

G.W.F. HEGEL: "Sense-Certainty," from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Chapter I (1807).

Translated by KENLEY R. DOVE

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G.W.F. HEGEL: “SENSE-CERTAINTY”
FROM THE *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*, CHAPTER I (1807)
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[90]* The mode of knowing which is, at the start or immediately, our object can be none other than that knowing which is itself an immediate *knowing* of the *immediate* or *what is*. We must proceed in a manner no less *immediate*, *accepting* this knowing as it presents itself, altering nothing, and merely apprehending with no admixture of conception.

[91] The concrete content of *sense-certainty* immediately gives it the appearance of being the *richest* kind of cognition. Sense-certainty even appears to be a cognition of a richness so infinite that no limit is to be found whether we *extend* to the farthest reaches of space and time in which it is spread out or whether we take a portion of this richness and analyze it by division. It appears, furthermore, as the *truest* mode of cognition for it has not yet deleted anything from the object, but has it before itself in all its plenitude. In fact, however, this *certainty* reveals itself to be the most abstract and poorest kind of *truth*. Of that which it knows it says only this: “it *is*”; and its truth contains nothing but the *being* of the subject matter [*Sache*]. Consciousness, for its part, only participates in this certainty as a pure ‘I.’ In other words, I participate only as a pure *this* and the object likewise as a pure *this*. The reason why ‘I,’ as *this* ‘I,’ am *certain* of *this* subject matter, is not because ‘I,’ as consciousness, may have undergone a development in connection with it and thought about it in various ways. Nor is it because *the subject matter* of which ‘I’ am certain, having a multitude of distinct characteristics, might be a complex structure of self-reference or a manifold structure of relating to other subject matters. Neither have anything to do with the truth of sense-certainty. In this mode of knowing neither the ‘I’ nor the subject matter stand for a complex mediation: the ‘I’ does not signify a diverse mode of representing or thinking and the subject matter does not signify a manifold of characteristics. No, the subject matter *is*, and it *is* only because it *is*. It is; to sense-knowing this is what is essential, and this pure *being* or this simple immediacy constitutes its *truth*. The certainty, so far as it involves a *reference*, is likewise an *immediate*, pure reference: consciousness is ‘I,’ nothing more, a pure *this*; the *singular* ‘I’ knows a pure *this*, or knows *what is singular*.

[92] In *pure being*, however, which constitutes the essence of this certainty and which this mode of knowing claims as its truth, there is a good deal more at play when we look on. An actual case of sense-certainty not only is this pure immediacy, but also plays the role of being an *example* of it. Among the innumerable distinctions that emerge in such examples of pure immediacy, we find that one difference is always preeminent: in each example of sense-certainty pure being is distinguished at once into the two already mentioned *thises*, a *this* as ‘I’ and a *this* as *object*. When *we* reflect on this distinction it is manifest that neither the one nor the other is involved in sense-certainty in a way that is merely *immediate*, but that each is at the same time involved as a *mediated* term. ‘I’ have the certainty *through* the mediation of another, namely through the subject matter; and this likewise is involved in the certainty *through* the mediation of another, namely through the ‘I.’

* Bracketed numbers [90–110] refer to the corresponding paragraphs in the Miller and Pinkard translations.

[93] This distinction of essence and example, of immediacy and mediation, is not merely one that we make; we find it in sense-certainty itself, and it has to be taken up in the same form as it exists in this mode of knowing, not as we have just determined it. In this certainty one moment is posited as that which simply and immediately is, i.e., as essence: this is *the object*. The other, by contrast, is posited as the inessential and mediated moment, which is not involved as it is *in itself* but rather as it is mediated by another: the 'I,' a way of *knowing* which only knows the object because *the object* is, and which might as well be as not. The object, however, *is*; it is the true and the essence. It *is* indifferent to whether or not it is known. It remains the same, even if it is not known, whereas this knowing is not if there is no object.

[94] The object has thus to be considered as to whether it in fact participates in sense-certainty as the sort of essence that that certainty claims it is—whether the Concept of this object, as essence, corresponds to the way it is present in this certainty. To this end we do not have to reflect about the object and ponder what it might be in the truth; we have only to consider how the object participates in sense-certainty.

[95] It follows that *sense-certainty* itself has to be asked: *What is the this?* If we take it in the two-fold Shape of its Being, as the *now* and as the *here*, the dialectic it has in it will take a form no less intelligible than the this itself. To the question: *What is the now?* we, to give an example, therefore reply: *the now is this night*. To test the truth of this case of sense-certainty, a simple experiment will do. We write it down. A truth cannot diminish by being written down; nor is it made less because it is we who preserve it. If we look again at the truth that has been written down, look at it *now, this noon*, we will have to say that it has gone stale.

[96] The now that is night is *kept*, i.e., it is treated as what certainty claims it is, as *something that is*; but instead it proves to be something that is not. The *now* itself no doubt continues to be, but as a sort of now that is not night; likewise, with respect to the day which it now is, the now continues to be a now of the sort that is also not day, in other words as something generally *negative*. This now that continues to be is therefore not immediate, but rather mediated. For as something that remains what it is and continues to be it is determined *by the condition* that all else, namely night and day, is not. Despite this, however, the now itself remains simply *now*, just as it was before, indifferent in this simplicity to whatever might still happen to play the role of exemplifying it. Although its being is constituted by neither night nor day, yet it is not in the least affected by this its otherness. Such a simple, existing by negation, neither this nor that, a *not-this* which with equal indifference is this as well as that—such a simple is what we call a *universal*. And in point of fact the universal is what is true in sense-certainty.

[97] It is also as a universal that we *give linguistic expression* to sensible being. What we say is “*this*,” i.e., the *universal this*, or again: “*it is*,” i.e., *being in general*. Of course in saying this, we do not explicitly *picture* to ourselves the universal this or being in general, but the universal is what we *express*. In other words, we simply do not speak in a way that conforms to the way we *mean* in this sense-certainty. But as we see, language is the more truthful; in it we ourselves immediately refute our *meaning*, and since

the universal is what is true in sense-certainty, and language merely expresses this, it is thus quite impossible that we should ever be able to express in words a sensible being that we *mean*.

[98] The same case will obtain with the other form of the this, *the here*. Let a *tree* play the role of exemplifying *the here*. When 'I' turn around this truth has disappeared and is changed into the opposed truth: *the here is not a tree*, but rather *a house*. The *here* itself does not disappear; *it is* what continues to be in the disappearance of the house, the tree, etc.; it is indifferently house or tree. Once again the *this* shows itself as *mediated simplicity*, in other words as *universality*.

[99] To this sense-certainty, then, *pure being* continues to be its essence, for it itself demonstrates the universal as the truth of its object. But that pure being does not continue to be as something immediate, but rather as something to which negation and mediation is essential. What continues to be is accordingly not what we *mean* by *being*, but *being* with a *determination*, being determined as an abstraction or a pure universal; and *our meaning*, for which what is true in sense-certainty is not the universal, is all that continues to be in the face of this empty, or indifferent, now and here.

[100] If we compare the relation in which *knowing* and the *object* at first appeared with the relation they come to have in this result, we see that they have reversed themselves. The object, which was supposed to be the essential, is now the inessential dimension of sense-certainty; having become the universal, the object is no longer of the sort that was supposed to be essential for sense-certainty. Certainty is now present in the opposed dimension. The truth of this certainty is in the object as *my* object, or in *my meaning*; the object is because 'I' have knowledge of it. Sense-certainty is thus indeed excluded from the object, but, for all that, it is not yet eliminated; it is merely forced back into the 'I.' It remains to be seen what the experience of this reality of sense-certainty will show us.

[101] The force of its truth thus now lies in the 'I,' in the immediacy of my *seeing, hearing*, etc. The disappearing of the single now and here meant by us is evaded because it is now 'I' who hold them fast. *The now is day* because 'I' see it; *the here is a tree* for the same reason. But in this relation, sense-certainty experiences in itself the same dialectic as in the preceding one. 'I,' *a this*, see the tree and *assert the tree as the here*; but *another 'I'* sees the house and asserts that the here is not a tree, but rather a house. Both truths have the same credentials, namely the immediacy of seeing and the confidence and assurance of both 'I's concerning their mode of knowing; but the one truth is lost in the other.

[102] What does not disappear in this experience is *the 'I' as universal*, whose seeing is neither a seeing of the tree nor of the house, but simply seeing, mediated by the negation of this house, etc., a seeing that is equally simple and indifferent with respect to whatever else might play the role of exemplifying what-is-seen, whether the house, the tree, etc. The 'I' is merely universal, just like *now, here* or *this* in general; I may well "mean" a *single 'I'*, but 'I' am as little able to say what 'I' mean in the case of the 'I' as in the case of the now or the here. When 'I' say *this here, now* or a *single one*, I say *all thises, all heres, nows, single ones*. In the same way, when I say 'I,' *this single 'I'*, 'I' am speaking generally of *all 'I's*; every one is what I say: 'I,' *this single one, this 'I'*. When theory is challenged to this crucial test—a test which it presumably could not sustain—to deduce, construe, find a priori (or however it is put) a so-called *this-thing* or a *this-man*, it is only fair that the challenger *say* which *this-thing* or which *this-'I'* he means. But to say this is quite impossible.

[103] Sense-certainty thus experiences that its essence lies neither in the object nor in the 'I' and that the immediacy it requires is neither an immediacy of the one nor the other. For in both cases what 'I' "mean" turns out to be something inessential, and the object and 'I' are universals in which that now or here or 'I' that 'I' mean does not continue to subsist, *is not*. Hence we come to the point of positing as the *essence* of sense-certainty sense-certainty itself *as a whole*, no longer merely one of its moments, as happened in the two preceding cases, where first the object opposed to the 'I,' and then the 'I' was supposed to be the reality of sense-certainty. Thus it is only the *whole* of sense-certainty that holds fast to itself as *immediacy* and consequently excludes from itself all the opposition that took place in the preceding cases.

[104] This pure immediacy is no longer concerned with the otherness of the here as a tree that passes into a here which is not-tree, of the now as day which passes into a now that is night; it is no longer concerned with an other 'I' to which something else is object. Its truth maintains itself as an unchanging self-reference which makes no distinction of essential and inessential between the 'I' and the object, and into which, therefore, no distinction at all can penetrate. Thus 'I,' this 'I,' affirm the here as tree and do not turn in such a way that to me the here might become a not-tree. 'I' also pay no attention that another 'I' sees the here as not-tree or that 'I' myself on another occasion take the here as not-tree, the now as not-day. Instead, 'I' am pure intuition. As far as 'I' am concerned, the case is closed, now is day, or, again, the here is tree. 'I' do not compare the here and the now with each other, but I hold fast to *one* immediate reference; the now is day.

[105] Since this certainty is no longer willing to come out of itself when we call its attention to a now that is night or an 'I' to whom it is night, we will therefore go to it and have the now that is asserted *shown* to us, for the truth of this immediate reference is the truth of *this* 'I' which restricts itself to one *now* or one *here*. Were we to take up this truth *afterwards* or stand *at a distance* from it, it would have no significance at all. For we would then eliminate the immediacy which, to it, is essential. That is why we must enter the same point of time or of space and have this truth shown to us, i.e., we must let ourselves be identified with this very same I which is knowing with certainty. Let us then see how the immediate that is indicated to us is constituted.

[106] The *now* is shown, *this now*. *Now*, it has already ceased to be when it is shown; the *now* that *is* is another now than the one that is shown, and we see that the now is precisely this: to be no longer as soon as it is. The now, as it is shown to us, is something that *has been*, and that is its truth; it does not have the truth of being. This much, however, is true—that it has been. But what *has been* is in fact *no essence* at all; *it is not*, and the point in question concerned what is, concerned being.

[107] What we can see in all this indicating is only a movement whose course is as follows: 1) 'I' indicate the now and it is asserted to be true; but 'I' show it as something that has been, or as something that has been eliminated, 'I' eliminate the first truth, and 2) Now 'I' assert, as the second truth, that it *has been*, that it has been eliminated. 3) But what has been is not; 'I' eliminate its having been or its having been eliminated, i.e., the second truth, negate thereby the negation of the now, and thus return to the first assertion, that *now* is. The now and the indicating of the now are thus so constituted that neither the one nor the other is an immediate simple, but a movement involving diverse moments.

This is posited, but instead *an other* is posited, i.e., the *this* is eliminated; and this otherness or this eliminating of the first is itself *eliminated in turn*, and is thus returned to the first. But this first, reflected into itself, is not exactly the same as it was at first, namely *something immediate*. Instead it is precisely *something reflected into itself* or a *simple* that remains what it is in otherness: a now which is an absolute plurality of nows. And this is the true now, the now as simple day which has many nows within it, many hours; such a now, an hour, is similarly many minutes, and these nows likewise many nows, etc.—the *act of indicating* is thus itself the movement which expresses what the now in truth really is, namely a result or a plurality of nows taken together. To indicate is to experience that now is a *universal*.

[108] The *indicated here*, to which ‘I’ hold fast, is likewise a *this*-here which, in fact, is *not this* here, but a front and back, an above and below, a right and left. The above, in turn, is itself the same multiplicity of otherness, with an above, a below, etc. The here that was supposed to be indicated disappears in other heres, but they in turn disappear as well. What is indicated, held fast, and continues to be is a *negative this*, which only *is* in that the *heres* are taken as they are supposed to be taken, but eliminate themselves in the process nevertheless; the negative *this* is a simple complex of many heres. The here that is meant would be the point; but the point *is* not. On the contrary, when the point is indicated as being, what the indicating shows is not immediate knowing but rather a movement from the here meant, through many heres into the universal here, which is a simple multiplicity of heres just as the day is a simple multiplicity of nows.

[109] It is clear that the dialectic of sense-certainty is nothing other than the simple history of its movement or of its experience, and it is clear that sense-certainty itself is nothing but this history. That is why natural consciousness too always comes by itself to this result, to what is true in sense-certainty, and has the experience of it. But as often as it does, it only forgets this result and recommences the movement from the beginning. It is therefore astonishing when, to challenge this experience, it is announced as a matter of universal experience—also as philosophical doctrine and even as a result of skepticism—that the reality or being of external things has, as *these* or as sensible, absolute truth for consciousness. To make such an assertion is not to know what one is saying, not to know that one is saying the opposite of what one is trying to say. The truth of the sensible *this* for consciousness is supposed to be a matter of universal experience: but universal experience is just the opposite. Every consciousness itself eliminates such a truth as, for example, *the here is a tree*, or *the now is noon*, and expresses the very opposite: the here is *not* a tree *but* a house. And within this assertion, which eliminates the first, consciousness promptly eliminates in the same way whatever asserts a sensible *this*. And in all sense-certainty consciousness will truly experience only what we have seen: that *this* is, as a *universal*, the opposite of what that assertion assured universal experience to be.

On the occasion of this appeal to universal experience a few anticipatory remarks regarding the practical sphere might not be out of place. Speaking practically, then, it would be appropriate to tell those who allege this truth and certainty of the reality of sensible objects that they have to be sent back to the most elementary school of wisdom, the ancient Eleusinian mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus, that they have yet to learn the secret of eating the bread and of drinking the wine. For he who is initiated into these mysteries comes not only to doubt the being of sensible things; he positively despairs of it, in part accomplishing the annihilation of these things himself, and in part watching it

accomplished. Even the animals are not excluded from this wisdom, but show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not stand back from sensible things, as if these had being in themselves. Instead, despairing of this reality, and with full certainty of their nothingness, they go right to and eat them up. And, like the animals, all of nature celebrates these mysteries revealed to all, which teach the truth about sensible things.

[110] But, as the foregoing remarks suggest, those who assert the absolute truth of sense-experience also themselves immediately say the opposite of what they mean to say—a phenomenon that is perhaps best suited to induce a reconsideration of the nature of sense-certainty. They speak of the existence [*Dasein*] of *external* objects, which, more precisely still, are to be determined as *actual*, absolutely *single*, *wholly personal*, *individual* things, none of which has an absolute counterpart anywhere. This is the existence that is said to have absolute certainty and truth. They mean *this* piece of paper on which ‘I’ am writing, or rather, have written, *this*; but they do not say what they mean. If they really wanted to *say* this piece of paper that they mean—and that is what they wanted to *say*—then this is impossible because the sensible *this*, which is meant, is *inaccessible* to language and language belongs to consciousness, to what is, in itself, universal. Thus during an actual attempt to say it, it would ultimately decompose; those who undertook its description could not complete it, but would have to turn the task over to others who would themselves have to admit in the end that they speak of a thing that *is* not. To be sure, they mean *this* piece of paper, which is here a thing completely different from that one up there; but they say “actual *things*, *external* or *sensible objects*, *absolutely single essences*” etc., i.e., all they say about them is the *universal*. What is called “the ineffable” is thus nothing other than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant.

If one says of something no more than that it is an *actual thing*, an *external object*, one has only spoken of it as the most universal of all things; what is thereby expressed is not its distinctive difference but rather its *likeness* with everything. Likewise if ‘I’ say: “a *single thing*,” what ‘I’ speak of is instead something *completely universal*, for every thing is a single thing; and, equally, “*this thing*” is completely arbitrary. If it is more precisely specified, as “*this piece of paper*,” then *each* and *every* paper is “a *this piece of paper*,” and all the while ‘I’ have only said something universal. But if ‘I’ want to come to the aid of speech—which has the divine nature of inverting my meaning immediately, transforming it into something else, and thus keeping it from *being expressed in words* at all—by *indicating* this piece of paper, ‘I’ then experience what is, in point of fact, the real truth of sense-certainty: ‘I’ indicate it as a *here* which is a here of other heres, in other words a here that involves in its self a *simple concatenation* of many *heres*, i.e., a universal. Thus ‘I’ take it up as it is in truth, and instead of knowing what is immediate, ‘I’ truly take, *I perceive*.