

Hegel, Hume,  
and the Identity of Perceptible Things

An Historical and Critical Analysis  
of Hegel's Chapter on "Perception"  
in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

ENGLISH SUMMARY OF:  
»Hegel, Hume und die Identität wahrnehmbarer Dinge  
Historisch-kritische Analyse zum Kapitel »Wahrnehmung«  
in der *Phänomenologie* von 1807«

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## §0 Summary.

Hegel's chapter on "Perception" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is a critique of the section of Hume's *Treatise* titled "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" (I.iv.2). Both discussions proceed under the assumption that the objects of perception are ordinary things around us, each of which has various perceptible properties. Both discussions examine the capacity of concept-empiricism to account for the concept of the identity of a perceptible thing—a crucial component of the belief in ordinary physical objects.<sup>1</sup> However, to extend his concept-empiricism to handle the non-logical concept of the identity of a perceptible thing, Hume is forced to introduce a variety of psychological "propensities" to generate, in effect, *a priori* concepts, he is forced to confront a certain kind of "contradiction" in the concept of the identity of a perceptible thing, and ultimately he is forced to regard this concept as a "fiction" or "illusion." Hegel reexamined Hume's account to show that the concept of the identity of a perceptible thing is indeed both non-logical and non-empirical, and cannot be defined in accordance with concept-empiricism. This is an important point in favor of Hegel's concept-pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> This point is also important in connection with the quite general problem of how we bring various sensations together into the perception of any one object.

"Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" is an extremely important section of Hume's *Treatise*. Though Hume's skepticism received growing attention in Germany at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Hegel was alone among his contemporaries in recognizing the importance of this section. Close consideration of the historical background of Hegel's analysis of perception, along with the many ways in which Hume's skepticism is especially important for Hegel, shows that it is altogether probable that Hegel read Hume's *Treatise*, including this specific section. Hegel's concern with that section is further supported by the fact that referring to it affords a complete, intelligible, and philosophically sound reconstruction of the aim and course of Hegel's argument in "Perception." On this reconstruction, Hegel's argument constitutes a two-pronged *reductio ad absurdum* of two key empiricist theses: (1) the thesis that the concept of the identity of a perceptible thing can be reduced to the concept of numerical identity by defining it in terms of the two quantitative concepts "unity" and "plurality" (or analogously "whole" and "part"), and (2) the thesis that human perception only involves passive reception of sensations.

Hegel claims that the concept of identity of perceptible things contains an objectively valid contradiction. Michael Wolff has shown that Hegel's view of "dialectical" contradictions neither denies nor violates the law of non-contradiction. Instead, Hegel holds that certain important truths can only (or can best) be expressed by using what appears to be a formal contradiction.<sup>3</sup> In the case at hand, it can appear—as it did to Hume, and as it must to a concept empiricist—that the two partial concepts contained in the concept of the identity of perceptible things, namely unity and plurality, contradict each other. In the case of perceptible things and the relation between things and properties, this is not the case. On the contrary, both aspects are interdependent; there are no unitary *things* without a plurality of properties and there are no *properties* without unitary things of which they are properties. Indeed, Hegel's point could now be expressed using a biconditional statement: Something is a perceptible *thing* if and only if it unifies a plurality of properties—and *vice versa*, if one will: Something is a plurality of *properties* if and only if they are unified in some one thing. An adequate concept of perceptible things integrates the two quantitatively opposed partial concepts "unity" and "plurality." Only with such an integrated concept of perceptible things can one grasp

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<sup>1</sup>Concept-empiricism is the thesis that every term in a language is either a logical term, a term defined by ostending a sensory object, or can be defined by means of these two kinds of terms.

<sup>2</sup>Concept-pragmatism is the thesis that we construct *a priori* some crucial non-logical concepts, and that we can assess, revise, and justify those concepts by assessing, revising, and justifying their use in organizing our experience and knowledge of the world. Though I did not use the term there, in *Hegel's Epistemological Realism* (Philosophical Studies Series, ed. K. Lehrer; Kluwer, 1989) I show that Hegel held concept-pragmatism.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Wolff, *Der Begriff des Widerspruchs. Eine Studie zur Dialektik Kants und Hegels* (Königstein/Ts.: Hain, 1981), 35-36.

their numerical identity. Two important points about the activity involved in cognition follow directly: (1) We can perceive things only if we integrate the various sensations they cause in us; that is one cognitive activity on our part. (2) To integrate sensations or perceptions of things we must use a (relatively) *a priori* concept—a concept which cannot be defined or derived in accordance with concept-empiricism, and this is a concept we must ourselves produce in order to perceive any outer thing. This is a second cognitive activity on our part. Both of these cognitive activities are, obviously, compatible with commonsense realism about the objects of perception.

## §1 Overview: Basic Issues and Interpretive Context.

This study has both an historical and a philosophical aim. The historical aim is to determine the importance of Hume’s epistemology for Hegel. Because Hegel’s direct references to Hume are few and apparently quite general, this aim is pursued in two closely related ways. In chapter One I set out several general reasons to show that Hume’s epistemology is important to the basic issues in Hegel’s epistemology. I also provide evidence that Hegel had studied Hume’s writings, including the *Treatise*. In chapter Two I show that Hegel’s analysis of “perception” in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is in fact a detailed critical analysis and assessment of the very important section of Hume’s *Treatise*, “Of Scepticism with regard to the senses” (I.iv.2), in which Hume analyses the concept of the identity of perceptible things. These two approaches complement each other. It is important to recognize both that Hegel should have treated some central issues in Hume’s epistemology, and to recognize and how Hegel treated those issues. Both lines of inquiry provide considerable evidence that Hegel closely studied Hume’s epistemology. Unlike most of his followers and interpreters, Hegel didn’t simply reject empiricism, he analyzed and criticized it in detail.

The philosophical point of this study is to show that Hume and (following him) Hegel analyzed some basic issues about perceptual synthesis, and did so much more acutely than their contemporaries, including Kant. Their question was: How do we bring together a particular group of sensory qualities in the perception of one single object (or event)? What kind of concept of the object is required to unify sensory qualities in this way? Although this problem was widely overlooked in Modern philosophy, it is absolutely central in the “new way of ideas” (especially in its “sensationalist” strand) and this question remains current in neurophysiology of perception as an aspect of the so-called “binding problem”: How do we determine that the same thing (or event) instead of various different things (or events) stimulates (*e.g.*) a specific area of the retina at any given time? This question arises within each sensory modality and also in across our various sensory modalities. The solution to this puzzle constitutes a necessary condition for conscious experience.<sup>4</sup>

The considerations required to establish Hume’s importance for Hegel’s epistemology are manifold and complex. Here I recite the grounds for my thesis, that these two analyses—Hume’s section “Of Scepticism with regard to the senses” and Hegel’s chapter “Perception”—belong together. Despite one important difference between them (discussed below), Hegel’s and Hume’s

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<sup>4</sup> Despite a long series of commentaries and other secondary literature on Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, no one has previously identified Hume as Hegel’s source, nor this problem as Hegel’s problem, in the “Perception” chapter. On the “binding problem” see, *e.g.*, Francis Crick and Christof Koch, “Towards a Neurobiological Theory of Consciousness” (*Seminars in the Neurosciences* 2, 1990, 263—75); Semir Zeki, *A Vision of the Brain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 321—24, 349; and Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Scribner’s, 1994), 208—11, 243—46. I do not claim that the “binding” of sensations is a *sufficient* condition for conscious experience; but its *necessity* suffices to establish its importance, and hence the importance of Hume’s and Hegel’s analyses. These issues are only touched on by Eli Hirsch, *The Concept of Identity* (New York: Oxford, 1982). Hirsch’s study is concerned primarily with the diachronic issue of identity over time and supports the general anti-empiricist thesis that our criteria for individuation of objects are innate, without addressing the specific issue about concept empiricism and without formulating the issues as sharply as Hume or Hegel.

analyses are closely related because:

- 1.1 Only by reference to common philosophical problems and their histories can Hegel's *Phenomenology* serve its intended purpose as an exoteric "ladder" to, *i.e.* a justification of, absolute knowledge—rational knowledge of the way the world is (regardless of what we may say or think about it).<sup>5</sup> We must accordingly identify the philosophical views that appear as "forms of consciousness" in the *Phenomenology*, as well as their main historical (and contemporary) proponents, and we must interpret and assess Hegel's critical analyses in such a context. I do this in the case of "Perception" by reference to Hume, specifically to the important section of the *Treatise*, "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" (I.iv.2).
- 1.2 Among modern philosophers before Hegel, only Hume seriously investigated the concept and nature of the identity of perceptible things. This is the main issue of Hegel's chapter, "Perception."
- 1.3 One indication of Hegel's reference to this section of Hume's *Treatise* stems from their use of the term "illusion" (»Täuschung«). Prior to Hegel, only Hume rejected the very concept of the identity of perceptible things as a mere "fiction" or "illusion."
- 1.4 Hume discussed grounds of proof that implicitly demonstrate that the concept of the identity of perceptible things is *a priori*. That is one main result of Hegel's analysis in "Perception," for which Hume's analysis provides crucial resources.
- 1.5 Alone among Hegel's predecessors, Hume regarded the concept of the identity of perceptible things expressly and exclusively as numerical identity. This concept provides precisely the assumption under which alone the "contradictions" Hegel identifies in perception count as contradictions.
- 1.6 The importance of numerical identity to the concept of the identity of perceptible things is reinforced by examining Russell's objection to Hegel's *Logic*.
- 1.7 Only Hume—so far as I have been able to determine through extensive research in the history of philosophy—attempts to avoid a contradiction within the *concept* of the identity of perceptible things by distinguishing perspectives from which to regard the identity of a perceived thing. This attempt is absolutely fundamental to the third phase of Hegel's analysis of "perception."—Though no one has previously identified either the philosophical view to which, or the philosopher to whom, Hegel thereby alludes.<sup>6</sup>
- 1.8 Due to his rejection of Kant's Table of Judgments, together with his commitment to "sensationalism," Hegel must carefully analyze the origin, nature, and content of our concept of the identity of perceptible things. Before Hegel, this issue was analyzed only by Hume, indeed only in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses."
- 1.9 Hegel aims to show that the concept of the identity of a perceptible thing contains a kind of objectively valid contradiction. Precisely this thesis results from a critical analysis of Hume's doctrine concerning the identity of perceptible things.

These close relations between the central issues of Hegel's and Hume's analyses are further supported by four points concerning the broader significance for Hegel of Hume's skepticism.

- 1.10 Hegel must consider Hume's skepticism closely because of its fideistic appropriation by Hamann and Jacobi.
- 1.11 Hegel must also consider Hume's skepticism closely because of Hume's broad and deep doubts about the objective validity of our basic concepts (including, *e.g.*, cause and substance).

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<sup>5</sup>In *Hegel's Epistemological Realism* [Kluwer, 1989] I show that Hegel is both a commonsense and a scientific realist.

<sup>6</sup>The editors of volume 9 of Hegel's *Gesammelten Werke* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968), which contains Hegel's *Phänomenologie*, provide no indications of Hegel's sources or targets. I have also found none in the commentaries and other secondary literature.

- 1.12 Hume's skepticism about the objective validity of our basic concepts points to an important issue which Hegel was the first in the history of philosophy to formulate and to answer in the affirmative: Is an active mode of cognition consistent with (commonsense or scientific) realism?
- 1.13 These three cardinal points of Hume's skepticism come together in a fourth, more important point: Prior to Hegel, only Hume carefully analyzed the origin, nature, and content of the concept of the identity of perceptible things. His analysis is in fact crucial for the tenability of "sensationalism," a view espoused by Hegel.

In order to understand these points correctly, both philosophically and historically, three historical facts must be borne in mind. These facts explain how Hegel's contemporaries could have led Hegel to Hume's section, "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses," and why Hegel's philosophical aims could only be fulfilled by analyzing that section of Hume's *Treatise* (e.g., there were no second-hand reports about it). To properly understand Hegel's historical circumstances requires considering the following points:

- 1.14 Because of the growing contemporaneous influence of Hume in Germany, it is altogether probable that Hegel read Hume's *Treatise* before 1806 (the year he wrote the *Phenomenology*).
- 1.15 Hegel understood Hume's "impressions of sense" as a kind of "substance" or "thing," as is shown by Hegel's Jena Logic manuscripts. Only in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" did Hume either express the view or try to show that impressions can exist independent of the mind, and that they thus count as a kind of "substance" or "thing."<sup>7</sup>
- 1.16 Kant, Fichte, and Schelling informed Hegel about Hume's idea of "illusion," but only in connection with Hume's doctrine of causality, not in connection with the concept of the identity of perceptible things.
- 1.17 Aenesidemus-Schulze, Reinhold, and Maimon highlighted for Hegel an issue closely related to the identity of perceptible things, namely perceptual synthesis—an issue which was especially important after Kant.

Finally, one important difference between Hume's and Hegel's analyses must be considered, in order properly to understand their relation:

- 1.18 Hume's analysis of the identity of perceptible things in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" treats only diachronic issues of identity. In contrast to this, Hegel's analysis concerns exclusively synchronic issues about identity. In order to connect their analyses, it is important to recognize that Hume's diachronic analysis is not exhaustive, not even within his own philosophy. To bring out the synchronic issues about identity within Hume's views requires briefly examining modern concepts of substance.
- 1.19 By referring to these relations between Hume's and Hegel's analyses, in the context of modern philosophical analyses of perception, it is possible to provide a textually complete and philosophically illuminating reconstruction of Hegel's chapter on "Perception." This reconstruction shows that Hegel's chapter is in fact a critical reanalysis of Hume's analysis in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses."

Most of these historical points are treated in chapter One. In chapter Two I reconstruct Hegel's chapter, "Perception," in exhaustive detail. Every last phrase is shown to have good philosophical sense, insofar as Hume is Hegel's historical and philosophical source. In chapter Three I assess

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<sup>7</sup>*Treatise* I,iv,2: 207. I cite Hume's *Treatise* by Book, Part, and section numbers, and pagination according to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978).

Hegel's results. The coincidence of my comprehensive systematic interpretation of the philosophical point of Hegel's argument, in close consideration of its historical context, with my complete reconstruction of Hegel's text provides maximal justification for my interpretation of Hegel's chapter on "Perception."<sup>8</sup>

The course of my discussion differs somewhat from the preceding recitation of my main points. My discussion proceeds as follows:

Referring to Hume's section, "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses," anchors Hegel's analysis of "perception" in a crucial problem in the history of philosophy. Identifying this problem provides the proper context for interpreting Hegel's chapter on "perception," and interpreting Hegel's chapter with this historical reference helps to fulfill the introductory *cum* justificatory role Hegel assigns to his *Phenomenology* (§2). Reviewing the historical background to Hegel's *Phenomenology* shows that Hegel in all probability read Hume's *Treatise* before 1806 (§3.1) and that he clearly alluded to "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" already in his Jena Logic manuscripts from 1804/05 (§3.2). Hegel's interest in Hume's analysis of the concept of the identity of perceptible things was very likely stimulated by contemporaneous discussions of "illusion" (»Täuschung«) in connection with causality (§3.3) and of perceptual synthesis (§3.5). However, due to issues of philosophical substance in Hegel's views, Hegel had decidedly greater interest than Kant or his successors in the details of Hume's analysis of the origin, nature, and content of the concept of the identity of perceptible things (§3.4). Two passages from Hegel's Jena Logic manuscripts show that Hegel had already analyzed these issues in 1804/05 (§3.6). One important connection between Hume's and Hegel's analyses lies in the question whether the concept of the identity of perceptible things is identical with the concept of numerical identity (§§3.6, 4). Reviewing Hume's analysis of the concept of the identity of perceptible things shows that he rejected such identity as a "fiction" or "illusion" (§4). Reviewing modern concepts of substance shows that there are not only diachronic, but also synchronic issues about the identity of perceptible things, and that Hume also touches on the relevant synchronic issues in the *Treatise* (§5). These points of substance serve to couple Hume's diachronic analysis with Hegel's synchronic analysis.

This coupling is reinforced by five reasons why Hume's skepticism was important for Hegel (§6). Hume's skepticism was given a fideistic twist by Hamann and Jacobi. Hegel had to refute Hume's skepticism in order to rebut Hamann's and Jacobi's fideism and to justify his own philosophical claim to rational knowledge of the world (§6.1). In this connection, Hegel must refute Hume's skepticism about the objective validity of our basic conceptual categories (§6.2). Hume's skepticism also raises the question, whether an active mode of cognition is consistent with realism about the objects of knowledge—a question Hegel sought to answer in the affirmative (§6.3). Hume implicitly made an important contribution to Hegel's defense of rational knowledge of the world insofar as Hume implicitly showed that the concept of the identity of perceptible things is *a priori* (§6.4). Still more important is the fact that Hume's analysis implicitly addresses the crucial question (especially for "sensationalism") concerning what concept can guide perceptual synthesis (§6.5). The importance of the question, whether the identity of perceptible things can be understood solely in terms of numerical identity, is clarified by considering briefly Russell's objection to Hegel's *Logic*. This also shows that Hegel's issues cannot be resolved simply by distinguishing, *e.g.*, semantic and metaphysical issues or material and formal modes of speech (§7).<sup>9</sup>

In chapter Two I reconstruct Hegel's chapter on "Perception" in detail. I show the following: (1) equating the concept of the identity of perceptible things with numerical identity is precisely the

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<sup>8</sup>I show how Hegel's argument in "Perception" fits into his over-all epistemological argument in the *Phenomenology* in *Hegel's Epistemological Realism*, ch. 11.

<sup>9</sup>In a word, Russell charged that Hegel built a grand metaphysical system on the failure to distinguish the "is" of identity from the "is" of predication. In fact, Hegel argues in "Perception" by *reductio ad absurdum* against equating the "is" of identity and the "is" of predication. Such an indirect proof requires initially making the contra-positive assumption that these two senses of "is" are the same, and then demonstrating the contradictions that result from that (consequently false) assumption.

assumption under which the “contradictions” Hegel identifies in perception count as contradictions; (2) Hume’s attempt to avoid these contradictions by distinguishing perspectives from which to regard the identity of a thing is absolutely fundamental to the third phase of Hegel’s analysis; (3) Hegel’s claim that there is an “objectively valid” contradiction within perception can in fact be proven through a close reexamination of Hume’s analysis; (4) the activity of our human mode of knowledge is highlighted by the non-formal yet *a priori* status of the concept of the identity of perceptible things; and (5) the objective validity of the concept of the identity of perceptible things is shown by the indispensability of this concept for knowledge of things with multiple properties.

In chapter Three I assess and in the main confirm Hegel’s results. I also consider and respond to some likely objections to Hegel’s analysis and its results.