What is truth?

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editorial remarks

The first question is: What is the subject matter of our science? The simplest and most intelligible answer to this question is that it is the truth.¹

This article is my try to explain some of the aspects of that quote of Hegel in my own words.

As the truth is expressed in the form of the concept, as will be shown below, I suggest that you also read my “Concept Tutorial”² in conjunction with this article.

And as Hegel also addresses the sceptics later in that paragraph, who say that there can be no knowledge of truth³, you might also want to read my other article “Ignorance and Scepticism”⁴ to better understand it and make the most use of it. You can read all three articles in any order, but you will see that they are connected.

In all three articles I try to convey to you some lessons I found from my Hegel readings. Of course some other may differ, but I hope that you will find them useful anyway.

In some ways, together they also constitute a challenge to the concept of “relativism” and of “alternative facts”.

This text was first published in my “Hegel workshop” (“Hegel Werkstatt”) incrementally between 1997 and 2007. It was first translated into English on 2020-07-05. On 2020-07-15/16, I reworked the translation, replaced several misleading words by better translations, adding several explanations and footnotes and also shortened other, more distracting parts.

The classical theory of truth - The correspondence between theory and object

In the classical theory of truth (“Correspondence theory of truth”⁵), which everyone intuitively advocates and which Hegel considered once of “supreme value”⁶ (even if he criticises it and expands / sublates it) and which the other theories of truth must at least take into account, a proposition is true if it has a “correspondence” “in reality” (“is the case”, as Wittgenstein and logical atomism⁷ say, adequately

¹ Hegel “Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Science, Vol. 1, §19, Zusatz 1 (translation by Gerats/Suchting/Harris, Indianapolis 1991, p.46)
² concept-tutorial.htm
³ Three sentences later, the quote continues: “But very soon a reservation appears: can we also know the truth? There seems to be a lack of proportion between us men, limited as we are, and the truth as it is in and for itself; and the question arises of the bridge between the finite and the infinite. God is the Truth; how then are we to be cognizant of him? There seems to be a contradiction between any such project and the virtues of humility and modesty.”
⁴ ignorance-and-scepticism.htm
⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth#Correspondence
⁶ “When Kant, in connection with logic comes to discuss the old and famous question: what is truth? He first of all presents to the reader as a triviality the explanation of the term as the agreement of cognition with its object a definition of great, indeed of supreme, value.” (Hegel: “Science of Logic”, §1310)
⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki(LogicalAtomism
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“reflects” reality, as Lenin and in his wake classical Marxism-Leninism say).

Today - at the end point of a long search in the history of philosophy up to our times, for an ever more refined and complex conception of truth - the classical theory may seem to some professional philosophers rather naive. However, everyone, including professional philosophers, in his ordinary life finds it nevertheless worthwhile, in case of doubts whether a UFO has landed outside, the lights have been turned off, the children have brushed their teeth, today is Sunday, etc., to simply “look” first.

The object here is therefore in that regard (quite in the sense of the empiricists and materialists - see below) the measure of truth.

How and where to make the comparison?

A question remaining is however, how one can practically carry out this comparison between ideas/models “in our head” on the one hand, in “reality” (“outside our head”) on the other hand. Comparing implies that there is some common ground where a comparison can take place. Apart from the specific problems that sometimes arise in the individual cases:

Does the comparison take place inside or outside our head/mind? Or in a third place? In any case, the question arises how the separate “inside” and “outside” can be brought together for comparison (and compared, which presupposes some common ground).

In order to circumvent these problems, some modern theories apply only formal criteria that no longer require this comparison, such as the “coherence theory of truth”8, according to which it is only important that the theory does not contradict itself.

Resolution

These different questions are resolved by making it clear that the comparison (between the outside world - mediated by sensory impressions - and the inner world (Hegel’s theory of the theoretical mind9 provides information about the complexity of the processes taking place) takes place in our head (or more precisely: in our mind) (and the difference between the inner and outer world can be derived from this, so this is not denied).

Thus the concept of the correspondence between subject and object actually expands to the “Coherence theory of truth” in the sense that the classical theory is “sublated”10 in it (because both the experience of the subject from your senses and experiences, your readings, the witness stories and discussions with others, the results of experiments etc. all need to be brought into coherence with the concepts of these subjects

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8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth#Coherence
9 https://hegel.net/en/e3131.htm
10 You might want to check the meaning of “sublated”, which is used several times in this article, because it represents an important aspect of Hegel’s concept of truth, in the article explaining the word “sublation”11.

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What is truth? (see the concept tutorial\textsuperscript{12}). So Hegel’s theory of truth is indeed rightly subsumed under this “Coherence theory of truth” in the Wikipedia article. By the way, I may also argue that the various “pragmatic theories of truth”\textsuperscript{13} can also be sublated in the “Coherence theory of truth”, because the practical experience of fability, is a sign of “incoherence”, leading to self correction (John Dewey\textsuperscript{14} for example was a former Hegelian, so it is no surprise that his theories are at least in some parts compatible with Hegelianism. If my understanding of Hegel is correct here, then Popper is therefore fundamentally wrong, when he believes that Hegel maintains a theory of truth where you systematically can’t prove anything true or wrong\textsuperscript{15}.

**Consequence: the logical processing of the many aspects**

It is now not only the task to bring object (sensory/measurement data) and subject (model/concept) into agreement, but to process everything that reaches us from outside (simple sensory data, measurement data, experiences, reports of others, theories about the object in books, etc.) and our own “ingredients” for this (further conclusions, views, feelings, intuition, etc.) into a logically consistent whole. Simply put: the whole must actually (logically) fit together.

In thinking, science and truth, logic has the task of arranging the given, multi-layered material in such a logical way that it becomes a complete whole (this also includes the discovery that at one point or another there is a lack of information/facts/material, which then remains empty for the time being or - depending on the possibility - must be asked for, for example in the form of experiments or other research).

These different aspects, points of view, etc. should not simply be stuck together in the sense of a “collage”, but should be processed into a logically ordered whole.

By the way1: Of course, the material can also be arranged in any other way, the free association of dreams, the productions of the artists etc. show this. On the one hand, however, the logical relationships of the objects is not independent from them, so that when you leave them out, you are missing something relevant and thus don’t have the whole thing. On the other hand, the productions of dreamy and artistic fantasy are obviously more subjective (than objective) in nature (i.e. they owe more to the subject than to the object) and therefore don’t do justice to the objects (and in everyday life, everyone expects that thinking about an object makes you more aware of it, makes you more worthy of it).

By the way2: Hegelian “Logic of Being”\textsuperscript{17} describes the side of the phenomena (which in turn cannot be

\textsuperscript{12} concept-tutorial.htm

\textsuperscript{13} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth#Pragmatic

\textsuperscript{14} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dewey#Pragmatism,_instrumentalism,_consequentialism

\textsuperscript{15} Popper misunderstands Hegel that way in his 1945 book “The open society and its enemies”. The book is criticised by Kaufmann 1959\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{17} e11.htm
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left out and, as it turns out, are the basic for the further process), his “Logic of Essence”\(^\text{18}\) describes the process of “logical digestion”.

**Objections: ignorance and scepticism**

Regarding the question whether there is another “reality” beyond that in the respective human “space of experience” that is not taken into account and therefore is not in accordance with the human thinking about the objects, I have answered in detail in “Ignorance and Scepticism”: first, this difference is only invented, since in case - this is the starting point of the sceptical doubt - it lies beyond human experience (thus cannot have its cause precisely in a human experience), then, therefore, the question is how one could ever know about it at all (how to make the comparison, see “Ignorance and Scepticism”\(^\text{19}\)). Experiencing / Knowing about what we can not experience/know by definition is obviously impossible, and therefore this imagined difference obviously has no practical consequence (I can never be embarrassed to find out that I am wrong) and obviously irrelevant as a theoretical thought as well (since it is apparently useless as a distinguishing feature between a right and a wrong theory, since, the way how this fundamental suspicion of deviation is constructed, it applies to any theory, no matter how good it is).

People might (rightly) have a (too) great respect for any “holy” absolute truth, being sure that it is too ambitious for our humble limited human mind (ironically, while such sceptics are in that way sure that there is no thing like an absolute truth, at least that “fact”/truth that there is no absolute truth is by them thereby treated as if it were a kind of absolute truth. A kind of contradiction (As Hegel noticed: in case you apply your scepticism/doubt to scepticism/doubt itself, the scepticism/doubt vanishes\(^\text{20}\)).

In real life however, people never just doubt everything and thereby take every theory/concept as evenly unproved and possibly false, but need to take decisions, so instead try to find at least a relative truth, that gives justice to what they know and experience and to avoid errors. That is exactly what we want to do here (and what Hegel in my understanding tries to do in his Logic and in his work as such: trying to examine, reflect upon, understand and explain what we do in our practice).

So the objection dissolves and is sublated to the effect that all aspects should be taken into account and that one should also be cautious of “hasty” answers and open to the correction of mistakes and the inclusion of extensions (which, however, can all be traced back to the consideration of all aspects - “the truth is the whole”).

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\(^{18}\) e12.htm

\(^{19}\) ignorance-and-scepticism.htm

\(^{20}\) “Wird der Zweifel Gegenstand des Zweifels, zweifelt der Zweifelnde am Zweifel selbst, so verschwindet der Zweifel.” (“Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion”, quoted after the TWA suhrkamp edition, volume 16, page 122). BTW, for entertainment, I produced a little song out of this quote (in German), which you could download\(^\text{21}\) if you wanted.
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The true is the whole

In the following we will now once again look at some of the typical aspects and arguments for pluralism, empiricism, etc., so that we can check for ourselves whether the concept of truth given here does indeed capture them adequately

(because obviously a concept of truth formulated in this way must indeed aim to also sublate the other concepts of truth as well).

Paradox - astonishment as a starting point for thinking/learning:

Philosophy begins by astonishment (the need to no longer accept something as simply unproblematically given, but rather to think about it), says Aristotle, and indeed, when something turns out to be problematic, a paradox/contradiction (e.g. from new phenomena that can’t be explained by the existing theories) arises, we feel unsatisfied with that state and aim that such problems are resolved (so it is a classical pedagogical motivation applied by teachers, for example, to present something to their pupil in a way that they are made aware that they can not explain it, so that they are aware that they are missing that knowledge and want to explain it and so learn its explanation).

The progress sought is then of course that a solution is sought which sublates the existing knowledge and the new phenomenon in need of explanation, which cannot be explained with what has been known so far (but perhaps even contradicts it apparently) in a new explanation on a new level (the rise from Newton’s physics to Einstein’s physics is the classical example, but this also happens in a much smaller level all the time in our daily life).

Plurality of the senses

It is said that the senses do not give certainty, because they may be deceived, but in practice it is usually the case that we at least get information from one sense about the deception of the other sense: we feel that we cannot touch an optical illusion; we see the other way round that the felt stimulus of our skin does not emanate from what we suspect, but from something else, etc. The different, superficially contradictory sensory data are something we want to put together in a convincing overall picture.
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**Witness statements**

Who is not familiar with the different testimonies in a crime thriller/detective story or in other research (oral history or even in everyday life, for example, in an argument between siblings). The film “Rashomon”\(^{24}\) (or more recently - and more trivially - “Hoodwinked!”\(^{25}\)) became famous. Here, too, the aim is to arrive at an overall picture from the various, superficially contradictory witness statements (whereby here, of course, it must also be taken into account that the unconscious or conscious falsification of statements is also a possibility here, since there are reasons to deviate from the “truth” in the respective report - each perceived from one’s own perspective. But even this will be reconstructed at the end of a satisfactory synopsis).

**Empiricism**

In the transition from scholasticism to empiricism (at least as it is reminded to us today from the perspective of empiricism) it is emphasised that in scholasticism only the authority of Scripture (Bible, Aristotle) was relevant, one would not have looked up “reality” at all (Illustration: the alleged refusal of the theologians to look through Galileo Galilei’s telescope in order to observe the moons of Jupiter itself\(^{26}\)).

By this dogmatism the contradiction (with a possibly deviating “reality”) is avoided by fading out something, not looking at it at all, not checking it (and if it nevertheless occurs in such a way that it cannot be ignored/repressed, then consistently forbidding it: inquisition).

But also quite independently of the way a religious or political “totalitarianism” or “fundamentalism” deals with “deviating/unpleasant facts”: it simply happens - also and especially nowadays, where one wants to look more openly - that something looks good “in theory” (which is then precautionary called “hypothesis” or “model”), and then, when it is checked, or based on meanwhile improved ones, finer measurement methods (so many differentiations in the more advanced physical theories can only be perceived and decided on the basis of refined measurements), then comes to results contradicting the theory, which must be explained and integrated, which can range from simple changes/expansions to “paradigm shifts”.

(But of course, even in today’s real-life scientific world, which is only run by fallible human beings, unpleasant facts can be explained away and ignored, a field for the sociology of science, among others, that shows the partial justification of the rather pessimistic descriptions of Kuhn, for example. However, one should be able to point out and criticise this unscientific behaviour at least by the standards for a correct scientific procedure mentioned here).

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\(^{24}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashomon

\(^{25}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoodwinked!

\(^{26}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_affair, especially footnote 7: “Galileo complained that some of the philosophers who opposed his discoveries had refused even to look through a telescope: Galileo did not name the philosophers concerned, but Galileo scholars have identified two of them as Cesare Cremonini and Giulio Libri (Drake, 1978, pp.162, 165; Sharratt, 1994, p.87). Claims of similar refusals by bishops and cardinals have sometimes been made, but there appears to be no evidence to support them.”
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Scepticism, thing in itself and models

From this experience the sceptic can deduce a reservation against existing explanations:

Even these existing explanations of an object may later prove to be inadequate. As a “reminder” for this deviation we postulate “the thing in itself”, which can also deviate from our explanations. Correspondingly, in this sceptical perspective, these explanations then only present themselves as “models” of reality. (In the materialism also of the Marxist-Leninist variant this sceptical reservation, despite all “cognitive optimism”, has been preserved in the distinction between “real” matter and “only derived” ideas in the mind).

If, on the other hand, this point of view is not taken into account, no need for verification/review can develop and instead a dogmatism can emerge.

In Hegel’s case, this standpoint of scepticism and criticism is therefore important (“second standpoint on objectivity”\(^\text{27}\)) and is taken into consideration/maintained in the process (and its sublation\(^\text{28}\) as its result).

Different theories

If theories as explanations of “facts” contradict each other (or can only partially explain the subject matter in each case without fitting together seamlessly), this is perceived, at least in natural science, as a problem that must be solved: either by falsifying the other theory(s) and/or by further developing the theory(s) so that they become a new theory in which the previous theories in question are integrated (at least in their explanatory content) (in the case of fundamental extensions with, otherwise without a “paradigm shift”\(^\text{29}\))

By the way: just as at the end of a successful investigation all testimonies can be explained, and even false testimonies that are not directly taken into account are also explained as false testimonies, so at the end of a summary of all the theories not all theories and all material are necessarily included, but some things remain justifiably left out.

This parallel also works in the opposite direction: just as new testimony, new evidence may lead to a re-evaluation of the whole case (which is what the producers of crime fiction/detective stories and trial films live on to a large extent), new results may of course lead to a re-evaluation/reordering, in which what is considered relevant/irrelevant from the existing facts and theories may also change - Thomas Kuhn\(^\text{30}\)’s “paradigm shift”).

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\(^{27}\) Hegel “Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Science”, Vol. 1, §37ff.

\(^{28}\) sublation.htm

\(^{29}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradigm_shift

\(^{30}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Kuhn

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**Pluralism - elephant example**

The blind men and the elephant, embodied as “Blindenbrunnen” (“Well of the blind men”) in the “Rheinaue” in Bonn, Germany. Source: Wikimedia

In the Indian tradition (Hinduism is the pluralistic religion par excellence, moreover, with Judaism, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Jains, Buddhists, etc., many other religions are added) there is the well-known fable of the blind men, which are supposed to describe an elephant: depending on whether the person concerned has the leg, the belly, the tail, the tusk, the ear, the trunk, etc. of the elephant in his hand, a completely different description of the elephant emerges (which obviously contradicts the other ones).

It is clear that the lesson to be learned from the story is that each of these descriptions contributes its part to the truth, and that the suppression/prohibition of one of these partial truths would not be appropriate, but would prevent us from arriving at the adequate and complete picture of an elephant. This, then, against ignoring, suppressing, prohibiting contradictory partial truths.

**Prohibition of divergent positions in contrast to the pluralism of different positions** The prohibition came out of the partial insight that the truth should not contradict itself, there can only be one truth. A position that historically occurred quite often, but was rather unpleasant for those who deviated from it and in this respect also hindered the search for truth.


32 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant)

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Modern left and/or postmodernist critics of “truth” therefore often have this position in mind when they take up the fight against the totalitarianism of truth or the claim to truth etc.

But both the position of the “only one truth” and that of the necessary pluralism as opposition to the “only one truth” themselves emphasise only a partial aspect of truth and, in so far as both are only partly right and partly insufficient (thus, if both also have negative effects), both must therefore be sublated (as it then also happens in the following section).

Back to the picture - The truth of the picture of the elephant

The parable of the elephant depicted lives in its power of persuasion from the fact that the unity of the one elephant is found in the different descriptions (the parable would be considerably less convincing if the blind person had ever felt and described quite different things, for instance a glass of wine, a handful of sand, the wind, a rose, a chewing gum, a computer etc. - possibly even as a description of an elephant).

Accordingly, the picture does not simply stand for pluralism, i.e. the good reason for the difference of experiences, but conversely also for the higher unity of these differences, which are suspended in the true picture (concept) of the elephant.

The truth as a concept

So, if you are aiming at such an all including, logical ordered truth, you arrive at what Hegel calls the “concept” (in Hegel’s German vocabulary: “Begriff”) and which is the subject of an article (and tutorial) of its own: see the concept tutorial\(^3\).

On the other hand, when you followed the concept tutorial and you apply it to the “concept” of “truth” itself, you should basically come to the conclusions of this article. That is why I said in the beginning that these two articles complement each other.

\(^{33}\) concept-tutorial.htm