

It seems too easy to fall into a dislike of Hegel; perhaps we are set up for it by Tolstoy's scathing portrait of the professorial German general, Pfuel, in War and Peace. It goes like this:

Pfuel was one of those hopelessly and immutably self-confident men, self-confident to the point of martyrdom as only Germans are, because only Germans are self-confident on the basis of an abstract notion--science, that is, the supposed knowledge of the absolute truth. A Frenchman is self-assured because he regards himself personally, both in mind and body, as irresistibly attractive to men and women. An Englishman is self-assured, as being a citizen of the best-organized state in the world, and therefore as an Englishman always knows what he should do and knows that all he does as an Englishman is undoubtedly correct. An Italian is self-assured because he is excitable and easily forgets himself and other people. A Russian is self-assured just because he knows nothing and does not want to know anything, since he does not believe that anything can be known. The German's self-assurance is worst of all, stronger and more repulsive than any other because he imagines that he knows the truth--science--which he himself has invented, but which is for him the absolute truth. (War and Peace, Bk. 9 chapter

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This description has the strength that it openly declares itself to be in the context of national stereotypes, and thus makes no demand to be taken overseriously. And yet even those stereotypes do not come from nowhere. The dichotomy between the absolute truth and what the German himself has invented is intended to strike us with real force as we are told that for the German there is no distinction, and as it happens, Hegel himself wished his readers to stop and marvel at such a claim no less than Tolstoy. The important difference is that Hegel would repudiate the accusation that he is loyal to an abstract notion. Abstract is the very attribute he ascribes to the thinking that would leave the distinction set in stone between what is true all by itself and what human beings think or invent. It might be useful to digress a moment and say more about that word "abstract". It sometimes seems to have almost magical powers to cloud minds.

It is often used to translate a word of Aristotle's "chorizein" meaning "to separate", as when Aristotle says in the Physics that the mathematician considers things like shapes and surfaces in separation from the natural bodies in which they occur, and that such separation does not produce false conclusions since those things are separable in or by thought from conditions like the

motions or mutability of the bodies themselves. This has a certain clarity and freedom from pretention. Somehow when one says "in abstraction from" various expectations are aroused, one of which is likely to be that whatever is appearing in abstraction from something else will turn out in fact to be false because of that very abstraction. Hegel, while very impressed with the power we have to separate things in thought that are not found separate in nature, probably bears as much responsibility as anyone for the general bad reputation of the abstract, though his objections to it are rather different from what seem to me the most common sort.

There is a kind of embryonic or tacit epistemology that is often contained in the use of the word "abstract". Let me sketch it. I think it might be described as Humean, or perhaps I mean Humesque. We begin by having particular impressions, as if we were a scrapbook full of photographs, no two exactly alike in any respect, not even the impressions of the flavors of two eggs. Then we work on our collection: we group similar photographs together, never mind just how; and we abstract the aspect they share, that is to say, we make it a separate thing, give it a name like "size" or "shape" or "cause", and proceed to behave as if this made-up being is just as real as the snapshots out of which we somehow, never mind just how, cooked it up. We can't help ourselves: we have to bring some order to our scrapbooks or we won't know whether to use the door or the window to enter and exit our rooms, but we must remember that the only real truth is the snapshots, and that the order of abstractions is a provisional, useful, falsehood. Hegel's reply to this account, as you have read in the first chapter of the Phenomenology, is to inquire about the givenness or immediacy of the snapshots. Far from being atoms, discrete chunks of being itself, they turn out to rely for their existence on those very universals which were to have been unmasked as false and empty abstractions.

The sceptical view is appealing to those who resemble Tolstoy's self-assured Russian in not believing anything can be known, but it has the disadvantage that it reduces all discourse not aimed at more sharply delineating the limits of human knowing to triviality. Hume himself, in one famous passage admits that it is billiards or meals with friends, not reasoning, that must rescue him from the despair implicit in his scepticism.

It may be that this view, or more generally a fondness for Hume, plays a strong role in the hostility to Hegel that students and tutors sometimes feel. What, meanwhile, does Hegel himself say about abstraction?

Let me read two brief paragraphs from the Preface to the Phenomenology; the first was among those suggested by Mr Wilkinson, and the second follows hard on its heels.

Quite generally the familiar, just because it is familiar,

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is not cognitively understood. The commonest way in which we deceive ourselves or others about understanding is by assuming something as familiar, and accepting it on that basis; all possible discoursing back and forth doesn't get such knowing beyond square one, it knows not why. Subject and Object and so on, God, Nature, the Understanding, Sensibility and so on, are uncritically taken for granted as familiar, established as valid, and made into fixed points for venturing forth and returning. Motion takes place back and forth between them, while they remain unmoved and thereby the motion remains only on their surface. Apprehending and testing likewise consists of seeing whether everybody's impression of the matter coincides with what is asserted about these fixed points, whether it seems that way to each or doesn't.

I add here parenthetically that this seems to me a marvelous description of a bad seminar, and more generally of a lot of the empty discussions that go on in the world. The next paragraph continues:

The analysis of an idea as it was ordinarily done, was in fact nothing more than ridding it of the form in which it had become familiar. To break up an idea into its original elements is to return to its moments which at least do not have the form of the given idea, but rather constitute the immediate property of the self. This analysis, to be sure, only arrives at thoughts which are themselves familiar, fixed, and inert determinations. But what is thus separated and non-actual is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of separating is the power and labor of the Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest power, or rather the absolute power. The circle that rests enclosed in itself and holds its moments together as Substance is the immediate relationship and therefore not astonishing. But that the accidental as such, detached from what binds and circumscribes it, what is bound and actual only in context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom--this is the monstrous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure "I". Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. The beauty which is without strength hates the Understanding for asking of her what she cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to

something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes (or "puts up") abstract immediacy, i.e. the immediacy which merely exists at all, and thereby (this power, the Subject) is the true substance, the being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside itself, but which is this mediation itself.

The text becomes interesting when Hegel says that the concrete is self-moving because it divides itself and makes itself non-actual. The context of that sentence is a description of a learning technique, the analysis of an idea. He has leapt from an account of the dividing of an idea, say, "Nature", into its component thoughts, to a statement about "the concrete", whatever that may be, namely that it divides itself, becomes non-actual, and is thereby self-moving. He is suddenly speaking here about the entirety of things. It is highly characteristic of Hegel that the small things remind him of the very greatest, and that they can be images or springboards at any moment leading to thoughts about the ultimate truth. In this he resembles both other philosophers and also poets. Perhaps it was not for nothing that the poet Hoelderlin was his roommate during their student years in Tuebingen. He makes clearer what the concrete might be by his example of a circle which rests in itself holding its moments together. The concrete is a whole whose parts have their reality or actuality in the context of their unity. The word itself comes from a latin verb, "to grow together". That the circle "holds its moments together as substance" may suggest that Aristotelian notion of substance according to which the primary substances, or beings are individual living things: an immediate particular horse or human, and Aristotle's reiterated point that the color or size or other attributes of the horse can only be because the horse is. They are the accidental, only actual in their context with others. It is the monstrous power of the negative that allows us to separate them off and think of them one at a time, to give them abstract being in and by our separating attention. That is, we negate their connection to their whole, we negate the whole itself and we cling to the dead remnant, this or that particular attribute we have chosen to attend to. It is only because we can do this that we can follow the motions of the concrete as it moves itself. More properly, our doing this is part of the same self-motion of the whole. This is a bold claim, and one that may be disagreed with at several levels. One may say that Hegel did not think this was true or that although he thought it was true, he was wrong.

I am more interested in the latter objection, because it seems to me that even if Hegel never did think that being and thought were one, it remains a much more interesting way to read him to behave as if he had. Parmenides is clearly on record as having said so,

and if western philosophical thought is a circle which Hegel says he himself completes, then he should be found giving full development to the earliest beginnings, and returning to unity with them.

But let me say a little more about the negative. It is central to Hegel's thought that human beings are essentially negating beings. All we do is negate: every word or deed has the form of undoing the apparent givenness or completeness of a thing or a thought. Every determination, in the sense of further definition of a thing, is a negation, and every negation is a further determination. This means that no negation is an annihilation. Every negation says something more about something that is there.

He remarks somewhere that we do not even leave the air we breathe or the water we drink alone: we must warm them or cool them to keep them within certain bounds, we flavor them, we prefer to consume them within containers, and so forth. It is striking that this can all be described as negating. Aristotle might have said we completed nature with art. Already in Plato, though, in the dialogue called The Sophist is the thought that each thing can only be what it is by containing as it were a large pinch of non-being, namely the otherness from all the other things it is not. The pervasiveness of non-being constitutes the essentially negative relation of each thing to all others, and also its unity with them. One begins to see the possibility that negativity might be the stuff the world is made of, not just something we do. What if the whole of things were a kind of active negativity, whose work upon itself had been to negate its own simplicity and homogeneity, and thus give rise to the manifold world? Time itself would only be one of the results of such activity, so it wouldn't really make sense to speak of a beginning of such activity in time, as if time must already have existed by itself first. Plainly the activity must always have existed, and everything with it. That is, the One and the Many are themselves one.

That is what I think Hegel means when he says that the concrete divides itself and makes itself into the non-actual, and thereby is self-moving. The concrete, taken in its broadest possible meaning, is the whole of things: the grown-together substance that is all being, in its almost unspeakably complex and seemingly inexhaustible set of self-relations. Looked at as a whole, it has a stillness, as when Timaios says that the Cosmos has no legs because it has nowhere to go. But it is not content to be a still whole, but is a self-moving whole by setting its parts free, by dividing itself into what is non-actual, at least by comparison with the actuality of the whole, namely into individual beings who must, insofar as they are separate, reveal that separation by dying, becoming other than what they are. This becoming is the self-motion of the whole. It is the temporality of all the parts in this atemporal whole that Hegel has in mind when he speaks, as he so often does, of moments. "What is separated and non-actual is an essential moment".

This over-arching structure is present everywhere: in the transactions Hegel follows so closely whereby a whole thought or experience seems to present its truth as completely contained in one aspect or attribute of itself, and in the way that one aspect, precisely by its insistence on its own completeness and reality, inescapably takes on a new meaning, becomes other than itself. Individual thoughts and beings have their own wholeness and concrete substantiality, and they, too, are self-moving by dividing themselves into non-actual moments; thus the whole is reflected in its parts. "Moment" is such a good word because it brings out the continuous and the discrete at once. Robert Bart once explained it by reference to the instant at the top of the trajectory of an object thrown straight up: that moment is perfectly continuous with every other in the continuous single motion from the ground back to the ground, and there is no finite time during which the body is at rest, yet there must be an infinitesimal moment between rise and fall, distinguishable from both. The sense of a distinguishable shape which is nonetheless part of a continuous process in time is what Hegel wants to express. The world is the way it is, in space and especially in time, because everything both as continuous and discrete is an expression of the force of the negative, finding itself in its own dismemberment.

The pure "I" is this self-separating force, seemingly existing all by itself, negating everything else, as when Descartes discards every thought and experience that is in any way dubitable and is left only with the certainty of his thinking ego, as negating. The "I" which is an active emptiness and is capable of containing everything while remaining negatively related to it all, i.e. doubting it all, is a good image of the whole itself. Of course the "I" does not in fact exist all by itself, but only in its negative relation to all else, and even in this it mimics the whole. The "I" is the place where the whole can become transparent to itself, in microcosm.

But I fear I have let myself be carried away with the intoxicating magnificence of the Hegelian project, and have not said enough to those who feel the beginnings of revulsion from his work. If what one demands most of all is clarity, one will be disappointed, perhaps scarcely less in my talk than in Hegel himself. But what are the assumptions of the demand for clarity? I think they are again atomistic, in the sense that perfect clarity requires there to be certain simple thoughts separate and fully defined, whose intelligibility is entirely self-contained, and which by combination with one another make up more complex thoughts, as atoms of elements make up molecules, of compounds. Unfortunately, anything whose intelligibility was truly self-contained, or was, as the founders say in the Declaration, self-evident, would have no relation to anything else and thus could not help to explain anything else.

Hegel is very rightly anti-atomistic, and if I could only thank him for one thing he taught me, it would be for the realization

that materialism and atomism, in spite of all the powers they have brought us, do not represent completed thoughts or any kind of rock-bottom to being. It is a shame to study Philosophy for four years and emerge with no higher standard for truth or reality than the hardness of a table-top, or a rock from the moon. Marx, in his effort to get beyond, or out from under Hegel, secured his fame among radical German University students forever by saying, "All Philosophy heretofore has merely re-interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it". Stirring as this may sound, it is hard to change something whose nature one does not yet understand, and short-sighted to declare that we already do understand the nature of material. Marx's deeper reply might be that all our understandings of the world have arisen in our efforts to change it, but this would be an answer borrowed from Hegel and his notion of negation.

Another reason one might have for an antipathy to Hegel is the importance of System in his thought. It is possible to feel terrified at the prospect of an enormous structure in which absolutely everything has its place, somewhat as do the souls of the dead in the Divine Comedy. The totality of the Hegelian system may seem to pave the way for political totalitarianism, and it may in fact have done so, both via the thought of Marx, and directly. Lenin's last project in Switzerland before his return to Russia followed by the Russian revolution, was over the course of a winter to read the entirety of Hegel's Logic. Hegel's anti-atomism extends to the individual human being as well, and hence conflicts with the Hobbesian doctrine of the priority of the individual over the state and with the concomitant teaching, dogma in the United States, concerning individual rights. We might as well recognize that our present understanding of human rights and of the legitimacy of government as dependent upon the consent of the governed, is not God-given, and may not be an ultimate truth, advantageous as we may concede it to have been to our nation and its citizens. What one might say next is probably a sufficient topic for a talk unto itself, but if you find yourself interested then I urge you to consider Mr Kates's preceptorial on Hegel's Philosophy of Right.

I hope I am leaving some time for a question period, during which you can tell me how I have neglected to address your particular reasons for disliking Hegel, but I would like to get to the end of paragraph 32 of the Preface.

Spirit is this power only by looking the Negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the Subject, which by giving determinateness an existence in its own element puts up abstract immediacy, i.e. the immediacy which merely is at all, and thus (the subject) is authentic substance: that being or immediacy whose mediation is not outside of it, but which is this mediation itself.

The subject is the "I", which takes the abstract simplicity of some being that merely exists, that is, that merely seems to be given and to be what it is in indifference to anything else, chooses some determinateness or attribute of the thing to tear away and treat as if it were not thereby dead but had being on its own, that is, gives it an existence in thought, the proper element of the "I", and thereby is itself authentic substance, namely a being which has its otherness or mediation within itself.

Of course the only being which could have all otherness within itself would be the whole.

But Hegel here shows the subject which thinks at all to be an image of the whole by mediating itself through its thoughts of other things. As the self goes on finding the truth in progressively more complex and self-related thoughts, it comes closer and closer to thinking the whole and thus to thinking itself as it is in its truth. We are thus seeking ourselves in our search for truth, and what Hegel elsewhere describes as a way of despair is also a path of successively deeper self-recognitions.

