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RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE

**HEGEL'S APPROPRIATION OF KANT'S
THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE
JENA PERIOD**

Kant's 'authentic idealism' Throughout his oeuvre, Hegel consistently stressed the necessity to distinguish between, on the one hand, the 'spirit' or 'principle' of Kant's thought, and, on the other hand, the 'letter' of Kant's philosophy, or its actual execution.



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In spirit or principle, Hegel believes that Kant's philosophy contains a core of potentially 'authentic' or 'true idealism'.⁸⁶ In its specific execution however, Hegel deems it fundamentally insufficient. Kant's idealism remains a 'subjectivism' insofar as it affirms the opposition between concept (*Begriff*) and being (*Sein*). In this way, Hegel alternates between praise for the potential of the principle of Kantian thought, and criticism of its actual execution.

The meritorious principle which Hegel takes to guide Kant's thought is that philosophy should consist in a self-justification of reason. For Hegel, this means that self-consciousness must show itself to be the implicit unity of all explicit conceptual oppositions. However, Kant succeeded in developing such an 'authentic idealism' only from a 'limited standpoint [*eingeschränkten Standpunkt*]'.⁸⁷

Hegel identifies several aspects of Kantian thought which contain this 'authentic Idea of Reason'.⁸⁸ Firstly, it is expressed in the question guiding CPR: 'How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?' The turn with which Kant set out to put metaphysics on the 'secure course of a science' (Bxviii), consisted in the hypothesis that objects conform to our knowledge, rather than the other way around. That is to say, critical philosophy must involve an investigation into the ways in which the object of experience must be thought in accordance with the rules of the understanding.

The ways in which the object must be thought are expressed by the categories, on which rests any synthetic judgment a priori. Hegel writes: 'The determinations of thought or *concepts of the understanding* make up the *objectivity* of experience [*Erfahrungserkenntnisse*]. They contain *relations* only [*überhaupt*], and therefore through them *synthetic* judgments a priori

are formed.'⁸⁹ By shifting in this way the focus of the inquiry from the *content* of an experience to its *form* (the 'relations' under which any object of experience must necessarily be thought), Kant manages, in his intentions at least, to break through the opposition between the subjective and the objective, since, in Hegel's words, for Kant '[t]he objectivity here means the element of *universality* and *necessity*, i.e. of the determinations of thought themselves – the so-called *a priori*'.⁹⁰ From this point of view, Kant's philosophy is true idealism because objectivity is taken *in terms of* the determinations of thought, rather than as simply opposed, or external, to them.

Secondly, for this same reason, Hegel finds in Kant's philosophy a core of true idealism 'insofar as it shows, that neither the concept in isolation nor intuition in isolation is anything at all; that intuition by itself is blind and the concept by itself is empty'.⁹¹ Since for Hegel any self-justification of reason must entail that subjectivity recognize itself as absolute (i.e. the implicit unity of what is explicitly opposed), Hegel takes Kant's stipulation that neither intuitions nor concepts can by themselves yield knowledge to be fully justified.

Lastly, it is above all in the Transcendental Deduction that Hegel recognizes in Kant's philosophy an authentic idealism: 'It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Reason that the *unity* which constitutes the *essence of the concept* is recognized as the *original synthetic* unity of *apperception*, the unity of the "*I think*", or of self-consciousness.'⁹²

THE IMPLICIT PRINCIPLE OF SPECULATION

The greatest merit of Kant's turn in metaphysics is that it asserts that the 'highest point'

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(CPR B134n) of the justification of knowledge is to be found in self-consciousness, as Hegel approvingly observes: 'The principle of speculation is the identity of subject and object, and this principle is most definitely articulated in the deduction of the forms of the intellect (*Verstand*).'⁹³

This principle is a principle of speculation, since as the *implicit*, speculative, identity of subject and object, or of concept and being, consciousness cannot be thought in terms of either side of that opposition. According to Hegel, however, Kant's standpoint is 'limited', precisely because it restricts the validity of the principle of the understanding itself to appearances only, excluding from its domain things in themselves, based on his infamous doctrine of the unknowability of things in themselves. This means that, for Hegel, the discovery of the speculative identity of subject and object reverts back to one side of that opposition: although Kant distinguishes the 'objective' from the 'subjective' unity of consciousness (cf. CPR B139-140), Kant's critical philosophy will never be able to go beyond subjectivism because of this restriction of the validity of that unity.

THE ONTOLOGICAL PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

The specific form of Hegel's critique of Kant's execution of the self-justification of reason is well brought out in his treatment of Kant's critique of the ontological proof of the existence of God. At that point, what Hegel takes to be the essential trait of Kant's critical subjectivism comes to light most prominently, viz. an affirmation of the *opposition* between thought and being.

Kant's criticism of the ontological proof rests precisely on the assumption that the categories are restricted to possible experience, that is, that their application only holds for a

given empirical manifold of representations. Since with the concept of God an object is thought which by definition cannot be given in experience, its existence can ex hypothesi never justifiably be known on this ground.

The only thing that *can* be shown, according to Kant, is (1) the necessary regulative function of the *idea* of God, and (2) the necessity to postulate God's existence as a demand of practical reason. For Kant, the ontological proof rests entirely on the deduction of existence from concepts. But since for Kant existence (*Dasein* or *Wirklichkeit*) is a category with a restricted use, judging that something exists can never be justified on the basis of thought alone but always requires empirical intuition.

BEYOND KANT'S SUBJECTIVISM

For Hegel, herein lies the very core of Kantian subjectivism: it is an explicit affirmation of the opposition between thought and being. This, however, is not a 'false' or 'wrong' opposition, and Hegel indeed sees its explication by Kant as highly valuable. Its merit, at this point, consists in the expression of that difference 'in its highest abstraction and in its truest form',⁹⁴ since at bottom all knowledge consists precisely in the implicit or speculative identity of thought and being.

That this identity cannot be 'known' as per the rules of the understanding Hegel takes to be one of Kant's 'excellent discoveries [*vortreffliche Entdeckung*]'.⁹⁵ Yet to state that, because of this, this speculative principle is nothing for knowledge, that it stands over against knowledge and cannot itself be brought before consciousness, is where Hegel refuses to follow Kant.

In Hegel's view, knowledge precisely consists in this very absolute identity and a true self-justification of reason will have to bring

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every opposition (most especially the difference in its 'highest abstraction' – as between thought and being) back to consciousness itself. The Kantian 'I think' as the highest point of the Deduction potentially expresses this insight into the truly synthetic *absolute* identity of the subjective and the objective, but remains abstract or formal once the restriction of its validity reverts the 'I' back to the merely subjective. A truly synthetic concept of self-consciousness must, according to Hegel, recognize its dependence on the content of its specific determinations, which leads to a much more differentiated concept of self-consciousness (ultimately, in his later philosophy, as 'spirit'), rather than it being merely a formal rule of the understanding with restricted validity.

The same problem holds for Kant's categories: they must remain formal and will never be more than 'static, dead pigeonholes of the intellect [*ruhenden toten Fächern der Intelligenz*]',⁹⁶ since a true self-justification of reason must be able to show how each category flows dynamically from consciousness itself, which can be explained by focusing on the way in which each category implies, and brings with it, its own opposite.

In this way, although much of Hegel's thought on objectivity clearly bears the hallmarks of Kant's major discoveries, the project of transcendental philosophy changes significantly from the Kantian project of the self-justification of reason in terms of a restriction and limitation of the understanding to possible experience into the path or development of consciousness towards fully self-conscious 'spirit', by tracing the dynamic logic of reason's own determinations and categories and therewith progressively recognizing itself as *absolute* subjectivity.

Hegel's early intuitions regarding such a project receive their first systematic

exposition, in all their theoretical and also practical-philosophical facets, in his major work *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807, and are carried through in the *Science of Logic* and afterwards. – JdJ

FURTHER READING

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⁸⁹ *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, §40 [hereafter referred to as *Encyclopaedia*]; all translations of this work are my own.

⁹⁰ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, §41.

⁹¹ Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, p. 326; *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 68; translation amended.

⁹² Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 515; trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge, 2010).

⁹³ Hegel, *Differenzschrift*, p. 6; *Difference*, p. 80.

⁹⁴ Hegel, *Skeptizismus*, p. 223.

⁹⁵ Hegel, *Skeptizismus*, p. 224.

⁹⁶ Hegel, *Differenzschrift*, p. 5; *Difference*, p. 80.



⁸⁶ See Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, in *Hauptwerke*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 1999), p. 5 [hereafter referred to as *Differenzschrift*]; trans. W. Cerf, H. Harris, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (Albany, 1977), p. 79 [hereafter referred to as *Difference*].

⁸⁷ Hegel, *Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie*, in *Hauptwerke*, vol. 1, p. 223 [hereafter referred to as *Skeptizismus*]; all translations of this essay are my own.

⁸⁸ Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, in *Hauptwerke*, vol. 1, p. 326; trans. W. Cerf, H. S. Harris, *Faith and Knowledge* (Albany, 1977), p. 69.

