

The Emphyrean Trail

"There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits."-Karl Marx

□ MENU



Hegelianism: Objectivity, Truth, and Universality.

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One of the harder things that stands in the way of engaging Hegel fruitfully is his peculiar terminology, and while one can often find some short remarks scattered through papers and pages online regarding Hegel, many of these terms are not easy to grasp with the poor detail they are presented with in summary. This post isn't to supplant a reading of these developments from Hegel but to at least provide a better summary resource than any I am aware of being available online for those interested in beginning to grapple with the concepts of *Truth*, *Concept (Universality)*, and *Objectivity* as Hegel uses them.

Under common thinking conditions—what Hegel calls *natural consciousness*—there is a presumption that thinking and objective world relations are in a way unproblematically related despite a presupposition that consciousness and objects are utterly independent and unlike each other. Natural consciousness assumes that there are objects independent of consciousness—today we generally call them *facts*—and truth is considered the mere correspondence of thoughts and the world of facts or things. Just *how* it is possibly intelligible that thought and objects could coincide and form truth is forever deferred to assumptions of givens or of simple pragmatic convenience. In my prior blog post on a very basic notion of [science \(https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/on-the-scientific-character-of-hegels-dialectical-method/\)](https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/on-the-scientific-character-of-hegels-dialectical-method/) and how Hegelianism can count as such, I vaguely gave an account of why and how objectivity and concept could coincide, but I'll expand on that post in more proper detail here, this however is no exhaustive account of these terms.

Here I'm mainly following and putting forth Richard Dien Winfield's summary account of the movement and relation of these concepts in his essay *The Objectivity of Thought*. I favor Winfield here mainly because he does a really nice job laying out the general logical form. It shall be easily apparent as you read on that there is a general form which runs through Truth, Concept, and Objectivity: *Universality*.

==The opposition of thought and object==

Thought is normally considered to be abstractly universal and fixed in character, while objectivity is individual and in constant change. Thought has no content of its own; it has no power to generate concepts other than what it can abstract from given experience of language or phenomena. Concepts, as abstract universals, merely externally subsume individuals that share a universal; e.g. red can be an abstract universal (as quality) which inheres in coats, cars, hair, cats, etc. Another type of abstract concept is class, which can be a collection of universals shared by a

set of individuals, e.g. animals, but the class remains indifferent to all other characteristics that inhere in individuals that possess it and do not give any way to derive any further specifications of individuals and their relations to each other.

Concepts as static definitions have no movement into other concepts and cannot through pure thought find a link to each other, that is, from no universal do we get its individual instances and vice versa. The only option left to link them is externally through the mediation of what is itself not thought: experiential intuitions. Thought itself, however, cannot explain why concepts should relate at all neither to other concepts nor to or through intuitions; it cannot ponder whether a thought itself is objective nor can it ponder the object which is external to thought in its own independence. All reason can do with such thoughts is to check their coherence when put together.

Because in such a situation of given thoughts reason can only check coherence and not question the universals themselves, it is a *subjective arbitrary* exercise of reason to pick and choose just what concepts will be input into its formal systems of logic to check coherence. From this results a plurality of equally coherent, plausible, yet contradicting claims such that one may just as coherently espouse monism or pluralism, atomism or internal relations, dynamic Becoming or static Being, etc. As thought is normally considered, reason is incapable of justifying why this and not that should be the primary category or universal of the individual object against which all else is to hold coherence with.

==Objectivity==

Objectivity—as one of the ultimate aims of philosophical and scientific striving—is a category of prime importance, but what is *objectivity as such*? First in our common understanding is the aspect that objectivity is *that which is what it is with or without us*; it is indifferent to our relation to it, for it is what it is on its own account. The common sense understanding of the concept, however, tends to stop here. Objectivity is what is, but only as a generality considered without us. What this objectivity is in itself is an incoherent mess of supposedly independent atoms which yet are dependent on conditions of existence of many kinds. Objectivity is independent of us, but is only half-recognized as requiring independence from *all other determinations external to the object*. If an object is not determined by itself, but also by another, then that other must enter the account of the object itself.

Empirical science tends to think better of it, but not by much; e.g. in physics, what is objective is considered mostly as a system of related terms (forces/fields) which together constitute the foundation and engine of our experienced existence. This system, however—even if it was a unified mathematical system that cascaded out of its initial determination the spatial, temporal, and material dimensions of our every day experience, as some theoretical unifications deem to do—fails to provide complete explanation of phenomena such as life and consciousness, as well as a full explanation of itself through its own process. Biology, chemistry, etc. suffer this same problem; the system remains founded on a given determination which is unintelligible in itself as well as giving no account of why it is at all—science can explain everything but science. The objects of

such science *seem* independent from each other, yet they only function in a dependence to other terms that are the experienced actuality of what underlies them, e.g. matter's natural motion expresses the law of gravity, but gravity is only intelligible through matter and not in itself.

Gravity expresses a superficial generality of the movement of matter, but when inquired into it only points back to the phenomena to explain itself. This is because in the common scientific understanding gravity originates as a description of a relation, not as that which generates the relation. While in Newton's time gravity was merely spooky action at a distance, in the days Einstein it is no more intelligible. Now gravity is understood as the effect of the bending of space-time in the presence of matter, yet when we inquire into what the nature of gravity is what we want to know is exactly *why* matter causes such an interaction, why does matter bend space-time? Any number of intermediary steps offers no more a solution. If gravity is as Einstein describes, a proper solution would derive gravity out of the nature of the concepts of matter and space themselves, mathematical or otherwise.

The scientific understanding comprehends objectivity only to the extent that it grasps that it must strive to find a unity in the multiplicity of experience which as one principle may explain out of itself all others. From this simple striving aim, however, such an understanding is doomed to fail, for it does not understand just what such a unity can even be conceived as. Because it relies on the analytic understanding, empirical science can only conceive of objectivity as an atomistic disjointed reality. It analyses, it breaks down the world into pieces until the pieces can be broken down no longer. When we reach these atomistic points where breakdown is no longer possible either as conceptual forces or material entities like quarks, then we say we have arrived at *true objectivity*. But then we are left wondering what this objectivity is, we can no longer penetrate into it analytically, it cannot be split apart. The end result of such an inquiry is an unintelligible disjointed reality. Therefore, it works in various models which posit underlying aspects which determine phenomena, but which in themselves depend on the very phenomena they are supposed to ground and explain. The law rather than explaining the phenomena is in practice a description of phenomena. The law of gravity *is not a concept*, the law is only the description of what we call the relation of gravity. The law of electricity is likewise not a concept, but merely the description of the generality of the relation which we call electric. Such an understanding alone can only grasp at the positing of an abstract unity, *law*, but as said already, law ends up being merely the generality of a phenomenal description which from such principle alone cannot produce anything else it is supposed to explain.

We may abstractly be able to derive from nanoscopic 23 dimensional vibrating strings the physical aspects of the other 22 lower dimensions, but why strings? Why 23 dimensions? Why vibrating? Why something rather than nothing? Why change in the unchanging? As such, empirical science fails to conceive and comprehend true objectivity. Its objects are always conditioned, always arbitrary, always taken as irreducible, given, and ultimately incomprehensible.

Objectivity—when pushed to its conceptual limit beyond the scientific understanding—is that which is what it is wholly on account of itself and no other; it is self-determined and it is self-generating. By this account the true object of knowledge for science is not this or that particular domain of abstract independent knowledge, but the universe—the totality of reality as a whole. The true object is that which needs not even the external observer to consciously determine that it is indeed the true; it verifies itself from within. It explains itself to itself, it is a science that can comprehend why science is possible at all.

==Truth==

Truth, as most understand it, is both simple and complex. The most popular theories of truth considered by most today are correspondence theories, coherence theories, and pragmatic theories. However, there are many more accounts of what constitutes truth in the modern day—many grounding the notion in different epistemological approaches concerned with social relations and perceptions, some grounding it on logical systems—but these aren't all that popular, and I'd like to just compare the major notions to the Hegelian position.

Hegel, unsurprisingly, has a conception of truth that is familiar yet alien to us. First, it must be made clear that Hegel is concerned with *Truth* and not truth. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §41, Hegel tells us that philosophy is not interested in historical or empirical truths; such truths are *singular, unessential* and *contingent*, of no interest to the mind which aspires to gain *universal* and *necessary* knowledge. What date the French Revolution began, how much volume a gram of sugar has, whether a goat is a four legged cute animal, or how many minutes are in a year. These are not the kind of truths philosophy is concerned with. These are at best mere empirical trivia subject to historical conventions.

Hegel's Truth is a priori and purely conceptual, requiring no empirical correlate. That says enough about Hegel's judgement on pragmatic theories of truth. For Hegel, the Platonic notion that Truth must be what it is in itself *eternally* holds: a concept itself must be true, and it is the concept which is the criterion of empirical judgments of truth. Truth must be internally coherent in that it is not a contradiction of the kind of $A=\sim A$ in the standard propositional sense. Hegel brings to light something not thought of by most (Plato, Spinoza, and some others had an inkling of it): Truth must be *necessary* in itself. This aspect is provided by the logic of concepts themselves, by how a genuine concept moves itself, how it freely *others* itself and eventually returns to itself, closing the circle of its being and grounding itself; thus, showing its own self-determination and objectivity.

This necessity, eternality, and coherence of Truth is familiar in that most do understand Truth as something which is what it is regardless of us. Truth is objective, Truth is always true, Truth is necessarily what it is, and Truth is not self-contradicting or irrational. Par the course for Hegel, even correspondence between concept and object is not excluded. The notion that judgments of truth are correspondence *to* concept is not unfamiliar. We say things like: they are a *true* friend; their aim is *true*; s/he is a *real* woman/man; this is a *real* sport, etc. In such statements the concept is the criterion of truth and the empirical correlate is what is false in relation to it. We think and say things like this often, yet we seem to not realize what such language implies about Truth.

Along with this is the common difference between Truth and falsehood/appearance. For example, say we are walking exhausted through the desert and see that it is our great luck that we have come upon an oasis pool in our great hour of need. We rush to it, unquestioning of its existence—its 'truth'—and as we get closer it begins to vanish. We stop, disappointed, and realize it was just a mirage—a mere appearance. The 'truth' of the object we chased was that it was not an oasis, but the mere appearance of one. Here, by truth, we mean the substantive reality. An appearance has

only a superficial reality—a superficial truth—which upon inspection vanishes just as the mirage does and reveals its truth underneath, in this case the truth as hot sand and evaporating water. When Hegel says that something is the truth of another, he means it in this very same sense. The Truth of things is their substantial reality, that is, when we find something—whether it is a material or conceptual object—to depend on another, that other is its truth, its substance, its essence.

If Hegel adds anything new to the concept of Truth, it is that *Truth is the whole* (<https://emptyreantrail.wordpress.com/2017/07/13/the-general-description-of-the-absolute/>). By this it is meant that Truth is a completed and self-grounding concept which attains *absolute form*, i.e. Truth is something that is what it is of its own account and completely independent from any external determination. Truth attains to objectivity when it has found its full determination within itself, and this is achieved through a systematic development, through a movement of concepts. Truth as such is not determined as a relation of our individual subjective claims against a world of given facts, but a determination of itself; it is full of content developed *in-and-for-itself*. It is True because *it is*, and it is what it is out of its own inner necessity, not because we or anything else determine it to be so through an external criterion. This reiterates the independence of truth from our subjective position, which common understanding agrees with, so what is Hegel adding?

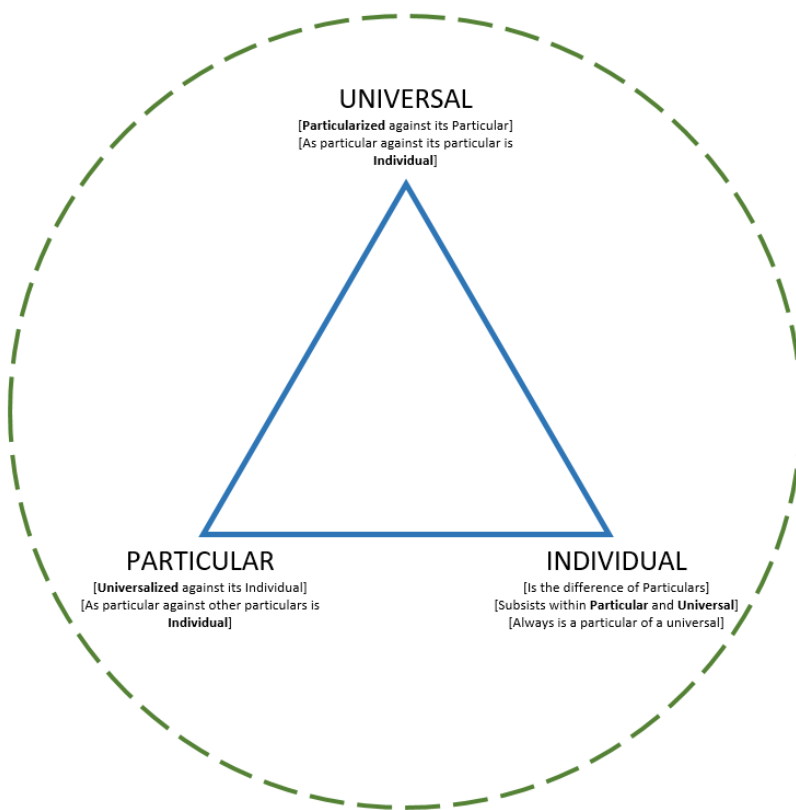
First is that Truth is the system of the totality of the world from matter to mind that knows matter and mind, not a contingent conglomeration of independent plurality of atomistic Truths. Second, common understanding agrees that truth is what is, but either simply assumes we unproblematically have it, or denies that we can grasp it *in-itself*—that we can only have our subjective frame of knowledge without objectivity. Hegel claims we can indeed grasp Truth in-itself; not from our side, however, not from an arbitrary subjective standpoint, but from *its* side—from the standpoint of the object itself. This requires a new way of thinking which *allows the concept of the object to develop itself before us* without our subjective arbitrary inputs determining it. It requires that the very concept of a concept in general be changed.

==Universality==

In the opposition of consciousness and thought, there was a problem between the knower and the known. This appears in various forms in different philosophies, but the main focus there was on the mere character of the universal concepts used by common understanding. Such concepts are abstract—both as poor in specificity and being separated from other concepts—and rigidly defined; thus they are mysteriously and problematically connected to the particular instances which they subsume. Hegel spends some moments in the *Phenomenology* to critique these kinds of “universals/concepts” for this failure to unite in themselves what they are supposed to unite as all-encompassing universals. For him, the universal is truly *Universal* only when it fully can account for its particular and individual instances in itself. The universal isn’t simply something externally common to all particulars, but the truth of all particulars, their ground and source.

The Hegelian Universal is not like the standard universal as we understand it, and it is very specific as a category as to what it applies to. At best, we may talk of the standard account as one of *abstract universals*, but Hegel's Universal is *concrete*. It is concrete for its very concept contains the particular individuals it aims to subsume in itself as its own particularizations, and it directly and explicitly logically links itself as concept to these seemingly subordinate concepts which it develops into. The Universal does not simply rigidly contain its particular instances, but it develops them from itself as its own inner differentiations. The true Universal appears as a *living* concept which is a self-generated, self-mediated, and self-differentiated unity which returns to itself as whole in all its parts.

The Hegelian Universal



The Universal, as *abstractly posited*, is intelligible first in necessary opposition to its *Particular* instances. The abstract universal, as abstracted, is in opposition to its Particular and finds itself thus not just as Universal, for it faces opposition of another concept and is not all encompassing, but as Particular against its Particular as well. One Particular is, however, indifferent from any other Particular. Hence, the Particular fails to properly differentiate the instances of the Universal from from one another and thus is itself also an abstract universality. Hegel introduces a new term in the relation of Universality and Particularity, *Individuality*, as the solution. The Universal (itself being Particular), and the Particular (itself being Universal), find their difference as Particulars in their Individuality. As this Particular and not some other, the Particular is Individual, thus the concrete Universal is finally completed—the Universal is abstract no longer. The Universal is Particular and Individual; the Particular is Universal and Individual; the Individual is Particular and Universal. The Universal does not underlie its Individuals, but rather the Individuals are the direct realization of Universality. *To be Universal is to be a unity realized through Particular Individuals*. The Universal is not a substance or essence underlying its individual particulars, it is not indifferent to them, it is not independent of them. The Universal is the unity of particular individuals and exists only as such particular individuals, e.g. *Becoming is its Coming* and

Ceasing to be, two moments of it (particulars) which are individuated in their specificity as inverse movements. While becoming is immediate vanishing, vanishing inherently must be directed towards a point of vanishing, either coming to be from nothing or ceasing to be into nothing.

There can be no such thing as an abstract universal that has never been instantiated, and, interestingly, neither can there be such a thing as a universal that has and will only ever be instantiated in a single individual instance, for a universal is an aspect shared by a plurality of individuals. To give some examples of what the Universal is in our everyday thinking:

A rose is always a particular individual rose, whether it is in our mind or in the world—it is not just *a* rose, it is *this* specific individual rose even when it is a mere formal outline image in my mind. A human is always a particular individual human, it is *this or that human*, it is never just *a* human. Repeat for anything else.

This kind of everyday abstract Universality, however fun, is not what Hegel is primarily concerned with ultimately comprehending. These kinds of universals are abstractly concrete, but Hegel aims to take Universality beyond what the vast majority of philosophers ever dare dream of. The Universal is a structure not just of our basic abstract thoughts, but of real things themselves—especially *living* things. It is the basic process and structure of living entities which are differentiated within themselves and partake in a process of genesis, dissolution, regeneration, and reproduction. Living beings share in a universal (the species as a specific genetic form), and individual members of the species *are the existence of the species as species* by 1) being its real existent form as concrete individuals 2) existing not only for their own individual sake, but also for the sake of reproducing the universal and keeping the species existent. Thus a species is a true Hegelian Universal in that they are a unitary whole that is self-differentiating, moving, and self-regenerating.

While we can easily conceive of, say, a cat *as cat* to be an independent being which lives more or less independently with respect to us and most other things, we cannot conceive the same of a car. Cars are not fully a universal like a cat is because a car is not a self-generating and reproducing kind of being. When we *really* conceive of a car, we cannot leave out that *humans make cars* and that they make them for utilitarian ends other than themselves. Cars find their existence wholly dependent on us unlike a real living entity which must and can fend for itself as an individual existent and as a reproducer of its species. While all things necessarily share universality in various ways and levels, not all universals are alike, and not all universals manage to exhibit the *life* of the full universal. Recalling Hegel's concept of objectivity from earlier, not all existent objects are equally objective. To be objective is to be self-determining and independent in existence; life thus shows itself to be more objective than most things. Life is more objective than mere inanimate objects for life self-determines to a far greater degree.

As one can see, the Universal *determines itself to be Particular and Individual*. It does not depend on any external determination or relation; it is what it is in-and-for-itself. As such, the Universal is the structure of objectivity itself in the realm of thought. The Universal, once developed, makes Objectivity intelligible as self-grounded and fully self-determined. This very Universality is thus the *Concept* of Objectivity itself.

When Hegel speaks of *the* Concept he speaks of the Universal. To be a concept for Hegel is to be a structure of unity, thus concepts are not simply thoughts in your mind. To be a genuine Hegelian concept is not to be just *any* unity, but a living unity. While a spherical material body (a rock) may be the universal, the concept, which unites in itself its particular properties, it is not a universal that is living, it is not a concept for itself. A spherical rock is not a spherical rock because it is its

species determination to be a spherical rock, it is spherical and it is a rock by no determination of its own. Its body and its properties are subject to physical laws external to its own determination. It is not the ground of its own existence like a species generates its individuals and is the ground of its individuals which then regenerate the species, but rather it is a merely arbitrary existence mostly existent due to external factors and subject to dissolution by change of those factors.

To reiterate on the opposition of thought to object, the common understanding of concepts is that they are abstract universals which are static and disconnected from individual instances which fall under them; they are also disconnected from other universals as such, connected only by synthetic judgments of experience and thus left to subjective whim. They are useful insofar as they can be used as categories to group many under one unifying term, but this only speaks to the sharing of one universal by many and does not deal with differentiating characteristics of the individual objects themselves. Concepts are not considered as having their ground in thought, but they originate from reflection of given experiential content of language or external stimuli.

For Hegel, *Truth is Concept*, and Concept is a self-developing and self-determining system of thoughts which unify and complete as and within the *Absolute* which is the final Truth and Universal. The necessity which moves concepts generates the system of the Absolute, and only when the Absolute is completed has Truth been accomplished in full. This is the meaning of "*The true is the whole.*" The Concept is the concept of the Object, but nonetheless there can be a disparity within Concept and the Object faced. Thus, Hegel terms the harmonious correlation of both as the Idea—i.e. the concept of the unity of Concept and Object. An Object which fully embodies its Concept is *ideal*; it is what it should be. Just as Truth can be incomplete, however, so can Objectivity and Concept be incomplete, and thus it should be no surprise that we find incomplete Universality in many thoughts and incomplete Objectivity in the objects of the world we face.



DECEMBER 12, 2016AUGUST 17, 2017 · POSTED IN CONCEPTS, HEGEL, PHILOSOPHY
TAGGED CC, DIALECTICS, HEGEL, HEGELIANISM, INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVITY,
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