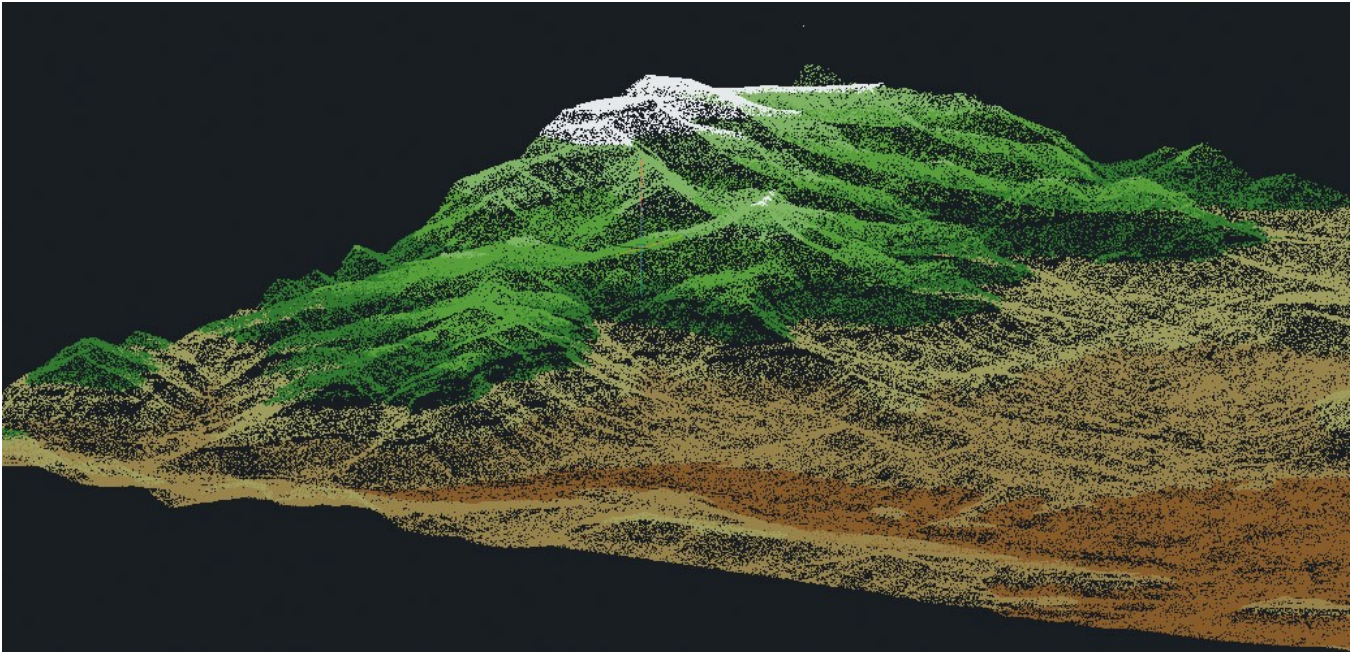


Hegel: We're All Idealists, Just The Bad Kind



"Thinking and the determination of thinking are not something alien to the subject matters, but are rather their essence. . . . Thinking in its immanent determinations, and the true nature of things, are one and the same content." (Science of Logic, §21.29, Cambridge trn.)

Who does not first read Hegel, come upon the claim that *thought and Being are one*, and scoff at such a seemingly outrageous claim in the modern day, or at least feel an initial apprehension and uneasiness in even considering such a seemingly antiquated *metaphysical* claim? The very claim itself arouses in us moderns a knee jerk reaction as if by reflex, for it is a seeming affront to all the great scientific and cultural progress we have made. Who could possibly believe such things today? What fool proudly proclaims that being and thought are one and the same when so clearly the thoughts in our minds are not identical with what objectively exists?

First, what does this claim *mean*? Second, how does Hegel cash out this claim in an argument if there even is one to be made? To answer the first, let us look at what Hegel himself says on the subject.

"Only what is known of things and in things by thought is really true in them, that is, what is known in them not in their immediacy but as first elevated to the form of thinking, as things of thought." (Science of Logic, §21.29)

The *truth* of things is thought, that is, their true being is thought. It must be noted that *thought* is intimately linked to *thinking*, for thinking is that which generates thoughts; they are not mere symbols or word names, but imply an activity. The English language itself seems to be aware of this intimacy of thought and thinking as an inseparable unity in the very phrase, "I thought;" a phrase that denotes thought as a past thinking.

This unity shall be shown as an important aspect of ideality later on. It is important to note that the identity of thought and being here is not one of an identity of thoughts in *my mind* and the external existent objects in the world. Hegel is no subjective idealist here. He isn't putting the true being of the world at the mercy of an individual or universal consciousness. That the *truth of things is thought* is something actually not so strange, and it does not do much violence to our common notions. We say of ideas and thoughts that they are not simply immaterial, but that they are essentially figments of mere imagination and in themselves nothing real. As shall be shown, Hegel's 'thoughts' and their ideality are not far from this common conception, as is seemingly always the wonderful case with Hegel's technical terms. Yet it is not to Hegel's shame that he is an idealist, for he recognizes the ideal for what it is—as a momentary figment on its own; rather the shame is on us who are idealists in its full pejorative sense without knowing it.

Let us first see an account of the meaning of the claim that thought is the truth of being from an everyday perspective to show that not only does this claim make sense with our more common notions, but even better, makes *more sense* with Hegel's technical meaning.

That things are more than merely their *immediate being* when we encounter them is no alien notion for us, in fact it's one of the most basic ideas both of simple common sense and religion as much as it is for rational empirical science. The meaning of ideality and thought as I shall speak of here is the vague yet common notion that thought/ideas are something *immaterial* in character and an abstraction as a generalized universal. Based on this common notion, the link of thinking and being is one that comes mostly from the structure of immateriality rather than an identity of abstractions in the mind, but the connection to the latter is also there in that only a thinking mind can perceive and capture the immaterial beyond in the present.

If we were to take a cow in its immediate presence before us—whether in material terms (such as its DNA or atoms) or in sensuous terms (what we see/hear/smell)—to be all that a cow is as such, we would be wrong about what it truly is as a cow. We would fail for various reasons, all to do with leaving out necessary pieces of the truth. Today the cow is a calf, but three years later it is an adult, four years later it is old, and three years later it's a pile of bones. If the cow at any of these moments is taken as being all a cow is—no matter how detailed the analysis of this temporal snapshot is—we would be wrong by omission of its aging and growth process. Suppose we admit into this scenario temporality and memory that we can learn from. We notice that the many cows we saw over the years were in fact the same cow growing older—much better, but we would still be wrong about what a cow is for no other reason than that we missed the reproductive aspect of the species as part of our concept. Without access to the cow across multiple significant moments of time as an individual, and

across multiple individuals to see the differences of sex and herd life, we would have a wrong conception of what a cow is. Why, even if we had all the necessary aspects of the cow species, we would still fail to grasp the truth if we did not have them in their proper order and relation.

What really is a cow? What is its truth—its nature? Luckily, that's not too hard to answer, and most of us come to know it just fine without any fancy logic.



Common sense and basic rationality enable us to be quite the scientists and take note of the various aspects of cows as individuals and as species. The beyond of immediacy does not bother us, we simply take it into account and bring it into our attempts to conceptualize the object. Let us return to our good cows to continue the point.

What a cow truly *is* is *neither fully instantiated in one individual of the species, nor does an individual of the species itself instantiate its own full reality as an individual in one single moment in the present*. No, what a cow truly is is something which is undeniably *beyond the present immediate material moment*. What it is can only be captured in the the now by our knowledge of it as a *concept*, an ideal entity penetrating beyond immediate appearance and grasping the past, present, and future of the cow as a unified whole. A cow *is* a past, a present, and a future; it is a universal as species, and an individual existent; it is a real difference of the same as its two sexes; it is the full essential possibility of an existent actuality. To be a cow is to be this unity of necessary aspects of a cow, the full essential possibilities of the individual within its species; possibilities only actualized and knowable through time and various

individuals. What materially exists before us at any moment is just that: a *momentary part* of what the cow truly is. It is this excess beyond the present that is 'ideal' in the normal sense, it is something immaterial and only apparent to thinking minds. Matter may have a future, but this future is a beyond which itself is not yet materially instantiated.

Common empirical science acknowledges that the truth of things is not their immediacy, but it does not comprehend what is beyond immediacy as something *ideal*. It does not take itself to be going beyond the material by acknowledging the reality of something beyond the immediacy of the present and tangible, yet it is precisely the objective reality and conceptual capturing of this beyond that marks truth as ideal in a common sense. The fact that the most concrete truth of things incorporates knowledge that exceeds what is materially present and sensuously evident, an excess existent only as immaterial potentiality, and that thought—and thought alone—captures the truth as being which *is* as much as what it *has been and is yet to be*, gives a sense of the ideality we necessarily deal with in everyday reality.

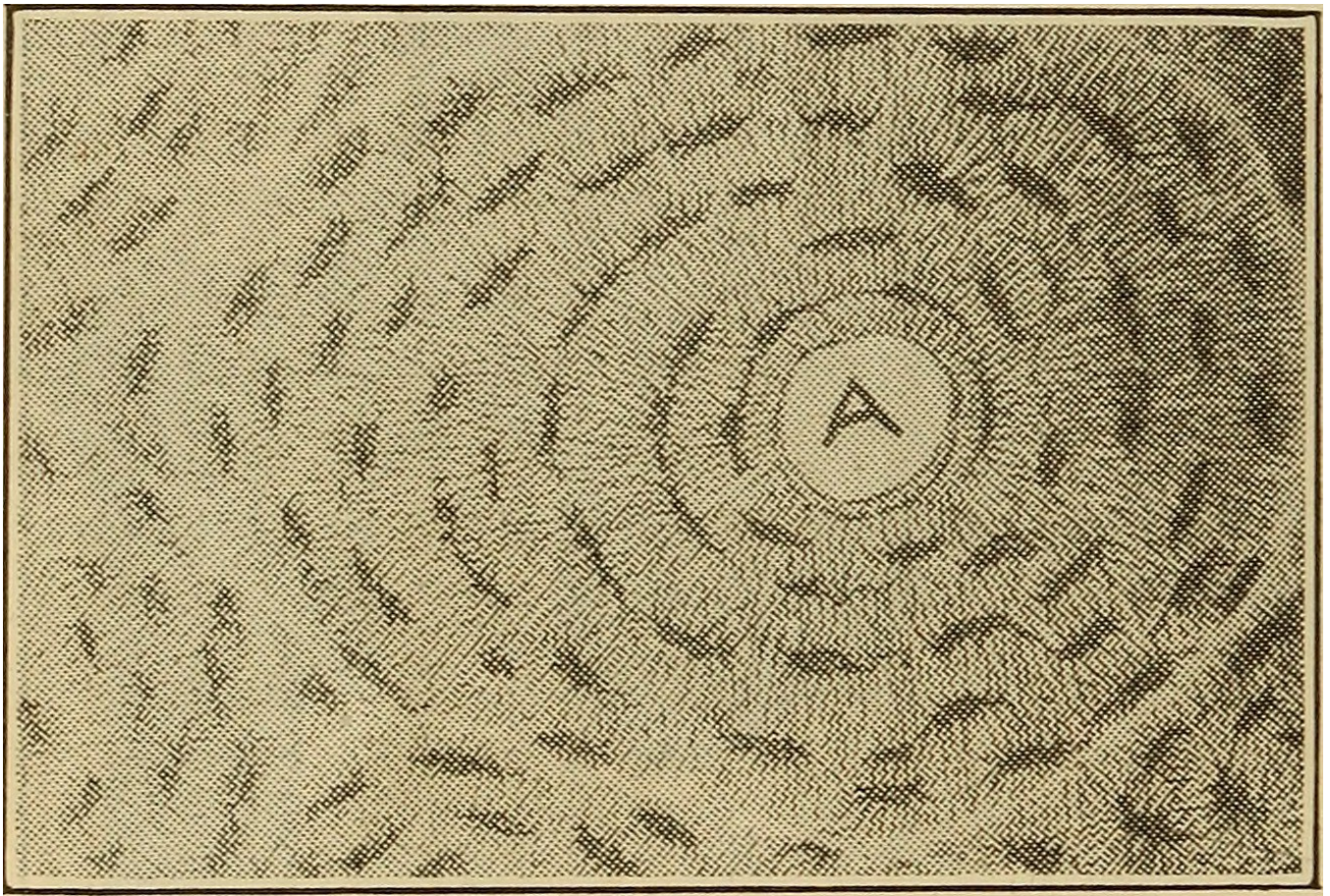
This is, you may think, nothing but a semantic game of shifting definitions. Why would immateriality itself be considered ideal? Just because we can only know the beyond of the present in thought does not mean that this beyond *is* thought. Hegel's term of the *ideal* has a very technical meaning, and an explanation of why it has the definition it does—this word being chosen due to its important common connotations of abstraction, unification, and figment. There is something interesting to note here: Hegel takes up in part the negative prejudice against ideality which common sense has. We say of ideas that of themselves they are mere figments of our minds when they do not correspond to the world, and Hegel takes up this notion of figment in a much stronger form than we normally consider. For Hegel the 'ideal', however, is not a term which merely denotes those immaterial things in our minds, but is a *structure*. As a structure, Hegel can thus confidently assert there is not a single thing which is *not* ideal, for even immediate material presence is so.

"Self-identity, however, is pure abstraction; but this is *thinking*. . . . It subsists through this simple oneness with itself. But it is thereby essentially a *thought*. Comprehended in this is the fact that Being is Thought; and this is the source of that insight which usually eludes the usual superficial talk about the identity of Thought and Being." (Phenomenology of Spirit, §54, Miller trn.)

Hegel means quite a few things by making the claim that thought and Being are one. Due to limits of length here, let me summarize the meaning of the *ideal* as that which is in a very strict sense **abstract**. Abstraction here means something simple: to be taken apart from a whole. In the process of normal scientific thinking we *abstract* pieces from the real whole we experience in space and through time, and piece these abstractions together as they seem to best fit given the general conceptions of reality, the object,

and the evidence we have. Normally, abstraction is considered to merely be vagueness by generalization, but its meaning as 'taken apart from a whole' is nothing strange to us. We often 'abstract' ourselves from our boring jobs and daydream. We read 'abstracts' of essays to decide whether we shall read them in full. We abstract *into* thought from real existents, and within our minds we arrange these abstractions into what matches the external object. The question of our regular notion of the truth of objects is one of piecing together and generating a proper concept which corresponds to them. Up to this point few will disagree, and most will argue that this so far supports nothing but the opposite of the claim that the truth of being is thought.

Abstraction is linked directly to thought in that Hegel identifies the essential character of thought as "*pure abstraction*." Thought has a peculiar uniqueness in that it encloses (abstracts) virtually all things including itself. Thus, abstraction is what links Being (what we would consider objective existence) and the thoughts in our minds as a structure of partedness which they share in common. Insofar as we have a unity, yet this unity itself is differentiated within itself or from an outer other, the very fact of these differentiated elements is nothing less than the fact of abstraction. This structure of abstraction is one that in this sense applies not just to thought, but to external existence itself. The common notion of abstraction is one of vagueness and lack of differentiation, and Hegel's notion concurs with it in the sense that proper abstraction is the ejection of a certain kind of detail and concreteness, i.e. *unnecessary* or *unessential* detail. Hegel's abstraction, however, opposes the common notion in that it is through the process of genuine and valid *absolute abstraction* that *essential concreteness* is attained.



Recall that thought and thinking are intimately tied as structure and generator of structure, and here this relationship repeats. Abstraction denotes, interestingly, both a structure and activity. Recall the cow, and that its truth is not just a timeless structure, but a structure that is *generated*. The cow is not just abstracted, but is engaged in a process of *abstracting*, i.e. of generating the very parts that constitute it. Abstraction as a process and as a structure is the very way truth comes to be grasped in our thoughts, and abstraction is also the very fact of the independent being of things in the world. In thought, we see this abstraction as the necessary *generation* of oppositions and distinctions made within concepts as their definitional content forms. In material nature, things are independent and under their own power only insofar as they can abstract themselves from the whole of the absolute (the universe, to most today) in which they subsist and depend, an abstraction which must be actively maintained if the object is not to dissolve. The very fact of self-identity, for example, is a fact of abstraction which separates a thing from its surrounding otherness. Insofar as anything is differentiated, insofar as it has any trace of independence, insofar as it *is*, *to that extent it is abstract, and thus, in truth, thought*—it is *ideal*. It is ideal in technical and common meaning: it is abstract, and to recall the negative prejudice mentioned earlier, it is a figment of a naive mind to think the *ideal as mere ideal* is the truth and reality itself. Only a naive mind can believe that *parts are absolute wholes*, that *abstractions as abstractions* can be complete concrete truth.

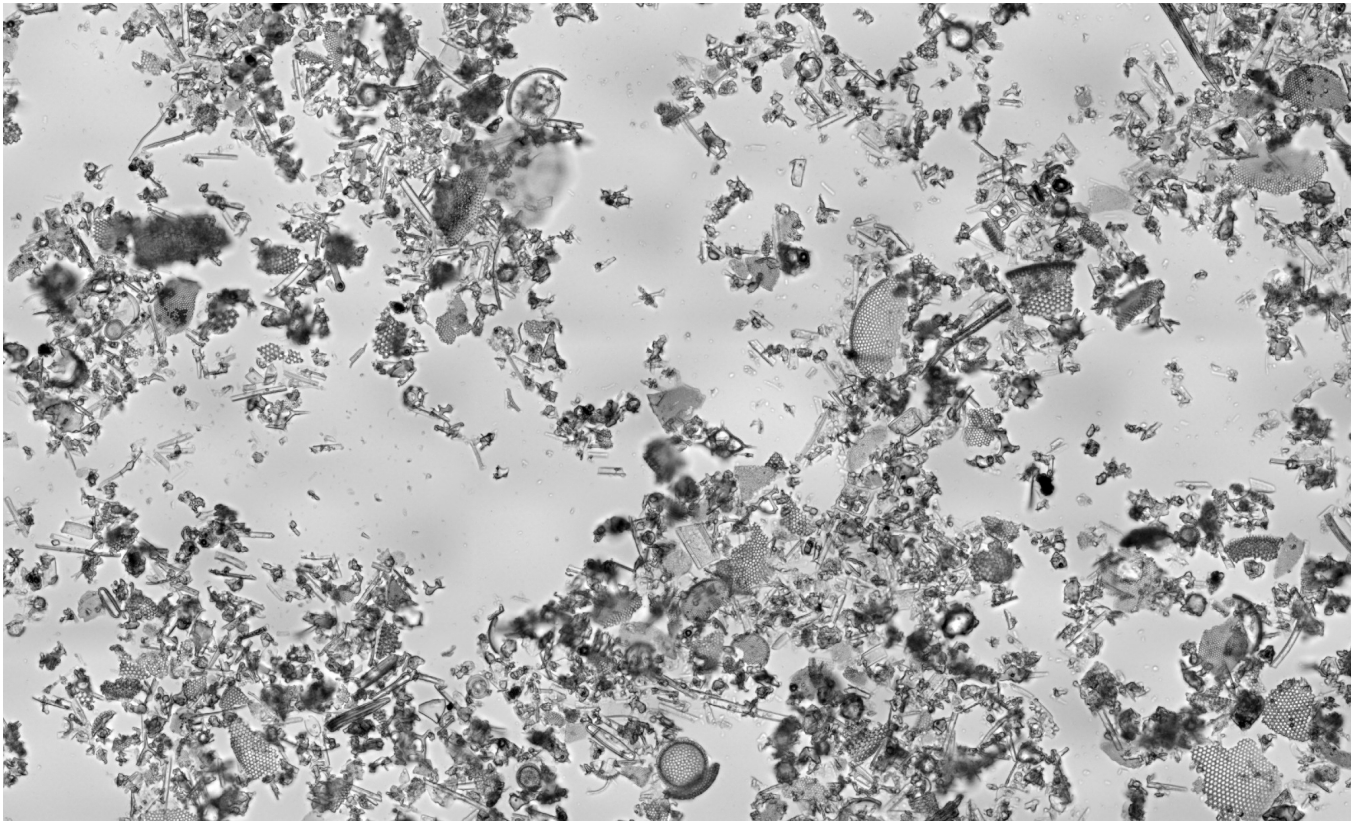
The truth of things as immediately taken is that they are *mere ideas* with no essential reality for themselves; their truth is a conceptual whole that is beyond any moment we

capture in the present. Abstractions, however, are *abstracted*. What engages this abstracting such that it can generate specific abstractions? If we want to grasp the *objective abstraction*, the truth of the objects we wish to know, we must step outside of *our* arbitrary subjective abstracting, but instead conceive in and through absolute abstraction—the object's own abstraction from an originating form that *differentiates itself*. In absolute form, abstraction is nothing other than *self-abstraction*, or *abstraction from* abstraction—the world itself *must* engage and have such a structure of abstraction by mere fact of the independence it has and the difference we observe in it so freely. It is thought, and thought alone, which is capable of enacting and thus mirroring such absolute abstraction as the true existing world must have. Only in knowing objects constituted through their own self-concretion do we know true objects in their independence at all, or, only in knowing thoughts in their self-thinking do we know them at all.

Now, what does all this metaphysical talk have to do with anything of real importance to your everyday life? This perhaps seems strange, but one should step back for a moment and realize just what this actually looks like in concreteness. Is this result of absolute abstraction not the very *ideal* of every practicing empirical scientist? Does not every competent scientist do their best to isolate, that is, *abstract*, the phenomenon they wish to understand for *itself*? That our greatest practical achievement, *material science*, presupposes abstraction as real to the extent that it actually attempts to enact it in the very form of an experimental isolation of factors and things is quite telling of how close the spirit of Hegel's absolute science is to our common life. Material science has made its amazing achievements in part because of the truth of abstraction, in the fact that things really do have a level of independence which is objective and observable as much as it is thinkable. If factors can be isolated as abstracted from the inessential concreteness of given reality, then positive and constructive abstraction can be made. The predictive model can arise as the abstraction from abstraction, the concrete consideration of the essential interaction of what is abstracted.

Of course, it is clear there is a significant difference between what scientists abstract from their abstractions and what Hegel's absolute abstraction generates. The common view of essence in science is the inversion of Hegel's, for it is an abstraction which we *can no longer abstract*—can no longer *break apart*—and in this, our common notions fall into the very idealism we believe we despise. We reduce the world to separate abstractions which are unintelligible in themselves and only externally related to other parts of the world; thus, as abstractions taken as ultimate truth, we mistake the ideal for the true. Things are considered essential insofar as they are basic or fundamental in that they constitute all higher things; thus, the world is reduced to only *truly being* these fundamental entities, e.g. atoms, energy, quantum fluctuations. This contrast between the conception of essence shall be dealt with in more detail below in a couple of examples. Now, instead of essence, we can also speak here of the holy grail of

objectivity as a more common notion of the truths we seek to know. This objectivity, even with Hegel, is the same objectivity which the common understanding knows: that which is objective is that which is what it is in its own right, and not because of anything else.



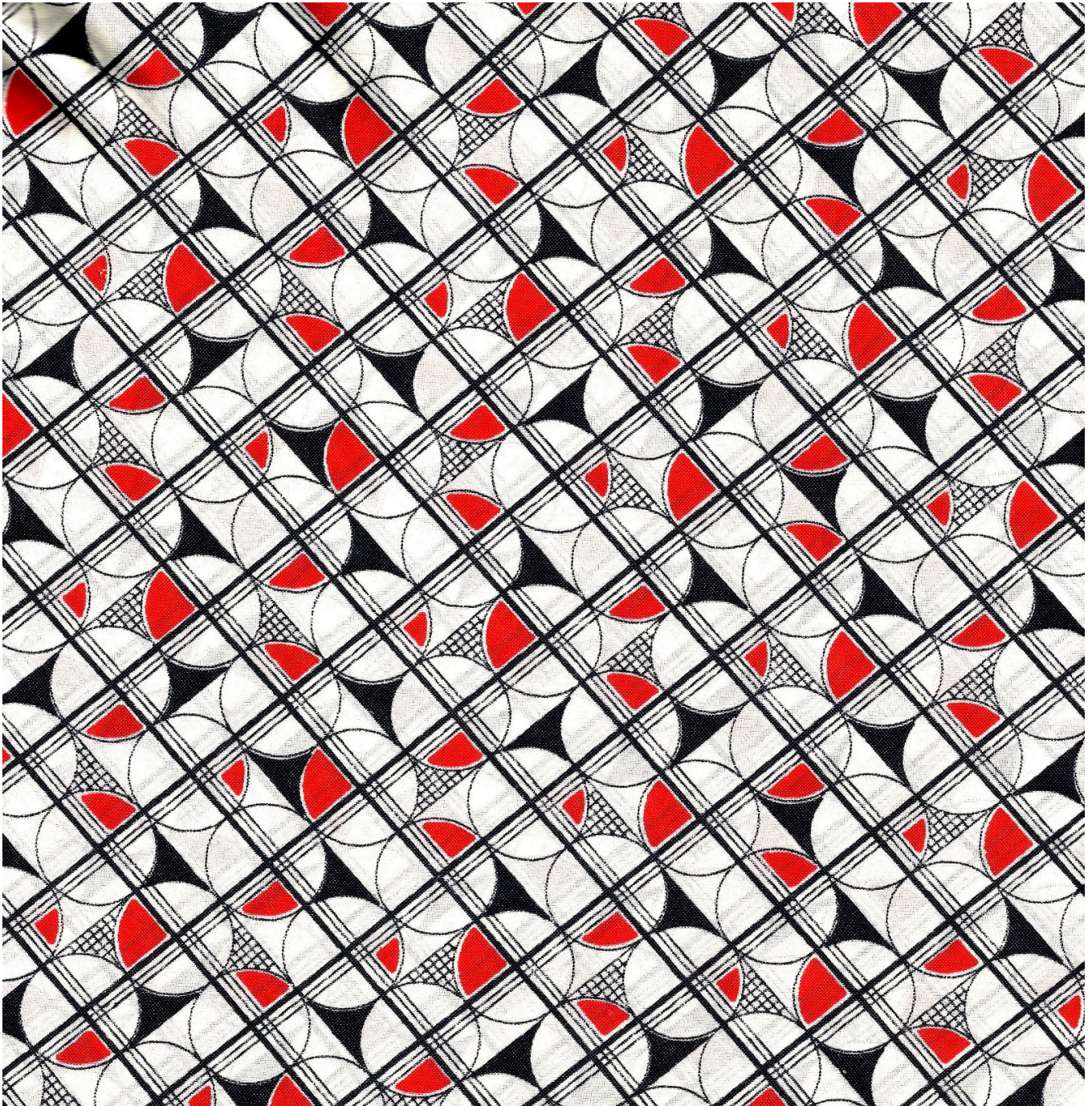
What would a material scientist say of the essential truth, or objectivity, of a piece of chalk? What are its objective features? Certainly not its shape or color, for these are subjective determinations not intrinsic to its substance as chalk. Even the measure of material of the chalk is not objective to its being as chalk, for chalk as chalk is merely its chemical composition as calcium carbonate. Does calcium carbonate as such essentially exist? It is a synthetic compound of elements, calcium and carbon, each which in turn is a compound of protons, neutrons, electrons, etc. Some of these particles, protons and neutrons, are themselves further compounds of what are now called quarks. The real essence, many would say, the real objects of the world, are these fundamental irreducible particles and their interaction with forces. They, and they alone, have a real self-abstraction unlike the chalk we encounter at our own scale. The philosophically minded scientist will tell us that the seeming independent structures of our everyday life are *ideal figments* that do not truly exist—life, consciousness, feeling, complex things have no essential reality themselves. There are fundamental forces, there are fundamental particles, and nothing else has any essential being. The chalk itself as chalk is a mere ideal figment that does not truly exist in this view. The world can only be taken as a broken unity of parts with no necessity which we can know, and where what is most intuitively real to us—our experienced world—is the most unreal. Indeed, the very things we wish to know disappear in this view as mere figments. This is actually a very popular view in pop-

quantum physics, and while Michio Kaku is not representative of the physics community as a whole he does provide a good example. It is according to a belief that the ideal is what is truly real that someone like Michio Kaku can confidently speak of the miniscule possibility that I can go to bed on [Earth today and wake up on Mars tomorrow](#) because my quantum waves make such a possibility. These probabilities and their actualization is considered without a context, as if they exist in and of themselves with no enabling conditions necessary. This is no less than the belief that a cow can materialize in the middle of nowhere deep in space merely by the fact of a probability, completely disregarding what a cow is and how it comes to be, merely taking into account an *abstract* reduction of the world to these probabilities.

Rather than an unexplainable and therefore unknowable object opaque to our thinking, Hegel's essence is intelligible through and through. Against the conception of the empirical scientist, Hegel's essential truth lies not in the abstracted pieces, but in the abstraction from these abstractions—their generated unity as a whole. That which is more self-abstracted is more objective, more essential, more *concrete* and complex, more real *as itself*, and is that which subordinates its constitutive parts within itself. Conscious life unifies and subordinates its body, which subordinates its organs, which subordinate their chemistry, which subordinate their physical elements, and as such is an immense inner concretion under its own life principles. To believe mere quarks and forces are the essential in this situation is to retreat from the experienced world into ideal figments, to fail to see that the horse pulls the cart and that this cart is not pushing the horse.

To bring our cows back to focus again, let us consider the objective concept: the species essence, or what we today know as the developmental principle of its species genetics. From the gene plan, a natural movement occurs given the right conditions in the fertilized egg and uterus such that a process of self-differentiation (self-*abstraction*) begins in the generation of the structures of the final organism. Cells are generated, an unconscious rationality in the cells organizes them into proper order and specialization, organs are developed to their full specification, the sexual organs and their accompanying hormonal and other chemical systems are developed and engaged, the cow eventually is born at a moment specified by an evolved biological clock, it continues to develop into maturity within its own essential determination as well as within a context to which it is adapted inasmuch as it can. Notice something important: the driving and determining principle here is not a lower order of existence such as chemicals, atoms, or quantum fluctuations. No, the object is not what it is by their power, rather *they* are as they are by the power of the objective principle of the cow. The life process subsumes and orders the lower factors of existence under its own ends as its means, and this process is not one moment, but exists necessarily as a systematically generated unity of many.

"In thus calling the principle or the universal an *idealization* as we have just done (and the concept, the idea, spirit, deserve the name even more), and in saying then that the singular things of the senses are *idealizations* in principle, or in their concept. . . . we must note, in passing, the same double-sidedness that transpired in the infinite, namely that an idealization is on the one hand something concrete, a true existent, but, on the other hand, that its moments are no less idealizations, sublated in it; in fact, however, there is only one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable." (Science of Logic, §21.143)



Nothing exists which is not ideal, even tangible materiality. Insofar as there is difference, insofar as there is becoming from a has been towards a yet to be, insofar as what we deal with and conceive is *not the whole truth*, it is but an *abstraction* from this whole, and to that extent, it is utterly ideal. The present is ideal insofar as it is not the whole truth of time, but only a part. The calf is ideal insofar as it is not the whole truth

of the cow, but only a moment. Matter is ideal insofar as it is not the whole truth of its being in that there is something beyond it, ontologically and temporally. We, the individual selves, are ideal insofar as we manage to be individuals of any kind, insofar as we are capable of extricating—of abstracting—ourselves from the immediacy of the web of material and cultural life. Thought is ideal insofar as it is *pure abstraction*—the ethereal substance which can abstract anything and everything. Thought can even enact universal *self-abstraction*, and thus can grasp the self-abstraction of other beings—their essence, their true independence and objectivity.

Thought and Being are not one as a correspondence of our mental imaginations to external reality, but as the same *structure* of abstraction, self-abstraction, and total unification. Just as thought can *think and concretize itself* through abstraction, objective Being can *be itself* only through the same power. To grasp the truth of being is not to force external objectivity into our concepts, but to grasp thoughts, the nature of things in their own self-generated necessity—their own freedom. It is to know things in their own *absolute abstraction* from the contingent and unnecessary so that they may abstract into themselves and concretize from within as nothing but their own essence and self-development. As Hegel says:

“When we speak of things, we call their nature or essence their concept, and this concept is only for thought; but still less shall we say of the concepts of things that we dominate them, or that the thought determinations of which they are the complex are at our service. On the contrary, our thought must accord with them, and our choice or freedom ought not to want to fit them to its purposes. Thus, inasmuch as subjective thought is our own most intimately inner doing, and the objective concept of things constitutes what is essential to them, we cannot step away from this doing, cannot stand above it, and even less can we step beyond the nature of things. . . . For us, that essence can only be the concepts that we have of the things.” (Science of Logic, §21.14)

There is something to say of the correspondence of our thoughts and objects. *Only if* what we do in our most inner being—our *thinking*—and what objective beings are in their most inner being as essential share the same free self-developing structure are *our* thoughts and objective being identical. An acorn can only *be and generate* an oak, and only insofar as thought *freely and necessarily* does as the acorn does do we have the correspondence of the thoughts in *our minds* with the existent thoughts out there.

Hegel agrees with and confirms common sense’s judgment of the ideal: the *ideal* must not be taken as *the* truth, for it is only but a necessary stepping stone and moment of grasping the whole of the absolute we seek. Though Hegel calls himself an idealist, it is only in recognition that *no thing is fully real or fully true on its own*, and that that these relative parts are a necessity in the active process of the self-constitution of the whole. To think that any single or many things could be the whole truth is, ironically, a

belief only a poor naive *idealist* in the commonly disdained sense could have—and we wouldn't be one of those, now would we?

About the author: Antonio Wolf is a former philosophy student, and continuing autodidact. Currently he's focusing on Hegel. He authors a blog, the [Empyrean Trail](#), which tries to expound Hegel's philosophy to make it accessible without watering it down.