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Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 61, Number 1, January 2023, pp. 103-126 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2023.0004*

Untrue Concepts in Hegel's Logic

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ABSTRACT In the following, I argue that Hegel took concepts—not propositions, judgments, or spatiotemporal objects—as the primary truth-bearer in his logic and attempt to offer a defensible interpretation of what it means for an individual concept (or "thought-determination") to be assessed as true or untrue. Along the way, I consider the shortcomings of several alternative interpretations of truth in Hegelian logic, paying particular attention to the now-common contention that a commitment to something like Frege's context principle prevents Hegel from assessing concepts independently of the role that they play in judgments.

KEYWORDS Hegel, truth, concepts, logic, contradiction

INTRODUCTION

In several places, Hegel remarks that his logic is concerned with the truth of certain concepts or "thought-determinations," and that this question is to be distinguished from asking about the truth of the propositions in which these concepts occur.[1] If Hegel does indeed think that individual concepts can be evaluated as true or false apart from their use in propositions, he stands almost entirely alone in thinking so. With one important exception of which he does not appear to have been aware—the Cartesian notion of "material falsity"—this idea has no major predecessors within the Western philosophical tradition.[2] It would further appear that no one after Hegel has attempted to reformulate a similar view. Philosophers have certainly

[1]Hegel published two versions of his logic during his lifetime: the comparatively longer *Science of Logic* (*SL*), which was published in two parts (1813 and 1816), and the comparatively shorter *Encyclopedia Logic* (*EL*) (1817). The most extensive discussion of the question of the truth of thought-determinations is an addition to *EL* §24, but see also GW 21:17/*SL* 18–19.

[2]In the Third Meditation, Descartes says that material falsity, unlike formal falsity, is directly applicable to ideas, particularly sensory ideas. An idea is materially false in the Cartesian sense when it represents what is not a thing as a thing. His main example is the idea of cold, which purports to represent something real but which in fact is nothing but the absence of heat. A similar account of the truth of concepts can be found in Gassendi's *Institutio Logica* (for a very helpful discussion of Gassendi's theory of truth, see Fisher, *Gassendi*).

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found other important ways of evaluating concepts—say, as obscure, or useless, or incoherent—but Hegel would appear to be the only major philosopher who thinks that it is profitable to ask whether individual concepts might be true or untrue.

There are, of course, good reasons to be skeptical of the idea that concepts might be true or false on their own. Aristotle articulates the still dominant (and probably common-sense) philosophical view when he claims that concepts like *red* or *mammal* cannot be true or false by themselves because they fail to assert anything that could be affirmed or denied. He plausibly concludes that only a particular combination of concepts, namely, the attribution of a predicate to a subject, can be true or false. Though the revolution in logic led by Frege overturned Aristotle's subject-predicate view of propositions, it did not affect Aristotle's rejection of the idea that concepts can be true or false. In fact, it arguably made the prospect of a merely conceptual notion of truth seem even more dim, for at least on one currently influential interpretation of Fregean logic, individual concepts not only have no truth value on their own; they also have no meaning apart from the propositions in which they figure.

These reasons to be skeptical of the idea that concepts themselves can be true or false perhaps explain why Hegel's occasional comments to that effect have not figured more largely in the reception of his logic. Whatever the cause, other aspects of his theory of truth have seemed worthier of attention. For instance, the British Idealists, influenced by Hegel's famous statement in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that "the true is the whole" (*PS* ¶20), attributed a view to Hegel according to which all propositions are at least partially untrue insofar as they necessarily fail to express the absolute.[3] Some contemporary readers have found strong parallels between Hegel's rejection of standard correspondence theories of propositional truth and contemporary so-called identity theories, and have attempted to forge connections in that area.[4] Others have found Hegel's discussion of judgment to anticipate Frege's own position, pointing to a kind of semantic holism and a correspondingly processual notion of truth.[5] In addition, the recent growth in interest in reading Hegel as a conceptual realist has led to a renewed focus on the actual examples Hegel gives of his theory of truth in the *Logic*, like that of the true friend, which suggests the centrality of a more ontological or material conception of truth, one that pertains to things, not propositions.[6] Although there are some important exceptions that will emerge throughout the following discussion, Hegel's comments about the truth or untruth *of concepts* have either been ignored by commentators or, more typically, finessed so that they actually point to more conventional truth-bearers, like propositions or material entities.[7]

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[3]E.g. Baillie, "Origin and Significance"; Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*; and Joachim, *Nature of Truth*.

[4]E.g. Baldwin, "Identity Theory"; Halbig, *Objektives Denken*; and the further references in Miolli, *Il pensiero*.

[5]E.g. Brandom, "Some Hegelian Ideas"; Pippin, *Shadows*; and Redding, *Analytic Philosophy*.

[6]E.g. Kreines, *Reason in the World*; and Stern, "Identity Theory."

[7]Hanna ("From an Ontological Point of View," 318–20) and Taylor (*Hegel*, 22–28 and 308) offer two particularly clear examples of the latter tendency. Both initially place great emphasis on the fact that Hegel's theory of truth primarily pertains to categories or thought-determinations, but both end up denying that thought-determinations actually have meaning independently of propositions, thus (in my view) blunting the fundamental insight. Closest to my own position is McNulty, "Logic," 138–39.

In the following, I attempt to textually substantiate the claim that Hegel took concepts as the primary truth-bearer in his logic and to offer a defensible interpretation of what it means for an individual concept or "thought-determination" to be true or untrue. Along the way, I will consider the shortcomings of the alternative interpretations that I have just briefly canvassed, paying particular attention to the now-common contention that Hegel endorsed something like Frege's context principle and therefore could not have possibly regarded concepts as true or untrue by themselves, or apart from the role that they play in judgments.

1. CORRECTNESS AND TRUTH

Hegel is fully aware that the notion of truth employed in his logic is unusual. When he is explaining what he means by 'truth' (*Wahrheit*) to his students, he distinguishes his notion from the ordinary conception, which he thinks is properly termed 'correctness' (*Richtigkeit*). In one remark, he says,

> Correctness and truth are very frequently considered to mean the same thing in ordinary life and one accordingly speaks of the truth of some content where it is a matter of mere correctness. Correctness generally affects merely the formal agreement of our representation with its content [*formelle Übereinstimmung unserer Vorstellung mit ihrem Inhalt*]; however this content may be otherwise constituted. The truth consists, by contrast, in the agreement of the object with itself, i.e. with its concept [*Übereinstimmung des Gegendstandes mit sich selbst, d. h. mit seinem Begriff*]. It may be correct anyway that someone is sick or that someone has stolen something. But such content is not true since a sick body is not in agreement with the concept of life, and so too theft is an action that does not correspond to the concept of human action. (*EL* §172 A)[8]

Hegel claims that we ordinarily think of truth as a matter of the agreement of one of our representations with what it is a representation of (which he here calls the "content" [*Inhalt*] of the representation). In the context from which this particular passage is drawn, it is clear that Hegel is talking about representations that occur in simple propositions or judgments. For example, when we judge that *this rose is red*, Hegel would say we are representing a given rose as red; this judgment is correct (*richtig*) only if the rose that we are representing as red in fact has the quality of being red.[9] Hegel's definition of 'correctness' is very close to the traditional definition of 'truth' as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. On this view, cognition acquires a truth value only when it takes the form of a theoretical judgment, a judgment that predicates something of an object.[10]

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[8]The other significant discussions of the distinction between *Richtigkeit* and *Wahrheit* in the *Encyclopedia Logic* are at §24 A2 and §213 A. All three of these occur in the additions (A) or *Zusätze* (Hegel's lecture room comments as recorded by his students and added to the 1830 edition). Passages from the *Encyclopedia* marked as R refer to the indented remarks that are part of the original text. In the *Science of Logic*, the most important discussion of this distinction occurs in the chapter on judgment: see esp. GW 12:64–65/*SL* 562 and GW 12:69–70/*SL* 567.

[9]Hegel's logic marks a contrast between mere propositions (*Sätze*) and judgments (*Urteilen*) and further distinguishes between four types of judgment. Martin ("Judgments and Posits") offers an extensive discussion of the former distinction, and Harrelson ("Logic and Ontology") offers a good recent account of the four types. My discussion abstracts away from these differences.

[10]The view that truth pertains primarily to cognition and particularly to judgments, and that judgment is a combination of concepts, has a long history in the Western tradition—versions of this are articulated by figures as diverse as Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Locke. For example, in the

Hegel does not have a very developed account of what makes a proposition or judgment correct—certainly nothing comparable to contemporary accounts—but he does not deny that such correctness is important in everyday life and in the empirical sciences.[11] His main concern is that this ordinary notion of truth not be confused with truth in the deeper, more distinctively philosophical sense. His worry is that if we call correctness by the name 'truth,' we will lack the right expression for the "subject matter and aim of philosophy" (GW 12:65/*SL* 562). Although correctness may be an appropriate standard to use in evaluating the propositions found in a book on, say, floriculture or Roman oratory, Hegel thinks it is entirely out of place when it comes to the assessment of rational or philosophical truths. He wants to reserve the word 'truth' to designate the primary standard of evaluation in philosophical contexts, even if that means relinquishing some of its ordinary uses.

So, what is truth in the specifically philosophical sense? In the above passage, Hegel defines 'truth' as the agreement of an object (*Gegenstand*) or content (*Inhalt*) with itself or with its own concept. Similar formulations can be found in the other two places where he discusses truth and correctness in the *Encyclopedia Logic*: for example, he says that truth in the philosophical sense "means in general the agreement of a content with itself, to put it abstractly" (*EL* §24 A2). And in a later passage, he says that "truth in the deeper sense consists in this, that objectivity is identical with the concept" (*EL* §213 A). These formulations are obscure, and there appear to be some subtle differences between them, but they share two features that are useful to identify before we move on to the examples of truth that Hegel provides.

The first is that Hegel clearly thinks that truth in the deeper sense is a relation that something has to itself, not a relation that it has to something else. Whereas correctness involves the agreement of one kind of thing (a representation) to another kind (the object represented), truth involves the agreement of an object with itself or with its own concept. Since the last of these passages states that an object agrees with itself when it is identical (*identisch*) to its own concept, it is natural to think that Hegel is rejecting correspondence theories of truth in favor of an identity theory of truth: a theory that contends that a proposition is true if and only if it is identical with a fact.[12] The identity theory is often seen as attractive because it offers us a way of eliminating the appearance of a gap between mind and world that is generated by theories that regard truth as the agreement

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Critique of Pure Reason, Kant offers a "nominal definition" of truth as agreement between cognition (*Erkenntnis*) and its object (B 82), or the agreement of our concepts (*Begriffe*) with their objects (B 670), and he specifies that such truth can be found only in judgments, indeed a specific class of judgment (B 350). But there is also a minority position, usually taken to be a supplement rather than an alternative to the traditional view, according to which truth is *also* a transcendental predicate of things themselves. This more ontological conception of truth is prominent in the medieval tradition, and Kant explicitly criticizes it at B 113. For an insightful discussion of Kant's views on truth that goes into these issues in greater detail, see Tolley, "Idealism and the Question of Truth."

[11] For some attempts to fill in this gap in Hegel's thought, see Halbig, *Objektives Denken*, 182–87 and 196–201; Westphal, *Hegel's Epistemological Realism*, esp. 112–13.

[12] For a detailed discussion of the relation between Hegel's theory of truth and the identity theory, see Miolli, *Il pensiero*, esp. 105–64. Miolli convincingly argues that the apparent overlap between Hegel's views and contemporary advocates of the identity theory is merely terminological, and dissolves when proper attention is given to Hegel's own vocabulary.

between our propositions, judgments, and the reality they represent (standard correspondence theories).[13] Since Hegel seems to be motivated by a similar concern in this passage, the identity theory might appear to be a perfect fit for him, offering him an effective way of contrasting his own conception of truth as a self-relation with mere correctness, which is problematic because it is committed to some kind of gap between cognition and reality.

But the second feature worth noting is that Hegel thinks that truth in the deeper sense is not a property of our representations of, or thoughts about, certain contents or objects, as both standard correspondence theories of truth and the identity theory maintain; it is instead a property of those contents or objects themselves. We will spend some time investigating what these contents or objects might be in a moment, but even without resolving that issue we can see that Hegel's theory of truth has an unusual view of what is now called the truth-bearer, or the entity that can be said to be true or false. Most traditional and contemporary discussions treat truth as pertaining exclusively to our thoughts or beliefs about things, and debates about the truth-bearer typically revolve around the question of whether these thoughts are best understood as propositions, judgments, sentences, or something along these lines. But for Hegel, truth applies directly to the objects being thought about; it is not a property of what we might think or believe about such objects. This marks a radical enough divergence from traditional approaches to raise the worry that Hegel is not offering a theory of truth at all, but has changed the topic entirely.[14]

Hegel's distinction between correctness and truth, then, goes something like this: correctness is a property that pertains to a representation of an object in a proposition or judgment when that representation corresponds to the object that it is representing; truth in the deeper or philosophical sense is not a rival way to assess the representations that occur in judgments. Instead, it is a way of assessing the objects about which we make judgments by determining whether those objects have the right self-relation. To understand what this means, we need to know more about what kinds of objects we are talking about and what it means for them to have the requisite self-relation, topics to which we now turn.

2. PROPOSITIONAL AND MATERIAL TRUTH

Since Hegel's definition of truth as the agreement of an object or content with itself is formidably abstract, it is fortunate that our guiding passage immediately goes on to provide us with two concrete examples of what Hegel means. He says that "a sick body is not in agreement with the concept of life and so too a theft is an action that does not correspond to the concept of human activity" (*EL* §172 Z). The other two passages that discuss truth and correctness in the *Encyclopedia Logic* use similar illustrations, speaking of a true friend as someone whose way of acting

[13]The resurgence of interest in the identity theory of truth at the end of the last century (see e.g. Dodd, "McDowell"; and Hornsby, "Truth") was partly inspired by some comments to this effect by McDowell in *Mind and World*. But McDowell has resisted the idea that he is committed to an identity *theory* of truth—preferring to describe his own position as simply truistic, as merely an identity *conception* of truth (see "True Modesty," 83).

[14]On this possibility, see Findlay, *Hegel*, 66 and 230.

conforms to the concept of friendship and a true state as one that conforms to the concept of the state. In all of these examples, the object or content that serves as the truth-bearer is a spatiotemporal individual that instantiates a concept. Such an entity is said to be true (*wahr*) if it corresponds to its own concept (the concept of life, or human activity), bad (*schlecht*) or untrue (*nicht wahr*) if it does not.

On the basis of these examples, Robert Stern has argued that Hegel's notions of correctness and truth can be explicated in terms of Heidegger's distinction between propositional truth and material truth.[15] For Heidegger, propositional truth concerns the correspondence between "statements, judgments or propositions" and "the way things are," whereas material truth (*Sachwahrheit*) concerns the "accordance of the thing with its essence."[16] Heidegger illustrates the latter with the medieval Christian doctrine that a created thing (*ens creatum*) is true when it corresponds to the idea of it preconceived in the divine intellect. Stern's claim is that Hegel's remarks about truth in the *Encyclopedia* exclusively concern what Heidegger terms "material truth." For Heidegger himself, of course, both propositional and material truth presuppose a third and more fundamental conception of truth—truth as unconcealment—but Stern does not find any echo of this deeper conception in Hegel.

We have already seen some reason to think that Stern is right to claim that Hegel's theory of truth is not meant as a theory of propositional truth, for although propositions or judgments can be correct or incorrect, it appears that they cannot be true in Hegel's sense. Indeed, Hegel goes so far as to say that it is impossible or absurd to think that truth in the philosophical sense could take the form of a judgment (GW 12:28/*SL* 525). Stern is also right that the examples that Hegel gives of philosophic truth strongly suggest that he is interested in material truth. When Hegel says that a sick body is not a *true* body, or that a theft is not a *true* action, the truth-bearer is clearly some existing individual entity, a thing (*Sache*) in Heidegger's broad sense. This suggests that the objects that we are concerned with in Hegel's theory of truth are not propositions but existing individuals, and that these entities have the right self-relation when they not only fall under the relevant concept, but are also fully exemplary instances of the concept.

There is no question that Hegel's philosophy permits of material applications of the notion of truth, applications to things in the above sense; indeed, his *Realphilosophie* is deeply concerned with such applications.[17] But a closer examination of the context in which these examples appear shows that they are not brought in to make any particular point about the truth-bearer *in Hegel's logic*; Hegel chooses them only because they illustrate the kind of self-relation at issue in logical truth, one that is already present "in the ordinary use of language" (*EL* §24 A2). Once we take this into account, we can see that Hegel's ultimate position on truth is closer to Heidegger's than Stern seems to appreciate, since Hegel would entirely agree with Heidegger that both propositional truth and material truth are philosophically derivative, presupposing a third, deeper conception of truth.

[15]See Stern, "Identity Theory," 78. Kreines offers a similar account, on which the bearers of truth or falsity are "particular individuals" (*Reason in the World*, 251). Neither Stern nor Kreines explicitly deny that another notion of truth, one restricted to thought-determinations, might be operative in the logic.

[16]Heidegger draws this distinction in his essay "On the Essence of Truth" (*Basic Writings*, 118).

[17]I have treated the material applications of Hegel's theory of truth in Alznauer, "Normativity."

We can see this by again referencing our guiding passage (*EL* §172 A). Hegel's remarks about truth and correctness there take place in his treatment of what he calls "the qualitative judgment"; they are proffered to help explain the claim that the qualitative judgment lacks truth. The potential truth-bearer here is thus not a spatiotemporal object, but a kind of judgment. This might seem puzzling given the pains to which we have just gone to *deny* that statements, judgments, and the like are the locus of truth for Hegel. But Hegel is not speaking of the truth of a qualitative judgment or even the truth of all qualitative judgments, but of the qualitative judgment considered *as a logical form.*[18] Hegel is aware that although it is very easy to understand how *a given judgment* might be untrue (in the sense of not corresponding to its object), it is very difficult to understand how *a logical form* could itself lack truth. The examples that he provides (the sick body, the bad action) are supposed to help with this difficulty by showing us a form of untruth that pertains directly to its bearer. The materiality of these examples is orthogonal to his purpose here; there is no hint that the logical form being discussed should itself be regarded as an existing individual like a body or an action. The purpose of these examples is only to show how something could be true or false by itself, rather than true or false by virtue of its correspondence to another entity.

That this is all Hegel has in mind can be confirmed by a closer examination of the role that these material examples play in the earlier discussion of truth in *Encyclopedia Logic* §24. Just prior to introducing these examples, Hegel makes the following claim about the "point at issue" between the ordinary conception of truth and his own conception:

> The question concerning the truth of the thought-determinations [*der Wahrheit der Gedankenbestimmungen*] must appear strange to ordinary consciousness, for after all, they seem to obtain their truth only from being applied to given objects. Consequently, it would make no sense to inquire about their truth independently of such an application. This, however, is exactly the point at issue. (*EL* §24 A2)

Here the contrast is not between a view that regards truth as pertaining to propositions and one that regards truth as pertaining to things, but between a view that regards truth as requiring the predication of a thought-determination to a given object and one that regards truth as pertaining to thought-determinations themselves (regardless of their application to any further object). The material examples that he uses here (the true friend and the true work of art) are only supposed to help us see how a thought-determination might be true *by itself*, without relation to anything outside of it.

In fact, to take these examples as indicating that Hegel is interested in a strictly material sense of truth would be to miss the main thrust of the discussion, which is to identify the basic project of the logic as involving the evaluation of logical thought-determinations as themselves true or untrue. He concludes his discussion of truth and correctness by returning to this issue:

> Truth considered in the sense here, namely as agreement with itself, constitutes the proper concern of logic. In ordinary consciousness, the question regarding the truth

[18] Also see GW 12:27–28/*SL* 525. Hegel consistently distinguishes between the *content* of the judgment, which can be evaluated in terms of correctness, and the *form* of the judgment, which should be evaluated in terms of truth.

> of thought-determinations does not even arise. The business of logic can also be expressed by saying that in it thought-determinations are assessed in terms of their ability to capture what is true. (*EL* §24 A2)

Here, again, thought-determinations are identified as the locus of truth in the *Logic*—not sentences, propositions, or judgments (as in theories of propositional truth) and not existing entities like bodies or actions (as in theories of material truth). Hegel certainly thinks that *propositions* can be correct in the sense of corresponding to reality. And he certainly thinks that *existing things* can be true in the sense of corresponding to their own essence or concept, with God being the highest example of such truth. But the "proper concern" of the logic is neither of these; it is a concern to assess individual *thought-determinations* in terms of their truth or ability to capture the truth (formulations that he treats as synonymous).

3. LOGICAL TRUTH

We have seen that when Hegel speaks of something as true or untrue in the *Logic*, he is referring neither to propositions, nor to individual things, but to what he terms thought-determinations (*Denkenbestimmungen*). These thought-determinations are true to the extent that they correspond to, or agree with, themselves. A complete and thorough discussion of the nature of thought-determinations and of the kind of self-relation Hegel is referring to is impossible here, but we can advance our understanding of both issues by turning to another important passage.

In a remark appended to *EL* §33, Hegel says the following:

> The question whether being, existence or finitude, simplicity, compositeness, and so on are *in and for themselves true concepts* [*an und für sich wahre Begriffe*] must seem odd to someone who believes that there can be talk only of the truth *of a proposition* [*eines Satzes*], that the only question can be whether a *concept* is being truthfully *attributed* (as it is called) *to a subject* or not, and that untruth depended on the contradiction that might be found to exist between the subject of the representation and the concept to be predicated of it. But the concept as something concrete (and even every determinacy in general) is essentially in itself the unity of diverse determinations. Hence, if truth were nothing more than the lack of contradiction, the first thing that would have to be considered for every concept is whether it did not of itself contain such an internal contradiction [*inneren Widerspruch*]. (*EL* §33 R)

This passage is intended as part of Hegel's critique of traditional metaphysics, but there are three more general points that can be drawn from it.

First, the specific thought-determinations that we are concerned with in the *Logic* are concepts (*Begriffe*) like being, existence, finitude, and so on. The list that he gives here suggests that the kinds of thought-determinations that the *Logic* will examine are basic philosophical concepts, not ordinary concepts like *red*, *dog*, or *beer*. In other passages, Hegel refers to thought-determinations like these with different terminology; he speaks of predicates (*Prädikate*) like existence; categories (*Kategorien*) like immediacy; and as we have already seen, forms (*Formen*) like judgment.[19] His preferred term in the *Encyclopedia* appears to be "thought-

[19]Hegel refers to these "thought-determinations" with a variety of different expressions. In the second preface to the *Science of Logic* alone, he calls them *Denkformen*, *Denkbestimmungen*, *Denkverhältnisse*, *logische Ausdrücken*, *Kategorien*, *Formen des Denken*, *Allgemeinheiten*, *Begriffe*, and *bestimmte Begriffe*. Although

determinations," but since that technical expression is sometimes a little unwieldy, and since Hegel is himself comfortable describing thought-determinations as concepts, I use both terms synonymously. It should be kept in mind, however, that the concepts being evaluated for truth in Hegel's logic are a specific kind of philosophical concept that would need to be further determined. On traditional interpretations, the specific concepts that the *Logic* deals with are those that are necessary for there to be any thought whatsoever; they are thus "pure" or a priori, containing no empirical elements.[20] Nothing I say in the following, however, will hinge on that.

The second point that this passage emphasizes is that these thought-determinations or concepts are to be assessed for truth by themselves and not as connected to each other in propositions or sentences (*Sätze*). Hegel explicitly rejects the traditional, Aristotelian view that only propositions can be true, seeing this view as impeding an appreciation of what he is trying to do in his own logic. As we saw earlier, Aristotle claims that a mere concept or category cannot be true or false by itself because truth and falsity only pertain to affirmations and denials, and affirmations and denials are only possible when concepts are combined in a certain way: when a predicate (like 'red') is attributed to a substance (like a rose). Aristotle concludes from these considerations that the "objects to which truth or falsity may belong"—what we are calling truth-bearers—"are combinations of concepts already formed" (*De Anima*, III.6).[21] Although it is easy to treat Hegel's talk of the truth of concepts as a mere *façon de parler*, in this passage Hegel is clearly denying that concepts need to be embedded in propositions in order to acquire a truth value. He both acknowledges the oddity of his view that concepts can themselves be true or false, and reaffirms that this is his view by rejecting the traditional claim that concepts by themselves are too simple to be true or false. In fact, in other places he notes that his attempt to determine the truth of concepts by themselves is almost entirely unprecedented and unique to his view of logic.[22] Passages like these make it very unlikely that Hegel's talk about a thought-determination or concept being true or untrue is intended as shorthand for something that would be better cashed out in terms of propositional truth.

A third and final point worth discussing here is Hegel's suggestion that we might view the untruth of concepts as a matter of internal contradiction (*inneren Widerspruch*), where this is understood as a concept containing incompatible determinations. We have already seen that Hegel characterizes truth, in its most abstract sense, as the agreement of an object with itself; and we have seen that in nonlogical philosophical domains (that is, in his *Realphilosophie*), this self-relation can be understood as a thing agreeing with its own concept or essence: a true friend, to use his example, is a person whose way of acting conforms to the concept

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Hegel sometimes marks distinctions between some of these terms (for example, he has a technical notion of *the* concept (*der Begriff*) which can be contrasted with mere thought-determinations), in most contexts he uses them interchangeably.

[20]See Houlgate, "Logic," 111–14.

[21]Citations from this work are according to book and chapter in the C. D. C. Reeve translation published by Hackett.

[22]Hegel writes, "The truth of these forms for themselves, let alone their necessary connection, has never been considered or investigated until now" (*EL* §162 R).

or essence of friendship. But such material examples of self-contradiction are obviously an awkward fit for logical truth since the objects that logic assesses are not individual things that may or may not correspond to their essence or concept, but are *themselves* concepts. This means that we need a different specification of what it means for this kind of object—a concept or thought-determination—to have or fail to have the right self-relation.[23] This passage suggests that a concept has the wrong self-relation when its content includes contradictory determinations.

The role that contradiction plays in Hegel's logic is, of course, both infamous and controversial. Interestingly, debates over the nature of contradiction in Hegel's logic divide along the same fault lines that we have seen with regard to his theory of truth in the logic. Some take contradiction to be primarily a negation of propositions, characterizing Hegel's view as a form of dialetheism, the view that a proposition and its negation can both be true.[24] Others take contradiction to be primarily a matter of material negation, modeling it on the relation of opposed magnitudes.[25] For these readers, Hegel is viewed as having ontologized the notion of contradiction, applying it to all things. But the remark we are looking at (*EL* §33 R) clearly suggests the possibility of a third interpretation, one like that defended by Karin de Boer, according to which the primary bearers of contradiction in Hegel's logic are not propositions or things, but pure concepts like being, substance, and identity.[26] Although the issue will no doubt continue to be litigated, there are plenty of passages that support de Boer's interpretation, passages that emphasize "the *necessity of the contradiction* which belongs to the *nature* of thought-determinations" (GW 21:40/*SL* 35, emphasis in original).

It is important to note that de Boer's claim that thought-determinations are the primary bearers of contradiction in Hegel's logic is not incompatible with the claim that these contradictions can also be expressed, though in a secondary manner, in sentences or propositions. If a concept like *identity* includes contradictory determinations, there is nothing preventing us from articulating this contradiction in propositional form, in terms of two conflicting sentences ("identity is identity" and "identity is difference") or in a single proposition ("identity and difference are the same") and certainly no one would deny that such paradoxical formulations are pervasive in both versions of Hegel's logic (see, e.g. *SL* 356–61; GW 11.260–65). However, these propositional expressions of the contradiction are misunderstood unless they are seen as expressing a contradiction that was already implicitly present in the concepts they treat. Claiming that the concept is the primary bearer of contradiction in the logic also does not force one to deny that contradiction plays a different, distinctively ontological role in Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, where it serves as a property of things. Contradiction clearly plays that role too, as countless passages throughout Hegel's writings attest. The claim is only that logical truth

[23]Inwood recognizes that it is unclear how to apply the definition of truth Hegel offers here—the correspondence of an object with its concept—to concepts or thought-determinations themselves, but attempts to hold onto it nonetheless (*Hegel*, 170–73).

[24]Ficara, "Dialectic," esp. 42–44.

[25]See Wolff, *Begriff*, 169.

[26]De Boer, "Contradiction," 372. Pippin refers to this as "concept negation" (*Shadows*, 158). Also see the valuable discussion of this point in McNulty, "Logic," 148–49.

requires a specifically *intraconceptual* notion of contradiction, one that pertains to concepts by themselves and is not dependent on either their applications in propositions or their instantiations in things.

4. CONTRADICTORY CONCEPTS

In attempting to specify Hegel's claim that philosophical truth is a matter of the agreement of an object with itself, we have determined that the relevant objects are thought-determinations or concepts and that these objects fail to agree with themselves when they contain contradictory determinations. This presents us with the question of what it means for a concept to be self-contradictory in the relevant sense.

The typical philosophical examples of contradictory or inconsistent concepts are notions like *square circle* and *wooden iron*.[27] To be sure, these are not philosophical concepts of the sort that Hegel is interested in, but they might seem to offer us a model of the kind of conceptual defect he finds in philosophical concepts. The notion *square circle* is usually taken to be contradictory or inconsistent because it includes two determinations (*square*, *circular*) that are independently intelligible but jointly incompatible. On many traditional approaches, such a notion not only has no object that corresponds to it, but is itself to be regarded as unthinkable or inconceivable. In the first *Critique*, for example, Kant terms such a pseudo-concept a *nihil negativum* (*Critique of Pure Reason,* B 348). Conceiving of a concept requires thinking its determinations together, but when the determinations of a concept are strictly incompatible, that cannot be done. From a high enough altitude, this might seem to fit Hegel's own procedure in the logic quite well, since he takes up philosophical concepts (e.g. *pure being*) and then reveals that they are contradictory by showing that they include incompatible determinations (e.g. *being* and *nothing*). It is natural to think that this is tantamount to showing that the initial concept is contradictory in the sense of being logically impossible and so unthinkable, which forces us to move to a new concept (*becoming*) that resolves the contradiction.

But although notions like these provide an analogy for the kind of inner contradictions that Hegel is looking for, they only underline the strangeness of defining 'truth' as lack of self-contradiction. Insofar as contradiction is a negative touchstone for truth, it might be acceptable to call a contradictory concept untrue, but there is surely an important difference between a merely noncontradictory concept and a genuinely true one. Even for an unapologetic rationalist like Leibniz, it is one thing to show that a concept is possible or conceivable in the sense of lacking contradiction, and quite another thing to show that an object corresponding to it actually or necessarily exists.

Some of Hegel's critics have thought that his logic simply ignores all these distinctions, conflating thinkability with being. Others have thought that his project is best reconstructed as limited to claims about thinkability, and so as a modest

[27] Kant's discussion of *square circle* in the *Prolegomena* is representative of early modern views in treating such concepts as unthinkable (4:341). The more contemporary view is that what are ordinarily called contradictory concepts are not actually contradictory in themselves (and so unthinkable); a contradiction only ensues from such a concept if we make the further assumption that something falls under it (see, e.g. Stenius, "Antinomies," 147).

logic of conceptual possibility—something that might seem to be corroborated by his occasional claim to be interested in whether thought-determinations *can* be true or are *capable* of grasping the absolute (*EL* §24 A2 and §28). But neither of these readings is easy to sustain. Hegel clearly recognizes that there is a difference between mere logical possibility and truth (contrary to his critics), and he clearly refuses to limit his claims in the *Encyclopedia Logic* to the former (contrary to his revisionist friends). Indeed, his most frequent criticism of ordinary logic is that it is unable to capture the truth precisely *because* it is limited to the principle of contradiction. He goes so far as to deny that statements about mere logical possibility or thinkability have any role at all in philosophical discussions (*EL* §143 R). His own ambitions in the *Encyclopedia Logic* thus clearly go beyond ruling out incoherence of the sort that characterizes *wooden iron*, *square circle*, and other contradictory concepts.[28]

Furthermore, it is clear that Hegel does not in fact regard untrue concepts as strictly unthinkable, involving an impossible combination of subdeterminations. Early in the *Encyclopedia*, he claims that even though the philosophical concepts dealt with by pre-Kantian metaphysics, like *cause* and *effect* or *force* and *expression*, are untrue, they can still be properly applied to finite things. Their untruth only prevents them from being applied to what he calls "infinite objects," or objects as they are in themselves (*EL* §23 A). Later in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, he makes a similar point about the relationship between *whole* and *part*. He says that although the concept of this relationship is untrue (*unwahr*), there are "low-level" things that do indeed correspond to it (*EL* §135 A). Since untrue concepts have valid applications in ordinary experience, they cannot be said to be simply unthinkable or logically impossible.

These examples suggest an alternative way of understanding Hegel's mode of conceptual critique, one that measures the adequacy of concepts against a standard provided by an independently given metaphysical vision or philosophical project, in this case, a vision that includes infinite objects like God and an inherently teleological conception of life. Contemporary forms of conceptual engineering often take something like this form, though the background metaphysical picture is usually more austerely naturalistic than Hegel's.[29] M. J. Inwood's *Hegel* offers an example of such a reading of Hegel's logic. According to Inwood, Hegel thinks that the primary defect of traditional philosophical concepts is their finitude, and the problem with finite concepts is not that they are sheerly unthinkable but that they cannot capture the characteristic objects of philosophy, which are themselves infinite (these objects are the usual suspects: God, the cosmos, and free will).[30] So when Hegel describes a given concept as untrue, the defect he is pointing to is an unfitness for application to infinite objects like these. This undoubtedly captures an important aspect of Hegel's view, since Hegel clearly does think that the finitude of thought-determinations makes them incapable of expressing the infinite, and that the critique of thought-determinations aims at revealing this.[31]

[28]On this, see Pippin, *Shadows*, 69–99.

[29]See e.g. Railton, *Facts, Values, and Norms*; and Scharp, *Replacing Truth*.

[30]Inwood, *Hegel*, 170–71.

[31]"The true critique of the categories and of reason is just this: to acquaint cognition with this distinction [between infinite and finite] and to prevent it from applying to God the determinations and the relations of the finite" (GW 21.77/*SL* 66). See also *EL* §28 A.

It also offers us a better reason to characterize defective concepts as untrue, and nondefective ones as true.

But Inwood's reading is problematic as an interpretation of Hegel's theory of logical truth. If a finite thought-determination proves itself to be incapable of expressing the features of an infinite object (like God or the world considered as a totality), this may be a defect in some sense, but it does not appear to be an *intrinsic* defect, much less a self-contradiction. Readings like Inwood's jeopardize Hegel's commitment to viewing the truth of concepts as a matter of a certain self-relation, instead treating truth as involving a contradiction between one thing (the concept being examined) and something else (the infinite object as independently given). And this commitment of Hegel's would appear to be philosophically well-motivated, for without it, his mode of assessing concepts will beg the question against the Kantian critique of reason, presupposing something about the existence or nature of precisely those objects that Kant said we could not know.

This puts two constraints on our interpretation of Hegel's notion of conceptual critique. If the defects that we find in concepts are merely semantic, a matter of having coherent content, then his logic is no more than a category theory and cannot pretend to provide us with anything like metaphysical truth.[32] But if these conceptual defects are merely metaphysical, if they simply measure concepts for their capacity to express Hegel's own picture of absolute reality, then his account will be hard to defend against the accusation that it relapses into pre-Kantian dogmatism. The unacceptability of these alternatives is well-known in the literature and does not need to be belabored. Although it should be uncontroversial that Hegel wanted to thread the needle between these alternatives, there is still plenty of disagreement as to whether he found a viable way to do so.

We can take a step in the direction of providing such an account by noting, as many commentators have, that Hegel's claim that the clearest paradigm for the kind of self-contradiction he is concerned with is not the standard notion of a contradictory concept but Kant's treatment of the antinomies of reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This comparison needs to be handled carefully, though, since Hegel thinks (quite provocatively) that Kant misunderstood the significance of his own argument in a way that is particularly pertinent to the question of whether concepts themselves can be true or false.

According to Hegel's retelling, Kant's discussion of the antinomies of reason argues that when we apply certain concepts to things in themselves, we find it necessary to affirm opposite propositions about the same object. We find, for example, that reason can show that the world is both limited and unlimited, both caused and uncaused, and so on. Kant concludes not that our concepts (e.g. *limit*, *cause*) are inherently defective in some way, but only that they cannot be applied to things in themselves (in this case, to the world as a totality), needing instead to be restricted to appearances. For Kant, the problem is not intrinsic to the concepts; it only arises from their *misapplication* to certain objects.

Hegel thinks this misunderstands the source of the antinomies and that the contradictions Kant finds are actually internal to the concepts themselves.

[32] Hartmann's "Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View" and Pinkard's *Hegel's Dialectic* are both criticized along these lines in Pippin's *Hegel's Idealism*.

He repeatedly insists that Kant's own attempt to examine the basic thought-determinations of reason was a failure because it neglected to consider these thought-determinations "in and for themselves [*an und für sich*]" rather than in terms of their applications (*EL* §41 A2, §47 R). According to Hegel's account, any rational or philosophical employment of categories like these is going to generate the same contradictions regardless of the specific object to which they are applied (e.g. God, space) (GW 21:157–65/*SL* 157–65). His claim is that whenever these thought-determinations are regarded as unrestrictedly valid, as they must be in any distinctively philosophical argumentation, they prove to be inherently dialectical or intrinsically contradictory.[33] If Hegel is right about this, then there is no need to take the further step of applying these notions to any particular object of reason, as Kant did, and so no need to express the contradiction in a proposition that predicates a thought-determination of a given object. We need only analyze the content of thought-determinations to discover their inner contradictions. Hegel typically expresses these contradictions in terms of contradictory propositions (e.g. "being is being," "being is nothing," etc.), but for him this propositional form is "completely superfluous," since it does not actually add anything to the cognition of the concept or predicate being examined (*EL* §85).

Determining exactly what Hegel means by analyzing concepts "in and for themselves" is no easy task, but an example drawn from Leibniz might be helpful in fleshing out the basic idea here, and showing why Hegel's procedure is different from what I earlier characterized as either merely semantic or merely metaphysical conceptual analysis.[34] The concept of the largest (cardinal) number makes sense in certain contexts: if we are given a finite set of numbers, we can rightly characterize one of these numbers as the largest. The concept is thus thinkable and has valid applications in ordinary life. But if we remove the context and ask whether there could be a greatest number "in and for itself," or in an unrestricted or unconditioned sense, we find that that concept proves inherently antinomial, for nothing can be a determinate number and yet greater than every other number. This is only intended as an analogy, but it provides a model of conceptual analysis that has the right features: it shows how a thought-determination could be thinkable and have valid applications in the restricted context of every day (as we saw in the case of the whole/part relationship), and yet prove to be inherently contradictory when used outside of a limited context, when it is (so to speak) predicated absolutely. Moreover, it shows that we can reveal these immanent contradictions in concepts *without* presupposing any particular conception of metaphysical reality to which the concept fails to apply. In particular, we do not need to presuppose the knowability or existence of any controversial infinite objects (e.g. God, the soul). In principle, all we need to do is remove the concept from a context where it has a restricted application. That is, we need to remove it from its ordinary (nonphilosophical) use, thus allowing its inner nature to emerge.

[33]Compare the generally recognized fact that the paradoxes that affect the ordinary notion of truth do not show up in ordinary usage, but *only* in philosophical contexts.

[34]On this point, I am following Pippin, *Shadows*, 158–59, though similar examples are used by others.

This is a mere sketch of Hegel's procedure, and it would need to be filled in to be convincing as a reading of the basic argumentative mechanism of the logic. But it allows us to make his notion of logical untruth a little more precise. A philosophical concept or thought-determination is *untrue* when it cannot be used in an unrestricted or unconditioned manner without revealing itself to include incompatible determinations. Such untruth is not the same thing as logical impossibility or unthinkability, since such concepts are not in fact unthinkable or unsatisfiable; to the contrary, they are fully intelligible and have valid applications in restricted contexts. But nor is it simply a matter of the concept's inapplicability to some particular philosophical or metaphysical objects (e.g. the world or God); untruth implies a contradiction that is *intrinsic* to the concept or thought-determination itself, not an unsuitability to some independently given object. If such a contradiction exists, it can be determined without applying the concept to any conceptually distinct object.

This shows that Inwood is not incorrect in saying that untrue concepts are inadequate for handling the proper objects of philosophy, for when a concept proves to be untrue in the sense just defined, it is eo ipso inappropriate for use with regard to the characteristic objects of philosophy. (Or to put the point more carefully, an untrue concept is inapplicable to such objects when considered by itself, but applicable to such objects as a sublated moment of a replacement concept.) The *Logic*, from this point of view, is an attempt to evaluate certain very basic philosophical concepts for their general usability in those more determinate philosophical sciences that treat the characteristic objects of philosophy, namely the philosophies of nature and spirit. The objects of those sciences (the world, spirit, God) are missing from his logic not because he rejects metaphysical theorizing about the natural or spiritual world—he gets to that soon enough, in his *Realphilosophie*—but because the logic is concerned with the antecedent question of what concepts could possibly characterize any of these objects, considered as things in themselves, without generating antinomies. Hegel's view is that metaphysics in the traditional or special sense—the contemplation of God, the soul, and the world—presupposes certain logical concepts and forms that must be validated, or evaluated for their truth, *prior* to being applied to any specific objects, and the business of his logic is to provide just that antecedent validation of logical concepts.

5. THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE

Given the central importance of evaluating concepts for their truth to Hegel's logic, it might seem somewhat surprising that there has been so much resistance to viewing concepts as the primary truth-bearers in his logic. Such resistance often stems from the belief that this interpretation of Hegel presupposes a naive, pre-Kantian notion of concepts as self-sufficient atomic units of meaning, a notion that is not only philosophically indefensible, but one that Hegel himself appears to reject in favor of Kant's view that concepts get their meanings from their use in judgments. The claim that Hegel follows Kant on this point has been widespread since Charles Taylor's *Hegel* was published in 1965, and is common in both so-

called metaphysical and nonmetaphysical readings.[35] John McCumber puts the point by saying that although it is "tempting to see Hegel's account of truth as one of some property predicates have independently of their inclusion in judgments," this cannot be the case "because for Hegel there are no predicates except in judgments."[36] As Robert Pippin similarly puts it, "Hegel does not think concepts can be independent units of meaning" because he thinks that "concepts can be determinately specified only by their role in judgments."[37] On such accounts, Hegel could not possibly intend to analyze the truth values of individual concepts apart from their use in judgments, since he thinks that they only have meaning in the context of judgments.[38]

If Hegel's logic does in fact argue that there are no meaningful concepts except in judgments, that would amount to a striking anticipation of Frege's context principle. Frege claims, "The meaning of a word must be asked for in the context of a proposition, not in isolation" ("Foundations," 90).[39] The potential connection between Frege and Hegel on this point has been recently popularized by Robert Brandom, who has offered a genealogy of Frege's context principle that traces it all the way back to Kant.[40] As Brandom's story goes, Kant was the first to fully break with the traditional idea that individual concepts have meaning on their own, and that propositions or judgments are assembled out of these building blocks. When Kant argued that the understanding can make no other use of concepts apart from judging with them (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 68/B 93), this entailed that concepts are not intelligible on their own but only in terms of the role that they play in judgments. Hegel not only endorsed the Kantian claim that judgments have semantic priority over concepts, but added another turn of the screw, claiming that judgments can only be understood in terms of their role in inferences. By doing so, Hegel anticipated several post-Fregean developments in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, particularly the turn to semantic holism.

Although Brandom has not himself claimed that Hegel endorses the context principle when it comes to logical thought-determinations (as opposed to

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[35]See Taylor, *Hegel*, 308. Similar views are defended in Pinkard, "Logic of Hegel's *Logic*"; and Surber, "Speculative Sentence."

[36]McCumber, *Company*, 39.

[37]Pippin, *Shadows*, 71.

[38]Since Hegel clearly denies that ordinary propositions can be true in the philosophical sense, as we saw above, readers who attribute this commitment to Hegel have been forced to identify a different kind of proposition that is the proper locus of truth claims in his logic. For DeVries, "Reference," 305, the pertinent distinction is between propositions (which are merely capable of correctness) and judgments (which can be true). For Hanna, the bearer of truth claims is ultimately "the judgment as having overcome its ontological limitations" or "ontologized judgments" ("From an Ontological Point of View," 320). For Pippin, the "thinkings that can be truth-bearers" are ultimately "judgments, albeit of a special sort" ("Replies," 1065).

[39]For a recent reading of Frege's context principle according to which it was *not* intended to be regarded as a strict requirement on all concepts, but only as a domain-specific requirement, one especially suited for concepts in mathematics, see Cariani, "Context Principle." I am following Brandom's interpretation of Frege's context principle not because I regard it as the most faithful interpretation of what Frege meant by that principle, but because Brandom's interpretation drives most of the interest in this issue in the contemporary literature. On less ambitious interpretations of Frege's context principle (like Cariani's), there is no obvious conflict between Frege's principle and the project I am attributing to Hegel here.

[40]See Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 14, 33–34.

ordinary, empirical concepts), several recent interpreters have claimed to find an authentically Hegelian argument for the context principle, or something quite like it, at the beginning of the third book of the *Logic*, which progresses from concept, to judgment, and then to syllogism.[41] It is impossible to provide a full interpretation of this section of the *Logic* here, but we can examine what Hegel says is wrong with the usual view of the relation between concepts and judgments to see whether he criticizes it on the same grounds that the inferentialist would.[42] At first glance, it appears that he does. Hegel explicitly denies that judgment can be defined as a "combination of concepts," and that the subject and predicate of a judgment can be "thought of as being on hand for themselves even apart from the combination" (*EL* §166 A). There is little question that in this passage, and passages like this one, Hegel is rejecting the idea that we can think of judgment as necessarily assembled from a number of independently intelligible—or in his terms "self-sufficient"—concepts. Since Frege's revolution in logic also required rejecting this traditional, Aristotelian view of judgment, it is natural to think that Hegel is moving in the same basic direction as Frege: away from a view where concepts have meaning independently of their role in judgments or propositions, and toward a view where the concepts found in judgments get their meanings from their roles in those judgments. Since Hegel's argument in the *Logic* proceeds to examine the syllogism, it is natural to think that he continues arguing in just this fashion, going on to show both that judgments lack meaning on their own and that they only gain meaning through their use in inferences. If it can be shown that Hegel believes that each of these things is the case, then we will have gone a long way toward confirming Brandom's claim that Hegel anticipates the inferentialist position on semantic content. But if the argument of this essay is correct, we will also have a problem on our hands, for if the thought-determinations of the *Logic* only have meaning by virtue of their use in inferential reasoning, then they certainly cannot be true or untrue on their own, independently of their use in propositions or judgments.

6. THE PRIORITY OF THE CONCEPT

Evaluating the inferentialist interpretation of Hegel's theory of judgment requires looking at Hegel's critique of the ordinary view of judgment in more detail. According to what he calls the "usual view," in forming judgments we start with a set of self-sufficient concepts—typically, subjects and predicates—and combine these to form a judgment that has what we would now call a truth value. For our purposes here, there are three components of this view worth separating out. First, the usual view takes judgment to be a whole that includes diverse concepts as its parts. So, the judgment *the rose is red* is composed of various concepts like *rose* and

[41] The most notable of these are perhaps Berto, "Dialectics"; DeVries, "Revival"; Pippin, *Shadows*; Redding, *Analytic Philosophy*; Stekeler-Weithofer, "Pragmatism," chap. 7; and Zarebski, "Background." Although Redding's "Hegelian Solution" and Pippin's *Shadows* point to significant differences between Brandom's inferentialism and Hegel's, they both follow Brandom in attributing a version of the context principle to Hegel, which is what I will be contesting here. Harrelson endorses a similar reading of Hegel's theory of judgment but without referring to Brandom in "Logic and Ontology."

[42] The relevant stretch of text is *EL* §166–71 and *SL* 550–57; GW 12:53–59.

red. Second, this view takes concepts as having a kind of priority over judgments because although a judgment would have no content without concepts, any individual concept, like *red*, would still have content or meaning even if it were never deployed in a judgment about roses (though it would not yet have any truth value). Third, since the whole judgment is a mere assemblage of self-sufficient parts, the whole can be made intelligible by beginning with the parts together with their interrelations. (These days, this is often called compositionality.) For ease of reference, these are the three points, reduced to slogans:

1. Judgments are wholes composed of diverse concepts.
2. Concepts have priority over judgments.
3. The parts explain the whole.

If Hegel were attempting to replace the ordinary view of judgment with a view that anticipates the context principle (as the inferentialist interprets it), then one would expect Hegel to accept the first of these claims, but to reject the second and third. He would need to accept the first claim, because the context principle assumes that individual concepts can be found in the context of judgments, and, therefore, that concepts are in some sense parts of judgments and play a role *in* them. But Hegel would clearly need to reject the second claim because the context principle asserts the contrary priority: that of the judgment over the concept. And if concepts have meaning only in the context of judgments, then they certainly lack the specific kind of priority that the ordinary view invests them with. Furthermore, for related reasons, Hegel would probably need to reject the third claim as well, for if the concepts that compose judgments are not independently intelligible, then it would appear that they cannot be used as an independent basis to explain the meaning of the judgments in which they occur. It is, of course, a further step to claim that we can reverse the order of explanation, that is, explain the parts by starting with the whole, but anyone pursuing a Brandomian reading of Hegel would not hesitate to make that extra step, which is central to the ambitions of Brandom's own inferentialist project.

But if we take a closer look at Hegel's criticisms of the usual view, we can see that he does not take this expected approach. Surprisingly enough, he rejects the first and third claims and appears to accept the second (though, as we will see, his own version of the priority of the concept is very idiosyncratic).

We should start with the first tenet of the usual view, the claim that judgment is a whole that includes diverse concepts. Although this claim is part of the common ground between the usual view of judgment and the inferentialist view, Hegel appears to reject it. Instead of regarding the judgment as a whole that contains various concepts, Hegel says that we should regard the concept as a unity that contains judgment and the parts of judgment as its own "moments" or "posits." He uses a somewhat dubious etymology of the word 'judgment' in German (*Urteil*) to help make his point, saying that judgment is a division (*Teilung*) of the original (*ur-*) unity of the concept (*Einheit der Begriff*) (*EL* §166 R; see also GW 12:55/*SL* 522).[43] Although it is difficult to say exactly what Hegel means by this, it is clear

[43]Ng nicely brings out Hegel's debt to Hölderlin on this point (*Hegel's Concept of Life*, 169–70). On Ng's interpretation, the concept (understood as original unity) develops into the judgment

that he is attempting to reverse the standard understanding of the relationship between judgment and concept. Although we normally think that judgments are wholes made up of concepts, Hegel thinks that in some deeper sense, we should understand the concept as an original whole that is then divided into various judgments and parts of judgments.

This reversal of the ordinary relation between judgment and concept prepares us to understand Hegel's reaction to the second claim, the priority of concepts over judgments.[44] According to the Brandomian interpretation, Hegel rejects this view in favor of the claim that judgments have priority over concepts, providing them with their meaning or content. But if we look at the text, we see little sign of this. In fact, Hegel appears to endorse some sort of priority of the concept over the judgment: he says the unity of the concept is "what comes first," judgment coming afterwards, and that what is *right* about the usual view is that it treats the concept as "the *presupposition* of the judgment" (*EL* §166 R and A, emphasis added).[45] Of course, Hegel means something very different from the usual view in asserting the priority of the concept. After all, he does not say that *judgments* presuppose *concepts* but something much more peculiar: that *the judgment* presupposes *the concept*.

In the context of this discussion, this means that the various forms of judgment can be derived from the very notion of the concept. His argument, which we can only baldly assert here, is that the concept includes three moments—universal, particular, individual—and each form of judgment is just a different way of relating these three moments. The concept is prior to judgment with respect to content because the various forms of judgment do not add any new content to the concept (say by connecting it to other concepts); they just display the content that was already present in the concept in a new, more explicit form. To use Hegel's own analogy, this is like the way that the notion of property is prior to those legal determinations that can be derived from it, like the claim that a thing belongs to the person who happens to take possession of it (*EL* §160 A). These further determinations only "unfold" or "posit" a content that was already implicitly present in the concept of property itself. It is not immediately clear what the implications of this logical argument about the priority of the concept over the forms of judgment are supposed to be for our understanding of the relationship between ordinary

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(understood as original division) because it is unable to ground the unity of an object such that it could be regarded as an individual (179). So the intrinsic limitation of the concept as such is not a total lack of content (as the Brandomian inferentialist claims) but the lack of the kind of content that would allow it to determine something as an individual. Following Redding's "Hegelian Solution," Ng characterizes Hegel's position as a form of "weak inferentialism," since it makes inferential articulation *necessary* for conceptual contentfulness but not *sufficient* (189). As I will try to show in a moment, even this weak inferentialism might be too strong, since Hegel seems to suggest that the development from the concept to judgment and from judgment to syllogism involves no new content at all, just a change in form (see *EL* §161 A). This suggests that the limitation of the concept is not, at the end of the day, a matter of inadequate content, but of inadequate form.

[44]See also McNulty, "Logic," 278–79.

[45]Note that this specific sense of primacy, which only concerns the question of content, is fully compatible with other senses in which the dependence goes the other way. Hegel clearly thinks that the concept depends on judgment for its actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), so in terms of actuality, judgment has priority over the concept, and syllogism has priority over judgment. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make this clarification.

concepts and ordinary judgments.[46] But it is clear that the logical progression from concept to judgment is not driven by any claim that the concept lacks content on its own (as the inferentialist reading supposes). Hegel's argument is always that the content already present in the concept is not yet fully explicit or determinate until the forms of judgment are unfolded from it, not that judgment provides the concept with its content. The progression from concept to judgment is thus developmental (from something to its fuller realization), not transcendental (from something to the conditions of its possibility).

This brings us the third claim, the explanatory primacy of the parts over the whole. Hegel has long been rightly associated with a kind of organicism that privileges holistic forms of explanation over atomistic forms, and we have already seen that he agrees with Frege that judgments cannot be understood as assembled from independently intelligible, atomic parts. So, it is right to say, at a high level of generality, that Hegel agrees with the inferentialist about the necessity of rejecting the third claim in favor of some kind of holism. But we can now see that this agreement does not go very deep because they have very different conceptions of the whole that we start from. On the inferentialist approach, we start with the judgment as a whole, and we understand the content of the concepts within the judgment by virtue of the role that they play in the judgment, and so on. But on Hegel's approach, we start with the concept as the implicit totality and then show that it differentiates itself, or particularizes itself, into the judgment and the parts of the judgment, then the syllogism, and so forth in the *Logic*'s dialectical progression. To illustrate his own position, Hegel uses his favorite Aristotelian metaphor, that of the seed becoming a tree:

> The seed of the plant already contains the particular factor of the root, of the branches, of the leaves, and so forth. But this particular factor is at first only on hand in itself and is only posited in that the seed discloses itself, something which is to be considered the judgment of the plant. (*EL* §166 A)

The concept is likened to a seed here because it already implicitly contains whatever content will later develop out of it; judgment is likened to a root or branch because it discloses the content of a concept by altering its form, making what was only implicit explicit.[47] Hegel's holism is thus a holism *of the concept*, and it has little to do with the forms of semantic holism developed later in the twentieth century that assert that the meanings of the individual words in a language are interdependent,

[46]My view, which I cannot defend here, is that Hegel's ultimate position is that all specifically philosophical judgments about something (e.g. being, life, action) only express a content that was already implicit in the philosophical concept of that thing, and that all philosophical concepts can be deduced from the concept (*der Begriff*), as necessary moments of its own self-actualization. But Hegel never denies that there are other, nonphilosophical sorts of concepts and other, nonphilosophical sorts of judgments. An ordinary empirical judgment like "Cats like to drink milk" clearly introduces new content, content that was not somehow implicitly present in the concept *cat*. On whether this view of philosophy makes all philosophical judgments analytic, see Werner, "Hegel on Kant's Analytic/Synthetic Distinction."

[47]Earlier in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel says that "the concept, in its process, remains with itself" and that in this process "nothing new is posited by this means with respect to the content." He says the *only* change brought about by this kind of development is an "alteration in form" (*EL* §161 A).

that is, dependent on the totality of statements in a language.[48] These more contemporary forms of holism treat individual concepts or properties as parts of a larger whole, whereas Hegel treats the concept (*der Begriff*) as a totality that includes all other philosophical concepts within itself, just as the seed contains the tree.

Hegel's alternative to the usual view of judgment is obscure in a variety of ways, and we have barely scratched the surface of it here. But we have seen enough to conclude that Hegel's objections to the usual view of judgment are not moving in the direction of a commitment to something like Frege's context principle—at least, not as this principle has been interpreted by contemporary defenders of inferentialism. Hegel rejects the view, common to both the traditional Aristotelian and the modern Fregean views, of judgments as wholes comprised of diverse concepts, and he endorses a revised, non-atomistic version of the traditional view that the concept has priority over the judgment. His critique of the usual view of judgment not only fails to provide evidence of any commitment to the idea that judgments provide concepts with their content, but also suggests the possibility that in strictly philosophical or logical contexts, a judgment merely unfolds or displays a content that is already implicit in the concept that it starts from. In the absence of more convincing textual evidence for believing that Hegel endorses the context principle, there would seem to be no reason to attribute it to him at all, and thus no reason to think that he believed that the philosophical concepts or thought-determinations treated in his logic require a judgmental setting in order to be evaluated for their truth.

7. EVALUATING CONCEPTS

On the reading I have defended, one of the central aspirations of Hegel's logic is to devise a method according to which the most basic concepts of philosophy can be evaluated as true or untrue *on their own*, prior to their use in complex philosophical propositions or their instantiation in reality. The notion of truth at work here, which takes such concepts or "thought-determinations" as its bearer, is largely sui generis. A concept is *untrue* in the specifically philosophical sense if it cannot be used unrestrictedly—that is, if it cannot be predicated of the absolute or used to characterize things as they are in themselves—without generating a contradiction. A concept is *true* if it lacks such immanent contradictions (though it will turn out that the only thought-determination that fully satisfies this condition is the last one treated in his logic: the absolute idea). Although conceptual contradictions of the relevant sort give rise to contradictory propositions or judgments, these propositions are to be understood as merely making explicit something that was already implicit in the concept being assessed. In Hegel's logic, concepts do not acquire a truth value by being expressed in propositions; instead, propositions regarding these concepts merely express or unfold the truth or untruth intrinsic to these concepts. Although there are further, more complex uses of the notion

[48]The phrase 'holism of the concept' is borrowed from the helpful discussion of this point in McNulty, "Logic," 282–83. Brandom defends a reading of Hegel as a semantic holist in "Holism and Idealism."

of truth in Hegel's logic, they build on this one and continue to take individual thought-determinations as the bearer of truth or locus of truth value.[49]

The importance of the *Logic* in Hegel's philosophy stems from his contention that our most basic concepts must prove to be true in this sense *before* they can be legitimately employed in philosophical reasoning about the fundamental structure of reality as a whole. This view of the function of a philosophical logic does not commit Hegel to a nonmetaphysical view of philosophy as a whole, but it does imply that the logical analysis of concepts can and must prescind from any substantive philosophical argumentation, from the application of the basic concepts that are to be evaluated (concepts such as *being*, *essence*, and the like) to what he calls "concrete subject matters" (such as the world and God) (*SL* 14; GW 21:13). Hegel's belief in the need for this kind of abstract conceptual critique prior to the development of any substantive account of the structure of reality leads him frequently to inveigh against those philosophers who employ their concepts naively—those who fail to recognize that the very concepts they are using might have intrinsic defects, defects that will inevitably emerge once they are deployed in philosophical argumentation and that can only be removed by devising improved successor concepts. He describes these philosophers as being "incapable of the simple consideration that their opinions and objections contain *categories which are presuppositions* and themselves in need of being criticized before they are put to use" (GW 21:18/*SL* 20, emphasis added, translation modified). The mistake that these philosophers make is to presuppose that their categories are true.

This vision of conceptual critique is one of the great achievements of Hegelian thought. It is the only fully worked-out model of conceptual evaluation that is, in principle, entirely independent of ordinary language use and completely free of any substantive metaphysical or scientific assumptions. Hegel's logic, so understood, offers a provocative contrast with the conceptual engineering projects that have become prominent in contemporary philosophy, projects that are motivated by a similar concern to remedy possible defects in our basic categories, but that are not committed to granting conceptual critique the same autonomy from other, potentially richer sources of knowledge. Needless to say, Hegelian conceptual amelioration is both more radical and less antecedently plausible than its contemporary equivalents, but that is no small part of its attraction.

[49]Among these further uses, three are worth identifying. First, Hegel frequently says that one concept or thought-determination is "the truth of" another concept when it resolves the contradiction in the latter concept. Second, he says that the final thought-determination in the logic, the absolute idea, is not only itself true but is the "absolute and entire truth" (*EL* §236). Finally, he claims that "something has truth only insofar as it is idea" (GW 12:173/*SL* 670). The last of these points beyond the logic, since it shows that the idea is not just the only true thought-determination but is also playing an important role in his ontology: it makes possible immanent standards according to which individual existing entities can be assessed as true or false (see Kreines, *Reason in the World*, 250–51). This material notion of truth (which takes individual entities as its bearer) presupposes the specifically logical notion of truth that I am focused on here. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to mark these other uses of 'truth' in Hegel's logic.

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