

A SCIENTIFIC UNDERSTANDING OF CONCEPT

by

Sripad Bhakti Madhava Puri Maharaja, Ph.D.



Hegel considers the Concept (in German *Begriffe*) to be a spiritual entity - the soul, if you will, of a thing. Looked at in another way it may be considered (although not precisely) like the essence of a thing. It is what makes the thing whatever it is. Thus if we took the Concept of a room (let's say "roomness") away from a thing we would no longer have a room but something

else. In this sense the Concept is essential to the being of anything. As soon as we determine "what" a thing is we are involved with its Concept. The Concept is the "whatness" of things.

When a baby experiences life inside a room, what does it experience? It has no Concept of room so it feels perhaps warmth, certain colors of light, maybe a sense of security since it has its needs met there. But it has not established the Concept of room – so it does not experience a room. It experiences sensations only. The sensations of a room do not a room make! In a room, or outside under the stars, or at a baseball stadium we experience sensations but without a Concept to associate with those sensations we cannot say or think room, outside, stadium, etc.



The body without the vivifying soul is simply a dead lump. If we look at the body from a molecular viewpoint it is a swarm of molecules and biochemical reactions. We can tease and torment every tissue and cell but in the end we will find only atoms and electrons. As a Nobel Laureate in biochemistry, Albert Szent-Györgyi once commented that despite having analyzed living organisms in detail, life somehow just slipped through his fingers. The Concept like the soul is absolutely necessary if one is to understand what life is, or what it is to be human or an animal, etc. The sensuous thing gives no indication of that.

The Concept, when we study the Logic, will be seen to involve Being. Therefore there is no question that the Concept is not real or actual. It IS. Although its being is not something that can be apprehended by the senses, being is certainly one of its qualities. And so is activity or determination. Therefore it is actual (active). Its action is the activity of thinking that is involved in the Concept. Because it is active, movement is present. Where there is movement there are moments – like the still images of a movie film. These moments are the differentiation of the Concept, logical

moments that thought passes through in its full coverage of the Concept. All of this together, the moments, the movement of thinking, and the sublimation of these in a unified Concept go into making what we call a Concept.

The immediate sense experience of an object is abstract in comparison with this. Although there are colors, feelings, etc. in the sense experience of objects, to thought the immediate is mere abstraction – and it is with thought that we are concerned in philosophy. The immediate has its logical connection with the mediate, of which one makes no sense without the other. To consider the immediate independent of mediation is therefore pure abstraction from the actual unity that obtains between the two.

If one insists on leaving the rational or logical aside and dealing only with the sense experience per se, then one enters the non-rational experience of things and reason is lost. Maintaining a purely conceptual standpoint in the realm of reason does not mean that the sensuous is ignored or neglected. Rather it is for the first time comprehended fully. If one chooses to leave reason behind for the sake of pure sensuous apprehension then one may be consigned to merely kicking stones and beating dead horses. But thinking will not simply remain inactive for long without eventually seeking its own element.

If we consider the Concept to be the actual essence of things, then in that sense it is more real than the thing itself – or what it really is. Of course, essence makes no sense unless there is something there that we can speak of as having an essence. One requires the other. Yet still we do make the distinction that what a thing is *essentially* is the actual reality of that thing. However, the Concept is different from essence and in the Logic we will find that it is actually the sublimation of being and essence. I am only using the term essence here since it is perhaps more readily understood at this stage than Concept. Strictly speaking or scientifically speaking the Concept and essence are not the same thing.

One more point should be made before closing. The term Notion has been used to translate *Begriffe*. This is not correct and even misleading. Notion implies a very vague impression of things but the scientific mind of Hegel was intent on bringing clarity and detailed development to philosophy. *Begriffe* means literally "to grasp." When we speak of grasping something we refer not only to something we do with our hand but also with our mind. Thus when we grasp something we mean that whatever is being explained has become clear to us. This clarity and precision is what Hegel means by Concept.

Vorstellung means representation, or literally "stands for." As we have explained above the Concept is not merely a representation that stands for the thing that it is the Concept of. Rather the Concept is what makes the thing whatever it is. Therefore to conceive of the Concept as merely an abstract representation of things is another erroneous interpretation of Hegel. The term *Vorstellung* or representation has its place in Hegel's philosophy but it is to be carefully distinguished from *Begriffe* or Concept.

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