way slowly. ... We do not solve them: we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions take their place" (Dewey 1910, p. 41). This is the genesis of a Concept out of its Being. Essence is the truth of Being; it is what is essential in the coming-and-going of Being, Being stripped of what is inessential.

An important qualification needs to be made here though. While these stages, such as Being, Essence and Concept, and the divisions within these stages, are presented as logically and conceptually distinct 'stages', when realised in processes of development they by no means constitute distinct, successive stages. And not because they have 'fuzzy' boundaries and overlap. Rather the different processes subsume and recapitulate one another. For example, the various forms which are manifested in the stages of Being and Essence are Concepts, but they are concepts in the process of being overtaken by new concepts that are themselves being ushered into being. And when a new concept emerges at last, it may then later find itself to have been just a stage in Essence as an opposite Concept emerges.

### The Abstract Concept

The third part of the Logic is the Concept, in German, *Begriff*, which is the noun from the verb *begreifen*, to comprehend, derived from the verb *greifen*, to grasp, just as the English 'to comprehend' comes from the Latin *prehendere*, to grasp or seize.

The Concept is a complete break from Essence. It is initially *abstract*, meaning undeveloped, lacking in connections with other things, poor in content, formal and so on, like the

*Urphänomen*, as opposed to *concrete*, which means mature, developed, rich in content, having many nuances and connections with other concepts. Hegel does *not* use the words abstract and concrete to indicate something like the difference between mental and material. So the third Book of the Logic follows how the Concept begins with an *abstract* concept, just the germ of something new, which then becomes more and more *concrete*. That is the development of the Concept.

Think of the abstract concept as a new idea, like at some point in 1968, somewhere in the US, a woman reflected on the relation between the position of women and the position of Black people who suffered from racism, and coined the word 'sexism'. This was a new idea, in everything that had gone before since people like Mary Wollstonecraft talked about the impact of gender roles on women in the 18th century, this idea had been in gestation, until it suddenly sprung into being in 1968. Subsequently, all the social practices that followed from the concept of sexism concretised, deepened and complicated that initial concept.

This new abstract concept is not gradually shaped in Essence; it comes as a complete break. It is like the judgment of Solomon, settling all the arguments with something that comes out of the blue. It is a breakthrough which launches a new science or paradigm, a new movement, drawing together all the threads from the confusion that preceded it during its period of gestation, enunciating the lessons of the story.

The Concept is the unity of Being and Essence, because it makes sense of the original observations, the facts of the matter, as well as all the disputes and alternative explanations. It is there, immediately, and not different from Being, but along with all the conflicting factions, it is now self-conscious. In that sense it is a negation of the negation, and immediate perception is reconstructed on the basis of the new concept. It is both mediated and immediate. The *concept* of the thing comes closer to what would others might mean by the 'essence of a thing', but Hegel uses the word 'essence' for the whole process, and the truth of that process, of 'essence', he calls the Concept.

Being and Essence, which are together what Hegel calls 'The Objective Logic', make up the *genesis* of the 'Subjective Logic', which is the Concept.

The first section of the Concept is Subjectivity, or the Subject. For Hegel the Subject is not an individual person, but a simple unit of consciousness arising from social practices which implicate the whole community, and reflected in language, the whole social division of labour and so on. It is Hegel's version of Goethe's *Urphänomen*, the simple thing or relation which captures in a nutshell the whole problem, the root of it all.

In a sense, for Hegel, there is only *one* concept. But that *one* concept, the Absolute Idea, is the outcome of a whole, long-drawn-out historical process, a process in which different individual concepts are posited at first as abstract Concepts, and then enter into a process of concretisation in which they merge with everything else, while developing their own inner resources. The Absolute Idea, which is the final product, is the result of the mutual concretisation of all the abstract Concepts, the objectification of each one on every other. In this conception, issues come up about Hegel having a master narrative, about totalising everything, and of practicing a kind of philosophical colonialism. But we can get all we need out of Hegel's Logic without swallowing the Absolute Idea.

The first section of the Concept, the Subject, is very complex and very important. Think of it as a single *unit* of a formation of consciousness.

The structure of the Subject is Individual-Universal-Particular, which are referred to as *moments* of the Notion (not successive stages). That is, the subject entails a specific, all-sided relation between *individual* finite actions; the *particular* norms of on-going activity and social relations entailed in the relevant social practice; and the *universal*, eternal products and symbols through which the Subject is represented.

The divisions of the Subject are the Notion (of each of these moments), the Judgment (which is a connection between two moments) and the Syllogism (in which a judgment is mediated by one of the three moments).

The process of concretisation takes place through *objectification* of subjectivity, that is, through the subject/object relation. The Object, which is the second division of the Concept, may be *other* subjects, subjects which are Objects in relation to the Subject, or subjects which have

become thoroughly objectified. Objectification is not limited to the creation of material objects or texts. Objectification is also ‘mainstreaming’, or institutionalisation. The process of development of the Subject is a striving to transform the Object according to its own image, but in the process the Subject being itself changed and in the process of objectification becomes a part of the living whole of the community. At this point, the particular history and self-consciousness of a Concept has become part of folklore, while the concept itself has become just part of the language, and the entire conceptual system of the community; the unique content of a concept is now tied up with every other concept.

The subject/object relation goes through three stages, the *mechanical* relation in which the subject and object are indifferent to one another and impact one another externally, the *chemical* relation, in which there is an affinity between subject and object, and the object presents itself as processes rather than things. The third division of the Object is *organism*, where the subject/object relation becomes a life process in which each is to the other both a means and an end.

The unity of Subject and Object, the third and last grade of the Concept, is the Idea. The Idea can be understood as the whole community as an intelligible *Gestalt*, it is the summation of the pure essentialities of a complete historical form of life. It is the logical representation of Spirit, or of the development and life of an *entire community*, in the form of a concrete concept.

Again, it is not necessary to swallow this idea whole. If you don’t accept that a community, at any stage in its history whatsoever, can be encompassed in the single concept, then this doesn’t invalidate the whole of the Logic. Individuals are always part of *some* fraction or tradition within society.

Assessing the experimental work of the cognitive psychologists with their Prototype Theories and the Theory Theory and so on, in the light of these ideas poses very challenging problems. But perhaps one or two observations can be made at this point. Hegel’s approach suggests that understanding the psychology of a concept necessarily entails understanding the *cultural historical genesis* of the concept, the *ontogenesis* of the concept – how the concept develops through the life experience of a person – and finally *microgenesis* – the rapid process of recognising something and responding. Responses are conditioned by a lifetime’s experience in a society embodying centuries of its experience in language, art and technology, and institutions. We cannot expect *one* model of a concept to tell us very much and nor can we expect an eclectic bundle of alternative theories to fare much better. The challenge is how to appropriate this experimental work into a theory of concepts which is dialectical.

Let us briefly review the forms of movement and change we have found in the Logic, before moving to a more detailed outline of how Hegel presents this dynamic in the form of logical critique.

## The Genesis of the Concept

We have seen that the Logic is made up of the three Books, each dealing with one science, based around the critique of one concept: Being, Essence and the Concept. Hegel also divided the Logic into two *volumes*: Being and Essence constitute Volume I, the Objective Logic, and the Concept Volume II, the Subjective Logic.

The Objective Logic is the genesis of the Concept, the process leading to its birth, it is the pre-history of the Concept. On the other hand, the Subjective Logic is the process of development of the Concept itself, its maturing and successive concretisation, beginning from the first simple, undeveloped embryo of a new theory or ideal or whatever to becoming just part of the language and way of life.

This is an important distinction for any theory of concepts. This issue could be illustrated in relation to how Hegel developed his social theory. Hegel came to the conclusion that world history, as such, begins only with the emergence of Law, or Right. He determined that the simplest and unconditioned, or archetypal form of Right was *private property*. In the Subjective Spirit he traced how conditions for the emergence of private property developed in pre-history, and then, under the title of “Philosophy of Right,” he developed his entire theory of modern society – family, economics, morality, ethics, politics and government, international relations and world history – by unfolding [*erweisen*] the implications of institution of private property.

Private property was the abstract concept, the germ, the *Urphänomen* of modernity. Once private property came into being and implanted itself, everything unfolded from that (he claimed) in a lawful, necessary process, which is contained in the concept of private property itself, and has only to be disclosed and developed. But the arrival of private property was a completely different kind of process traceable to the emergence of human life from natural conditions. So Hegel's concept of world history was... private property. In the development of the human spirit, the arrival of private property marked, for Hegel, a discontinuity, and complete break, and the concept which constituted this break had to be the foundation for any theory of what would follow. In the "Philosophy of Right," the first section is on private property (Hegel called it Abstract Right), the abstract concept of the subject matter of the work which is World History, the history of States. What is noteworthy though is that the concept of Right is not derived or proved within the "Philosophy of Right," but on the contrary, is derived in the last section of the Subjective Spirit, which is concerned with conditions of human life irrespective of law, private property, the state and so forth. Here he shows how certain problems (e.g. insecurity, trade, slavery) which were insoluble without the institution of the right of private property, which Hegel took to be synonymous with respect for the autonomy of a person. Here we see, in a sense, Volume I and Volume II of the science world history, as Hegel saw it.

This *unfolding* of what is *in* a concept, is quite distinct from the process of *genesis* which led up to the creative leap in which the concept is *born*. Once the situation has produced a concept, it is relatively unimportant how it came about. So this is a very important corrective to the conception of Hegel as an historical thinker. Understanding the forces which lead to a situation certainly helps in the formation of a concept of it. But the scientific study of *the situation itself* means to grasp it as a *concept* (which a study of its historical origins contributes to but is not equal to) and then to determine what follows from, or unfolds from the concept. The concept is a nodal point in development. To grasp the concept of something, presupposes an historical investigation of it.

So the starting point of a theory is the Concept which forms the subject matter of the theory, not Being, even though in reality the science emerges from Being. Both the Objective Logic and the Subjective Logic begin from a kind of simplicity. In the case of the Objective Logic, the simple starting point is *unreflective immediacy*, which passes over to reflected immediacy. In the case of the Subjective Logic, the simple starting point is an idea, an *abstract concept*, a relation which, having been the outcome of a long process of gestation and remains from beginning to end the subject of the science. The development of a theory is not mindless of 'externalities'. The maturation of a concept is a logical process, but only thanks to the incessant 'correctives' provided by events and external criticism. In trying to understand the necessity of the thing, we have to continually go back to the original concept and rethink things, and make it more precise, forming a more and more concrete conception of the thing. In studying the history of emergence of the concept, the point is to comprehend the mistakes and conflicts and false starts of the past in order to arrive at a simple and clear concept of the thing which is to form the starting point of the science. All the preceding conflicts are then overcome and *sublated* into the new concept.

### Each Division has a Distinct Form of Movement

A concept is continuously challenged and subject to critique, while itself being the outcome of problem solving and criticism. Concepts can only be understood in terms of a process of this kind. No theory relying on a static image will do. Concepts are always in movement and change. So it is important to note four different kinds of movement that are to be found in the Logic and to clearly distinguish them from each other.

Each of the three books of the Logic constitutes a self-standing science, beginning with an abstract concept, and unfolding what is contained in that concept. The three sciences are the science of being, the science of reflection and the science of the concept. Each of these three sciences manifests a distinct form of movement. In addition, the leap from one science to another, the 'creative leap', is a fourth distinct form of movement.

In Being, the form of movement is *seriality*. That is, a concept passes away and has no more validity, and is then replaced by another, which in turn passes away. It's just one damn thing after another, a transition from one to the next to the next without any progress. Like the images

of things passing through your consciousness as you sit in a train passing through a suburban landscape.

In Essence, 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 Concept, each new relation is incorporated into the concept with all the former relations merged with it in a more concrete concept, so the form of movement is *development*.

Hegel puts it this way in the *Shorter Logic*:

“The onward movement of the Concept is no longer either a transition into, or a reflection on something else, but *Development*. For in the Concept, the elements distinguished are without more ado at the same time declared to be identical with one another and with the whole, and the specific character of each is a free being of the whole Concept.

“Transition into something else is the dialectical process within the range of Being: reflection (bringing something else into light), in the range of Essence. The movement of the Concept is development: by which that only is explicit which is already implicitly present.” (1830/2009 §161)

In each Book, there are different forms of *reference* between the opposites. Hegel describes the difference between Essence and Being thus:

“In the sphere of Essence one category does not pass into another, but *refers* to another merely. In Being, the form of reference is purely due to our reflection on what takes place: but it is the special and proper characteristic of Essence. In the sphere of Being, when somewhat becomes another, the somewhat has vanished. Not so in Essence: here there is no real other, but only *diversity*, reference of the one to *its* other. The transition of Essence is therefore at the same time no transition: for in the passage of different into different, the different does not vanish: the different terms remain in their relation. ...

“In the sphere of Being the reference of one term to another is only implicit; in Essence on the contrary it is explicit. And this in general is the distinction between the forms of Being and Essence: in Being everything is immediate, in Essence everything is relative.” (1830/2009 §111n)

For the fourth form of movement, Hegel usually uses the phrase “is the truth of,” as in “the Logic is the truth of manifest spirit” and “the Concept is the truth of Being and Essence.” Here the foregoing content is *grasped*, mastered if you like, or “sublated.” That is to say, just as a certain process is terminated and negated, it is also transcended and maintained in a more enduring and stable form. This form of movement I liken to how we ‘draw the lesson’ from an experience.

## Hegel’s Logic and Categorisation

I mentioned above that dialectical logic offers the only alternative to categorisation by attributes. Categorisation by attributes is essentially what Hegel is exhibiting in the first section of the Logic, Being, which issues with a concept as a catalogue of measures. The process in which the concept is identified or recognised is that described in Essence. This does not involve abstraction of isolated attributes, but rather a kind of successive approximation process in which known concepts are tested out and successively replaced by more adequate concepts. In the third section, the concept is grasped initially in its uniqueness and its concrete relations with other concepts are developed.

These forms of movement Hegel worked out in philosophical terms, based on a study of the development of states, sciences, art, technology, culture and so on, but also informed by a life-long involvement in education.

In the two next chapters, I will outline in more detail how Hegel develops the Logic through critique. But this much should be clear: the project of creating a psychology of concepts on the basis of a concept being some kind of image inside the head is untenable. Only a theory which takes concept to be a *process* is going to be able to capture the nature of concepts.

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