

## *Representing versus Thinking*

In Hegel's account of the increasing generality of spirit's productions, the theory of the structure of representations may seem an attempt to solve the problem of generality by sophisticating the perception-based "new way of ideas" found in Locke and Hume. But in the long run, Hegel believes, all such approaches fall short of a full explanation of the nature of thought, for real thinking is something that differs in kind, not just in degree, from the imagistic abilities of representing. My task in this chapter is to explain Hegel's distinction between representing and thinking in preparation for our examination of his theory of the structure of thought in the following chapter.

### TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THOUGHT

#### The Classical and Symbolist Theories of Mind

According to H. H. Price, there have been two major approaches to explaining what it is to have a concept, the classical and the symbolist theories.<sup>1</sup> In the classical theory, whose heritage extends at least to Plato, having a concept is a relation to a special sort of object, usually called a concept or a 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

1. This distinction is taken from H. H. Price, *Thinking and Experience*.

inspectivism. Opposed to this rich tradition stands the more radical approach of the symbolists. On this approach, having a concept consists of 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."<sup>2</sup> The symbolists take the basic sense of having a concept to be dispositional—the disposition being acquired (at least in the case of simple concepts) by abstraction from an encounter with an instance of the concept through sense experience. Using 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.<sup>3</sup>

Neither classical nor symbolist accounts of the nature of thought are necessarily representational, that is, committed to the view that thought is to be understood in terms of the thinker's possession of an inner representational system that bears some semantic relation to the world. Nonrepresentational symbolism has been given a spirited defense by Gilbert 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 seem not nearly so strong, since the

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.

3. Although lately there have been few advocates of the classical view—Kurt Gödel and Alonzo Church, perhaps—the symbolist tradition is clearly dominant, especially in the cognitive sciences. Within the contemporary debate there are none who 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*, vol. 2, or Ned Block, ed., *Imagery*, for a representative sample of positions.

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.<sup>4</sup>

Theory	Representational position	Nonrepresentational position
Classical	Possessing a concept of <i>A</i> = standing in some relation <i>R</i> to an inner representation of <i>A</i> (Plato, Descartes)	Possessing a concept of <i>A</i> = standing in some relation <i>R'</i> to <i>A</i> itself (Russell and Moore in their realist period)
Symbolist	Imagist: Possessing a concept of <i>A</i> = being able to image <i>A</i> (Berkeley) Nominalist: Possessing a concept of <i>A</i> = being able to use mental word " <i>A</i> " (Hume, Geach, Sellars)	Possessing a concept of <i>A</i> = being able to behave appropriately toward <i>A</i> 's and the absence of <i>A</i> 's (Ryle, Skinner)

The classical inspectivist and symbolist theories 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, whereas the symbolist theory seems especially suited to our thought about concreta. It seems implausible to claim that, when I think about what I had for dinner, I am inspecting a universal or concept; it seems 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 and interaction of these symbols. On the other hand, the idea that mathematical thinking consists of the inspection of or insight into the nature of pure intelligible entities has long had a (perhaps surprising) power to it.

Hegel makes a studious attempt to reconcile and do justice to the truth in each of these theories by incorporating the strong points of

4. The examples are meant only to be suggestive; each of these thinkers is too complex to be adequately characterized in this simple chart.

each into a highly structured theory of mental activity.<sup>5</sup> 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

In symbolist theory it is maintained 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 can be plausibly identified with thought, and that seems either circular or regress-generating.<sup>6</sup>

Hegel's symbolist predecessors often did not fully exploit the possibilities of their position. All too often they treated simple possession of a symbol, its mere presence before the mind, as 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, namely, the symbols for simple concepts, that wear their meanings on their sleeves. Simple concepts are supposed to be intelligible independent of any other concept, even in isolation from all others, and are represented in the mind by nonconventional symbols—either innate or generated by perception. If the symbolist then forgets to take the dispositional sense of concept possession as basic, the occurrence of the thought and the occurrence of the symbol seem identical, making it easy to infer that

5. I 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 §§24–25).

6. This is a relative of what Daniel Dennett calls "Hume's Problem"; see *Brainstorms* pp. 102, 12. Symbolists give two answers to this problem. The answer given by Dennett or Jerry Fodor avoids the regress 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 strategies defeat the regress; the most satisfactory theory might combine them. For evidence that Hegel noticed this problem, see *Encyclopedia* §455. I find no evidence that he saw either of these ways out of the problem.

the thought and the symbol are identical. Such a view leads toward the possibility of having a concept by having a symbol present to the mind which is not connectable in any way with any other symbol. 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 attacks this weak but popular form of symbolism. Since symbol and concept are identified, mental activity seems to be decomposable into various distinct operations on symbols—thinking, remembering, imagining,—and the unity of conceptual activity as such is 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 (*EL* §20). Furthermore, the content of thought then appears to be without intrinsic connection—a set of individual, discrete universals (§20). 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 truth.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, symbolism, especially as instantiated in the classical empiricist theories of Hume, David Hartley, and James Mill, tends toward the mechanistic, and Hegel is absolutely convinced that no mechanistic theory can be adequate to the phenomenon of thought. Mechanism leaves no room for ends and purposes and thus cannot account for the teleological process of rational thought. Even a mental chemism, as John Stuart Mill liked to call his theory to contrast it with his father's, falls short in this respect. Hegel is committed to a mental organicism, which he takes to mean a teleological holism. The fact that symbolist theories of mind are particularly attractive to materialists and mechanists, however, is not much of an argument against them, even for Hegel, for it is not clear that a mental organicism must eschew symbolism. And in his theory, symbolic representations do play a central role.

7. See §25. We examine Hegel's reasons for this below, in the critique of representationalism.

Hegel in fact maintains that all subjective thought is tied to symbol and sign manipulation. We think *in* words, he says (§462); whenever we think, the thought is embodied in a sign or symbol (§462, *Zusatz*). The thought is not the sign or symbol; rather it is at work through the sign or symbol (§462, *Zusatz*). 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

In classical theories it is claimed that thinking consists of 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 individuals 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 puzzles over how an individual mental entity can represent a universal.<sup>9</sup> 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. Hegel does not completely reject the classical theory, however. How and why he thinks it has to be salvaged is revealed by his understanding of the problems of representationalism. The idea of a nonrepresentational symbolist theory of mind is entirely foreign to him; the existence of internal symbols in imagination and memory is obvious to him. So symbolism is considered by Hegel to

8. For a sustained critique of visual metaphors in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

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

be committed to representationalism. Yet he believes that representationalism entails certain consequences that condemn it as a final answer about the nature of thought.

### Problems with Representationalism

Hegel is well aware of the pressures within any representational theory, pressures that tend to cut the mind off from external reality, keeping it trapped behind a veil of ideas. 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.<sup>10</sup> But then, since we have access only to our representations, 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 regards as 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 believes, condemn one to subjective idealism, an intolerable position. Hegel does not reject representationalism wholesale, however; he believes that, as a theory of perception and the lower cognitive functions that involve sensory elements (intuition and *Vorstellung*), representationalism must be the correct answer. There needs to be a nonrepresentational anchor for our mental activity, however, one that ensures that our knowledge is of things as they are in themselves.

Hegel's rejection of representationalism in order to escape from

10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, also criticizes this metaphor of inner space at length

subjective idealism depends on 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, and so forth are representational. But the idea of having universals themselves in the mind has not seemed as 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 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 when we do so we have not yet 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.

#### HEGEL'S RESPONSE TO THE TRADITIONS

Hegel's attempt to reconcile representational symbolism and nonrepresentational classicism revolves around his notion of a concrete universal. He believes that his predecessors erred in assuming an absolute distinction between individuals and universals and attempts 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

Hegel believes that most of his predecessors have chosen the wrong paradigm of predication. These philosophers—philosophers trapped in the "attitude of the understanding"—have taken

such accidental predications as "The ball is red" as paradigmatic. In such a case there is no intrinsic connection between the universal and the individual it is predicated of—both the universal and the individual seem quite indifferent to each other. Taking this to be the paradigmatic predication relation leads, Hegel believes, to a metaphysics in which the world is seen as composed of nexus of bare particulars (in his terminology "abstract individuals") and ontologically independent universals (he would call these "abstract universals"). Hegel thinks such a metaphysics impossible; to escape being trapped in it one must reject both the abstract individual and the abstract universal.<sup>11</sup>

In the place of accidental predication Hegel considers a version of essential predication as an ideal to be striven toward, for in an essential predication the universal and the individual are intrinsically tied. The essence of something is also seen by Hegel to have some explanatory power; saying of what kind a thing is can be a legitimate explanatory move. But Hegel goes further than this, for an essence, something's concept, is held to be, not a *descriptive* essence, but a *prescriptive* ideal. Something's concept offers an ideal pattern that the thing strives to realize in the course of its existence, although individual things are never perfect exemplars of their essence. In this respect we can begin to see a rather strange melding of Aristotle's concept of essence with the Kantian notion of concept. Kant insisted that "a concept is always, as regards its form, something universal which serves as a rule" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A107). Hegel seizes on three aspects of Kant's a priori concepts—their unrestricted universality, their prescriptive force, and their conceptual priority over their instances—and transfers these properties to the basically Aristotelian conception of an essence or thing-kind.

Hegel also learned from Kant that concepts are not discrete entities that exist and can be known each independent of any others; neither thinker has the notion of a *simple* concept. We can say that Hegel took over from Kant a coherence theory of concepts: even bottom-level basic ideas are to be understood through their interaction with other ideas in basic principles, in contrastive relations, and so forth. Perhaps most important, the crucial relations between concepts need not all be construed as analytic "inclusions"; Kant

11. See R. Aquila, "Predication and Hegel's Metaphysics."

inaugurated the search for nonanalytic but also nonpsychological, rational connections between concepts, and Hegel willingly followed. Thus what Hegel calls a concept is a prescriptive ideal that is part of a system of such ideals that the world is striving to realize and in terms of which we can make sense of what happens in the world. Hegel, however, takes the rule-like character and implicit systematicity of concepts so seriously that he makes a move Kant would never dream of; he insists that the being of the I is the being of a concept, for the I is the rule for the unification of all experience. The unity of apperception is the ideal governing all synthetic activity in the mind. Indeed, since the I provides the ultimate rule—all concepts must be unified under it, including the pure concepts—the I, the self, becomes a super-concept, a concept of concepts (*WdL*, vol. 2, pp. 220–21; *SL*, p. 583).

Every universal of whatever kind unifies something, but, in contrast to abstract universals like red, concrete universals not only unite various different individuals under some heading but also account for their internal unity. The model for this internal unification is the synthesis of the manifold into the unity of apperception. The manifold is unified, according to the Kantian vision, because I make it mine, constituting myself in that very process. Hegel attributes this kind of self-constituting activity to every concrete universal, to all concepts. Any unity of a manifold which is not thus 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. A concrete universal is therefore different from the abstract universals that 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-particularizing or self-specifying, and with undimmed clearness finds itself at home in its antithesis” (*EL* §163, my tr.). An abstract universal is a tag that 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.

In sum, 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; it 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. What ultimately *is*, according to Hegel, is a universal self-constitutive activity that becomes self-conscious in man's 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 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.<sup>12</sup> Hegel ultimately transcends representationalism, abandoning a common assumption shared by most philosophers 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 on the symbols is itself symbolic. Hegel insists rather that, when we are thinking, the symbols themselves, the representations before the mind, are in-

12. This 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; §238, *Zusatz*. See also *WdL*, vol. 2, pp. 485–8; *SL*, pp. 824–7.

consequential. What really counts is what we do with the symbols. The activity actually operating on 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 on inner symbols. 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 that directly invoke activity.<sup>13</sup> Although 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 that govern the interactions of the symbols (in veridical thought) is only a representation of the demands and permissions that govern the interactions of the things symbolized.<sup>14</sup> 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 on the fact that we instantiate the same rule system that governs the world.<sup>15</sup> 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.

13. In Douglas R. Hofstadter's popular book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, a distinction is drawn between inert and active symbols. Hofstadter, along with other contemporary symbolists, insists that active symbols are spatiotemporal entities and that, 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.

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

15. Hegel 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.