

Handout for Lecture 4:
“Infinity, Conceptual Idealism, and the Transition to *Self-Consciousness*”
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“Infinity” [Unendlichkeit] is Hegel’s term for a distinctive structure of identity constituted by necessary relations among different “moments”, each of which is what it is only in virtue of its relations to the others and its being comprised by the whole it is a moment of. It the final form of understanding consciousness.

The principal lesson we are to learn from the final experience of understanding consciousness is that this holistic structure of identity and difference that results from this progressive process of making explicit what is implicit in empirical consciousness is the structure of *self-consciousness*. It is this discovery that the key to understanding empirical consciousness lies in self-consciousness that motivates for us the expository narrative transition from the *Consciousness* chapter to the *Self-Consciousness* chapter.

Empirical consciousness understanding itself under the concept of infinity understands consciousness as consciousness of a difference that is no less *immediately* cancelled...it is a distinguishing of that which contains no difference, or *self-consciousness*. I distinguish myself from myself, and in doing so I am directly aware that what is distinguished from myself is not different [from me]. I, the selfsame being, repel myself from myself; but what is posited as distinct from me, or as unlike me is immediately, in being so distinguished, not a distinction for me. [PhG ¶164]

Two sorts of assimilation are already on the table: conceptual realism and objective idealism. Conceptual realism says that what things are in themselves, no less than what things are for consciousness, is in conceptual shape.

Objective idealism says that the concepts articulating what is *to* understanding consciousness what things are in themselves and the concepts articulating what is *to* it what things are for consciousness are reciprocally sense-dependent.

I think that Hegel is gesturing at a third idealist thesis—what I will call “conceptual idealism.”

The argument of the closing passages of *Force and Understanding* has three phases. It starts with a characterization of the lessons to be learned from consideration of the final form of the supersensible world understanding takes itself to confront: the inverted world. The second phase consists of remarks about the structure of identity in and through difference that Hegel calls “infinity.” The concluding phase is the claim that we can see (though it cannot yet) that in conceiving its object on the model of such an infinite structure, understanding consciousness has put itself in a position to recognize itself in its object—that it has actually become a form of consciousness that does not merely presuppose self-consciousness, but *is* a form of self-consciousness.

From the idea, then, of inversion, which constitutes the essential nature of one aspect of the supersensible world, we must eliminate the sensuous idea [Vorstellung] of fixing the differences in a different sustaining element; and this absolute Notion of the difference must be presented and understood [darstellen und auffassen] purely as inner difference...

Certainly, I put the ‘opposite’ here, and the ‘other’ of which it is the opposite there; the ‘opposite’, then, is on one side, is in and for itself without the ‘other’. But just because I have the ‘opposite’ here in and for itself, it is the opposite of itself, or it has, in fact, the ‘other’ immediately present in it. Thus the supersensible world, which is the inverted world, has at the same time overarched [übergriffen] the other world and has it within it; it is for itself the inverted world, i.e. the inversion of itself; it is itself and its

opposite in one unity. Only thus is it difference as inner difference, or difference in its own self, or difference as an infinity. [160].

What is wrong with the inverted world [verkehrte Welt] is not the inversion, but the reification of it into a world—just as what was wrong with the conception of a supersensible “calm realm of laws” was the reification of laws into superfacts.

[O]nce the tautology ‘The world is described by descriptive concepts’ is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*. [In “Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities,” in H. Feigl, M. Scriven, and G. Maxwell (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. II (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), §79.]

The alternative he is recommending in place of descriptivism is a distinctive kind of *expressivism*. Modal claims, it is true, do not simply describe the actual. (Laws are not superfacts.) But that is not because they describe something else. It is because they express something implicit in the actual. They express the exclusive differences in virtue of which any actual state of affairs is the state of affairs it is.

Infinity, or this absolute unrest of pure self-movement, in which whatever is determined in one way or another, e.g. as being, is rather the opposite of that determinateness, this no doubt has been all along the soul of all that has gone before...but it is as ‘*explanation*’ that it first freely stands forth... [PhG ¶39].

The movement of the understanding that first shows up as inferentially traversing the moments in explanation is an aspect of the larger movement that in the *Introduction* Hegel calls “*experience*.” The focus of the discussion of experience in the *Introduction* is the experience of *error*.

In his conception of experience as the experience of *error*, Hegel emphasizes the *critical* rational task-responsibility: the responsibility to resolve conflicts arising from the *material incompatibility* of judgments.

As we saw in discussing the *Introduction*, the rational requirement to revise one’s commitments in the face of their incompatibility gives experience the shape of a continual unmasking of what was *to* consciousness the way things are in themselves, what it took to be the facts expressed by true judgments, as appearance, as merely what things were *for* consciousness. In addition to this emphasis on and interpretation of the significance of the critical dimension of the rational responsibilities constitutive of Kantian apperception, Hegel adds a further one that is decisive for his account of experience. It is a *recollective* rational task-responsibility, given prominent place at the metalevel in *Absolute Knowing* under the heading of “Erinnerung.”

To understand this recollective phase of experience it is helpful to think of it in Fregean terms of sense and reference. In the generic way in which I want to approach these terms, talk about “senses” is talk about what is sayable and thinkable. It is what is in suitable conceptual shape to be the content of (possible) knowings, in Hegel’s terms what things can be *for* consciousness. Talk of “reference” is talk about what is talked or thought *about*, what is there to be (possibly) known, the objective realm of things as they actually are *in themselves*.

Conceptual realism is the claim that the conceptual realm of graspable senses has no outer boundary. This is the view that McDowell expounds in *Mind and World*:

[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the

case. So since the world is everything that is the case . . . there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought. [p. 27]

Hegel's account of the distinction and relation between what things are for consciousness and what they are in themselves, which I am recommending thinking of in terms of senses and referents, is like the Fregean and unlike the Tarskian in that the semantic order of explanation it adopts begins with senses rather than referents. A recollective reconstruction assembles appearances, ways things have been *for* consciousness, into *histories* that display them as successive appearances *of* an underlying reality, presented by the constellation of claims and concepts in which that history culminates (so far). The recollection exhibits a process by which how things really are, in themselves (according to it), was gradually, fitfully, but ultimately successfully revealed by different appearances of it. It traces an *expressively progressive* trajectory through the senses by which the referent was presented to the consciousness that thereby comes to know about it as it is in itself. The sequence of senses is expressively progressive in that each successive step shows up as the making explicit of some feature of how things really are that can now be seen, retrospectively, to have been all along implicit in prior appearances of it. Each progressive step consists in an experience of error: the presence of an anomaly in the form of incompatible commitments, acknowledgement of the anomaly in the form of an effective practical obligation to repair it, a revision of beliefs and concepts (doxastic and commitments concerning material incompatibility and inferential consequence) that resolves the difficulty, and a story about what it was about the situation as it is thus discovered to be that accounts for the prior appearance, both insofar as it is now taken to have been veridical and insofar as it is now taken not to have been veridical.

To know something falsely means that there is a disparity between knowledge and its Substance. But this very disparity is the process of distinguishing in general, which is an essential moment [in knowing]. Out of this distinguishing...comes their identity, and this resultant identity is the truth...Disparity, rather, as the negative, the self, is itself still directly present in the True as such.

For understanding consciousness to conceive itself under categories of *infinity* is for it to understand its object, the objective world as it really is, in itself, as what is revealed, discovered, by the process of experience, understood as having this character.

This truth therefore includes the negative also, what would be called the false, if it could be regarded as something from which one might abstract. The evanescent itself must, on the contrary, be regarded as essential, not as something fixed, cut off from the True...

Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is in itself, and constitutes actuality and the movement of the life of truth.

The True is thus a vast Bacchanalian revel, with not a one sober; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose....[PhG ¶39].

In the *whole* of the movement, seen as a state of repose, what distinguishes itself therein, and gives itself particular existence, is preserved as something that *recollects* itself, whose existence is self-knowledge, and whose self-knowledge is just as immediately existence. [PhG ¶47]. Emphasis added.

Thus *Verständigkeit* too is a becoming, and, as this becoming, it is reasonableness *Vernünftigkeit*. [PhG ¶55].

The path to what I have been calling “conceptual idealism” is paved by the recollective construal of the sense in which the in-itself (“*Ansichsein*”) is implicit in how things are for consciousness.

Already something thought, the content is the property of individuality; existence has no more to be changed into the form of what is in-itself and implicit [*Ansichsein*], but only the implicit into the form of what is explicit, of what is objective to self [*Fursichseins*]. [PhG ¶29].

“[R]ecollection, the inwardizing, of that experience, has preserved it and is the inner being, and in fact the higher form of the substance. [PhG ¶808].

This sense of making or producing the reality behind its appearances (the referents those senses represent) is *sui generis*. Recollection is the *doing* that *produces* the distinction, essential to consciousness, of what is *to* consciousness what things objectively are, in themselves and what is *to* consciousness only how those things appear *for* consciousness. It is what we must understand to understand how that distinction can show up to consciousness itself, and hence why and how the concept of consciousness essentially involves the concept of self-consciousness.

Conceptual idealism asserts a dependence of *semantics* on *pragmatics*. For it explains the semantic relation between sense and reference in terms of *recollecting*: an activity, a practice, a process. Conceptual idealism, in asserting the distinctive kind of explanatory and conceptual priority of pragmatics over semantics that is embodied in taking the recollective dimension of experience to provide the framework within which to understand the institution of semantic relations between representing senses and represented referents, thereby asserts a practical priority of, and asymmetric dependence relation between, norm-governed experiential practices made explicit by the use of deontic vocabulary and nomological tracking relations made explicit by the use of alethic vocabulary.

At this final stage, “what is, for the Understanding, an object in a sensuous covering, is *for us* in its essential form as a pure Notion.” For that reason we can see that “the Understanding experiences only *itself*,” not something experienced as other than itself. [PhG ¶165].

Since this Notion of infinity is an object for consciousness, the latter is consciousness of a difference that is no less immediately cancelled; consciousness is for its own self, it is a distinguishing of that which contains no difference, or self-consciousness. [PhG ¶164].

By contrast to representational thinking:

Speculative [begriffendes] thinking behaves in a different way. Since the Notion [Begriff] is the object's own self, which presents itself as the *coming-to-be* [Werden] *of the object*, it is not a passive Subject inertly supporting the Accidents; it is, on the contrary, the self-moving Notion which takes its determinations back into itself. In this movement the passive Subject itself perishes; it enters into the differences and the content, and constitutes the determinateness, i.e. the differentiated content and its movement, instead of remaining inertly over against it...[A]nd only this movement itself becomes the object. [PhG ¶60].