

HEGEL ON REPRESENTATION AND THOUGHT

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I

The Classical and Symbolist Theories of Mind

According to H. H. Price,¹ there have been two major approaches to understanding what it is to have a concept: the classical theory and the symbolist theory. The classical theory, whose heritage extends at least to Plato, takes having a concept to be a relation to a special sort of *object*, usually called a *concept* or *universal*. The kind of relation the thinking mind has to this object is most often conceived as analogous to sight, a version of the classical theory which Price calls *inspectivism*.

Opposed to this rich tradition stands the more radical approach of the symbolists. On this approach, having a concept consists in possessing a certain ability, in particular the ability to engage in *symbolic* activity. "The symbolist philosophers, when *they* talk of concepts or abstract ideas, treat them not as inspectable entities ('objects of thought') but as dispositions or capacities. To possess a concept, they tell us, is just to have the acquired capacity for using one or another sort of general symbol."² The symbolists take the basic sense of having a concept to be dispositional, a disposition acquired (at least in the case of simple concepts) by abstraction from an original occurrent encounter with an instance of the concept through sense experience. Employing the concept is a later actualization of such a disposition. Those who take images as primary and words as secondary symbols that must be understood in terms of the primary symbols (Price cites Berkeley) are called *imagists*; those who take words to be the primary signs or symbols with which we think, Price calls *nominalists*.³ Neither of these approaches to understanding the nature of thought commits one to a representational view, i.e., the view that thought is to be understood in terms of the thinker's possession of an inner representational system which bears some semantic relation to the world.

Nonrepresentational symbolism has been given a spirited defense by Ryle. But once one says that thinking is overt symbolic activity, the move to admitting that there is also covert symbolic activity within an internal representational system seems irresistible, given the variety and richness of

intelligent human activity. The pressures on the classical view to posit an internal representational system, however, seem not nearly so strong, since the relation to the universal which defines this approach can be variously interpreted and need not be thought of as a relation to an internal representation of the universal. The following table roughly sketches the possible positions and gives some putative examples in each category.⁴

	Representationalist	Nonrepresentationalist
Classical Theory	Possessing a concept of A = Standing in some relation R to an inner representation of A. (Plato, Descartes)	Possessing a concept of A = Standing in some relation R' to A itself. (Russell and Moore in their realist period)
Symbolist Theory	<i>Imagist</i> : Possessing a concept of A = Having the ability to image A. (Berkeley) <i>Nominalist</i> : Possessing a concept of A = Being able to use mental word 'A'. (Hume, Geach)	Possessing a concept of A = Being able to behave appropriately toward A and the absence of A. (Ryle, Skinner)

The classical inspectivist and symbolist theories of thought are too narrow to account straightforwardly for the full range of thought; each has a different area of strength. The classical theory is more suited to an account of our thought about abstracta, while the symbolist theory seems specially suited to our thought about concreta. When I think about what I had for dinner, it seems implausible to claim that I am inspecting a universal or concept, and much closer to the truth to say that various images, visual and gustatory, or various words, such as "omelet," "potato," or "sauerkraut," are flashing through my mind, and that my thinking consists in the rehearsal of these symbols and the adoption of different attitudes or behaviors toward them. On the other hand, the idea that mathematical thinking consists in the inspection of or insight into the nature of pure intelligible entities has long had a (perhaps surprising) power to it.

Hegel made a studious attempt to reconcile and do justice to the truth in each of these theories by incorporating the strong points of each into a highly structured theory of mental activity.⁵ Contrary to what one might expect, Hegel rejects the classical representational theory of Plato and Descartes and unites symbolic representationalism with classical nonrepresentationalism.

Problems with Symbolism

The symbolist theory maintains that thinking is *nothing but* the rule governed manipulation of symbols or signs. But even at first blush only the *knowledgeable* or *intelligent* (though not necessarily conscious) manipulation of symbols could be plausibly identified with thought, and that seems either circular or regress-generating.⁶

Hegel's predecessors often did not exploit fully the possibilities of their position. All too frequently they slip into talking as if the simple possession of a symbol, its mere presence before the mind, is sufficient to constitute having the appropriate concept. The lure of the classical, relational picture of concept possession is evident in this tendency. This view is made plausible by the idea that there is a set of natural symbols which wear their meanings on their sleeves, namely, the symbols for simple concepts. Simple concepts were supposed to be intelligible independently of any other concept, even in isolation from all others, and were represented in the mind by nonconventional symbols either generated by perception or already innate. If the symbolist then forgets that he or she takes the dispositional sense of concept possession to be basic, the occurrence of the thought and the occurrence of the symbol seem identical, making it easy to infer that the thought and the symbol are identical. Such a view leads toward the possibility of having a concept by having present to the mind a symbol which is not connectable in any way with any others. Conflating concept possession with the simple presence to mind of a symbol results in a very poor theory of thinking and one particularly inept at dealing with self-reflection, for it abandons the essential symbolist insight into the active nature of thought.

Hegel strongly attacked this weak but popular form of symbolism. Since symbol and concept are identified, mental activity seems to be decomposable into various distinct operations upon symbols—thinking, remembering, imagining, etc.—and the unity of conceptual activity as such gets lost. Rather than engaging in one complex activity with many essential components, we seem only to engage in assorted simple activities. Thus, Hegel complains, thinking becomes just another faculty of mind alongside others.⁷ Furthermore, the content of thought then appears to be without intrinsic connection—a set of individual, discrete universals.⁸ From the weak symbolist point of view, any connection between two concepts must appear totally contingent; necessary, intrinsic connection between concepts must be impossible, for there are no necessary connections between symbols.

Such a conception of thinking condemns all thought to being incapable of containing the Truth.⁹

Hegel does maintain, however, that all subjective thought is tied to symbol and sign manipulation. We think *in* words, he says;¹⁰ whenever we think, the thought is embodied in a sign or symbol.¹¹ The thought *is* not the sign or symbol, but rather is at work through the sign or symbol.¹² Thinking expresses itself in the *use* of a sign. When we think about thought, we think about what is at work in the symbols or signs that are presented to us.

Problems with the Classical Theory

Classical theories claim that thinking consists in the mind's standing in some relation to a *universal*. But how, then, can we think about individuals? The answer must be that we have no such contact with them *qua* individuals.

Attempts by classical theorists to explicate the *nature* of the relation between mind and universal have not been very successful. The metaphor of seeing has dominated such attempts.¹³ Inspectivism is a child of substantialist theories of mind, theories in which the mind itself is reified as an entity related to its objects in the way a person perceiving physical objects is related to them. Inspectivism, like symbolism, is threatened with either circularity or a regress, for, as Kant saw, perception itself involves thought and therefore relation to the universal. Hegel puzzled over how an individual mental entity could represent a universal:¹⁴ a representational version of classical inspectivism seems to boil down to the obviously inadequate theory that there are signs the mere presence of which to mind constitutes possession and exercise of a concept, a theory Hegel rejects, as we have already seen.

Hegel does not completely reject the classical theory, however. How and why he thought it had to be salvaged is revealed by his understanding of the problems of representationalism. The idea of a nonrepresentational symbolist theory of mind was entirely foreign to him: the existence of internal symbols in imagination and memory he took to be patent. So Hegel considered symbolism to be committed to representationalism. Yet he believed representationalism entailed certain consequences which condemned it as a final answer about the nature of thought.

Problems with Representationalism

Hegel was well aware of the pressures within any representational theory of mind that tend to cut the mind off from external reality, keeping it trapped behind a veil of ideas. For whatever semantic relation is supposed to exist

between our representations and their objects, its veridicality must remain forever beyond our ken. If this worry is taken seriously, even our self-knowledge is threatened.

Epistemological skepticism and the problem of the thing-in-itself are vitally linked for Hegel. Both are often motivated by entirely separating the subjective from the objective world to be cognized, by adopting a picture of the mind as an inner space populated with merely subjective representations.¹⁵ But then, since we have access to our representations only, we cannot independently ascertain whether they are indeed veridical representations or whether there is any relation at all between our representations and any other reality. We cannot even ascertain whether they are correctly characterized as representations. The Kantian answer to such empiricist skepticism, the division of knowledge into possible phenomenal and impossible noumenal knowledge, Hegel took to be a sham. Knowledge that is not knowledge of things as they are is not knowledge at all: Kant's theory is just another form of skepticism, according to Hegel.

Purely representational theories of mind, Hegel believed, condemned one to subjective idealism, an intolerable position in which he thought Kant was mired. Hegel did not reject representationalism wholesale, for he believed that as a theory of perception and the lower cognitive functions that involve sensory elements (intuition and *Vorstellung*), representationalism had to be the correct answer. There needed to be a nonrepresentational anchor for our mental activity, however, which would ensure that our knowledge is of things as they are in themselves.

Hegel's rejection of representationalism in order to escape subjective idealism depends upon his other metaphysical positions. In particular, his claim that the *universal*, and not the individual, is the substance of the world is crucial. We cannot have other actual individuals in our minds; this is why our dealings with such individuals in perception, imagination, etc., is representational. But the idea of having universals themselves in the mind has not equally seemed to be impossible. Often enough it has been claimed that this is the only place they exist. It is our knowledge of the universal—the object of pure thought—that is nonrepresentational and fully objective, according to Hegel; because the universal is the in-itself of the world, we are not condemned to subjective idealism, but rather know things as they are in themselves. Hegel does admit that we *can* represent universals to ourselves (and do so in art and religion), but to do so is not yet to have achieved true thought. In true thought we stand in a nonrepresentational relation to the object of our thought, which must always be a universal. Thus we turn next to explicating the nature of the universal, the object of

thought, and the nature of its relation to the thinking mind.

II

Hegel's attempt to reconcile representational symbolism and nonrepresentational classicism revolves around his notion of a concrete universal. He believed that his predecessors had started off on the wrong foot by assuming an absolute distinction between individuals and universals. He attempted to overcome this rigid distinction by arguing that both the individual and the universal are to be reconceived as *moments* of a more complex, articulated unity, the concrete universal, or concept. For our purposes, his technical terms "concrete universal" and "concept" can be treated as one. His basic argument for reconceiving the world in these terms is that we are otherwise incapable of reaching a fully coherent conception of the world. That argument, however, is beyond our bounds here.

The Active Concrete Universal

A concrete universal is different from the *abstract* universals which previous thinkers in the classical tradition took to be the object of thought.

The universal of the concept is not a mere sum of features common to several things, confronted by a particular which enjoys an existence on its own. It is, on the contrary, self-particularising or self-specifying, and with undimmed clearness finds itself at home in its antithesis. (*Enc.* #163)

An abstract universal is a tag which can be hung on things otherwise quite indifferent to it in order to sort them out; a concrete universal, on the other hand, must reach to their very hearts and afford an explanation of their being. An abstract universal is static and unchanging because it is dead, a mere sum of otherwise unrelated features. A concrete universal, however, is alive, dynamic, and dialectical: it is essentially a part of a self-developing system.

...but also *a* concept is, first, in its own self *the* concept, and this is only one and is the substantial foundation; second, *a* concept is *determinate* and it is this determinateness in it which appears as content: but the determinateness of the concept is a specific form of this substantial oneness, a moment of the form as totality, *of that same concept* which is the foundation of the specific concepts. This concept is not sensuously intuited or represented; it is solely an object, a product and content of *thinking*, and is the absolute, self-subsistent object, the logos, the reason

of that which is, the truth of what we call things. (WL, I, 18; SL, 39)

The foremost characteristic of a concrete universal is that it is *active*. The whole universe is the realization of a universal activity, and this activity is the concrete universal. Its mode of action is teleological, that is, it is self-realization; the concrete universal is both cause and effect, it is self-developing. Second, a concrete universal is the *truth* of those objects it characterizes and animates. It is their essence, that which explains what they are and why they behave the way they do. Third, a concrete universal is not separable from its instances, but actively manifests itself in and through them. Fourth, concrete universals, concepts, have an essence of their own, *the* concrete universal, which realizes itself in the active self-realization of its contributory moments. Concrete universals are essentially parts of a self-realizing system.

Hegel attributes a self-constituting activity (like that of the Kantian self) to every concrete universal, to all concepts. Any unity of a manifold which is not actively involved in the very nature of the elements, while also constituting its own self in the activity, is to that degree a merely abstract universal. What ultimately *is*, according to Hegel, is a universal self-constitutive activity which becomes self-conscious in our knowledge of it—the Absolute.

The Rejection of Inspectivism

It is Hegel's ontology that allows him to break away from representationalism and the classical tendency toward inspectivism, for at the highest level of pure thought, he believes, the concept is not an inert entity we inspect, but is rather the activity we *are*. Instead of standing apart from a universal or a representation that we somehow "look" at, in pure thought we become a special *realization* of the concrete universal, and realizing a concrete universal is not the same as representing it.¹⁶ Hegel ultimately transcends representationalism, abandoning a common assumption shared by most philosophers, at least since Descartes.

Hegel takes thought to be a certain distinctive and dynamic, structured activity. He is a symbolist to the degree that he holds that this activity must be realized as symbolic activity in a subjectivity, but he refuses to identify thinking with any specific set of symbolic activities; he also refuses to say that the action upon the symbols is itself symbolic. Rather, Hegel insists that when we are thinking, the symbols themselves, the representations before the mind, are inconsequential. What really counts is what we do with the symbols. The activity actually operating upon the symbols—for which the symbols are but "pieces in a game"—is thinking. This activity is not,

of course, a kind of action performed by some homunculus upon inner symbols. Rather, the activity is implicit in the symbols themselves; they are symbols for concepts by virtue of participating in a system of demands and permissions, and in this sense they are codes which directly invoke activity.¹⁷ While Hegel would admit that symbols are not the things they symbolize but only representations of them, he would not say that the system of demands and permissions which govern the interactions of the symbols (in veridical thought) is only a representation of the demands and permissions which govern the interactions of the things symbolized.¹⁸ Real thinking, which, according to Hegel, is always veridical, is achieved when our internal symbol system is governed by the *same* rule system as the world. Thinking is to be identified with the instantiation of this rule system; our ability to think true thoughts about the world is based upon the fact that we instantiate the same rule system that governs the world.¹⁹ In philosophy this rule system also becomes the object of our thought, not by our symbolizing it to ourselves, but by our self-consciously participating in the system, self-consciously playing the game. Thus Hegel rejects a representationalistic reading of thought, rejects inspectivism, and synthesizes the symbolist and classical theories through the claim that in thinking the active universal is present in our symbolic activity.²⁰

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Notes

¹This distinction is taken from H. H. Price, *Thinking and Experience* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1953), though perhaps loosely.

²*Ibid.*, p. 309. Hegel and Price both use "symbol" and "sign," but whereas symbols for Hegel have some natural connection with what they symbolize and signs do not, it is just the reverse for Price. This terminological matter should not bother us.

³While lately there have been few advocates of the classical view—Gödel and Church, perhaps—the symbolist tradition is clearly dominant, especially in the cognitive sciences. Within the contemporary debate no one would adopt a pure imagist position, but there is considerable controversy over the forms mental representation might take and the possible role of images and natural language words in thinking. See Ned Block, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), vol. 2, or Ned Block, ed., *Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1981), for a representative sample of positions.

⁴The examples are meant only to be suggestive; each of these thinkers is too complex to

be adequately characterized in this simple chart.

¹I use "mental activity" here to signal that my concern is with Hegel's theory of what he calls "subjective thought." Hegel distinguishes subjective thought—what goes on in the minds of individual thinkers—from objective thought—the working of reason in the world at large. See *Enc.* # #24 and 25.

²This is a relative of what Daniel Dennett calls "Hume's Problem" (*Brainstorms* [Montgomery, VT: Bradford Books, 1978], pp. 102, 122). There are two answers that symbolists give to this problem. The answer given by Dennett, Fodor, etc., avoids the regress/circle by analyzing intelligent capacities into complexes of *less intelligent* capacities. Ryle, on the other hand, replies by giving an adjectival analysis of intelligence: doing *X* intelligently or knowledgeably is not doing *two* things concurrently, namely, doing *X* and thinking about *X*, but is instead a matter of *how* one does *X*. Both these strategies cut the regress/circle; the most satisfactory theory might combine them. For evidence that Hegel noticed this problem, see *Enc.* #455, though I find no evidence that he saw either of these ways out of the problem.

³*Enc.* #20.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Enc.* #25. We shall return to his reasons for this below when we examine his critique of representationalism.

⁶*Enc.* #462.

⁷*Enc.* #462, *Zusatz.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹For a sustained critique of visual metaphors in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁰The section of the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* entitled "Vorstellung" traces the stages in which our mental representations become increasingly universal in content.

¹¹Rorty (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) also criticizes this inner space metaphor at length.

¹²This is one of the points of his discussion of thought in # #20-25 of the *Encyclopedia*. Only in this way can we make good sense of his distinguishing between objective and subjective thought while maintaining their identity. This also explains why philosophy or thought is the *self-movement of the concept*, which we, as it were, simply observe (*Enc.* #238, *Zusatz*; also *Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, pp. 485-88; *Science of Logic*, pp. 824-27).

¹³In Douglas R. Hofstadter's popular book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), a distinction is drawn between inert and active symbols. Hofstadter, along with other contemporary symbolists, insists that active symbols are spatiotemporal entities and in the final analysis their interaction is to be explained causally. Hegel, in effect, would deny that such symbols are physical entities (according to him, they are like mental utterances) and would probably even more strongly deny that their interaction is to be explained by the laws of physics and chemistry. The interaction of such symbols must be explained entelechially, as being the fulfillment of a *telos*.

¹⁴Otherwise, he would have to deny the identity of subjective and objective thought.

¹⁵Hegel sees the world as the interplay of concrete universals. But thinking is precisely

that: an interplay of concrete universals. He distinguishes objective thought and subjective thought, the only difference between them being their venue and mode of realization. Objective thought is realized everywhere; subjective thought is realized within individual subjectivities (through their symbolic activity). But Hegel insists on the identity of the two forms of thought.

²⁰I have had helpful criticism from numerous people, most importantly W. Sellars, A. Baier, W. E. Kennick, and Jay Rosenberg, as well as the members of the Propositional Attitudes Task Force: Murray Kiteley, Jay Garfield, Chris Witherspoon, and the late Herb Heidelberger. My thanks to them all.