



The Objectivity of Thought G.W.F. Hegel

The following passage from Hegel's Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences gives a summary in his own manner of the fundamental features of his doctrine of the objectivity of thought, of his metaphysical logic, or identification of the movement of thought with that of world history.

Thoughts may under proper conditions be called objective; and among them are to be reckoned the forms which are treated in the first instance in the traditional logic; and which are usually regarded as merely forms of conscious thought. Logic therefore coincides with metaphysics as the science of things as grasped in thoughts adequate to the expression of their essence.

The relation of such forms as concept, judgment, and inference, to others such as causality, etc., is to be considered when we come to it in our Logic. But it is also to be noted in advance that inasmuch as thought seeks to form a conception of things, this conception (and therewith also its most elemental forms, judgment and inference) cannot consist of forms and relations which are foreign and alien to things. Reflection, it was said above, leads to the general aspect of things; but this itself is one phase of conception. The assertion that there is intelligence — Reason — in the world signifies the same thing as does the expression 'Objective Thought'. This latter expression, however, is inconvenient just because 'thought' is too habitually used only for what belongs to mind, to consciousness, and 'objective' used primarily for the non-mental.

Note 1. When one says that thought — objective thought — is the heart and core of the world it may seem as if consciousness is being imputed to the things of nature. We feel a reluctance to regard the inner activity of things as thought, since we say: Man is distinguished from nature by his ability to think. We should then have to speak of nature as the system of unconscious thought, as of an intelligence which, as Schelling says, is 'petrified'. Instead of using the expression 'thought' it is therefore better, in order to avoid misunderstanding, to say 'thought-forms'. 'The logical' in accordance with what has been said, is to be sought as a system of thought-forms in general in which the opposition of the subjective to the objective (in its usual interpretation) disappears. This interpretation of thought and of its forms is more exactly expressed when...we say there is reason in the world, whereby we mean reason is the soul of the world, dwells in it, is its indwelling principle, its inmost nature, its universal aspect. A more exact illustration is the fact that when we speak of a particular animal we say 'it is an animal'. 'Animal' in general cannot be pointed out, but in every case a particular only. 'Animal' does not exist, but is the general nature of particular animals, and every existing animal is concrete, definite, particular. But to be an animal (the kind in general) belongs to the individual animal and constitutes its definite essence. If we take from a dog its being an animal it is impossible to say what it is.

Things in general have a permanent, inner nature and an external existence. They live and die, arise and pass away; their essence, their universal aspect is the 'kind', and this is not to be understood merely as a 'common quality'.

Thought, which determines the substance of external things, is also the universal substance of what is mental. In all human contemplation there is thinking. Thought is the universal in all perceptions, memories, and in absolutely every mental activity, in all volition, wishing, etc. All these are simply further specializations of thinking. When we understand thought in this way it appears in a different light from what it does when we say we have the capacity to think, among and alongside of other capacities such as sensation, perception, volition, and the like. If we regard thought as the truly universal in all nature and in all mind, it extends over all and is the basis of all. To this interpretation of thought, in its objective significance, we may add at once what thinking is in its subjective meaning. We say first of all, 'man thinks', — but at once we add that he perceives, wills, etc. Man is a thinker and is universal, but he is a thinker only in so far as the universal is the object of his consciousness. An animal is also potentially universal, but the universal is as such not the object of its consciousness, but the individual only. The animal sees a single thing, for instance its food, a man, etc. But all these remain for it merely single things. Similarly sensuous feeling always has to do with single things (this pain, this agreeable flavor, etc.) ...Man alone becomes so 'reduplicated' as to be universal *for* the universal. This is the case in the first instance when man knows himself as 'I'. When I say 'I' I mean myself as this absolutely definite person. Yet in fact I say nothing especial about myself thereby. Everyone else is also an 'I', and in designating myself as 'I' I really mean myself, this individual, but I use a perfectly general expression. 'I' signifies mere self-consciousness in which everything individual is negated and annulled, the ultimate, simple and pure level of consciousness. We may say, 'I' and 'Thought' are the same, or more exactly: 'I' is Thought as Thinking. What I have in my consciousness is conscious object to me. 'I' am this contentless receptacle for anything and everything, for which all things are and which lays up everything into itself. Every man is a whole world of ideas, which are buried in the 'night' of the Self. So Self is the universal in which abstraction is made from everything particular, in which however everything is included. It is therefore not mere abstract universality, but universality which contains everything in it. In general we use 'I' very carelessly; it is only philosophical reflection that makes it an object of attention. In the Self we have pure unmediated thought, an animal cannot say 'I'; — only man, because he is Thought. In the self is manifold internal and external content, and according as this content is constituted do we have the experience of sensation, perception, memory, etc. But accompanying everything is the Self, or in everything is thought. Man is therefore always thinking, even when he is only perceiving; when he considers anything he considers it as a universal. He attends to a particular thing, isolates it, withdraws attention from everything else, takes it as abstract and universal, even if only formally universal.

In the case of our ideas the twofold situation occurs: either the content is thought, but not the form, or contrariwise the form belongs to thought, but not the content. For instance, if I say 'anger', 'rose', 'hope', these are all known to me by feeling, but I express this content in a general manner, in the form of thought. I have therein omitted much that is particular, and given the content only as universal, but the content remains sensory. On the contrary when I have an idea of God the content is really a pure thought, but the form is sensuous, as I find it immediately within me. In ideas then the content is not merely sensuous, as in

visual sensation, but either the content is sensuous and the form a matter of thought, or vice versa. In the former case the matter is given and the form belongs to thought, in the latter case thought is the source of the content, but through the form the content becomes a 'given' one, that thereby comes to the mind from without.

Note 2. In logic we have to do with pure thought, or pure thought-forms. In thinking (in the usual sense) we present to ourselves something which is not merely pure thought, for one means thereby a thought whose content is an empirical one. In logic thoughts are viewed as having no content other than that which belongs to thought itself and which is produced only by it. Thus the thoughts are pure thoughts. So the mind is just pure mind, and therein free. For freedom is just this : in what is other than oneself still to find oneself, to depend upon oneself, to be self-determining. In all impulses I begin with something outside me, with something of such a kind that for me it is external. In such a situation we speak of dependence. Freedom exists only where there is no 'other' for me, which is not myself. The natural man who is moved only by his impulses is not independent. However willful he is, still the content of his volition and of his opinions is not his own, and his freedom is only a formal one. When I think, I give up my subjective particularity, sink myself in the thing, let thought take its own course, and I think badly when I inject anything of my own.

If we, in accordance with what we have said, regard logic as the system of pure thought forms, the other philosophical sciences, the philosophy of nature and philosophy of mind alike appear as applied logic ; for it is the animating soul of them. The interest of all other sciences then is merely to recognize logical forms in the products of nature and mind, products which are only special manifestations of the forms of pure thought. For example, if we take the syllogism (not in the meaning of the old formal logic, but in its true one), it is the law that the particular is the mean which unites the extremes — the universal and the singular. The form of the syllogism is a general form which all things have. All things are particulars, uniting themselves as universals to singulars. The impotence of nature carries with it the consequence that it does not express logical forms in purity. Such an impotent expression of the syllogism is, for example, the magnet, which in the middle, at its indifference point unites its poles, which here in spite of their difference are one. In physics one also learns the universal, — essence; the difference is simply that the philosophy of nature brings to our consciousness the real forms of the notion in the things of nature, — Logic is then the animating spirit of all sciences. The thought-forms of logic are the pure spirits. They are the heart and core, yet at the same time what we constantly talk about, and which therefore appear to be something quite familiar. But what is thus familiar is usually the most unfamiliar. Thus, for example, 'being' is a pure thought-form; but it never occurs to us to take 'is' as the topic for our consideration. One usually believes that the Absolute must lie far away, but it is just the most immediately present, which we carry about with us constantly and use in thinking, even without explicit consciousness of it. In language preeminently are such thought-forms crystallized. And so the instruction in grammar which is imparted to children has this use: it unconsciously calls attention to distinctions in thought.

It is commonly said that logic has to do only with forms, and must derive its content from some other source. Logical thoughts, nevertheless are not 'only' something as over against all other content, but all other content is 'only' something in contrast to them. They are the basis, implicit and explicit, of all. — A higher level of culture is necessary for the directing of attention to such pure forms. The consideration of them in and for themselves

has the wider meaning that we derive these forms from thought itself and out of their own inner nature determine whether they are true. We do not derive them from without and then define them or show their value and validity, judging them by the form they take in our consciousness. For if we were to set out from observation and experience and say, for instance: we are accustomed to use the term 'force' in such and such cases, this kind of definition would be correct when it coincided with the phase of the object which is presented in our ordinary consciousness. However, in this way, a concept is not determined in and for itself, but in accordance with a certain presupposition, which presupposition is then the criterion, the standard of correctness. But we do not need to use such a standard; but to let the living forms themselves take their own course. The question of the truth of the forms of thought seems curious to the ordinary-consciousness. For they appear to have truth only in their application to given objects, and accordingly there would be no meaning in inquiring about their truth without such application. But this is just the question which is now at issue. In connection with it one must know just what is to be understood as truth. Usually we call truth the agreement of an object with our idea. We have then as a presupposition an object to which our idea of it must conform. — In the philosophical sense, on the contrary, truth in general, abstractly expressed, means agreement of a content with itself. This is therefore a quite different interpretation of truth from that previously mentioned. However, the deeper (philosophic) meaning of truth is found in part even in customary speech. Thus one speaks for instance of a true friend and understands thereby one whose actions conform to the conception of friendship; so also does one speak of a true work of art. Untrue means then the same as bad, inconsistent with itself. In this sense a bad state is an untrue state. And the bad and the false in general consist in the contradiction which exists between the form or concept and the existing content of an object. Of such a bad object we can form a correct idea but the content of such an idea is 'untrue' internally. Of such 'truths' which are at the same time falsities we may have many in our heads. — God alone is the true agreement of concept and reality. All finite things have a falsity about them; they have a concept and an existing content, but a content which does not conform to its concept. Therefore they must pass away, whereby the non-conformity of their concept and their existence is rendered manifest. An animal has its concept in its 'kind' and the 'kind' frees itself from singularity by death.

The consideration of truth in the sense here explained, agreement with oneself, constitutes the real interest of logic. In the ordinary consciousness the question of the truth of thought-forms does not occur at all. The business of logic can then be expressed also as follows: the forms of thought are considered, as to how far they are capable of containing the truth. The question then centers about this point: which are the forms of the infinite and which the forms of the finite? In the ordinary consciousness one raises no questions about finite thought-forms but lets them pass without challenge. But all error comes from thinking and acting in accordance with finite forms.

Note 3. One can know the truth in various ways and the modes of truth are to be regarded merely as forms. Certainly one can know the truth through experience; but this experience is only a form. In the case of experience all depends upon the mental endowment with which one approaches the actual. A large mind has large experiences, and sees in the varied play of phenomena what is really involved. The Idea is at hand and real, not something far off and hidden. The great mind, as that of a Goethe for example, as it looks into nature or history has great experiences, sees the rational and expresses it. It is furthermore true

that one can know the truth through reflection, and one defines it by means of the relations of thought. The true in and for itself is, however, not present in its own proper form in either of these two modes. The most perfect mode of knowledge is that in the pure form of thought. Man here acts in perfect freedom. That the form of thought is the absolute, and that the truth is manifest in it as it is in and for itself, — this is the assertion of philosophy in general. Proof of this means in the first place: that those other forms of knowing are shown to be finite forms. The lofty skepticism of the ancients achieved this when it showed of all those forms that they contained contradictions within themselves. When this skepticism attacks the forms of Reason, it injects something finite into them first in order thereby to lay hold upon them. All the forms of finite thought will appear in the course of logical development, and, too, just as they arise in accordance with a necessary law. Here (in this introduction) they must be dealt with at first in an unscientific manner as something simply given. In the logical treatise proper not only the negative side of these forms but also the positive will be shown.

When one compares the various forms of knowledge with one another the first, that of immediate acquaintance, may easily appear the most appropriate, the finest and highest. Under this form falls all that in respect to moral value is called innocence, religious feeling, simple trust, love, loyalty, natural faith. The other two forms, first that of reflective knowledge, and then also the philosophical, emerge from out of that simple, natural unity. In so far as they have this in common with each other, the attitude of desiring to grasp truth through thought may easily appear a bit of arrogance on the part of man, who proposes to know the truth by means of his own powers. As the starting point of all mental disunion, this may certainly be viewed as the source of all evil and wickedness, and as the original sin. And it would seem accordingly that thinking and knowing ought to be given up, in order to achieve a return and atonement. So far as the relinquishing of this native unity is concerned this remarkable disunion of the mind within itself has from ancient times been an object of the consciousness of nations. In the natural state such an inner division does not occur, and natural objects do nothing wicked. An old idea of the origin and consequences of that disunion is given us in the Mosaic myth of the fall of man. The content of this story forms the basis of an essential religious doctrine, the doctrine of the natural sinfulness of man and the necessity of some help for it. It seems appropriate to consider the story of the fall of man at the beginning of Logic, since logic has to do with knowledge and in this story also it is a question of knowledge, its origin and meaning. Philosophy must not shrink from the presence of religion and refuse to hold its place as if it had to be satisfied if religion merely tolerated it. But on the other hand also the view must be rejected that such stories and religious representations are obsolete; for they have the veneration of thousands of years among peoples. Now if we look more carefully into the story of the fall of man we find expressed in it as was remarked before, the universal relation of knowledge to the spiritual life. The spiritual life in its simplicity appears at first as innocence and simple trust. But it lies in the very nature of spirit to transcend this simple state; for the spiritual life is distinguished from the natural, and, more precisely — from animal life, — by the fact that it does not remain on the level of unconsciousness but becomes self-conscious. , But then this state of disunion is likewise to be transcended and the spirit must of itself return to unity. This unity is then a spiritual one, and the basis of that return lies in thought it-self. What inflicts the wound also heals it. — It says in our story that Adam and Eve, the first human beings, — humanity in general — were in a garden in which were a tree of life

and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of God it is said that he had forbidden man's eating of the fruit of the latter tree. Of the tree of life at this point there is no further mention. Herein is expressed the thought, then, that man was not to attain to knowledge but was to remain in the state of innocence. Among other peoples also, of deep insight, we find the idea that the first condition of man was a condition of innocence and inner harmony. In this there is so much of truth — that at any rate in the disunion in which we find all humanity involved we cannot acquiesce. On the contrary it is not correct that the elemental natural simplicity is the right condition. Mind is not merely a simple thing; it contains essentially in it the aspect of mediation. Childlike innocence of course has something charming and touching about it, but only in so far as it reminds us of that which is to be revealed through the spirit. That sort of simplicity which we see in children as a natural thing must be regained as the result of the labor and formative process of mind. — Christ says: Except ye become as children, etc. He does not thereby say that we should remain children. — In our Mosaic story we find, further, that the occasion of their losing their simplicity came to man through external sollicitation (through the serpent.) But in fact the entrance into opposition, the awakening of consciousness, lies in man himself, and this story is repeated in the life of every man. The serpent declares divinity to consist in knowing what is good and what is evil; and it is this knowledge, in fact, which has fallen to the share of man in that he has broken with the unity of his simple existence, that he has partaken of the forbidden fruit. The first indication of awakening consciousness was that the persons observed that they were naked. This is a very naive and elemental touch. In the sense of shame then lies the departure of man from his natural and sensuous existence. Animals, not progressing to the point of this departure, are devoid of the sense of shame. In the human sense of shame, the mental and moral origin of clothing is to be found; the purely physical need is a mere secondary consideration. — Then follows the so-called curse which God placed upon men. The thought emphasized in it bears chiefly upon the opposition of man to nature. Man must labor in the sweat of his brow, and woman bear offspring in pain. So far as -work is concerned in this connection, it is at once the result of the estrangement and also the means of overcoming it. The animal finds immediately at hand what it needs for the satisfaction of its wants; man on the contrary in his relation to the means of satisfying his needs is dealing with what has been wrought out and formed by himself. So in these external things man is dealing with himself. — The story is not yet closed even with the banishment from paradise. It continues: God said, Behold, Adam has become as one of us, for he knows good and evil. — Knowledge is here delineated as divine, not, as before, as what should not be. Herein lies the refutation of the assertion that philosophy belongs only to the finite level of mind. Philosophy is knowledge, and through knowledge is realized the original call to man to be an image of God. And when it says further God drove man out of the Garden of Eden that he might not also eat of the tree of life, the thought is expressed that man on the side of his natural being is indeed finite and mortal, but in knowledge infinite. It is a well-known doctrine of the church that man is by nature evil, and this evil nature is characterized as original sin. But in connection with it the superficial idea that original sin has its basis in a chance deed of the first man is to be abandoned. In reality it lies in the very notion of mind that man is evil by nature, and one must not imagine that this can be otherwise. So far as man is a product of nature and conducts himself as such his condition is one that ought not to be. Mind ought to be free and be what it is through its own choice. Nature is for man merely a preliminary state which he must reconstruct. Opposed

to the profound ecclesiastical doctrine of original sin stands the theory of modern enlightenment that man is good by nature and must remain true to this condition. The emergence of man from out of his natural state is his differentiation as a conscious being from the external world. This state of differentiation characteristic of the notion of mind is however not one in which man ought to remain. Into this condition of disruption all finite thought and volition fall. Man constructs his purposes from out of his own being and draws from himself the material of his own action. So long as he presses these purposes to the utmost extreme, takes cognizance of himself alone and formulates his own private volitions to the exclusion of what is general, he is evil ; and this evil is his subjectivity. At first glance we have here two kinds of evil ; but in reality they are one. Man, in so far as he is a spirit is not a ‘natural creature’. So far as he conducts himself as such a natural creature and follows the objects of sensual desire, he willfully tries to be one. Natural evil in man is therefore not like the natural existence of animals. ‘Naturalness’ has then this more limited meaning, that the natural man is isolated as such, for nature everywhere lies under the bonds of isolation. In so far as man wills a natural state, so far does he will isolation. In opposition to this type of action which is characteristic of natural isolation — from impulse and inclination — there arises, to be sure, law or general regulation. This law may be an external power or have the form of divine authority. Man is in servitude to the law so long as he remains in his natural state. Among his inclinations and feelings man indeed has also social, benevolent inclinations, sympathy, love, etc., which reach out beyond selfish isolation. But so long as these inclinations are unreflective what is potentially universal in them is still in form subjective; self-interest and chance have ever full play here.

G.W.F Hegel. From “Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences.” *Readings in Philosophy*. Ed. Albert Edwin Avey. Columbus, OH: R.G. Adams and Company, 1921.

© SophiaOmni, 2014. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.