

ABSTRACT
THE PROVINCE OF CONCEPTUAL REASON:
HEGEL'S POST-KANTIAN RATIONALISM

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In this dissertation, I seek to explain G.W.F. Hegel's view that human accessible conceptual content can provide knowledge about the nature or essence of things. I call this view "Conceptual Transparency." It finds its historical antecedent in the views of eighteenth century German rationalists, which were strongly criticized by Immanuel Kant. I argue that Hegel explains Conceptual Transparency in such a way that preserves many implications of German rationalism, but in a form that is largely compatible with Kant's criticisms of the original rationalist version.

After providing background on Hegel's relationship to the traditional rationalist theory of concepts and Kant's challenge to it, I claim that Hegel's central task is to provide a theory of conceptual content that allows a relationship to the objective world without being dependent on the specifically sensory aspect of the world, which Kant's theory of concepts required. Since many interpreters deny that Hegel's use of the term "concept" is comparable to other historical philosophers (or our own), I first show that Hegel's critique of standard conceptions of concepts presupposes an agreement of subject matter. I then show how Hegel's account of the "formal concept" provides the skeleton for a view of conceptual content that relies on negative relations between terms, rather than a relation to sensibility, to provide content.

Hegel's account of conceptual content is completed when he shows how a universal term is further specified so that it can determine singular objects. This occurs in its adequate form in a teleological process. I argue that Hegel's account of teleology in the *Science of Logic* is an attempt to explain how and where Conceptual Transparency obtains. A teleological process is one in which a concept constitutes an object, and this means that a concept is perfectly adequate to express that thing's nature and not merely to represent it. However, in the final chapter, I show that Hegel's concept of teleology is meant paradigmatically to illuminate how human purposive processes have constituted a social world that is conceptually accessible to us. In this way, the primary "province" of Hegel's rationalism is the human constructed world.

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ABBREVIATIONS OF HEGEL'S WORK

The following are the main abbreviations of Hegel's work used in the text. See the Bibliography for full bibliographic information. Hegel's work will typically cited first in the German *Werke* edition, then in English translation (where available), followed by paragraph and section number where applicable.

- (W) *Werke in zwanzig Bänden.*
- (GW) *Gesammelte Werke.*
- (EG) *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III. Werke, vol. 10. (Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind)*
- (EL) *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I. Werke, vol. 8. (Encyclopedia Logic)*
- (EN) *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II. Werke, vol. 9. (Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature)*
- (GPR) *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts. Werke, vol. 7. (Outlines of the Philosophy of Right)*
- (PG) *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Werke, vol. 3. (Phenomenology of Spirit)*
- (VA) *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I. Werke, vol. 13. (Lectures on Aesthetics)*
- (VGP) *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, I-III. Werke, vols. 18-20. (Lectures on the History of Philosophy)*
- (WL) *Wissenschaft der Logik, I & II. Werke, vols. 5-6. (Science of Logic)*

Introduction

One of the most influential ways of distinguishing the character of philosophy in contrast to other modes of inquiry is to say that philosophy is in some way uniquely “conceptual.” All sciences *use* concepts; philosophy is the science or study of concepts themselves. The specific characterization of the philosophical attention to concepts often varies: it is “analysis,” or “explication,” or “mapping,” or perhaps “engineering.”¹ But at the very least, the “conceptual” qualifier has been a useful heuristic for demarcating philosophy, the simplicity of which has not been matched by a naturalistic approach to philosophy that does not acknowledge the strict distinction between conceptual and empirical sides of inquiry.² Even so, the ‘conceptual conception’ of philosophy (as it can be designated) has some notorious problems, not least of which is determining what a concept is, and how knowledge of a concept can be anything other than a belief in which the concept is employed.³ For many, this conception of philosophy is associated especially with the “linguistic philosophy” and “conceptual analysis” of the twentieth century and has waned with the (supposed) waning of those traditions. However, its provenance is not necessarily tied to such a

¹ Cf. in order Grice (1958); Carnap (1950); Ryle (1971, Vol. 2, 201-2; 441-45); Cappelen (2018). The following description of Ryle shows that “analysis” was never the best metaphor for the conceptual conception: “[T]he philosopher’s task is never to investigate the *modus operandi* just of one concept by itself; the task is always to investigate the *modus operandi* of all the threads of a spider’s web of inter-working concepts. ... To fix the position of one concept is to fix its position *vis-à-vis* lots of others. Conceptual questions are inter-conceptual questions; if one concept is out of focus, all its associates are out of focus” (1971, Vol. 1, [1962], 189). For Ryle, it is inappropriate even to think of concepts as separable “atoms” of thought (ibid., 185).

² Consider, for example, Kornblith’s (2002, 1) strong renunciation of a conceptual conception of philosophy: “The idea that philosophy consists in, or, at a minimum, must begin with an understanding and investigation of our concepts is, I believe, both natural and very attractive. It is also, I believe, deeply mistaken. On my view, the subject of ethics is the right and the good, not our concepts of them. The subject matter of philosophy of mind is the mind itself, not our concept of it. And the subject matter of epistemology is knowledge itself, not our concept of knowledge.” Since on this naturalistic view, philosophical questions are (usually) also empirical questions, there may be no clear way to demarcate philosophical subjects from others (cf. ibid., Ch. 6). Whether this is a virtue or not is itself a matter of dispute. Note the remark of Jerry Fodor: “If [what I’ve written] doesn’t sound like philosophy, I don’t mind; as long as it doesn’t sound exactly like psychology, linguistics, or AI either” (quoted in ibid., 169).

³ Classic challenges include Quine (1951) and Williamson (2007).

limited historical moment; nor perhaps is the source of its renewal. Immanuel Kant himself says that the “*philosophy* of any subject” is “a system of rational cognition from concepts” (Ak. 6: 375/181), and that the “analyses” of concepts is “[a] great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the business of our reason” (A 5/B 9).⁴ It is perhaps G.W.F. Hegel, though, who is most emphatic among historical philosophers about the distinctly conceptual nature of philosophy: “[P]hilosophical thinking has its own *peculiar forms*, apart from the forms that they [philosophy and the empirical sciences] have in common. The universal form of it is the *concept*” (EL 52/33/§ 9).⁵ “[Q]uite generally, the whole course of philosophizing, being methodical, i.e., *necessary*, is nothing else but the mere *positing* of what is already contained in a concept” (188/141/§ 88R).⁶ Despite the notorious historical antipathy between Hegelianism and analytic philosophy, in view of such passages it is not altogether inappropriate when Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer speaks of Hegel’s philosophy as “conceptual analysis *avant la lettre*” (2005, 9).

It is true that Hegel not only *uses* concept-talk but speaks *about* concepts pervasively in his writings, perhaps more than any philosopher who preceded him (with the possible exception of Kant himself). In addition to numerous less systematic references, Book III of his *Science of Logic* (WL) is *The Doctrine of the Concept*, and it is far more than a perfunctory taxonomy of concepts, as such a doctrine would have been in other contemporary “logics.” Yet a remark Hegel makes about other writers applies aptly in his case: “[I]t is not as easy to ascertain whatever else [they] have said about [a concept’s] nature” (WL II: 252/514). The remark applies differently in Hegel’s case than to

⁴ Quotations from Kant will cite the standard *Akademie* edition, followed by the English translation, typically from the Cambridge edition of Kant’s work. Citations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will simply refer to the page-numbers of the first (A) and/or second (B) editions. The English is the 1998 Guyer/Wood translation.

⁵ Quotations from Hegel (unless otherwise specified) will cite the 1970 German *Werke* edition, the English translation, and (if applicable) the section or paragraph number. In citations from the *Encyclopedia or Philosophy of Right*, “R” refers to the paragraph remarks added by Hegel, and “Z” to *Zusätze* (additions), added from Hegel’s students’ lecture notes.

⁶ Just prior, Hegel describes the deduction of a concept as “to this extent entirely *analytic*.”

those writers to which he is alluding. In the latter case, it is not easy to know what they mean by “concept” because of a lack of explanation: “For in general they do not bother at all enquiring about it but presuppose that everyone already understands what the concept means when speaking of it” (ibid.). As is still the case today, the word “concept” was used in many (and often unexplained) senses by Hegel’s philosophical contemporaries. But in Hegel’s case, it is not the lack of explanation but the difficulty of the explanation that has led to a difficulty in knowing what, for him, concepts are, and why they can be philosophically significant. Hegel has not generally been regarded as an ally for a ‘conceptual conception’ of philosophy because his discussion of concepts, or more curiously, “the concept,” has seemed to involve a change in topic.

The problem can be simplified in this way: Hegel’s apparent conceptual *metaphysics* seems to block any potential relevance of his conceptual *method*. In the tradition of conceptual analysis of the twentieth century, part of its appeal was supposed to lie in its metaphysically deflationary character. That is, in an analysis of <knowledge>⁷, one was not speculating about a transcendent *eidos*, but simply drawing out ‘what we mean’ when we use the term in the relevant way. One was thus not, in the practice of philosophy itself, committed to new or strange entities beyond those involved in the ‘object language’.⁸ However, Hegel’s discussion of conceptuality has easily invited the view that concepts for him are not only (if at all) the determinate meanings of his terms or the medium of thought but further supersensible entities (or one supreme entity) about which Hegel has a theory: concepts are “in” things, and they explain what things do, or the world itself is the emanation of a single “Concept.” We will have opportunity to see how such views can seem precisely to be Hegel’s. But were one to take such a view, then Hegel’s characterizations of philosophy I quoted above

⁷ I follow Stang (2016) in using this convention to refer to concepts rather than words. One can read the notation as “the concept *knowledge*” or “the concept of knowledge.”

⁸ Cf. Ryle’s “Systematically Misleading Expressions” ([1932] in his 1971, vol. 2) for an especially self-conscious approach to this issue.

would take on a whole new coloring: now the “analysis” of the concept (or positing what it contains) would involve a claim that one was drawing out the basic structure of reality, or explaining the inner *conatus* of living entities.

Such metaphysical views would block the methodological relevance of Hegel’s theory of concepts not simply because they are (or may be) false, implausible, or unfashionable. Instead, these views turn conceptuality from the ‘fabric’ or medium of thought itself to a new object of theory, something postulated (apparently outside our thought) in a way that may or may not conform to our theory of it. If that is what a concept is for Hegel, then presumably we need some other medium of thought or method to attain knowledge of “concepts” in this new sense.⁹ The putative advantage of the conceptual conception of philosophy is then lost, for that approach assumed that philosophical knowledge would be the clarification of something we either *already* have (in some inchoate form) or else could have, rather than something about which we form theories *ab initio*. A metaphysical reading of Hegel’s “concept” is uniquely problematic in this regard. For it is one thing if Hegel’s talk of “Substance” or “God” is genuinely metaphysical, for these are simply unique *objects* of conceptual thought. But if the *subject* of conceptual thought – our own thinking, so we thought – is similarly alienated from us and treated as the object of a metaphysical theory, then Hegel’s whole philosophizing seems to be unmoored from any direct connection to us. On the other hand, if Hegel’s reference to the concept can be connected in a recognizable way to a humanly accessible form of thought, then Hegel’s philosophy as a whole may touch ground in an important way.

The aim of this dissertation is to provide an interpretation of Hegel’s talk about concepts, especially as found in his *Doctrine of the Concept*, that explains both how Hegel’s view is about

⁹ This strategy is admitted by Kenneth Westphal, who uses “conceptions” for concepts in the more ordinary sense: “Hegel analyzes ‘the concept’ (*der Begriff*) as an ontological structure, like a law of nature rather than a conception, though when we are thinking rightly, ‘the concept’ (in Hegel’s ontological sense) is an object of human thought (via the right use of our conceptions).” See also Bowman (2013, 32-33).

concepts in a recognizable way and how that view can seem to have the metaphysical consequences that have led many to treat his view as *sui generis*. As we will see, Hegel's view is recognizably about concepts because he uses "the concept" to refer to the general structure of thought, within which many individual concepts may be distinguished. Hegel thinks that this structure is free and creative, so that concepts are not something merely given, but rather something determined by us. He often uses the term "negativity" to describe this subjective activity. Hegel's view has a metaphysical dimension, however, because he thinks that the self-determining of conceptual content can result in the constitution of objects, objects whose nature or essence is a concept itself. I will call this conviction of Hegel's "Conceptual Transparency," the view that our concept of something can fully express its essence. As Hegel writes, "[T]he nature, the specific essence, that which is truly *permanent* and *substantial* in the manifold and accidentality of appearance and fleeting externalization, is the *concept* of the thing [*Sache*], *that which is universal in it*" (WL I: 26/16; modified). The key interpretive *explanandum* for this project will be to show precisely *how* these two dimensions of Hegel's view can be compatible, especially without ascribing to Hegel a severely subjectivizing idealism that would say, e.g., that the world as a whole is the product of our creative thinking.

Though my inquiry will not be directly oriented toward contemporary debates about the method of philosophy and conceptual analysis, it offers a glimpse of an apparent advantage of Hegel's view *vis-à-vis* the traditionally prevalent conceptual conceptions of philosophy, which may go some way to addressing some standard criticisms of those approaches. For it is frequently objected to conceptual conceptions of philosophy that they are capable merely of clarifying what we mean, without touching the truth of the subject matters they consider, except perhaps coincidentally.¹⁰ Whether this is objectionable is controversial in its own right. Someone such as P.F. Strawson

¹⁰ See again Kornblith (2002, 170): "If we want to understand the mind, then we would be well advised to look to our best current theories rather than the concepts we have prior to such theoretical engagement."

seemed to think that this was a task enough for philosophy. His own program of “descriptive metaphysics” thus attempted simply “to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world” or “to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure” (1959, 9). But is this the most one can say about what philosophy achieves? At the very least, Strawson’s conception seems to fall short of what Hegel credits to philosophy. For Hegel undoubtedly sees conceptual knowledge as capable of essential knowledge and does not feel the need to qualify conceptual knowledge as only ‘ours’, as if different beings could have different concepts of the same objects. Hegel’s view promises to combine the ‘subjective’ dimension of conceptual analysis with the ambition to claim ‘objective’ truth. Yet it is not clear at the outset how such a view is possible.

In claiming such objectivity for concepts, and even that they express what things are “in themselves,” Hegel’s view most obviously conflicts with Kant, or at least seems to do so. For Kant believes that concepts are objective only to the extent that they refer to sensible marks of objects, but that these sensory qualities do not themselves constitute the essence of things, which is hidden from us. It seems that on this Kantian view, conceptual analysis cannot yield essential truths (except of the ‘nominal essence’ of something). Recent years of Hegel scholarship have seen a renewed appreciation of Hegel’s dependence on Kant, but the most dominant attempts to treat Hegel as a Kantian have failed to explain the compatibility of Kant’s skepticism about concepts with Hegel’s view of Conceptual Transparency. Hegel says that concepts can be the “source of their own actuality,” and this surely seems to mean more that conceptuality is a necessary and ineliminable feature of all apperceptive self-consciousness.¹¹

Scholars have worried that if Hegel is not sufficiently Kantian, then he will be guilty of a “pre-Critical” rationalism or “dogmatism.” This despite the fact that Hegel frequently praises this

¹¹ Here I allude to the approach of Pippin (1989ff.), which will be discussed at many points in what follows.

pre-Kantian tradition in no uncertain terms, as, for example, standing at “a higher level than the later critical [sc. Kantian] philosophizing” (94/66/§ 28). It is in view of such high praise from Hegel, as well as the tendency of contemporary scholars to dismiss or fail to explain these remarks, that I have labelled Hegel’s view in the present work a “rationalism.” What Hegel seeks to retain from rationalism is precisely what the Strawsonian conception of conceptual analysis seemed to lack, namely the conviction that conceptual content is not only an expression of our subjective habits of thought, but also (at least in some cases) an expression of something’s essence, namely Conceptual Transparency. (“Rationalism” can surely mean something more or different than this, but this will be the primary characteristic of interest here.) More common these days is to discuss the sense in which Hegel is an “idealist.”¹² This has led to an extensive focus on the way that Hegel thinks of thought and conceptuality as involved in sensory experience. Idealism thus understood is almost identical with a “conceptualism” about sensory experience.¹³ Yet Hegel’s primary interest in concepts is the role they play in philosophical thought, not sensory experience. And “idealism” seems to be a less pertinent label for treating the role of concepts in philosophy itself.¹⁴ For Hegel’s view of philosophy has less to do with the ‘mind-dependence’ of the entities philosophy discusses as with their “rational” character.¹⁵ Moreover, whatever Hegel’s views are about the reach of conceptuality to all objects of worldly experience, he sets *limits* to the ability of concepts to make things rationally intelligible. Hegel’s rationalism has a “province.” My aim is to articulate the source and limits of this province in Hegel’s thinking.

¹² The relevant connotations of idealism and realism will be discussed further below, at 4.2.

¹³ I treat this issue further in Wolf (2019). It is not a focal topic of the present work.

¹⁴ At least with the most common connotations of the term. But see Hegel’s remark: “The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in the recognition that the finite is not that which truly is [*ein wahrhaft Seiendes*]. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism...A philosophy that attributes to finite existence, as such, true, ultimate, absolute being, does not deserve the name of philosophy” (*WL* I: 172/124; modified).

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., “The science of right is a section of *philosophy*. Consequently, its task is to develop the Idea—the Idea being the rational factor in any object of study—out of the concept, or, what is the same thing, to look on at the proper development of the thing itself” (*GPR* 30/18/§ 2; underlined).

0.1 Plan of the Work

In Chapter 1, I clarify the role that “Conceptual Transparency” plays in eighteenth century German rationalism in the Leibnizian tradition and show why a modified version of that view would be appealing to Hegel even after Kant’s Critical philosophy. Despite Kant’s great influence on Hegel, Hegel continued to affirm that in philosophical thinking, concepts can express the essence of things, and he frequently ties this view to the pre-Kantian rationalists. The unique conviction of these rationalists is that Conceptual Transparency holds universally, so that any truth is a conceptual truth, and every truth is determined by the essences or natures of the things in question. This view had important epistemological, metaphysical, and methodological dimensions for rationalism. Hegel rejected Conceptual Transparency in this universal form, relying as it does on accepting the existence of a “happy coincidence” between our thought and the world, which is supported theologically. However, Hegel realizes that Kant’s critical rejection of Conceptual Transparency in all its forms had deleterious consequences for philosophy itself. Kant’s critique of metaphysics depends on what I call the “Aesthetic Constraint,” the view that the content of concepts depends specifically on objects of the spatio-temporal world. Yet holding this view, Hegel thinks, rules out the very kind of conceptual inquiry that is characteristic of even Kant’s philosophy. The challenge, then, is set: to arrive at a version of Conceptual Transparency that does not rely on a happy coincidence, but escapes the strictures of Kant’s semantics.

Chapter 2 sets out the basic structure of Hegel’s view of conceptual content as it appears in the *Doctrine of the Concept*. Yet since Hegel so often speaks of concepts in the singular as “the concept,” I first defend the view that Hegel is properly considered a conceptual theorist, and that his

remarks that distance his view of concepts from an ordinary one apply to a limited set of characteristics popularly seen as defining concepts, which I call the “standard model.” I argue Hegel’s critique of the standard model assumes a wider agreement about what concepts are and seeks only to show that certain special features of the standard model can be discarded. I then seek to show how Hegel’s account of the “formal concept” in the *Doctrine of the Concept* works out a basic conception of conceptual content. Hegel’s use of “concept” in the singular is his term for the “universal” structure of conceptual content, which is divided by negative relations he calls “particularity” and realized in “singular” objects. In Hegel’s view, a concept proper is the unity of these three “moments.” On this purely formal basis, Hegel attempts to show that a concept could have content without appeal to sensibility (Kant’s Aesthetic Constraint) because of the sense-independent role of negativity and contradiction in determining conceptual content. Even if conceptual cognition depends genetically on sensibility and inherited language, it comes to be conceptual when its structure is determined by “negativity” alone.

Why does this schematic account of conceptual content arrive in the middle of a book that is supposed to effect the “replacement” of metaphysics? In Chapter 3, I seek to answer this question by offering an account of the relationship between the *Doctrine of the Concept* and the prior Books of the Objective Logic. Rather than ending with the purely critical results of the Objective Logic, which shows in many cases that the received view of metaphysical concepts lead to contradictions, Hegel uses the account of conceptual form, judgment, and syllogism to *recapitulate* metaphysical concepts. In effect, Hegel’s *Begriffslöge* carries out a more extensive version of Kant’s “Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories.” This allows Hegel to explain that the proper role of metaphysical concepts like <substance> and <essence> is to express the satisfaction of thought within certain forms of judgment and syllogism. Thus, Conceptual Transparency is possible in Hegel’s case because talk

about essences (in particular) does not terminate with the critique of metaphysics in the Objective Logic.

The transition from “Subjectivity” to “Objectivity” in Hegel’s *Begriffslogik* shows how the bare account of conceptual form is sufficient for an account of objective conceptual content. In Chapter 4, I show how Hegel’s account of objective conceptual content depends on a logical interpretation of teleology consistent with Hegel’s account of conceptual form. Teleology explains how objective conceptual content is possible because a teleological process involves the realization of a universal, through a definite means (particular), in a singular object. Teleology satisfies Hegel’s criteria for the unity of conceptual form. In doing so, it shows how an object can be conceptually transparent: in being constituted by a purposive process. I show how this conception of Conceptual Transparency leads to a restricted (“provincial”) form of rationalism. Since Hegel also thinks that non-teleological objects are possible (which I discuss by means of his “Mechanism” chapter), Hegel is not committed to the view that every object has an essence that can be conceptually known. Philosophy, insofar as it has objectively true content, must thus be restricted to domains in which teleology can be said to hold. I illustrate this claim by considering a few cases of Hegel’s *Realphilosophie*, his philosophy of right, aesthetics, and the philosophy of nature.

Chapter 5 concerns the paradigm case in which Conceptual Transparency holds in Hegel’s philosophy: the social ontology implicit in his concepts of “objective spirit” and “ethical life.” Social ontology is conceptually transparent if and when it is the product of collective intentions that Hegel would regard as conceptually or purposively structured. I first attempt to show that Hegel’s social ontology results from his development of the view of Kant and Fichte on practical conceptuality. Both Kant and Fichte recognizes that practical concepts could play an active role in determining how things are, and that this effect was not reducible to an explanation in terms of sensibility. I

show that in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, he builds on this view by showing how, if practical activity leads to objective results, these will be conceptually transparent objects. And the world of social ontology, especially social institutions, are just these kind of objective results of practical activity. Social ontology thus becomes the paradigm case of Conceptual Transparency. I then show how this paradigm case helps elucidate Hegel's rationalism in its metaphysical, epistemological, and methodological dimensions: it helps illustrate why Hegel speaks of the social world in terms of substance and essence, it shows how "absolute knowing" of the social world is possible, and it explains how a form of conceptual analysis is possible that has fully objective credentials.