

Hegel on Cognition and the One

Talk by Andy Blunden for the
Third Biannual Conference of the Australian Hegel Society,
2-3 December 2021

Abstract

Too little attention has been paid to the advice Hegel gives us on how to understand complex processes, advice which can be usefully applied to the solution of present day crises in social and political developments.

I shall suggest a reading of the *Logic* focusing on the concept of the One (S. 255) rather than Being as the point at which the ‘unfolding’ of the categories begins, and the passage (S. 779) of the *Science of Logic* on Cognition, in which Hegel draws attention to the “concrete individuality (*die konkrete Einzelheit*) that is given to subjective, natural cognition as the *first (das Erste)*” claiming that *das Erste* must be *something simple (das Einfache)*.” The treatment of the One in the Doctrine of Being, then, can be seen in a new light, but I will rely on the *Shorter Logic* for the thankfully more succinct treatment Hegel gives there.

In relation to social crises, I shall further discuss the backwards and forwards movement of cognition, between the immediately given situation and the history of the process itself and its theoretical expression, to determine the ‘concrete simple something’ from which a practical comprehension can be unfolded.

Analytic and Synthetic Cognition

In the last chapter of the *Science of Logic* before the Absolute Idea, The Idea of Cognition, Hegel outlined the method of Analytic and Synthetic Cognition. He specified how the division of the subject matter of the sciences is to be carried out according to the inner nature of the subject matter itself, rather than by an arbitrary, subjective scheme imposed from without.

Here is the key passage from the *Science of Logic*:

The progress, proper to the Concept, from universal to particular, is the basis and the possibility of a ***synthetic science***, of a ***system*** and of ***systematic cognition***. The first requisite for this is ... that the beginning be made with the subject matter in the form of a ***universal***.

In the sphere of actuality, whether of nature or spirit, it is the ***concrete individuality (die konkrete Einzelheit)*** that is given to ***subjective, natural cognition*** as the ***first (das Erste)***; but in cognition that is a ***comprehension***, at least to the extent that it has the form of the concept for basis, the ***first*** must be on the contrary ***something simple (das Einfache)***, ***something abstracted from the concrete***, because in this form alone has the subject-matter the form of the ***self-related universal*** or of an ***immediate based on the Concept***.

Hegel 1816, p. 801, S 779. The italics are Hegel’s, the bold mine

The “first” is the concept from which each science is to begin – the ‘cell’ which is to be unfolded into the ‘circle’ of a finite science. Hegel is saying that the *synthetic* phase of a science must begin with this “*something simple*.” This

prescription applies to “actuality, whether of nature or spirit” – i.e., the natural and social sciences.

Hegel describes this “something simple” (*das Einfache*) as “the concrete individuality that is given to subjective, *natural cognition*.” *Einzel* means ‘single’, so *Einzelheit* means a ‘single-ness’, an instance. “Natural cognition” refers to the common sense or, normative perception of a process within the broader social formation, prior to critical analysis or synthetic reconstruction.

The *first* is a product of analytical cognition. At nodal points in the development of science, a ‘simple something’ is abstracted from concrete experience, and subjected to *synthetic cognition*, that is, the dialectical unfolding or reconstruction of a whole process, the whole ‘circle’ of the particular science. These nodal points mark out the alternation between analytical cognition and synthetic cognition.

This ‘something simple’ must be “*abstracted* from the concrete” by analysis. So, the beginning of a science requires the abstraction from the whole concrete field of experience of such a concrete individuality to be made the starting point for a synthetic reconstruction of the concrete in theoretical form. This act of abstraction requires an insight into the whole process:

analytic cognition ... starts from a *presupposed*, and therefore individual (*einzel*), *concrete* subject matter; this may be an object already *complete in itself* for ordinary thought, or it may be a *problem*, ...

Hegel, 1816, p. 787, S. 753

Hegel said that “the first requisite for this is ... that the beginning be made with the subject matter in the form of a *universal*.” That is, the *concrete individuality* which is the product of analysis is simultaneously *the universal*. That is to say, it is an *archetype* or unit of the entire organism which is to be synthesised in theory. ‘Concrete individuality’, for Hegel, means that the cell is internally contradictory (like the exchange-value and use value of a commodity), the coincidence of two antithetical concepts which can be exhibited by analysis. It is by the disclosure of this internal, implicit contradiction, that synthetic cognition unfolds the whole circle of phenomena which make up the science in question.

The “something simple” is an *individuality*. This is the difference between, for example, ‘morality’ and a moral *action*, or between ‘art’ and a *work* of art. A study of art must begin with an analysis of a ‘work of art’. An individuality is *discrete and bounded*, and not continuous or intangible; a *particle* rather than matter, *concrete* rather than abstract, a *something* rather than stuff, an *action* rather than activity.

According to Hegel, an exposition of the science following the path of synthetic cognition begins from this concrete individuality which is deemed to be an ‘abstract’ instance of the universal in the sense of being simple, and abstracted from its concrete circumstances.

The *clarification* of the problematic phenomenon is mediated by taking up the *concept* of this concrete individuality. It is then subjected to immanent critique, successively surpassing its limits, elaborating the particular forms implicit in it,

until arriving at a contradiction which can be resolved in actuality only by the emergence of some *new* concrete individuality, and with that a new branch of natural or social science, a new phenomena and chain of events.

Hegel does not claim that the natural and human sciences can be elaborated by logic alone, without reference to observation and experiment:

Their [the sciences'] *commencement*, though rational at bottom, yields to the influence of fortuitousness, when they have to bring their universal truth into contact with actual facts and the single phenomena of experience. In this region of chance and change, the adequate notion of science must yield its place to reasons or grounds of explanation.

Hegel, 1831, §16. S. 70

The One

Hegel made these observations with respect to the “sphere of actuality,” that is, the natural and social sciences, not including logic. Nonetheless, a somewhat parallel process is exhibited in the early sections of the *Logic*. The subject matter here is the *pure essentialities* of experience, so can hardly start from something “that is given to subjective, natural cognition.” Instead, the *Logic* draws its starting point from the history of *philosophy*. Thus the *Logic* begins with Being. But Being is neither concrete nor an individuality; logic does not concern itself with finite *things*, but rather, Logic is concerned with “thinking over” (*nachdenken*) the *thoughts* it finds before it.

Nonetheless, the same strictures apply to logic as apply to synthetic cognition generally. Logic begins with Being, and in the well-known sequence of derivations, Hegel shows that as an empty concept Being is Nothing. This transition, however, manifests Becoming. According to Hegel (1831, §§87-88), whereas Being and Nothing are *abstractions*, Becoming is a *concrete* concept because it is the unity of Being and Nothing. The contradiction within Becoming, however, is that Becoming is intelligible only if *something* is becoming, leading to the concept of *Dasein*, some determinate being (1831, §§97ff.). A determinate being cannot be some vague process lacking distinction from its background or environment, but must be a **One** – some concrete individuality.

I take it that this initial series of analytical transitions *clarifies* the initial abstraction given to philosophical cognition from the history of philosophy by showing that a beginning must be made from a One, a unit, a concrete simple something. The derivations which follow on from this point in the *Logic* have a different, synthetic character. From the initial, abstract, empty concept of Being to the concrete, individual One, analysis *clarifies* the initial conception inherited from the past, and determines the One, to be the necessary starting point for the Logic. After this, the derivation produces more and more concepts – one and many, discreet and continuous, the various species of quantity, and so on, *without doing away with* the foregoing concepts beginning with the unit. It is these concepts which properly form the subject matter of logic.

Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* renders into a logical and necessary totality, in outline, all the ‘circles’ of the various sciences of his time. Beyond the Philosophy of

Nature, his derivation went somewhat further but still rested on the ability to draw the nodal points of the encyclopaedic system from natural cognition and existing practices. At the present moment, if we may tempt the Owl of Minerva, somewhat more is required. Most likely Hegel scholars will not be called upon to aid the solution of problems in the natural sciences. We do, however, have something to say about the unfolding worldwide *social* crisis, the solution of which entails the solution of the problem of a labour process which destroys the very conditions for human life at the same time as mediating itself with those same natural conditions.

Analysing complex social-historical problems

So, if we are facing some social problem and we want to gain a practical understanding of it, we know, taking Hegel's advice, that we need to identify that concrete simple something which is both individual and universal. We are looking for the cell which can give us a visceral understanding of the whole. We are not looking for a theoretical construct but must rely on 'natural cognition' to perceive something that is familiar which typifies the whole process. But this is by no means simply achieved. What is most familiar may be the most difficult to understand. Despite its being a universal simple something, its identity may not be at all obvious. To identify the One we must turn to history and the theoretical self-descriptions provided by the historical actors themselves.

The problematic situation is immediately before us, and we have at hand the richest possible representation of the problem. On the other hand, the historical record is relatively abstract and is mediated through documents, records and memory which are saturated with the perspective of the authors and are in that sense unreliable. But the historical record provides us with invaluable cues to help us identify the One.

The problematic situation we are facing was not always present, so we look back into the past to find when the most salient features of the present crisis first came into existence, usually as the result of some social, political or technical revolution. The historical record also provides information about the conditions under which the relevant revolution took place, conditions which made it a real possibility and transformed the real possibility into a necessity. Our aim remains to identify the concrete simple something, but in order to recognise it when we see it, it will be necessary to understand how it responds to the conditions around it.

Now, while Hegel believed that "in the history of *philosophy* the different stages of the logical Idea assume the shape of successive systems, each based on a particular definition of the Absolute. ..." etc., etc., he did *not* make this claim about history in general. However, he did see in the historical trajectory of the *finite institutions* manifestations of the rational, as expressed in his famous maxim about the rational and the real. To be more specific, we can cite some examples of his view:

The historical origin of the judge and his court may have had the form of a patriarch's gift to his people or of force or free choice; but this makes no difference to the concept of the thing.

1821, §219 n.

and

But if we ask what is or has been the historical origin of the state ... all these questions are no concern of the Idea of the State.

1821, §258n.

So it would be wrong to assert that the form and conditions in which an institution *first arose* expresses its *concept*, that is to say, what is *universal and necessary* in the formation. But having regard to the conditions at the time we can understand why things transpired as they did at the time.

The conditions of emergence of an institution are in general unstable and transitory. As a general rule, it is some time *after* an institution has come into being out of its conditions, that further interaction with its conditions, which are now the *object* of the newly emerged subject, give rise to a new developments distinct from the conditions and forms of activity which prevailed previously and a new concrete simple something appears. That is, at some point an action will take place which *does* adequately expressed a concept of the new formation and which adequately responds to conditions and will go on to attain the stability of a true *living* concept.

The development which takes place from this moment is essentially that given in outline in the *Logic*, but most novel formations prove to be *transitory*. Looking back from the present it is far from self-evident that this or that newly emerging form of action is the One which will endure and prove to be the seed of the current crisis. Historical, or more properly, *genealogical* investigation takes the form of a *back and forth movement* between the immediately given present crisis and the mediated historical record. In each reflection, the investigator considers each new emergent social form in connection with the conditions to which it responds and whether it can function as a living universal individual in relation to the present crisis. Each hypothesis can be tested by tracing the historical unfolding of the given institution and its relation to conditions, to seek within its course the genesis of the present crisis.

The aim of this genealogical investigation of the past is to identify the concrete simple something which aptly expresses the concept of the present crisis, and can be seen to be responding to the conditions of which it is *itself both the necessary cause and effect*. Not only does this provide a concrete universal concept of the present crisis but points to practical measures which can reasonably be expected to go to the roots of the present crisis.

Conclusion

Not only does the identification of the One, that simple relation which can enable us to form a concrete concept of a problematic situation, it gives us a practical insight into the key relationships on which the present crisis rest.