

# What is Hegel's *Logic*?

Andy Blunden, January 2025

Logic is a science which has no positive content, although it is only Hegel's *Logic* which actually fulfils this requirement. Unlike every other science, the concept of the subject matter of logic is therefore not a concept with positive content but an empty concept, Being. Even then, Hegel manages to analyse this abstract conception by showing that Being is Nothing, thereby deriving the concept of Becoming, which in turn implies some determinate being which is becoming, a *unit* of some kind, a One.

Still, every logic must be the logic of *something*. Formal logic is a propositional logic or calculus; that is, it seeks to present the laws governing the truth value of propositions in relation to other propositions. Hegel's *Logic* is not a propositional logic.

Hegel's *Logic* has been described as a "category theory" (Pippin, 1989, p. 6) in the sense that, beginning without any presuppositions, Hegel derives a set of categories each of which is implicit in the categories already derived.

Hegel tells us that the content of the *Logic* are the "pure essentialities" of the *Phenomenology of Spirit (PhG)*. Now, despite its obscure form, the *Phenomenology* is an empirical science, having to do with how human beings come to philosophical thought, both individually and historically and its content includes all the institutions and cultural products of human life, that is, "Spirit."

According to Pippin, "The whole point of the transition from the standpoint of the *PhG* to the *Logic* had been to prevent our understanding the *Logic* as a category theory alone" (1989, p. 178). Likewise, I conclude that the *Logic* is a logic of human practice or activities.

I am not alone in claim that the subject matter of Hegel's *Logic* is human activity. Charles Taylor has written:

For any highly systematic body of thought like Hegel's we can reconstruct the whole from many perspectives. Each one gives us something, though some are more illuminating than others. I believe that looking at Hegel's thought from the angle of the underlying conception of action provides one of the more interesting perspectives on the whole.

Taylor, 2010, p. 22

By implication, Karl Marx also proposes that we read Hegel in this way in his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

8. All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

Marx, 1845

The problem of interpreting Hegel's *Logic* as the logic of human practices or anything else is complicated by the fact that Hegel rightly insists that cognition must follow the logic of the subject matter itself not any independently existing schema, including that of the *Logic* itself. If we understand that the *Logic* is the

logic of human practices, then this would imply that the subject matter of any science must be taken as some form of practice. That is, that practice, or activity, is the one substance of the world through which the world is to be understood. Being free of any particular form of practice, the *Logic* can adapt itself to the logic of any given practice and reveal the logic immanent within that form of practice.

This raises the question of how the One is to be interpreted as a unit of practice or activity, which is maximally indeterminate. If we can answer this question, then we will have guidance as to how to form the germ cell of any given science. Solving this problem will also require us to solve the problem of how the categories of the *Logic* can be “forms of practice,” when self-evidently they are *logical* categories, not forms of any practice.

Note that the sequence of concepts in the *Logic* is not such that in any sense one category “becomes” the next. The transition takes place through the content of the category surpassing the internal limits of the category. Whether this transition actually takes place depends entirely on the *content* of the category.

In the section of the *Science of Logic* titled “Idealism,” Hegel explains:

A philosophy which ascribed veritable, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy ... matter, or atoms are *thoughts*, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, that is, in their sensuous individuality – in fact what *is*, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable.

Hegel, 1816, §316

Hegel does not deny that a world beyond human action exists or claim that that world is an unknowable “thing-in-itself.” On the contrary, he takes “externality,” the world beyond experience, as one concrete whole, and takes it that what we know about that world is thanks to human activity, which in turn always has to do with “externality.” Marx criticised Hegel because Hegel “idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such” (Marx, §1, 1845). This is the point where Marx’s philosophical materialism parts company with Hegel’s objective idealism. The Professor of Logic, G.W.F. Hegel, took the activity of the elite, their thinking and communication, as the determining activity in human life. The communist revolutionary, Karl Marx ascribed all human knowledge to practice, noting that by “practice” Marx meant not “behaviour,” abstracted from consciousness, but rather practice as the concept from which both behaviour and consciousness can be abstracted. The *Logic* is open to both interpretations.

Since Hegel’s philosophy is monist, its foundations are not changed by the word we give to the one substance. Grasping *Geist* as human practice does have repercussions on how we *interpret* the *Logic*, however. It also obliges us to explain how the categories which are found in the *Logic* can be interpreted as forms of human practice rather than forms of thought as Hegel takes them to be.

The first thing to note is a logical concept is no more an action or activity than F# is a musical sound or Bb minor is a musical composition; they are merely musical *categories*.

So when I claim that Hegel's *Logic* is the logic of *forms* of practice, its categories relate to actual, material practices as propositional calculus relates to an actual proposition, or the categories of the musicologist relate to actual music.

Any science, if understood in the way recommended by Hegel, begins with an analysis of its subject matter initially represented in some abstract general conception, and determines a unit which is to function as the germ cell from which the science of that phenomenon is to be built. In the *Logic*, the One takes the place of this unit.

Any positive science, whether a natural science or a social science, is taken to be the science of some form of human practice. It makes its beginning by identification of that germ cell which is to function as its starting point and must first analyse that cell or unit. The concepts which arise directly from that analysis will not be categories of the *Logic*, but concepts characteristic of the particular domain of practice which constitutes the subject matter of the science. The products of that initial analysis will be unique to the subject matter, the content of that unit, as will all the subsequent concepts derived from analysis.

It remains to determine Hegel's conception of human action to reveal how the *Logic* can be interpreted as the logic of human practice in a way which is true to Hegel's intentions. Hegel elaborates on human actions in the latter part of the "Idea of Cognition," in the Syllogism of Action. Hegel further clarifies his conception in the chapter on Morality in the *Philosophy of Right*. In this latter work, Hegel touches on questions which are not relevant to the problem before us, but I will summarise Hegel's view having in mind Hegel's conception of the unit of activity or practice.

See "[Units in Hegel's Theory of Action.](#)"