

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ARGUMENTATIVE AND CONCEPTUAL THINKING

by

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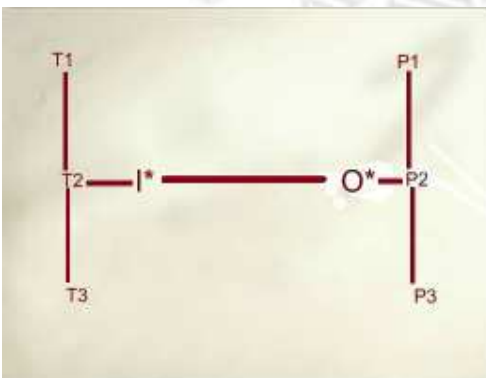
Argumentative thinking has two aspects, viz. positive and negative. Such thinking effectively ignores the content since the actual object is considered “out there” beyond the subjective thinking that is going on “in here” or inside oneself or the finite mind. No explicit connection is established between the subjective and objective worlds or realms. This

type of thinking is of necessity concerned only with its own knowing or with itself, thus Hegel calls this vanity. In this sense it is indifferent to what is outside it, thus it is abstract thought – thought that is stripped from its actual content. This difference or indifference is the negative aspect of argumentative thinking. In addition, we may understand it positively as a union/unity with an “I think” or thinking ego conjoined immediately to an objective content. The objective content is supposed to be the truth that the subjective thinking is to discover or recreate for itself in its subjectivity. One understands the truth when thinking subjectivity is identical with the objective content. However, this identity is not one of substantial identity but formal only. In other words, subjective understanding and objective actuality may be the same in form but are essentially different in substance – one in the medium of thought, the other in the medium of being. A correspondence is merely assumed between these two.

Thus we may state the two aspects of argumentative thinking as:

- 1) Negative: the thinking ego or “I think” opposed to or negatively related to a content.
- 2) Positive: the unity or assumed correspondence between the real thing with its properties and the ideality of the thinking ego.

Of notable interest here is that there is a total lack of an explicit principle to explain the correspondence between the real and ideal realms. The senses that are supposed to interface between the subjective and objective realms serve as a conduit between the two, but how the objective effects or enters into the subjective or vice versa is not explicitly known, or in other words this aspect is effectively ignored. This is the defect of this model for knowing or establishing truth.



To help us better see what is happening let us draw a diagram of the situation. In this diagram the I with its thoughts (T1, T2, T3, etc.) is opposed to an object O with its

properties (P1, P2, P3, etc.). Note that next to the I and the O are their respective marks (*). This mark means that the ego or I is in reality an abstract entity like a point. In other words, ala Hume and Kant the ego is a formal unity of which only its thoughts are determinable, the ego itself is beyond determination. The same is true for the thing or object since we can only determine the various properties of a thing while that substantial being that supposedly unifies the properties is an unknown abstract thing-in-itself. For Kant, such unification of the properties arises from the unity of the abstract ego itself. (The finer details of this process requires a separate paper dealing with the thing and its properties.)

In other words, by determining a sugar cube before me as white, cubical, sweet, crystalline, etc. I am left with a collection of properties that are unified only by the thinking ego itself. What is left over after I abstract all its properties is a mere thing-in-itself that I cannot say what it is, only that it “is” or must be there since that is the way I originally started my whole thinking, i.e. that was my original assumption. This undeterminable thing-in-itself that is left over is represented by its mark.

Of course, today we may say that there are molecules, atoms and electrons that are at the base of the various properties we observe. However, even these entities have properties so that ultimately we are left with the same situation since that which holds the properties as such is undetectable or undetermined except to say that such an entity “is”. That pure ‘being-there’ is merely the abstract thought of existence itself, however, argumentative thinking is not aware of it as its own thought.

Both the I with its thoughts and the thing with its properties have the form of a substantial Subject with its accidental Predicates. This arises from the form of knowing or determination associated with the proposition: the Subject is the Predicate. Argumentative thinking holds its content apart from itself, then analyzes this content in the form of propositions. For example, a sugar cube is considered in the following way:

1. It is white
2. It is sweet
3. It is cubical
4. etc.

Each statement is in the form of the proposition: The Subject is the Predicate.

We also notice here that this type of thinking does not relate one property to another. It simply lists them. It arbitrarily picks up new properties from its own thinking without relying on any order for its determinations. Its only concern is to find ever-newer determinations in this haphazard and undefined way from its own subjectivity. These determinations expressed as propositions are therefore not developed in a scientific way from the contents and are therefore not related to each other in any systematic way either. This whole approach to ascertaining truth is therefore highly unsystematic and unscientific.

In order to establish a more systematic model of thinking and establishing truth Hegel presents the Concept and conceptual thinking. The identity that argumentative thinking merely assumes between the subjective thought determinations of the ego and the properties of the object is instead considered by conceptual thinking to be an apriori synthetic unity, in which apriori means that the unity is originally already existing. In this sense, “synthetic” is misleading since the unity exists as a whole prior to any synthesis of its parts. Thus we do not have the problem of how to relate the one to the other, they will already be intrinsically related. This relation or relating is a process – an activity, and the unity is a result of this activity. But we must understand that this activity is actually negative activity or thinking. What appears in argumentative thinking to be the thinking of the ego opposed to an object, is thus understood in conceptual thinking to be an I-object unity. In other words, we may take the diagram above and think of the Concept as the intrinsic dynamic unity of all that is contained therein. (We have yet to explicitly develop the specific movement that is involved in each case; we are presenting things in a general way here.)

Because it may be confusing to refer to the object as having an ego, we call it the self of the object, as when we refer to the object “itself.” The thinking or negative activity that goes on in the self-object unity that we call the Concept is a self-thinking or self-determining. We no longer have to refer to a separate ego that is doing the thinking against an external object. Furthermore, the self-determining Concept does not make its determinations based on the fixed form of the proposition. Rather we have to consider the dialectical relation between the Subject and Predicate in the propositional form, where the Subject goes into the Predicate, the Predicate becomes the substantial and the Subject becomes the Predicate, then the counterthrust back to the Subject which again becomes the substantial.

This can all be more easily understood in terms of an example. Thus if we have the proposition (judgment) that “the swan is white”, we seem to lose the subject (Swan) in the predicate (white). In other words, we seem to identify the subject with the predicate and imply that the swan (Subject) is only whiteness itself (the Predicate). The copula “is” takes on the meaning of identity. When thought confronts this shock, which it states but does not mean, it immediately suffers a counterthrust and returns back to the Subject (swan) as the substantial ground of its judgment. This to and fro activity of thought goes on unnoticed in ordinary thinking or adjudging. The whole movement and the various moments that are included within it now form the basic Truth or actuality. Thus we have the self-object or Concept as our apriori synthetic unity.

Because of this unity, the thought-property relation of argumentative thinking will form the categories. In addition the form of the proposition upon which argumentative thinking is based must be comprehended conceptually. It is this Concept along with its various moments and movements when systematically developed and comprehended that form both the method and content of Science. The activity that goes on in all of this is called conceptual thinking.



Hegel

In this whole ascent to conceptual thinking from the platform of argumentative thinking we must recognize that the concept of an ego that is thinking has been sublimated in the self-thinking or self-determining Concept. Much of the confusion that attends the study of Hegelian philosophy comes from misunderstanding this basic difference between the argumentative thinking of

the ego and the conceptual thinking of or in the Concept. There will be a tendency to fall back into argumentative thinking whenever the term “thinking” is encountered. This is due to bad habit and failure to understand the difference as explained above and what is actually being referred to when we mention conceptual thinking.

Of course it would be better to assimilate this as basic to our thinking, and that will come with practice as one studies the development found for example in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1]. It may help to realize that thinking is going on at an absolute level or in other words as Absolute Truth itself. This means that we can understand it as the thinking of God, in which God and God’s thinking are identical in their difference. Because we are finite parts of God, just as a drop of water is part of the ocean, the activity of the Absolute is going on within us as well as without us, just as the activity of the ocean affects the drop as much as the drop, or a large number of them, affect the ocean. It is this interpenetrating relationship or activity between the infinite and finite that we refer to as “our” thinking. This does not deny the freedom or independence of the finite self, but this can only be fully understood when we develop the Concept of God and the various determinations of unity, multiplicity, identity, difference, etc. that are all part of that most concrete of all concepts (God) and consequently the most difficult to comprehend.

Hegel gives the example of a seed to explain the development of the Concept. A seed contains all the determinations of a full grown tree. The various aspects of the tree are not explicitly present in miniature form in the seed, but implicitly. In the same way the Concept contains the full determinations of its object. The development occurs by way of sublimation of previous determinations by later ones. Furthermore the process is circular so that when the end is reached it cycles back to the beginning, just as the seed produces the tree which again produces a fruit and seed. The task in studying the *Phenomenology* is to follow the development of consciousness (or knowing) as a subject-object relationship in coming to its dynamic unity – this whole process and its result – as the Concept.

References:

1. Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated by Miller, A.V., Oxford University Press, (1977).