

Concrete Concepts

The Logic of Problems in Post-Hegelian French Philosophies

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CONCRETE CONCEPTS

The Logic of Problems in Post-Hegelian
French Philosophies

ANNA CORNELIA PLOUG

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The Problem of Logic

*dialectic is not merely the symphony of being, being in its
measure and in its harmony; dialectic is the creative movement
of the symphony*

— Jean Hyppolite, 1952¹

In this study, I advance the thesis that because concrete thinking is at its core a question of logical form, the method with which we ought to approach theory development in the critical humanities is the dialectical practice of problem articulation. Let me briefly unpack the dual line of interest organising this claim. First, the thesis responds to the current yearning for the concrete prevalent in contemporary theory, which often comes to a halt because it associates concreteness with the nonconceptual, immediate or singular. Drawing on a Hegelian understanding of logical concreteness, I defend the idea that we can think of conceptuality in a way that succeeds in steering clear of abstract and detached thinking without however relegating the responsibility of concreteness to an external empirical material that arbitrary theoretical frameworks may subsequently be applied to, or privileging contingent experiences so as to give up on universalising conceptual thinking altogether. Second, the thesis takes up the 20th century French legacy of thinking through problems as a scientific and practically engaged alternative to abstract philosophical questioning.

¹ Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 113. Hereafter ‘LE’.

In contrast to recent reinvigorations of the problem as a positive and creative invention of new concepts, I argue that in order for problem articulation to work as an effective method of concrete theory development, we need to rethink the problem as logically and experientially mediated. In other words, the thesis provides a metaphilosophical account of concrete concept formation by linking together the problem and the dialectic, whose intellectual histories are otherwise normally kept apart.

More specifically, the thesis seeks to reconstruct a methodological understanding of *concrete concepts* from the encounter between G.W.F. Hegel's dialectical-speculative logic and its legacy in a specific moment of post-Hegelian French philosophy identified through the cross-reading of four key texts published in 1947-1952. The main body of the thesis consists in three interpretative moves, focusing on i) Hegel's account of logical concreteness in the relation between *The Science of Logic* and his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ii) the determination of "woman" in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), and iii) problems as a category of philosophy of science in Gaston Bachelard's *Applied Rationalism* (1949) as well as in Jacques Martin's *The Individual in Hegel* (1947), the latter which – together with Jean Hyppolite's *Logic and Existence* (1952) – mediates the historically antagonistic juxtaposition of the *problem* and *dialectics*.

The reason for revisiting this specific cluster of texts is that they together convey a particularly interesting but unappreciated philosophical potential of mobilising dialectical logic for a transdisciplinary methodology of problem-induced concept formation. To put it programmatically, I take the *problem* to be a materialist and methodological translation of the Hegelian concept of *concreteness*. Since the Hegelian concrete fundamentally follows a logic of immanent critique, this brings in a significant prospect for reconfiguring problem thinking as critical in a more substantial sense. Rather than the usual story of existentialist and experience-oriented Kojèvean French Hegelianism being replaced by structuralist anti-Hege-

lianism from the 1960's and onwards, I will point to a motion towards a dialectical reconstruction of problem posing in the so-called "turn to the concrete" characteristic of parts of French philosophy around the 1940's. Taking my cue in Martin's only recently published text which explicitly links dialectics and the problem, I propose to use this philosophical moment as the basis of retrieving a methodological understanding of concrete conceptuality which answers to the desire for concreteness driving the critical theoretical humanities of our time.

I use "logic" in the sense proposed by Hegel according to which logic is the philosophical study of the derivation of categorical forms. In other words it concerns the rational formation of concepts. The "problem of logic" announced in the preface title thus indicates a two-faced concern structuring the thesis. On the one hand, it expresses my ambition of reading Hegel's *Science of Logic* as a resource for thinking through problems as a means to constructing a concrete method. Does Hegel offer a philosophy of the problem? What form of the "problem" can be recuperated – implicitly and under other names – from Hegel's dialectical-speculative logic and its afterlife in French thought? In order to set up the coordinates for exploring a notion of concrete concepts across different thinkers, the thesis triangulates the categories of *exemplarity*, i.e., the relational mode between singularity and universality, the *problematic*, i.e., a methodological approach to scientific development, and *mediation*, i.e., the practice of logical inference.

On the other hand, "the problem of logic" points to Hegel's purely philosophical mode of thinking the progression of the Concept, which any materialist thinker will need to take issue with, and many indeed have done, from Marxism and the tradition of critical theory to numerous figures associated with the French anti-Hegelianism dominating the theoretical scene of European philosophy in the 20th century and onwards. The problem of logic which sparks feminist Hegelian thought such as

Beauvoir's is how to make the dialectic of concept formation workable and come alive in and through the experiential sphere of reality. How can this "concrete logic" be operationalised into an extra-philosophical materialist method enriching critical thinking? The thesis thus takes the form of a systematic exploration of the logic of concept formation and asks how we may translate Hegel's ideal of philosophical concreteness as an aspect of concepts themselves into a methodology apt for critical contemporary theory. While the Marxist tradition is precisely *the* place where the legacy of Hegelian concreteness has been incorporated into a critical method, my project is to demonstrate another possible route of this legacy which instead of focusing on exposing ideological structures centres on the productive constitution of new and transdisciplinary objects of analysis. The thesis thus contributes to the field of metaphilosophy in the dual sense of a philosophical inquiry into the *method* of philosophical thinking, and a philosophising *after* the materialist overcoming of self-sufficient philosophy, in other words it aims to participate in staging a conversation about the philosophy of critical theorising today.

THESIS OUTLINE

PART ONE introduces the issue of concrete concepts from a contemporary standpoint and sets up the problematic that motivates this thesis. With the predominant anti-dialectical post-Deleuzian tendencies in new materialist thinking as its prime example, CHAPTER 1 shows how current attempts at reaching the concrete reveal the pitfalls of relegating concreteness to the object or doing away with abstract reasoning too quickly. CHAPTER 2 prepares the ground for setting out an alternative understanding of concreteness by situating the thesis of this project in relation to, on the one hand, the already living legacy of the Hegelian dialectic of abstract/concrete in Marxist thought, and, on the other hand, transdisciplinary methodological programmes of problem-thinking that have seen an upsurge recently as a way to conceptualise “real-world” or “concrete” knowledge production. This chapter also accounts for the argumentative plan of the thesis.

PART TWO provides a reading of Hegel’s notion of logical concreteness to address the question of how to think through the practical effectivity and justification of a concept while avoiding any unreflected recourse to brute experience. CHAPTER 3 looks at Hegel’s critique of abstraction in *The Science of Logic* to show that “concrete thinking” entails not a combination of detached elements but the progressive development of a unity. CHAPTER 4 then traces the dynamic of concretion in and through the temporal counterpart to logic, i.e., the history of philosophy, to discuss how historicity plays a part in the concretisation of concepts. From this outset, I begin to reconstruct a notion of the *concrete concept* as characterised by its productive articulation of a conflict and its function as *Grundbegriff* structuring a theoretical whole. I argue that it should be viewed “diachronically” in

light of its relation to its constitutive history rather than through external connections. The history of philosophy, in turn, may work as attestation of this strictly logical account, both insofar as it is seen as the temporal *parallel* to the course of logic, and insofar as it is taken to supply philosophy with paradigmatic *examples* with which to further the development of the concept.

PART THREE explores one particularly successful example of a “concrete concept” in more recent thought, namely Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of woman, and gives a new interpretation of *The Second Sex* as a concrete and transdisciplinary analysis. **CHAPTER 5** shows the point of intersection of the French Hegel renaissance and the “turn to the concrete” in the inter-war years, and places Beauvoir in this historical context, from which she has often been omitted. My focus on the conceptual and non-anthropological streams in the early to mid-20th century French reception of Hegel’s work, accomplished especially by a mediating reading of Jean Hyppolite, allows me to examine a different kind of influence than the traditional treatment of Beauvoir’s use of the master/slave dialectic in *The Second Sex*. I point to a methodological rather than thematic Hegelianism, in short. **CHAPTER 6** thus traces the dialectical movement in the work from an utterly abstract determination of femininity to increasingly more complex logical forms, culminating in the figure of The Little Mermaid. Beauvoir’s (implicit) methodology cannot be reduced to her Hegelian influence, however. **CHAPTER 7** discusses the role of examples and “lived experience” in working out a concrete analysis of woman, with special attention to the passage from the first to the second volume and argues that the contradictions of her text are not to be explained away but rather proof of the concreteness of her endeavour. We encounter here a mode of exemplarity that is materialist in a double sense, i.e., both in terms of the source of the content and in terms of the formative logic of its determinations.

PART FOUR unravels how the epistemologist notion of the *problématique* emerging in early 20th century French philosophy of science can be viewed as an attempt to theorise experientially engaged concept formation as an alternative to pure and detached philosophical questioning. Working as the catalyst of the constitution of new objects of scientific inquiry, the problem is pivotal for understanding theory development. While Beauvoir *de facto* produced a concrete concept, she does not provide an explicit methodological framework for this analytical practice, and while the notion of problem articulation *is* precisely a methodological endeavour from the outset, its proponents, such as most notably Gaston Bachelard, are expressly anti-Hegelian in their formulations of this method. I find this missed encounter especially fruitful for envisioning a mode of concrete thinking that is both critical and productive. **CHAPTER 8** considers the Hegelian remnants of the French notion of problem articulation by presenting the work of Jacques Martin, who as one of the few draws a connection between Hegelian dialectics and the problematic as a methodological strategy. I propose to read the two notions in tandem by recourse to the category of *mediation* approached as an alternative to dialectics, as suggested by Hyppolite's interpretation of Hegel's work as a "philosophy of mediation". **CHAPTER 9** then examines Bachelard's anti-positivist and historically informed epistemologist account of the formation of new concepts in the natural sciences to critically reinterpret his conception of the intellectual in(ter)vention of problems. I argue that we from Bachelard, who himself criticises the focus on "the concrete" popular in phenomenological circles in his time because of its naïve reliance on the given, can retrieve a useful *methodological* understanding of the workings of concrete concepts. **CHAPTER 10** concludes the thesis by reappraising Hegel's notion of mediation (*Vermittlung*) to examine more closely the logical form of the problem, which is strictly speaking not productive, but precisely effective through *reproducing* what is already

present, and through this very gesture projects a practical task to be subjected to. Based on the assumption that ‘the methodological is political’, I finally assess the significance of a methodology of concrete concepts for contemporary theoretical humanities and promote a notion of dialectical problem articulation. Focusing on some of the consequences for a feminist critical thinking, I argue that we need a critical and concrete rather than abstractly affirmative conceptual politics.