

## SUBJECT AND OBJECT: *The principle of distinction and inseparability*

by

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One of the most important instances of distinct but inseparable entities is that of subject and object. When we carefully think about them, we realize that one term implies the other. In other words, a subject cannot possibly exist without a corresponding object otherwise we would never be able to talk about

“subject.” In a similar way, an object can only be called an object because it is in relation to a subject. All opposites will in fact exhibit this same interdependence when we carefully think about them.

For example, we could not speak of “blindness” if there were no one who could see. The word “blind” would never have any reason for its existence unless someone had the ability to see. Light and darkness, sleep and waking, day and night, etc. all such terms have meaning only in relation to their opposition to one another. Thus we conclude that this opposition is essential to the existence of either term. We can look at existence as a polar reality or polarity. One side rises or falls with the other. There is no possible way that one side can exist without the other.

We have an example of this in a physical sense in a magnet. A magnet has two distinct poles: a North pole and a South pole. If we try to separate the poles of a magnet we cannot accomplish the task. By cutting a bar magnet in half we only get two magnets each with a N and a S pole. Another physical example that exhibits inseparable polarity is a coin. A coin has a head and a tail. It is a single unity with two distinct sides. Thus subject and object can also be seen as a single reality with two aspects.

Because two different types of experience corresponding to subjective and objective confront us, their unification has generally taken the shape of attempting to reduce one to the other. Thus idealists will try to reduce all objectivity to subjectivity, while materialists will try to reduce all subjectivity to objectivity. Philosophy and science have as their aim the unification of the manifold of experience – to systematize it. They may not be aware that this impulse is driven by the fact that Reality is already a polar unity.

Not recognizing this polar nature, however, they attempt to express that unity as a reduction to either subjectivity or objectivity. In doing so they not only eliminate the opposite term but also destroy the reality of that term to which they are trying to reduce everything, because as we have seen above one

requires the other for its very existence. Reality can never be one OR the other, it has to be both at the same time or neither.

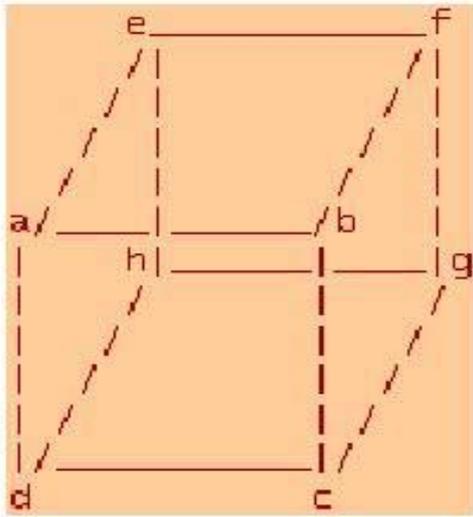
The polar nature of Reality seems to be reasonable at this point in our analysis. But we must be careful not to think of this as a duality. We are not saying that there are separate fundamental subjective and objective realms existing independently in reality. We are saying that these are distinct realms that are co-dependently existing as a single polar unity, distinct and distinguishable but at the same time inseparable from one another.

To further avoid this conception of duality we must account for yet another factor that we have not yet considered. We generally think of subject and object as nouns, i.e. in their nominal form. But these terms are likewise used as verbs. Thus “subject” as a verb has the active sense of putting a thing or person under something or someone other than itself. In the same way “object” as a verb implies the active meaning of taking a stand against or in opposition to another. In fact, the Latin root “*ject*” in each word means “to throw.” The point is that both words, subject and object, imply that a lot of action is involved though we may not at first associate activity with the nominal form of these terms.

This activity of one in relation to the other is just as present and important as the passive existence of the two elements themselves. In fact, it is the presence of this active relation between subject and object that is most often neglected in philosophy and has led to the battle that often arises between idealist and realist interpretations of Reality. As we mentioned both philosophy and science attempt to find a unified explanation of Reality which appears manifested as a multiplicity, yet which we at the same time can understand as being one whole.

We may now begin to realize that unity and multiplicity are also opposites and therefore, according to the principle we are beginning to recognize, must also be aspects of a single Reality. Thus the word “universe” reveals the uni(ty-di)verse polarity that it actually is – a unity in diversity. A dualistic Reality is inherently detestable because it violates the fact that one consciousness or reason pronounces the existence of a dual Reality, thus contradicting itself: duality is contained within a unity.

This is all very theoretical so far, and quite vague because we have not said anything yet about what is the actual activity going on between subject and object. We will get to that. But what does our analysis so far mean practically for experience? To explore this aspect let us first take an example from what are called optical illusions. The Necker cube is a simple example that we will use it to illustrate what we mean. There are many such examples that can illustrate the same point even better than this one, but we will



keep it simple to avoid bulky image formats. The Necker cube is shown above.

Here we have a set of lines (dashes) in a two dimensional plane. They are drawn in such a way however, that they give the illusion of being a three dimensional cube. By looking at the object we can alternately see a set of lines on a two dimensional plane, a cube facing to the left and down with “abcd” as the face and “efab” as its top, or a cube facing to the right and upward with its face being “efgh” and its bottom visible as “hgcd.” Not everyone can see this so easily, but I think we can get enough people who can see it, so that those who cannot may be convinced that this is actually the case. The point being made here is that our subjective act of “seeing” does influence the object we see. The object is not just passively sitting in front of a subject. The subject is actively involved in constructing what it sees! This is a field of ongoing research in what is called Gestalt psychology, as well as in the interdisciplinary scientific studies of the biology and psychology concerning the visual process, and most recently in computer related pattern recognition theory, useful for identification-verification purposes along with or instead of passwords, and of course for robotics and artificial intelligence development.

Of special interest to Hegel was the Newtonian conception of color. He objected to Newton’s idea that white light was a combination of the various colors, and was much more favorable to Goethe’s idea that color was the result of a combination of light and darkness. Considering the importance of the unity of opposites or polar reality as we are calling it, we can understand his preference for this unity of light and darkness as the principle of color. This is a very complex and intricate area for study and properly belongs to the Philosophy of Nature. The idea that color is, ‘something in itself’, i.e. frequency of electromagnetic radiation, can only be a partial understanding of that reality and is a valid area of study for empirical science. Ultimately, however, color is related to our visual sense and the coupling between color and the subjective detection of color is also a polar reality. So not only must color itself be understood as something like a polarity

of light and darkness, but the polarity involved in seeing color must also be understood in terms of the observer’s relation to color. Although Newton’s concept of color provides the best fit with empirical observations, there are areas where this is not so, and especially so in the area of visual color where many difficulties arise in using his model. A proper scientific understanding of phenomena should not produce incompatible situations when considered in relation to subjective observation, and should certainly not be inconsistent in a scientific, rational philosophical sense. Heisenberg, who gave us the famous uncertainty principle, said in a comment (1941) concerning the importance of considering Goethe’s theory of color along with that of Newton’s, “*It is not enough to be aware of the laws in accordance with which all the events in the objective world are governed, it is also necessary that we should constantly hold before us all the consequences which these laws have for the world of our senses.*” Although this subject is too detailed to go into here, I am mentioning it only to point out another example of the fundamental importance of the nature of polarity that we are using to introduce some of the more abstract concepts of Hegel’s philosophy.

The proper philosophical understanding of the subject-object problem is not only a fundamental theoretical principle of great importance to philosophy, but one of very significant practical application as well. Comprehending this relation at its deepest level requires understanding exactly what activity is going on between the subject and object as a unified reality. This really reaches to the heart of Hegelian philosophy – the identity in difference of thought and being. Notice we are not saying identity AND difference, as if they were two separable or separate terms. Identity and difference are opposites, so by now I hope we can at least be alerted to the fact that they are therefore not separable. We will also discuss this important opposition in future issues.

Because we are now discussing practical experience we next have to go over into the consideration of the subject as consciousness. We have to note here that we are not following the scientific conceptual development of Hegel’s Encyclopedia where the



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– **Werner Heisenberg  
Nobel Laureate in Physics**

concept of Subject or Subjectivity appears in the Logic and that of consciousness in the section on Mind/Spirit. The relation of

Subject to consciousness is therefore not being presented here in its true scientific form. We are ignoring that higher and more abstract level of understanding and working at a much more familiar level for introductory purposes. Eventually we will have to penetrate into that higher level of understanding as well, but for now we will simply and immediately consider subject as finite consciousness at this point.

The activity of subjective or finite consciousness in relation to its object or content is now what we want to consider. The same relation that exists between subject and object holds for consciousness and its content because we are considering these terms to be interchangeable for the present. Thus there is no question of consciousness unless there is something to be conscious of. At the same time 'a content' means that it is "contained" in something. A container is necessarily required for whatever is considered 'a content'. In this case the container is consciousness. Therefore, consciousness and what is opposed to it – its content, may also be considered a polar unity. The contribution of consciousness in determining its object is no less than the object's determination of consciousness. There is a reciprocal relation involved. We must not make the mistake of thinking that because consciousness has an active role in constituting its object that the object is a product or creation of consciousness, or just consciousness. This would be reductionism. This is NOT the situation we are describing. The object has as much importance in the forming consciousness as consciousness has in forming the object. We are not taking sides and saying that only the subject is active. The object is active as well, and this balanced interactivity is the proper understanding of polar reality. To claim that only consciousness has a formative role would be Kantian philosophy. On the other side, we have the materialist philosophy of Marx and scientific materialism that claims all activity for the object and that consciousness is informed only by its action, that consciousness and life arise from the activity of matter. We see now, according to the analysis we have made, that both of these perspectives are one-sided. They do not comprehend the polar nature of Reality and the inter-dependence that exists between consciousness and its content.

The perspective of the phenomenologists and existentialists who came after Hegel, remain only at the level of analysis that we are considering here. They do not approach the conceptual development of consciousness and its content to determine their origin, or the conceptual relation to subject and object that we referred to earlier, or to determine the specific details of the inter-dependence of the two sides. Our presentation for the moment is at a very superficial level compared to their true scientific conceptual development that we find in Hegel, so we have to be careful not to stop midway between experience and the Absolute and think we have arrived at Truth.

Hegel's "*Phenomenology of Spirit*" (*PhdG*) presents the detailed analysis of the movement of thought in the relationship between

consciousness and its object. It is this movement that establishes the unity of the two sides in an explicit way. The primary focus of the existentialists and phenomenologists is the finite individual. But if we understand the essential polarity of reality then we cannot be satisfied with a one-sided understanding of finite individuality without recognizing the infinite universality that is likewise present therein. The major proponents of phenomenology and existentialism may have found it hard to resolve the problem of reaching the absolute perspective of Truth, and it is difficult. But Hegel has shown how this is possible through the careful and consistent analysis of thought that is implicit in the way we conceive our selves in the world.



***Consciousness, as spirit in its manifestation which in its progress frees itself from its immediacy and external concretion, attains to the pure knowing which takes as its object those same pure essentialities as they are in and for themselves. They are the pure thoughts, spirit thinking its own essential nature. Their self movement is their spiritual life and is that through which philosophy constitutes itself and which it is the exposition.***

– G.W.F. Hegel

At the same time because the *PhdG* is only the introduction to Hegel's system, even when we understand the details of the movement between consciousness and its object we only come to the preliminary stage of being able to enter the scientific conceptual understanding of Truth where we will be able to distinguish and relate the concepts such as Subject and consciousness more clearly. So it is not appropriate to stop at the *PhdG* either. One has to move beyond the introduction to the system to get to the main feature presentation. There are others who feel that the introduction to Hegel's system can be ignored and go directly to the Encyclopedia, but this can likewise be seen as one-sided understanding when we realize that the Encyclopedia deals with the "pure essentialities" of the manifestations of spirit progressing through its various stages to pure knowing found in the *PhdG*. Essences, of course, make no sense independent of what they are the essences of. Thus Hegel says in his Preface to the "*Science of Logic*", "*Consciousness, as spirit in its manifestation which in its progress frees itself from its immediacy and external concretion, attains to the pure knowing which takes as its object those same pure essentialities as they are in and for themselves. They are the pure thoughts, spirit thinking its own essential nature. Their self movement is their spiritual life and is that through which philosophy constitutes itself and which it is the exposition.*"