# II. Sense-Certainty

From *Hegel and the Other,* by Philip J. Kain

Charles Taylor (*Hegel*, 141) and Rockmore argue that sense-certainty resembles empiricism.[[1]](#endnote-1)I do not think that is correct. While it is true that sense-certainty, like empiricism, limits knowledge to sensation of particulars, nevertheless, unlike empiricism, it embodies no notion of appearances, impressions, sense-data, or anything of the sort. Rather, sense-certainty takes itself to be immediate knowledge that grasps things as they are—without altering them in any way **(***PhS, 58*). What Hegel has in mind here, I think traditional metaphysics—which in the *Logic* he says is a form of thought that never became aware of the modern antithesis between the subjective and the objective. It claims to take the material furnished by sense and bring it before the mind as it really is. It takes the laws and forms of thought to be the laws and forms of things. Thought grasps the very nature of the thing—without distortion

This form of knowledge, immediate knowledge of particulars, fails for Hegel, and indeed fails in much the same sort of way it was thought to fail in the ancient world. Sense-certainty is the sort of knowledge that Platen attacks throughout the *Theaetetus***.** Plato concludes that particulars are too shifting and changeable to be objects of knowledge and that we cannot give an account of primary things taken by themselves.[[2]](#endnote-2) Aristotle, too, argues that there can be neither definition nor demonstration about sensible individuals.[[3]](#endnote-3) As I have already suggested, sense-certainty also corresponds to what Kant) calls a "synthesis of apprehension," and it would not work for Kant either, because we have left out the rest of the threefold synthesis. Pippin thinks there are no clear philosophical precedents for sense-certainty.[[4]](#endnote-4) I suggest there are several.

It might seem odd, however, to think that Hegel would decide to link traditional metaphysics with Kantian epistemology when these philosophical outlooks are so opposed. But from another perspective it is not really so odd. Plato, Aristotle, and Kant at some place in their theory must attend to, and ordinary consciousness (perhaps in any age) just seems to begin with, the simplest and the most naive notion of knowledge—knowledge as a direct grasp of sense particulars. Perhaps any theory must start with some sort of simple apprehension. But from there we quickly find that there is much more to it. At any rate, I want to focus on the parallel here between Hegel and Kant.

In "Sense-Certainty," we start with simple, immediate, and seemingly indubitable sensation, as if we only had an as yet unorganized manifold of isolated sensations. We certainly do not have conceptually organized objects, but, as Hegel puts it, merely a "this." We have a "here" and a "now"—a spatial here and a temporal now—making up a this. We point to it, indicate it, mean it—we can say no more about it at this stage (*PhS*, 59- 60).

But even as we try to indicate a this we soon discover that we do not really have such a pure immediacy before us—we do not really have a simple here or a now, but only instances of them. The here and the now change. Night changes into day. As I turn my head the tree disappears and I see a house. The indicated referent does not remain, it will not hold stable, it is not preserved. If now is night, Hegel says, let us write it down: "A truth cannot lose anything by being written down, any more than it can lose anything through our preserving it." But the next time we look, it is noon and our truth "has become stale" (*PhS*, 59-60). The now changes, it is different, it has a different referent. We have ignored the role of time. Indicating a this will not indicate the same this through time. The this will not indicate the unity of an object through time. We have left out a synthesis of reproduction in imagination. We have ignored memory—we forget (*PhS*, 64).

Hegel wants us to see that any here, now, or this is really a universal. No this will indicate a sensuous particular. Any this can only indicate any and all *heres*, *nows*, *thises*. Language can never say, can never express in words, the sensuous particular that we mean (*PhS*, 60). Hegel is headed in the same direction as Kant here. We cannot have knowledge simply of isolated, given sensations. Knowledge involves universal— it requires concepts.

What if, in order to understand sense-certainty, we do not focus on the sensation, as we have been doing up to now, but focus instead on the knowing "I"? It is the I that holds the this fast. Now is night rather than day because I see night, not day. Here is a tree rather than a house because I see a tree, not a house. The only problem with this, however, is that the I too is a universal. One I sees day. Another I sees night. The I refers to any I (*PhS*, 61). This will soon become very important. Hume has shown us that we cannot experience a single unified self. Hegel shows us that language cannot even indicate such a self. Indeed, very much in opposition to Kant, Hegel will argue that such a self—certainly a Kantian transcendental self does not exist. In chapter IV of the Phenomenology, in the section called Lordship and Bondage," we will see that for Hegel the self, like all else. Is nothing but a conceptual relation. At any rate, sense-certainty does not overcome its difficulties in this direction.

What we are driven to, for Hegel, is a now of many *nows*, a here of many *heres*, an I of many I’s—a plurality holding together as a universal, We have I’s sensing a now that is a process, a passing of *nows* in time **(***PhS***,** 64, 66A IVf). Time, then, is an inescapable element of any sensation. And thus a synthesis of reproduction is a necessary element of any organized experience. The series of isolated sensations must be held together, remembered, reproduced, through time.

Why does Hegel begin with sense-certainty? One reason is that this is where Kant's deduction starts in the first edition. It is also where ordinary consciousness starts. But perhaps most importantly, Hegel starts with SCUM certainty because it is about as far as possible from where he wants to end up—with the whole, the absolute. Sense-certainty is as opposed to a doctrine of internal relations as anything can be. It is Hegel's view that adequate knowledge cannot be had about particulars. The part can only be understood in relation to the whole. Hegel rejects the notion of a world that is just there, given, outside, other, over against consciousness, with everything in it externally related. So Hegel starts with precisely that, in order to undermine it, to move us away from it, to show us that such particulars have been abstracted from the whole.[[5]](#endnote-5)

According to Stern, a holist argues that the world contains concrete objects that cannot be treated as compounds made up of more fundamental self-subsistent elements. These objects have a unity that is not properly analyzable into a plurality of self-subsistent and externally related pails. Pluralists, on the other hand, think the world contains fundamental sell-subsistent elements that are ontologically prior to and independent of their instantiation in the whole, and so pluralists can explain the whole through a combination of separable elements.[[6]](#endnote-6) What Hegel does again and again in the *Phenomenology*is to focus on specific relations. And each time he shows us that we cannot understand these relations alone and in isolation. Each time we must move on to a more general relation that takes up and includes within it the earlier, more particular relation. In "Sense-Certainty," then, the fact that language will not express particulars is not due merely to a failure on the part of language. Rather, particular objects themselves fail to hold up for us. Hegel rejects the notion that brute particulars are simply there, given, for sense experience. As we shall see, for Hegel, we must come to understand objects themselves as conceptual relations.

As Charles Taylor puts it, being aware of something, being able to say something about it, involves grasping aspects that things have in common, rather than just their particularity. For Hegel, we shall see, all particularity, all difference, is difference within a commonality. Ultimately we have differences *within*the absolute. All differences *from*the absolute would subvert the absolute. It would mean there was something other than, outside, the absolute, and thus the absolute would not include all of reality—it would not be absolute.

However, there is something else in "Sense-Certainty" that we ought to notice, as it will become a source of difficulty for the conceptual. The way Hegel puts it in the Logic is that everything finite is unstable, changeable, transient, implicitly other than what it is, suddenly turning into its opposite— as night turns into day. Thus, while we must admit that nothing escapes the conceptual, we must also admit that fixed concepts always have a very difficult time holding on to things.

1. T. Rockmore, Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Plato, Tiieaetetus, esp. 182a-182e, 205c. Stern (Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object, 44) makes this point also. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1039D-1140a. I have used the Bollingen edition of the Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), but I cite the column pagination so that any edition may be used. Hyppolite (87) also points this out. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Pippin, 123. Generally speaking, Pippin as well as Rockmore (2) emojji appreciate the degree to which Hegel's Phenomenology is following, cnriztao trying to get beyond Kant. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an interesting and valuable treatment of "Sense-Certainty," see K. Dulckeit, "Can Hegel Refer to Particulars?," in The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays, ed. ]. Stewart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 105-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stern, Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object, vii, 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)