

Imagination: Universality and Signification

In Petry's edition of the *Encyclopedia*, it appears from the table of contents that Imagination is subdivided into (a) Reproductive Imagination, (b) Associative Imagination, and (c) Phantasy, which is then itself subdivided into (i) Symbol, (ii) Sign, and (iii) Language. But this division seems to be Boumann's, not Hegel's, for if attention is paid to the architectonic mentioned in the main paragraphs, it is clear that Reproductive Imagination and Associative Imagination are one and the same, and that the three divisions of Imagination are (a) Associative or Reproductive Imagination, (b) Symbolic Imagination, and (c) Sign-making Imagination. I treat them in this order.

ASSOCIATIVE OR REPRODUCTIVE IMAGINATION

Spirit, in the exercise of the ability to set images before itself which are no longer occasioned by the immediate intuition, is the reproductive imagination. As a result of spirit's having gained unconscious control over what is presented to it (which means that reference to the present intuition as stimulus is no longer necessary in the explanation of the occurrence of the mental act), the process of abstraction, analysis, and generalization which was already in evidence in recollection has become more thorough, more advanced. For now, "it is however only within the subject, in which it is preserved, that the image has the individuality in which the

determinations of its content are linked together, for its immediate, i.e., its initially merely spatial and temporal concretion, its being a unit within intuition, is dissolved" (§455). In recollection, the contents of the images were still complete spatiotemporal objects as met with in intuition, although abstracted from their spatiotemporal context. But when the skills of construction have reached the sophistication involved in imaginative reproduction, the distinct determinations met with and united in the experience of a spatiotemporal object become dissociable from each other, no longer hanging altogether in natural clumps. The connection between determinations is no longer given by the general rules of construction or the particular knowledge of spirit; in forging the connection, spirit no longer follows the rules constitutive of objectivity but unites the determinations in accordance with some subjective general representation. "The reproduced content, as belonging to the self-identical unity of intelligence and produced from intelligence's universal mine shaft, has a general representation for the associative relation of images, of the representations which, in accordance with other circumstances, are more abstract or more concrete" (§455, my tr.).

The picture of mind operating in reproductive imagination which emerges from these remarks seems to be the following. In recollection, mind achieves the ability to generate images of each particular determinateness an object may possess, but intuition is still a controlling factor. In the reproductive imagination, these abilities are freely exercised, but they are not informed with a rational order either; they are governed by arbitrary associations. In more intuitive language, having only encountered red fire trucks and green lanterns, with the power of imagination I can separate and recombine these into images of green fire trucks and red lanterns. Images of particular determinations are produced, not individually without any connection, but as realizations of a more general representation, which, however, can be quite abstract, a mere association.

What we want to know is the nature of this general representation. We have already noted that images have a certain generality; we must now see that imaginative representations have a higher level of generality: "Images are already more general than intuitions; however, they still have a sensuously concrete content whose relation to other such contents I am. In that I now direct my

attention to this relation I obtain general representations—representations in the proper sense of the word. For that through which the individual images relate to each other is precisely what is common to them” (§456, *Zusatz*, my tr.). Hegel goes on immediately to explain this common element: “What is common is either a certain particular aspect of the object raised to the form of universality, such as the red color of the rose for instance, or the concrete universal, the genus; in the case of the rose for instance, the plant” (§456, *Zusatz*).

We can now understand more exactly what has been accomplished in the earlier stage of recollection and here in reproductive imagination. The abstract general representation within the mind in recollection was still the representation of a particular individual object, and its generality was that of subsuming beneath it the multiplicity of intuitions in space and time to which it could give rise. Strictly speaking, it is only now, at the level of the associative imagination, that we have achieved a truly general representation, namely, the first representation of such things as redness and humanity.

It is important to note that Hegel distinguishes two different forms of universality, although they are not distinct for subjective spirit at this level: there are particular abstract properties and there are concrete universals. What is the difference, and why is it so important? Hegel himself identifies the concrete universal with the genus, and other texts make it clear that Hegel thinks of the genus of a thing as giving its essence, its concept, its ideal type, the peculiar unity among the otherwise contingent determinations which makes the thing what it is. In associative imagination both kinds of universal become indifferently available to spirit, but the associative imagination draws no distinctions between them. It is only at the stage of thought that this distinction can be made by spirit, for only at that point has spirit so systematized its own products that it can isolate the crucial nodal points within the system.

It is here within the treatment of the associative imagination that Hegel discusses briefly what he takes to be the shortcomings in the previous treatments of this subject, specifically, the notion of laws of association of ideas and of abstraction. His first attack on the laws of the association of ideas is merely terminological, for he points out

that "it is not *ideas* that are associated," which is true in his system, since his definition of "idea" is quite different from any given by anyone working in the empirical tradition he is attacking. But this hardly strikes a death blow. His other criticism, however, cuts deeper. He claims that the "modes of relation" commonly considered under this heading are not *laws*, "the precise reason for this being that the same matter is subject to so *many* laws, that what occurs tends to be quite the opposite of a law in that it is capricious and contingent,—it being matter of chance whether the linking factor is an image or a category of the understanding such as equivalence and disparity, ground and consequence, etc." (§455). Associationists of the time often multiplied their "laws" beyond all plausibility (although Hume certainly did not), and when care was taken to keep the number small, they were stated vaguely enough to be quite unscientific in any case.

There is also a deeper criticism lurking here, which we can restate as follows. In physics the fundamental laws are relatively few, and they apply universally. There can be great complexity in their application, thus rendering the actual calculation and prediction of specific events practically impossible, but this is not a difficulty with the theory; it creates no problem in employing the theory to *explain* events, for they are all explained in parallel fashion. The so-called laws of psychological association, however, are in a very different situation. There are even greater difficulties with prediction—but this might at first be thought to be merely practical. What is more important is that these laws are not treated as universally applicable; in constructing a post hoc explanation, we do not mobilize the full set of laws but choose one that will give the proper result, and accordingly the other laws must not hold. In one case we invoke the law of associating resembling representations, in another case we invoke contiguity, and in a third, causation. There is, or at least seems to be on the Humean account, nothing to decide which laws get invoked until after the fact; the laws are to that extent merely ad hoc. And this points up a nonpractical difficulty in using these laws to construct predictions about what a person will think: even having specified the antecedent conditions, we cannot decide which law will be the one obeyed. Unless we have a higher-order law to give us some method of deciding this, we are in principle barred from predicting. Thus, I believe, it is not merely the multiplicity of

purported associative laws which is the focal point of Hegel's criticism—Hume avowed only three and Hartley only the law of contiguity—but their *nonsystematic* multiplicity that bears the brunt of the objection. The "laws" of association simply do not share the characteristics of law-likeness with other laws.

Is this a fair objection to Hume and the other associationists? There are things the associationist can do to hold this objection off, such as insist that the laws of association are measures of the probability of a certain kind of idea following another and must be given various weights relative to the background conditions. Thus, in any particular case, prediction is not possible, since the laws are only probabilistic, but all the laws apply, just with different strengths, and all have universality and necessity. But this is not a very happy move, and I am not aware of anyone making it or a similar move at the time. Hume and the other associationists took themselves to be developing a system of laws for the operation of mind in the same way that Newton gave laws for the operation of natural systems. Hegel has seized on some of the significant differences in the formal nature of the two kinds of laws to demonstrate the inadequacy of the associationist program to its own ideal. The ideal of a predictive psychology modeled on physics never attracted Hegel in any case, of course.

Hegel is not yet finished with the associationists, however; he takes a further look at the concept of abstraction. He does not deny the legitimacy of the concept, but he does find fault with the associationists' attempts to analyze it. He claims that associationists think of the abstraction of a general representation as a kind of superimposition of similar images. This has been a common post-Lockean attempt to explain Locke's rather unfortunate pronouncement that the idea of a triangle "must be neither oblique nor rectangular, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but *all and none* of these at once" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. IV, pt. 7, sect. ix, my emphasis). Hegel does not attack this rather confused notion of an abstract idea (which was not Locke's reflective position) straightforwardly, however; rather, he points out that with this in mind one still needs to explain how just these images get combined: "In order that this superposing may not be entirely accidental and conceptless, an attractive force or something of the kind had to be assumed between the similar images" (§455,

my tr.). This remark of Hegel's immediately brings to mind one of Hume's: after discussing the principles of association that govern the mental world, Hume notes that "here is a kind of *attraction*, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to shew itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous; but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown" (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. I, pt. 1, sect. iv). But, says Hegel, it is silly to treat the bond between different images as some sort of attractive force; the bond is spirit itself.

Hegel's point is that representations have the powers they have—they are the representations they are—because of their role in a complex system. The associationists cling here to the idea that our representations are thoroughly natural and that their interactions are also as natural as the causal relations among physical particles. But the holism of representations defeats the conception, for their interactions are not atomistically determined. The system is primary, not any particular property of the representations. The "attractive force" between representations is not an empirically demonstrable entity on empiricist principles; there is no perception of it, and if there were, that perception would be just another impression. Images are not united by some intrinsic attractive force; the postulation of a natural attractive force between subjective entities constitutes a pseudo-solution to understanding their order and connection. An attempt to construct a mechanical model of the mind and of the nature of an idea or concept must fail, for it fundamentally misconstrues the nature of spiritual activity, which is not mechanical but holistic and teleological. And once spirit is recognized as this force, and the images are understood to be determined by the totality in which they participate, the road to the proper understanding of what is spiritual has been opened.

Yet to talk of a free act of spirit is not to say that the ordering of images is chaotic or indeterminate, for "intelligence itself is not only general form; rather, its inwardness is in itself determinate, concrete subjectivity with its own content or worth [*Gehalt*] which stems from some interest, implicit concept, or idea" (§456, my tr.). But how are we to understand such an internal determination? What is the mechanism of determination here? If we say that we have a form of agent causation, not mechanical causation—under-

standing the activity of spirit in the terms that seem to spring most quickly to mind given Hegel's own idiom—we have then set up a picture that presupposes an agent, a mind within the mind itself, the "little man" theory of mind. Clearly this is not something we want to attribute to Hegel. But agent causation is not the only alternative to mechanical causation. Another model of determination is that of an element's being determined by its place in a whole. Hegel's point is that the order of particular images and representations can often be legitimately and usefully explained by reference to the whole train in which they occur, which is itself accounted for by reference to some higher-level mental entity, such as an abiding interest or an attempt to solve a problem, which involves even further holistic reference to the mental life of the subject.

On the basis of this functional determination of mental acts, we can then reintroduce a notion of agent causation in the mental sphere, as is clearly necessary at a later stage, since we can cause thought to occur by trying to think of something, setting oneself to consider a problem, and so on.

This possibility of the holistic explanation of series of mental acts shows up another fault in naive associationism: if the associationist principles are adopted as the sole explanatory principles of mental activity, rational, goal directed thought is unintelligible—or, rather, is unintelligible *as* rational thought. On the basis of the associationist laws alone we cannot distinguish flights of fancy from well-controlled problem-solving patterns of thought. The recognition that series of thoughts come as intelligible units or wholes is the first step toward separating "the play of a thoughtless representing" (§455) from rationally informed thought itself.

SYMBOLIC IMAGINATION

Insofar as individual images acquire a place within a train of thought, they begin to point beyond themselves and thus begin to acquire meaning. This is the next level, the symbolic imagination, which together with sign-making imagination Hegel often calls fantasy. We must not presume that because Hegel talks here of meanings he has moved into quasi-linguistic mental activity, nor is the abstract rational content that unifies the subjective representa-

tions a "hovering presence" or a ghost. It exists *in* the representations and needs them in order to have actual existence: "Thus, while informing [this fund of representations] with its own content, [intelligence] is in itself determinately recollected in it—fantasy, symbolizing, allegorizing, or poetical imagination" (§456, my tr.). Thus a particular image of a particular rose becomes a symbol for all roses, and it is called to mind at times in order to be the particular embodiment of or vehicle for, for instance, a representation of beauty. Which particular rose-image is present to mind when one is thinking about flowers or roses or beauty is entirely unimportant, and the explanation of the occurrence of the image does not account for it in all its particularity, but only in its general formal features. There are of course certain conditions the image must meet to be eligible as a symbol for a certain general representation, namely, it must be an image of something that shares the appropriate property: "This [fantasy] chooses, to express its general representations, no other sensuous stuff than that whose independent meaning corresponds to the determinate content of the universal to be imaged. So, for example, the strength of Jupiter is presented through the eagle, since the eagle is held to be strong" (§457, *Zusatz*, my tr.). But fantasy can operate with complex sets of symbols, and "it is rather by a coherence of details that allegory expresses what is subjective" (§457, *Zusatz*). This level of mental activity underlies the possibility of art, but the discussion of the particular modes of symbolization belongs properly to the philosophy of art and is not discussed here at all. We can note, however, that the art of poetry, as explicitly linguistic, is a strange hybrid between the symbolic and the signfic. It would be interesting to see how consistent with this account of symbols and signs Hegel's treatment of poetry and art is.

Symbolic fantasy is an important turning point in mind's growth to free self-determination, for "insofar as the content it derives from itself has an imaged existence, intelligence is perfected into intuition of itself within phantasy" (§457). Previously what was present to mind was best accounted for by reference either to the external influences on mind (intuition) or to what prior experience the mind had already accumulated together with the present intuition (representation in the lower stages). In symbol fantasy, however, this is no longer true; the particular images, what is present to mind, are now to be accounted for by reference to particular goals or interests

or to larger-scale chunks of spirit's life, such as character or projects. With the ability to symbolize, spirit becomes capable of dealing effectively, although still rudimentarily, with universals beyond the universals of sense. We can symbolize such universals as justice and thus begin to get an adequate grasp on what must otherwise remain beyond the power of sense or recollection. Spirit and thought are themselves nonsensible universals, and the symbolizing imagination marks a significant step toward the self-comprehension of spirit.

Let me summarize metaphorically the route we have watched spirit take. At the level of intuition spirit is, as it were, a mirror of its objective environment. It obeys set laws in reflecting the environment, but these are constant enough to be ignored for most purposes—the explanation of what plays across the face of the mirror is carried by the facts about the environment. But this will not do totally for two reasons, and our attention is directed to the mirror itself. There are or can be flaws in the mirror that need to be taken into account (illusion, madness), and, more important, the mirror itself is not a merely passive reflector—it is active within its reflection, reorganizing the input. At first the reorganization of the input seems merely a matter of adding depth or body to the reflection by including in the now increasingly multidimensional reflection after-images and other perspectives of the objects reflected, but we then notice that some images now are “shadowed” with related but non-coobjectual images, and that these shadows group the images into new suborganizations. We also find some images unrelated to anything in the immediate environment. In our explanations of why the mirror's overall image is what it is, we find these shadows to be of increasing importance, and by grouping them into similarity classes we can develop theories of the character of various mirrors, what their interests are, and so on—and these theories simplify our now otherwise incredibly complex task of explaining why they reflect the images they do.

SIGN-MAKING IMAGINATION

In that spirit only begins at the level of symbolic fantasy to determine itself, to determine its own content, it is only relatively free,

for to embody the general representation it must find an image that exemplifies that property. Spirit advances to sign-making fantasy, for the sign is an arbitrary vehicle for the universal content of spirit, and in the sign spirit achieves a higher measure of freedom. But the transition from symbolic to sign-making fantasy is not clear in the *Encyclopedia*; it seems the proper move, but just how is it effected? Hegel points out several times that the symbol is subjective, and he maintains that this failing is overcome in the sign. "Subjective" is a protean word in Hegel's philosophy, and each of its occurrences demands our attention.

In using "subjective" here Hegel is clearly not pointing out the mentality of the image that serves as symbol. Insofar as we are dealing with mental images here this needs no pointing out; but if we extend our discussion to include artistic images, which Hegel seems to allow, then we are no longer limited to mental images at all. In what other sense are all these things subjective? If the ontological status of the symbols is not relevant, then I suggest that the link between symbol and symbolized is. There is a purely natural connection between the two in that they share common properties. But this does not account for the choice of a particular image as a symbol, for there are presumably many other images that share the natural link to the symbolized. There is no rule to decide what symbolizes what, and no common agreement is necessary for something to be a symbol to someone. To this extent the link between symbol and symbolized is subjective and up to the whim of the agent. In the sign, this subjectivity is supposed to be overcome, but as the sign is also an arbitrarily chosen entity that stands for another, is the sign-signified link not just as subjective? It is subjective, but this case is different in an important aspect. There is no longer a natural link between sign and signified. Whereas symbols can be varied relatively arbitrarily on the assumption that the natural link between symbol and symbolized will carry the brunt of the symbolic labor, such an assumption can no longer be made about signs. Precisely because the link between sign and signified is totally arbitrary, it must be held to consistently; the arbitrary linkage has become the essential tie.¹

1. Even in a private language, if such is possible, the sign-signified relations must be held to consistently if they are to exist at all.

Any semantic relation must depend on certain uniformities. In the case of the symbol-symbolized relation, the crucial uniformities are intrinsic to the respective contents, but the existence of a particular symbol-symbolized relation is dependent on fully arbitrary choice. In the sign-signified relation the crucial uniformity is none other than the continued observance of a once-arbitrary correlation. The original correlation was fully arbitrary, but the existence of a particular sign-signified relation depends on its having become a rule, an objective fact, that the two are correlated.

If this is the sense in which a sign is a more objective embodiment of spirit's representation, why is this to be seen as an advance beyond the more subjective symbol? Because, in making a sign, spirit has broken still further from being determined and has become to an even greater extent the determining factor in its own existence. "In its use of intuition therefore, intelligence displays more willfulness and sovereignty in *designating* than it does in symbolizing (§458)." For in the sign the particular content of the intuition employed has become fully unimportant; it must, of course, have a content, but which content is fully arbitrary. In creating signs "from its own self, [intelligence] then gives its independent representation a definite determinate being, *using* the filled space and time, the intuition *as its own*, effacing its immediate and proper content, and giving it another content as significance and soul" (§458, my tr.). The sign-signified relation is higher than the symbol-symbolized relation because the activity of spirit is now fully responsible for the link. Further, because there need not be a direct sharing of properties between sign and signified, more complex, more abstract, more universal contents can be easily signified than can be symbolized, and thus spirit is able to possess these more abstract contents determinately in the sign.

The sign-making fantasy seems to mark a watershed for spirit in that, due to the markedly increased ability to deal with universals that such signs afford, a significant advance can be made in spirit's self-comprehension, and in particular in spirit's ability to give itself concrete embodiment and expression. "Intelligence *qua* reason starts by appropriating to itself the immediacy it finds within itself . . . , that is, by determining it as *universal*; from here on its activity as reason (§438) is to determine as *being* what is perfected (completed) to the concrete intuition of itself within it, that is, to

make itself into *being*, into the *subject matter* [*Sache*]" (§457, my tr.). In earlier stages the emphasis was on unfolding the universal content of the "found" material. The emphasis now shifts, however, to individualizing and expressing the universal, the proper content of spirit, spirit's inner nature. "It is to be emphasized that insofar as fantasy brings the inner content [*Gehalt*] to image and intuition and this is expressed by [fantasy's] determining it as having being, the expression that intelligence makes itself *be* or makes itself into a thing should not seem peculiar, for its content [*Gehalt*] is intelligence itself, as is the determination intelligence gives the content" (§457, my tr.).

Spirit's self-comprehension makes its first recognizable appearance here, but it is still severely limited by the mode of universality available to sign-making fantasy, for it is confined to the abstract universal and is therefore merely formal. "The formations of phantasy are recognized everywhere as such unifications of what is proper and internal to spirit [the universal] with what is intuitable [the singular]; . . . As the activity of this unification, phantasy is reason, but insofar as the capacity [content, *Gehalt*] of phantasy as such is a matter of indifference, it is merely *formal* reason, whereas reason as such determines the truth of the content" (§457).

We are now on the brink of language, but we must be aware that not all signs are linguistic signs. Hegel's first examples of signs are cockades, flags, and gravestones. These are signs, for their link with what they signify is fully arbitrary and conventional. Indeed, to the extent that they lack the semantic structure we find in language, they are more adequate examples of signs than words are, for linguistic structure looks beyond the imaginative activities we have been discussing, anticipating the standpoint of thought, of the understanding in particular. The ability to create signs Hegel calls the productive memory; he reserves the term "memory" (*Gedächtnis*)² for sign-using mental activity, "for although in general usage memory is often taken to be interchangeable and synonymous with recollection, and even with representation and imagination, it is never concerned with anything but signs" (§458).

2. Unlike *Erinnerung* (etymologically, "inwardizing"), which we translate "recollection," *Gedächtnis* seems to be derived from the past participle of "to think." Perhaps it is for this reason that Hegel uses it for the higher activity of signification.

Although language itself is the product of the later stage, memory, Hegel devotes a good deal of time in §459 to a discussion of the nature of the linguistic sign per se, for the linguistic sign, in particular not the written sign but the spoken, exhibits the nature of being a sign most fully. As a sign, "intuition . . . acquires the essential determination of having being only as a sublatedness. . . . In its truer shape, the intuition of a sign is therefore a determinate being within *time*—determinate being which disappears in that it has being, while in accordance with its further external, psychical determinateness it is the positedness of the *tone*, which intelligence furnishes from the anthropological resources of its own naturalness, the fulfillment of the expressiveness by which inwardness makes itself known" (§459).

Spirit's being is spatial and temporal, but since space is static and time active and moving, spirit expresses itself more adequately in time than in space. The tone is "physicalized *time*" (§401, *Zusatz*), and, in the tone, space and time find a relation that parallels the abstract nature of their relation in spirit itself to a surprising degree. "For in the tone, corporeality becomes posited temporally as motion, as an internal oscillation of the body, a vibration, as a mechanical shock through which the body as a whole moves only its parts without having to alter its relative place, sublates its indifferent juxtaposition by positing its inner spatiality temporally, and by this sublation allows its pure inwardness to emerge from the superficial alteration brought about by the mechanical shock, before immediately restoring itself" (§401, *Zusatz*). In the tone, the activity of spirit is evident as activity, rather than as frozen in the spatial self-externality of the written word.

Hegel is attempting here to give a proof that spoken language is metaphysically or ontologically prior to written language, an attempt that depends both on his analysis of the nature of spirit and on certain theses of his philosophy of nature. The attempt does not succeed, for we can no longer take all his premises seriously. But from this priority Hegel derives the superiority of alphabetic over hieroglyphic writing systems, since in an alphabetic system the signs do not directly signify representations but rather signify the tones that are naturally used to signify representations. Insofar as the alphabetic system is an encoding of the phonemic system, which is both temporally and metaphysically prior to it, it is both a

more adequate or proper and a more efficient expression of spirit than a hieroglyphic system. Hieroglyphic systems, for instance, tend to be tainted with symbolism rather than being pure signs. There is, however, no sudden break between symbolic and sign systems, for our spoken language has its roots in the onomatopoeic replication of natural sounds. But, as elsewhere in Hegel's thought, the fact that onomatopoeia is only the beginning of language shows that it is the lowest level, unessential (§459).