

Handout for *Sense Certainty*

Bob Brandom

All certainty is either *mediated* or *not mediated*, that is, it either requires proof or is neither susceptible nor in need of any proof. There may be ever so much in our cognition that is immediately certain only, that is only through proof, yet there must also be something *indemonstrable* or *immediately certain*, and all our cognition must start from *immediately certain* propositions. [Kant *Logic*, p. 79]

Hegel distinguishes these two dimensions of Kant's distinction between intuitions and concepts in the first paragraph of *Sense Certainty* as "immediate knowledge" and "knowledge of the immediate. The first is a matter of "our approach being immediate or receptive." This is immediacy of the *act* of "apprehending without comprehending." [PhG ¶90] It is to be distinguished from "knowledge of the immediate," which is immediacy of the *content* apprehended.

It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects...locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. [Wilfrid Sellars "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities" §108.]

Hegel structures his discussion in three movements of thought, unpacking what is implicit in the notion of knowledge of the immediate, what is implicit in the notion of immediate knowledge, and what is implicit in the notion of immediate knowledge of the immediate.

The beginning of hermeneutic wisdom in reading this bit of the *Phenomenology* consists in disentangling the various distinctions that Hegel deploys in his compelling argument for this important conclusion, and avoiding the snare and delusion of what I will call the "Bad Argument" that his exposition invites us to find in its place.

The Bad Argument results from failing to distinguish three kinds of repeatability that Hegel points out, and treating them as though they all amounted to generality or universality in the sense in which the universals or properties expressed by predicates contrast with the particulars referred to by singular terms. All three are important for arguments Hegel makes, but they, and the arguments they actually support, must be carefully distinguished. The first sort of repeatability concerns the kind of epistemic authority distinctive of the deliverances of sensuous immediacy. It is, Hegel observes, a *kind* of authority, which can be exhibited by *different* episodes with *different* contents.

An actual sense-certainty is not merely this pure immediacy, but an *instance* of it. [PhG ¶92]

It is as a universal too that we *utter* what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: 'This', i.e. the *universal* This; or, 'it is', i.e. *Being in general*...

Similarly, when I say 'I', this singular 'I', I say in general all 'I's; everyone is what I say, everyone is 'I', this singular 'I'.

"If we describe it more exactly as 'this bit of paper', then each and every bit of paper is 'this bit of paper', and I have only uttered the universal all the time." [PhG ¶97, ¶102, and ¶110.]

It certainly *looks* as though the point is that since *any* object can be responded to appropriately by some tokening of the *type* ‘this’ (that *any* subject can be indicated by some tokening of the type ‘I’), that these demonstrative and indexical expressions must be understood as having universal contents and expressing absolutely general concepts. The argument would then take the form of an analogy. The repeatable expression ‘Red’ applies to a lot of particulars. So ‘red’ is a predicate, which expresses a concept and stands for a universal or property: the universal or property shared by all things that are properly called ‘red’. In the same way, the repeatable expression ‘this’ (‘I’) applies to lots of particulars. Indeed, for *any* particular (in the case of ‘I’, any particular self) it is possible to refer to it by using a tokening of the repeatable type ‘this’. So ‘this’ (‘I’) is a predicate, which expresses a concept and stands for a universal or property: the universal or property shared by all things that are properly called ‘this’ (‘I’), that is, all particulars (or particular selves).

That would be a Bad Argument. Spelled out as I just have, the fallacy should be obvious. Although ‘this’ is a repeatable expression type that can be applied to any particular thing or situation, it is not *predicated* of them, it is not *describing* them, it is not a universal in the sense of expressing a *property* that they share or a *concept* that they fall under. To refer to something as ‘this’ is not to characterize it in any way, certainly not to attribute a property to it, even a very general one.

Hegel is fully aware of the distinction that vitiates the Bad Argument, and is in fact concerned to insist on it. On the side of the immediacy of content (as opposed to the immediacy of the origin of the act of sensing—it’s being noninferential in the only sense Sellars and Hegel allow that cognition can be noninferential), Kant’s understanding of intuitions construes them as *particular*, by contrast to the *generality* of concepts. Hegel sees that this doctrine is ambiguous. Kant in the Second Analogy of Experience carefully distinguishes relations of representations from representations of relations, the former a matter of relations among the subject’s representings, and the latter a matter of relations represented as objective. His (meta)concept of intuition, however, elides the analogous and equally important distinction between particularity of representations and representations of particularity

Kant thinks of intuitions as *both* singular-term-like, in representing particulars, *and* demonstrative-like, in being unrepeatable token(ing)-reflexive representations. These features can, of course, coincide. But they need not.

Hegel claims in *Sense Certainty* that the authority of immediacy that invests acts of sensory awareness implicitly involves *two* sorts of repeatability of the content of those acts. We might distinguish them as *classificatory* and *recollective* repeatability. The first is the classificatory or characterizing repeatability of predicates and concepts, which Hegel calls “universals”. The second, which in the context of endorsements whose cognitive authority depends on their immediacy turns out to be presupposed by the first, is epitomized by the way pronouns pick up, repeat, and so preserve the content of demonstratives serving as their antecedents.

The Good Arguments begin with the observation that the authority of immediacy is itself a *kind* of authority. This is true, in turn, along two different dimensions. First, the authority of having been immediately (in the sense of noninferentially) responsively elicited can be invested in *different* contents. Second, for an unrepeatable episode to be intelligible as possessing any kind

of epistemic *authority*, it must be related to *other* episodes that can inherit or appeal to that authority. Otherwise it is a *mere* occurrence, like an eddy in a stream.

Both truths have the same authentication [Beglaubigung = warrant, credentials], viz. the immediacy of seeing, and the certainty and assurance that both have about their knowing; but the one truth vanishes [verschwindet] in the other. [PhG ¶101]

The process whereby one certainty (commitment) “vanishes in another,” that is, has the authority it possesses in virtue of the immediacy of its origin (its having been noninferentially elicited by receptive sensory processes) undercut by the advent of another certainty with credentials of exactly the same kind but whose content is not mere *different* (distinguishable) but *contrary*, is a process of *experience* [Erfahrung] in the sense that Hegel gives to that expression in his *Introduction*. This is a much richer sense of ‘experience’ than the notion of sense experience that lies at the heart of the conception of sense certainty. As Hegel will argue in the *Perception* chapter, it opens the way for the acknowledgement of *error*.

The first of the two good arguments I am taking Hegel to be making in *Sense Certainty* is that the possibility of such an experience of the vanishing of one immediate certainty in another contrary one shows that sense certainty already implicitly acknowledges what it explicitly denies: the presence of a *universal* element in its conception of the authority of *immediacy*.

A second line of thought entangled with this one throughout *Sense Certainty*, which comes to be the central focus in the third movement of the section [¶103-8]. The issue it addresses is what is required for a dateable, intrinsically unrepeatable act or event—a unique occurrence—to be associated with a content that can be “held onto” or “preserved” after the expiration of the act itself, so as to be available for comparison with the contents of other such acts. The lesson of the second good argument is that deictic or demonstrative expressions do not form an autonomous stratum of the language—a language game one could play though one played no other—and would not even if what was demonstrated had the shape of facts or judgeable contents. Deictic tokenings as such are unrepeatable in the sense of being unique, datable occurrences. But to be cognitively significant, what they point out, notice, or register must be repeatably available, for instance to appear in the premise of inferences, embedded as the antecedent of a conditional used to draw hypothetical consequences, and embedded inside a negation so that its denial can at least be contemplated. Demonstratives have the potential to make a cognitive difference, to do some cognitive work, only insofar as they can be picked up by other expressions, typically pronouns, which do not function demonstratively. Deixis presupposes anaphora.

I point out the Now, and **it** is asserted as the truth. I point **it** out, however, as something that has been, or as something that has been superseded [etwas aufgehobene]; I set aside the first truth. [PhG ¶107]

I now assert as the second truth that **it has been**, that **it** is superseded. [PhG ¶101]
But what has been *is not*; I set aside the second truth, **its having been**, **its** supersession, and thereby negate the negation of the 'Now', and thus return to the first assertion, that the 'Now' *is*. [PhG ¶107]

The resulting understanding is of the Now, and hence immediacy in general as thoroughly mediated, in the sense that the authority of any immediate sensory episode depends on its being situated in a larger relational structure containing elements that are not immediate in the same

sense. For being preservable or recollectable in the anaphoric way, we now realize, is the being of the Now, an essential presupposition of the possibility of immediacy conferring epistemic authority on a determinate content. The possibility of "holding fast" to the Now (in fact anaphorically), making it into something *repeatable* while preserving its selfsame content, by contrast to the type <now>, which though repeatable does not preserve the content of a single tokening or /now/, is essential to the notion of immediacy investing a particular content with its authority:

The 'Now' and the pointing out of the 'Now' are thus so constituted that neither the one nor the other is something immediate and simple, but a movement which contains various moments. [PhG ¶107]

This account presents a crucial fact about the use of demonstratives and similar indexical expressions in contributing to empirical knowledge. *Deixis presupposes anaphora*.

The second good argument I am taking Hegel to be making in *Sense Certainty*, then, is that the possibility of determinately contentful sensory awareness implicitly requires the presence of something that makes the content of such acts *recollectibly repeatable*, in order to make sense of the authority of immediacy. What is required is another sort of act, one that is *not* an act of immediate sensory awareness, but is rather one that has its content and credibility or authority indirectly, by inheritance from such an act of immediate sensory awareness.

The conception of empirical knowledge that Hegel calls "sense certainty" mistakenly tries to understand the role of immediacy of origin—the immediacy of the act of endorsing a content—in terms of various conceptions of immediacy of content—the immediacy of what is endorsed. I began my discussion of *Sense Certainty* by urging that Hegel fills in Kant's notion of immediacy by analyzing his intuition/concept distinction as conflating three distinctions that are actually orthogonal to one another: receptivity vs. spontaneity of episodes, particularity vs. generality of what is represented, and unrepeatability (token-credibility) vs. repeatability (type-credibility) of representings. I then argued that we can acquit Hegel of commitment to the Bad Argument if we disentangle two good lines of thought that are not sufficiently clearly separated in his discussion of them. Both start with the observation that the epistemic authority of sensory episodes that are immediate (noninferential) in their provenance is a *kind* of authority. It is a kind of authority that, first, can be invested in *different*, even *incompatible* contents. And it is a kind of authority that, second, can be inherited anaphorically *from* one unrepeatable demonstrative or indexical (tokening-reflexive) episode *by* others that have the *same* content, but are *not* themselves immediate in their origin as the originating episode was. The epistemic authority conferred by sensuous immediacy of origin is genuine and important. But it is in principle intelligible only in a larger context that involves both generality and anaphoric repeatability structures relating immediately authoritative episodes to ones that inherit that authority in a way that is *not* immediate. This latter recollective structure picks up on a theme from Hegel's *Introduction*, and foreshadows the structure that will be attributed to agency in the *Reason* chapter. The former point is already fully present in Kant, who treats judgments involving both intuitions and concepts as the minimal units of awareness or experience, and intuitions without concepts as blind.