

The Ideal in Absolute Idealism

Something to keep in mind when dealing with Hegelian ideality is that thoughts are *concepts*, and concepts for Hegel are, as an analogy, '*living*' and self-moving *unifying* processes. Activity and movement—process—is something inherent to Hegel's conception of reality as a whole. Beings are active, Nature is active, thought is active, and Spirit is active. Hegel's philosophy is no collection of definitions merely put together, but chained by a moving inner necessity. As an Idealist he is often attacked for his 'abstraction', meaning that he deals with and thinks that strange things like ideas are the 'reality' of the world and that 'material' is an illusion. On this particular attack Hegel is not guilty when this is meant in the typical Berkelyan sense of ideas, but in Hegel's own technical meanings it is admittedly true that he held to such a claim.

Abstraction in the common understanding tends to mean two things: a vague concept or something that exists mentally. Hegel is not guilty on the first, and by common conception not guilty of the second insofar as Hegel's "thoughts" are not simply mental representations. In method, Hegel is a complete opposite of vagueness; indeed, it's the strongly interwoven concepts which cause much of the mental suffering to the new reader who mistakes him to be just another philosopher whose concepts can just be taken up as if his language has everyday meanings.

Finitude, Abstraction, Thought, and The Ideal

Ideality and ***abstraction*** are, as anything Hegelian, more than simple definitions or statements. While there is a connection between the common notion of ideality and Hegel's, there is also a separation with his speculative meanings. The connection between them is this: in the common notion ideality has to do with abstraction, thought, and *unification*; this is also true for Hegel's ideality. In the common notion the ideal unifies in thought by abstracting from concrete difference, hence its vagueness and lack of definite detail, and this is why it is called *abstract universality*. In Hegel's philosophy, however, ideality is something quite more than in the common notion.

Ideality for Hegel is meant in multiple senses:

1—As that which is *finite*, that is, the finite as a literal *abstraction* that has no reality outside the Infinite/Absolute. By abstraction it is meant that a finite term is literally taken out of a concrete whole, it is abstracted from its relations and set apart from it.

2—As that which is *thought itself as pure abstraction*. This has to do with thought as *concepts* and not as mere representations.¹

3—As the Ideal in the Platonic sense of that which explains the possibility of the correspondence of thought and external object as well as being the measure of Truth.

In a more common sense of 'ideal' it can also be taken as that which attains to its Concept, that is, an object that is true and what it *should* be in that it embodies its concept (an ideal object is one that is completely what it should be).

These aren't actually *fully* separate senses, but it helps to consider each in context when Hegel speaks of the ideal. Hegel says:

1—*"The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognizing that the finite has no veritable being. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism, or at least has idealism for its principle.... Consequently, the opposition of idealism and realistic philosophy has no significance. This ideality of the finite is the most important proposition of philosophy, and for that reason every genuine philosophy is Idealism... Now above we have named the principle or the universal the *ideal* (and still more must the Notion, the Idea, spirit be so named); and then again we have described individual, sensuous things as *ideal* in principle, or in their Concept, still more in spirit, that is, as sublated; here we must note, in passing, this twofold aspect which showed itself in connection with the infinite, namely that on the one hand the ideal is concrete, veritable being, and on the other hand the moments of this concrete being are no less ideal—are sublated in it; but in fact what is, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable."* (Science of Logic: §148-9)

2—*"The durable existence, that is, the substance of an existence, is its selfsameness, for its non-selfsameness would be its dissolution. However, selfsameness is pure abstraction, but this pure abstraction is thought."* (Phenomenology of Spirit: §54)

3—*"The Idea is truth in itself and for itself—the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity. Its 'ideal' content is nothing but the concept in its detailed terms: its 'real' content is only the exhibition which the concept gives itself in the form of external existence, while yet, by enclosing this shape in its ideality, it keeps it in its power, and so keeps itself in it."* (Encyclopedia Logic: §213)

The ideal is *finite* insofar as it is a true abstraction which can sustain itself as an existent differentiated from, yet within and part of, the Absolute; it is a *thought* insofar as it is a unifying abstraction as *Concept*—an abstracting self-relating² unity. Returning to the finite, it may be seen as ideal in the common sense in that it what is ideal has no true enduring substance, that it is a vanishing figment or appearance of imagination/thought. All that is finite has substance and essence that neither empirically nor conceptually has absolute grounding substantiality upon close inspection, but points beyond itself. That *finite things do not subsist independently*, but instead are dependent is exactly their ideality, i.e. finite things are by conception and reality literal abstractions of our own mind which in fact do not exist alone but are abstracted by us away from the real concrete whole which they subsist in. Finite things

may be ideal, may be abstractions, but they are no mere vanishing figments or illusions for Hegel, they are a real moment or part of reality.

This pointing beyond itself of finitude is itself a pointing towards an ideality of finite things themselves in another sense: it points towards their essence and truth which is an intelligible immaterial universal principle. Whether one calls the truth of things matter, spirit, energy, forces, laws of nature, et cetera, these truths are concepts unlike the immediate sensuous appearance of things. This ideality, however, is not a mere dead abstract vague representation defined and done away with as in the common notion of ideality, but is a *unifying structure* called a concept. As concept it is a self-differentiated unity developed through other concepts internally related to each other in systematic fashion—it is *concrete*. Such concept is a unity of unity and difference, or a unity of identity and difference which links what is with what it is not. As concept which has a *concrete universal* structure, the ideal is the principle of development and existence of finite things, yet these finite things are themselves part of the ideal concrete structure into which they seem to vanish. As parts they are moments of it which themselves are as necessary and enduring as the totality which they comprise. With this in mind, the finite itself also is as ideal as the very beyond it points to, and the empirical sensuous existence of things is no less ideal, for though it is the external existence of the ideal, this external existence is itself immanently linked to and part of the concept it embodies.

For the third meaning, the *Idea* is the realization of what *should be* insofar as an object is the realization of its own freely self-determined concept—one may relate this to the common notion of the ideal of things, what they would be as 'perfect'—and in so doing such an object is *true* in accordance to its concept. This ideal, however, is not simply a completed 'perfection', but also a developmental perfection insofar as concept and externally existent objectivity coincide. The Idea, however, is not reducible to what things *should be*, and Hegel himself does not mean this despite how it sometimes fits.

The Idea is the reality of objects insofar as they have any reality. Insofar as an object is informed by a concept, it is Ideal, and *all objects* are necessarily structured by concepts of various levels of development. The Idea itself is the penultimate concept of the *Logic*, and while objects have a trace of the Idea, not all embody the Idea fully when they do not show the developed freedom and complexity which it has. Hegel says "The first form of the *Idea is Life*," that is, what we rightly conceive as the *living organism* is the first object of nature which embodies (corresponds) the unity of the Concept as an object that is a self-determining unity. Concerning *Truth*, the Idea is truth just as it is meant: the unity of concept and object. As Hegel notes, however, this is "in itself and for itself," that is, Truth as simply being (object) and as comprehended (concept)—in this case 'for itself' notes that the object comprehends its own correspondence of its concept of itself with the object that it is. the Idea is Truth in the

sense philosophy had desired since the days of Plato: the grasp of the object's nature or essence and not simply an appearance for me. The object is the Truth itself, and Truth is this object.

As is often the case with Hegel, a term may be meant in *all* of its meanings even when one particular aspect is being emphasized, so it's a good exercise to see what Hegel is pointing out on the surface while also being aware there are the other meanings right underneath.

Concreteness

Concreteness³ is often used to refer to the experienced empirical world which exists as it does in its fullness. For Hegel, concreteness is more akin to an accumulated 'thickness' of connections inhering in a concept; such thickness provides the solid contextual ground for concepts in the structure of systematic unity. Even so-called abstract concepts in the end show themselves to be concrete not simply because they have a place in a systematic whole, but because they form the ground as well as are results of such systematic whole. The empirical is concrete in that it is a totality that is already unified and thick with real connections. Thus, for external existents of nature, there seems to be no problem of abstraction like there *seems* to be for thought. Nonetheless, one may speak of spheres of nature as abstract in some senses. Concreteness, to butcher it a bit, is expressed in contextual thinking which considers the connections of things either logically as necessary or empirically as the temporospatial relation of things.

-
1. With concepts there is a necessary connection to yet another aspect of ideality as *intelligibility*, but I shall deal with that in another post.
 2. Self-relation almost always requires two concepts/determinations in order to make self-relation intelligible by providing the necessary basis for determining self-relation as opposed to other-relation. As such, self-relating often implies relation to at least one other. Self-relation as self-abstraction is the beginning of particularity and eventual individuality. That said, *immediate* self-relation is possible and itself intelligible such as in The One of *Being-for-itself* which is a totality that sublates all otherness within itself.
 3. A fun and short piece on this by Hegel is [Who Thinks Abstractly?](#)