

Handout for Lecture 3:
“Force and Understanding: From Object to Concept
The Ontological Status of Theoretical Entities and the Laws that Implicitly Define Them”

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My first interpretive claim is that the topic unearthed and bequeathed for investigation by perceiving consciousness is the nature and status of theoretical entities: unobservables that can only be known inferentially.

My second interpretive claim is that in Hegel’s discussion, *force* stands in allegorically for theoretical entities generally. The consideration of “force” is a way of talking about the class of things that are only *inferentially* epistemically and semantically accessible. One of the main issues being addressed is the ontological status of those postulated, only inferentially accessible unobservable theoretical entities.

The true world, the world of things as they are in themselves, is now taken to consist of the theoretical entities, whose interactions produce the observable effects (in the allegory, the expressions of the forces) that constitute its appearance, what it is for consciousness. This is what I call “invidious Eddingtonian theoretical realism.” It is a theoretical realism in that, like Eddington in his famous essay, it identifies the real with the theoretical entities that are postulated as actual, whose activity is understood as the source of what is observable. It is invidious insofar as it understands the observable/theoretical distinction to be an ontological one, and, turning on its head the implicit instrumentalism of empirical consciousness understanding itself as sense certainty and as perceiving, treats *only* the theoretical entities as real.

The way this move gets made in *Force and Understanding* is that the play of forces, which in invidious Eddingtonian theoretical realism stood in allegorically for theoretically postulated reality known about inferentially via the mediation of observables that result from the interactions of solicited with sets of soliciting forces, itself is unmasked as an appearance, as being not reality as it is in itself but only what it was *for* the understanding consciousness at the end of its first tripartite experience (which led from force and its expression, through the doubling of forces, to the play of forces). At this turning-point

The Understanding, which is our object, finds itself in just this position, that the inner world has come into being for it, to begin with, only as the universal, still unfilled, *in-itself*. The play of Forces has merely this negative significance of being *in itself* nothing, and its only positive significance that of being the *mediating agency*, but outside of the Understanding... What is *immediate* for the Understanding is the play of Forces; but what is the *True* for it is the simple inner world. [PhG 148]

[T]his play of Forces is so constituted that the force which is *solicited* by another force is equally the *soliciting* Force for that other, which only thereby becomes itself a soliciting Force. What is present in this interplay is likewise merely the immediate alternation, or the absolute interchange, of the *determinateness* which constitutes the sole *content* of what appears: to be either a universal medium, or a negative unity. [viz.: inclusive ‘also’ or exclusive ‘one’]... Each of these two sides, the *relation* of soliciting and the *relation* of the opposed determinate content, is *on its own account* an absolute reversal and interchange [Verkehrung und Verwechslung]. But these two relations themselves are again one and the same, and the difference of *form*, of being the solicited and the soliciting Force, is the same as the difference of *content*, of being the solicited Force as such, viz. the passive medium on the one hand, and the soliciting Force, the active, negative unity or the One, on the other. In this way there vanishes completely all distinction of *separate*, mutually contrasted *Forces*, which were supposed to be present in

this movement, for they rested solely on these distinctions; and the distinction between the Forces, along with both those distinctions, likewise collapses into only one. Thus there is neither Force, nor the act of soliciting or being solicited, nor the determinateness of being a stable medium and a unity reflected into itself, nor are there diverse antitheses; on the contrary, what there is in this absolute flux is only *difference* as a *universal* difference, or as a difference into which the many antitheses have been resolved. [PhG 148]

The concept of appearance must be decoupled from that of what is observable (sensuously immediate), and reconstrued along the lines developed in the *Introduction*. That is, appearance is the status a way things could be has to consciousness when it is discovered *not* to be how things are in themselves, but only how they were *for* consciousness—that is, through the experience of error. In this sense, theoretically postulated entities can be discovered to be merely apparent, and observable ones can retain the status of the real.

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What is immediate for understanding consciousness is different from what is immediate for empirical consciousness understanding itself as sense-certainty or as perceiving. The immediacy in question is not *sensuous* immediacy, the immediacy of what is noninferentially *observable*, but the immediacy of what is *thinkable*, what is graspable by being placed in a conceptual space, articulated by relations of material consequence and incompatibility (mediation and determinate negation). It is in this sense that the play of forces is immediate for Understanding: it is a set of actualities interacting according to modal relations of necessity, possibility, and impossibility in virtue of which it is *conceptually* articulated and so *immediately* graspable by empirical consciousness conceived of as understanding, that is, as grasping thinkables precisely in virtue of their standing in just this sort of relation to other thinkables.

The assumption that the reality side of the reality/appearance distinction lines up with the unobservable side of the observable/unobservable (sensuously immediately accessible vs. inferentially mediately accessible) distinction, characteristic of the invidious theoretical realism of this first form of understanding consciousness is to be rejected, just as the identification of reality with the observable side, characteristic of sense-certainty and perceiving consciousness was rejected by understanding consciousness.

A number of lessons are taught by this first (three-phased) experience of understanding consciousness: the ontological legitimacy of merely inferentially accessible entities, the essential role played by actuality in filling out the modal structure of necessity and possibility that articulates determinately contentful states of affairs, and the need for a holistic conception of what it is to be determinately contentful. The principal overarching form of the move being made, comprising these lessons, is however the transition from thinking in terms of force to thinking in terms of law. This is a shift of focus, consonant with the holistic

lesson, from *relata* to the *relations* that, it has been learned, functionally define and determine those *relata*. Instead of asking about the nature and ontological status of theoretical *entities*, in the sense of items that are only inferentially accessible, semantically and epistemically, to empirical consciousness, consciousness conceiving of itself as understanding now asks about the *relations* in virtue of which anything at all is inferentially accessible. These are relations of necessity, possibility, and impossibility that constrain and determine the actual interactions of thinkables: the determinately conceptually contentful states of affairs we think about.

I take it that one of the large lessons Hegel wants to teach us through the subsequent discussion in this chapter is that it is a mistake to reify the laws, that is, to think of them as constituting a supersensible world. To do that is to think of statements of law as functioning like ordinary ground-level empirical statements, as describing or representing some way the world is. To use that representational model is to think of statements of law as stating superfacts. Hegel wants to move us beyond this *representational* semantic paradigm to an *expressive* one. Statements of law should be understood as making explicit something that is implicit already in ordinary empirical descriptions of how things are. What they make explicit are alethic modal features of the conceptual articulation of objective empirical states of affairs in virtue of which they are the determinate states of affairs they are. The notion of representation has a place in this larger picture, but it is not the exclusive Procrustean semantic model to which all statements should be assimilated.

Hegel considers a final way in which the representational semantic model deployed by empirical consciousness conceiving itself as understanding can be applied to yield a construal of the relations between law and the world of empirical appearance (the “play of forces”). This is what he calls the “inverted world” [verkehrte Welt].

According, then, to the law of this inverted world, what is *like* in the first world is *unlike* to itself...Expressed in determinate moments, this means that what in the law of the first world is sweet, in this inverted in-itself is sour, what in the former is black is, in the other, white. [PhG 158]

The view being considered reifies the necessity-structured (lawfully related) possibilities that strongly contrast with actuality into another world, alongside the actual world. It is a supersensible world since unlike actuality, possibilities cannot be sensuously immediate, and so cannot even supply observationally delivered premises from which other merely possibles could be known inferentially.

In the law of motion, e.g., it is necessary that motion be split up into time and space, or again, into distance and velocity. Thus, since motion is only the relation of these factors, it—the universal—is certainly divided *in its own self*. But now these parts, time and space, or distance and velocity, do not in themselves express this origin in a One; they are indifferent [gleichgültig] to one another, space is thought of as able to be without time, time without space, and distance at least without velocity...and thus are not related to one another through *their own essential nature*. [PhG 153]

His response begins with the idea that understanding the sense in which force and mass are distinct but necessarily related by Newton’s second law requires thinking about how statements of the law function in *explanation*, to begin with, in *inference*.

[T]he law is, on the one hand, the inner, *implicit* in-itself [Ansichseiende] being, but is, at the same time, inwardly differentiated...this inner difference still falls, to begin with, only within the Understanding, and it is not yet posited *in the thing itself*. It is, therefore, only its *own* necessity that is asserted by the Understanding; the difference, then, is posited by the Understanding in such a way that, at the same time, it is expressly stated that the difference is not a *difference belonging to the thing itself*. This necessity, which

is merely verbal, is thus a recital of the moments constituting the cycle of the necessity. The moments are indeed distinguished, but, at the same time, their difference is expressly said to be *not* a difference of the thing itself, and consequently is immediately cancelled again. This process is called “explanation.” [Erklären] [*PhG* 154]

The claim that the objective pole of the intentional nexus cannot properly be understood apart from an understanding of the subjective pole, and so of the whole intentional nexus marks a decisive move in the direction of Hegel’s idealism.

I see the move being made here as the second in a three-stage process of articulating ever more radical commitments collectively constituting Hegel’s final idealist view.

- The first commitment is to what I have called “conceptual realism.”
- The second commitment is to what I call “objective idealism.”
- The third is to what I call “conceptual idealism.”

I offer these claims as a tripartite analysis of Hegel’s idealism, claiming that his view in the *Phenomenology* is what you get if you endorse all of them. I take it they form a hierarchy, with each commitment presupposing those that come before it.

The objective idealism that comes into view in the *Force and Understanding* chapter is a thesis about understanding. More specifically, it is a view about the relation between understanding the subjective pole of the intentional nexus and understanding the objective pole. I take it to be a symmetric claim: one cannot understand the objective pole without understanding the subjective pole, and *vice versa*.

There is a semantic distinction between two sorts of dependence relation that is fundamental to understanding the thesis of objective idealism. This is the distinction between reference-dependence and sense-dependence of concepts.

The concept law is sense-dependent, but not reference-dependent, on the concept explanation.

Objective Ontological or Metaphysical Categories:	Subjective Pragmatic Categories:	Syntactic Categories:
Objects/Properties or Particulars/Universals	Referring/Classifying	Singular Terms / Predicates
Facts	Asserting, Claiming, or Judging	Declarative Sentences
Laws	Explaining as Inferring	Universally Quantified Subjunctive Conditionals

For Hegel *if* there is a reciprocal sense-dependence relation between the notion of material incompatibility that applies to properties, hence facts, and is expressed in laws in the objective realm, and the notion that applies to classification by applying predicates, making claims and judgments, and explanatory inferences in the subjective realm of thought, *then* corresponding sense-dependences will hold at all of the levels retailed in the chart above.