

# William Bristow on Sally Sedgwick's "Hegel's Critique of Kant"

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Critique

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By William Bristow

The style of Sally Sedgwick's book *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* is careful, meticulous, cautious and circumspect—not at all hyperbolic or overstated. But Sedgwick's conclusions are dramatic. Sedgwick concludes in the book that the respective positions of Kant and Hegel on the question of the limits of human knowledge are dramatically reversed, relative to common, considered opinion. It is commonly supposed that, while Kant soberly teaches the limits of human knowledge, as expressing human finitude, Hegel claims to realize the potential in human knowledge to be absolute and unlimited. According to Sedgwick's interpretation, in contrast, Hegel objects fundamentally against Kant's Critical Philosophy on the ground that it over-steps the bounds of human knowledge, in claiming knowledge that, given our finitude, we can never attain. More specifically, Hegel objects, on Sedgwick's reading, that Kant illegitimately claims knowledge of a set of timeless conceptual forms and their associated principles, which constitutes an eternal, fixed framework of nature, whereas, according to Sedgwick's Hegel, we finite human beings cannot achieve knowledge of an eternally fixed categorical structure, lifted above what she calls sometimes "the realm of the empirical" (e.g, p. 71) and sometimes "contingent, historical reality" (e.g., p. 147). I devote the majority of this review to describing how Sedgwick arrives at this surprising conclusion, and then, at the end, I make a few critical observations about her reading.

The key issue to understand correctly in grasping Hegel's objections to, and differences from, Kant's Critical Philosophy, according to Sedgwick, is the relation of conceptual form to sensible content. Sedgwick focuses on the relation of conceptual form and sensible content in the context of understanding *theoretical cognition*. (Though she explains in her Introduction that her project begins from the desire to understand and explain Hegel's famous empty formalism objection against Kant's categorical imperative, and then she is led back from there to the discussion of the relation of conceptual form and sensible content in theoretical cognition, because it is in this context, not in the practical

context, that Kant's commitment to formalism and Hegel's objections to that formalism are more thoroughly treated by both philosophers.) Sedgwick shows how Kant's commitment to our understanding as discursive is fundamental to his account of the nature, limits and possibility of human knowledge. That our understanding is discursive implies for Kant that concepts, as universal representations, and sensible intuitions, are "heterogeneous", in the sense that they have independent sources. Neither can be generated out of the other, but both are necessary, Kant famously holds, for human knowledge.

In the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant undertakes to explain how sensible representations, despite being subjective, nonetheless amount to cognitions *of objects* (in other words, he undertakes to explain how such subjective representations are nonetheless properly cognitive or objective). Essentially, Kant argues that the given sensible representations come to have relation to an object only through being unified according to a set of *a priori* concepts, concepts that have their source, not in our cognitive engagement with nature, but instead in the logical functions of our faculty of understanding. These concepts (the categories), and the associated principles expressing the conditions of experience they contain, "constitute", Kant tells us, the relation of representations to objects (see KrV, B137). This account enables Kant to fulfill what Sedgwick stresses is his main ambition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely to "save metaphysics" in the face of sceptical challenges it faces. This account saves metaphysics insofar as the categories and their associated principles amount to justified *a priori* knowledge of nature. The principles of the understanding justified in the Transcendental Analytic amount to a formal framework of nature, a framework of principles legislated *a priori* by our understanding.

Importantly, this strategy for saving metaphysics has three implications that, taken together, are described in Sedgwick's book as "Kant's skepticism":

- *The restriction thesis*
- *The subjectivism thesis*
- *The contingency thesis.*

*The restriction thesis* is just the thesis that human knowledge is limited to the realm of possible experience, that we cannot attain knowledge of the traditional supersensible objects of metaphysics. This restriction follows from the fact that the *a priori* conceptual forms, as necessary conditions of human knowledge, are themselves cognitive only insofar as they provide unity to an externally given *sensible* content—otherwise they are 'empty'. *The subjectivism thesis* (closely bound up in Kant's account with the restriction thesis, but distinct) is the thesis

that, because the conceptual forms—the categories—have their source *a priori* in the functions of *our* understanding, the realm of nature that they constitute is determined as a realm merely 'for us'; our knowledge is restricted to objects as they appear to us. We cannot know objects as they are *in themselves*.

In order to describe *the contingency thesis*—especially important to Hegel, on Sedgwick's reading—we need a bit more of Kant's epistemology before us.

The pure principles of the understanding, constituting the framework of nature, are insufficient, Kant argues, to account for the possibility of empirical knowledge and empirical science of nature. As far as those principles are concerned, nature, as given to us in experience, might still be so diverse in its forms that we could not cognize it on the basis of empirical concepts or laws. As Kant presents in §§ 76 and 77 of his *Critique of Judgement*, it is because of the heterogeneity of conceptual form and sensible content in our knowledge that we cannot determine on the basis of constitutive *a priori* principles that the diversity in natural forms "harmonizes with" the universal. It is a main claim of the *Critique of Judgement* in general that, partly because of this play between what is given in sense experience and the framework provided by the *a priori* principles of the understanding, we need another *a priori* principle, though not for the faculty of the understanding, but rather for the faculty of reflective judgement, the faculty we exercise in forming universals for the knowledge of sensibly-given particulars. Kant argues that, in order for empirical knowledge of nature to be possible, we must *presuppose* that nature has that unity and order necessary for our cognition of it; this implies conceiving of nature as organized purposively relative to our cognitive powers. In making that assumption, our faculty of judgement is governed *a priori* by a principle of purposiveness. This principle, unlike the principles of the pure understanding, is subjective, in the sense that it prescribes not to nature, but to ourselves. As Kant makes clear in the important §§ 76 and 77, to represent nature as organized purposively relative to our cognitive power is to represent it as having that unity of universal and particular that it would have for an intuitive understanding. This amounts to representing nature as having organic unity.

Third, then, the *contingency thesis* states that, because the empirical particulars cannot be generated out of our grasp of the universal, given the discursivity of our understanding, there is, according to Kant, "contingency in the relation between 'nature's products' and the 'intellect'" (Sedgwick, p. 22). Sedgwick quotes from the *Critique of Judgement*: "In terms of the universal [supplied by the understanding], the particular, as such, contains something contingent" (KdU, §76, AA, 5: 404; quoted by Sedgwick, p. 22). An intuitive understanding would cognize in a way free of this limitation. For an intuitive understanding, concept

and intuition, or universal and particular, would be related in such a way that, quoting from the *Critique of Judgement*, "there would not be [...] contingency in the way nature's products in terms of particular laws harmonize with the understanding" (KdU, §77, AA, 5:406; Sedgwick, p. 22).

Hegel is dissatisfied with Kant's account of human knowledge because of the 'sceptical' implications (summarized in these three theses: restriction, subjectivism and contingency). Hegel thinks we can do better. Hegel thinks that what underlies these sceptical implications in Kant's account is his conception of the discursivity of our understanding, according to which conceptual form and sensible content are heterogeneous. And, interestingly, Hegel finds the antidote to Kant's model of heterogeneity in the model of organic unity that Kant himself points to as an intuitive understanding, contrasting with our own discursive understanding, in the *Critique of Judgement*.

This sets up Sedgwick's distinctive interpretive theses in her book. While many recognize that Hegel sees in Kant's own notion of the intuitive understanding a model of our own speculative knowledge, many take this to mean that Hegel attributes essentially divine powers of cognition to us. Based on careful, close interpretations of the relevant texts, Sedgwick reads it quite differently. Sedgwick argues that what Hegel draws from Kant's notion of the intuitive understanding and from Kant's associated model of organic unity is an alternative conception of the relation of concept and intuition in cognition, a model that avoids "Kant's scepticism". Sedgwick proposes that Hegel sees in the model of organic unity a way of representing the *identity* of form and content in knowledge, a way that differs from models that commentators typically attribute to Hegel. The identity of cognitive form and content advanced by Hegel, in pointed contrast to Kant's heterogeneity or dichotomy, is widely interpreted as achieved through a reduction of one of the elements to the other, either concepts to intuitions (rendering Hegel a reductive empiricist), or, more plausibly, intuitions to concepts (rendering him a reductive rationalist). Sedgwick argues convincingly against these interpretations, and puts another in their place. In an organic unity, as Kant explains, the parts stand in a relation of "reciprocal determination" to each other and to the whole, in contrast both to a relation in which the whole is fully determined by the parts and to a relation in which the parts are fully determined by the whole. Sedgwick argues that Hegel conceives the relation of concept to intuition in cognition as one of "reciprocal determination", as opposed to one of reduction. Sedgwick summarizes a central thesis of her book as follows:

I suggest that achieving identity, for Hegel, is neither a matter of depriving concepts and intuitions of a role in human cognition altogether, nor a matter of reducing one component of cognition to the other. Instead, we achieve identity, in his view, by recognizing the way in which the two components stand to each other in a relation of reciprocal determination. (p. 47)

Substituting the model of organic unity for the model of dichotomous heterogeneity for the relation of concept and intuition in our knowledge has two very important consequences for our knowledge, according to Sedgwick's interpretation: one positive and one negative. The positive implication is that we can thereby avoid the sceptical implications of Kant's idealism, especially those contained in his subjectivism and in the contingency thesis. If conceptual form is not, as in Kant, something determined in advance and independent of our encounter with the world in sense-experience, but rather something at least partially determined through that encounter, then our knowledge of the natural world on the basis of that form is not, as it is in Kant, of a subjectively determined domain, but rather of "the reality of nature itself" (p. 89). If we replace Kant's model, according to which *we contribute* the form to an alien content, with the model of reciprocal determination of form and content, we avoid the consequence that the form "cannot be taken to reveal the nature of the independently given sense content itself" (p. 89)—which, again, is what we have according to Kant's account. We avoid the implication, made explicit in Kant's idealism, that our theory of knowledge represents our knowledge of nature as "deficient" or "second-rate" (cf. p. 80).

That's the good news, as it were. Adopting the model of organic unity, as reciprocal determination, also has a negative implication for our knowledge, relative to Kant's system, according to Sedgwick's interpretation of Hegel. Sedgwick draws the negative implications in her Chapter Five, and I will end by discussing those implications critically. But, first I take notice of Chapters Three and Four, even if briefly, because important pieces of Sedgwick's interpretation come into focus in these chapters.

In Chapter Three, Sedgwick provides an interesting, subtle and enlightening interpretation of Hegel's puzzling grouping of Kantian Critical Philosophy together with Lockean empiricism, and in Chapter Four she provides a very detailed, nuanced reading of Hegel's engagement with Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories in his early essay *Faith and Knowledge*. Both chapters show Hegel to be, in stark contrast to his reputation, a careful, accurate reader of Kant's texts, even of Kant's most complicated texts. Moreover, these chapters further specify how Sedgwick understands Hegel to conceive the relation of conceptual form and sensible content in our knowledge. Sedgwick argues that

Hegel agrees with Kant both that we rely in our knowledge on an independently given sense content, and that that sense content is blind independently of being conceptualized. According to Sedgwick's reading, Hegel's criticism is directed in particular at Kant's conception of conceptual form as "external" to the given sense content. According to Sedgwick's Hegel, Kant's interpretation of conceptual form as "external" to that reality which is the source of the sensible content is responsible for Kant's objectionable subjectivism.

In Chapter Five, then, Sedgwick develops her interpretation of Hegel's critique of the externality of conceptual form in Kant, by examining Hegel's criticism of Kant's philosophical procedure of critique in contrast to Hegel's own procedure. Kant's procedure of epistemological criticism depends on the conception of conceptual form as external insofar as Kant undertakes in his critical investigation to determine conceptual form in advance and independently of the objects of knowledge to be known through these forms. Sedgwick discusses Hegel's critical discussion, in his Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the attempt to know our cognition, in advance and independently of the objects of that cognition. On the basis of this text, Sedgwick attributes to Hegel the sceptical view that we cannot, contrary to what Kant thinks, discover through a special form of critical reflection "a form that is fixed and thus in no way indebted to contingent, historical reality" (p. 147).

Sedgwick fills out this picture of Kant's critique as claiming knowledge beyond our capacity with a discussion of a section of his *Science of Logic* entitled "With What Must the Science Begin?". There Hegel criticizes previous philosophers, including Kant, who begin their inquiries implicitly crediting to themselves "the ability to identify the 'commonest' categories and methods, the categories and methods that can be affirmed by every rational or finite rational nature (SL 32/WL I 21)" (p. 153). They implicitly credit this capacity to themselves, according to Hegel, because they *begin from* these categories and methods, as fixed or given, and then proceed to their presuppositions or justifications. But Hegel, on Sedgwick's reading, denies that we have these cognitive powers. She writes:

On the interpretation I am proposing, one of the mistakes Hegel attributes to those engaged in critique is that of attributing to the critical thinker extraordinary abstractive powers—powers to separate out, at the start of inquiry, the concepts and methods that can be affirmed by all rational natures from those that are merely contingently valid. (p. 153)

Sedgwick explains that, while Hegel's procedure may seem similar to Kant's, since he also begins from familiar or commonly accepted categories, and then proceeds to their conditions (p. 154), there is a fundamental difference. In

Hegel's procedure, the initial assumptions and concepts are overturned or negated. In Hegel's procedure, the initial starting point is not fixed, but overcome or gone beyond. Sedgwick writes:

[A]s Hegel employs it, analysis does not serve the purpose of finally grounding the supposedly universal and necessarily valid assumptions with which we begin; it instead makes their contingency explicit. (p. 155)

Sedgwick notes that this process includes the construction of a new self-understanding on the basis of the criticism of our previous self-understanding. "But", she writes, "we discover that this new self-conception was also mistaken, and that we were not entitled to the self-confidence we had at the start" (p. 155). Reviewing Hegel's actual procedure in his major works, Sedgwick reports that the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology* each "records a *history* of false starts in the efforts of philosophers to ground their sciences" (p. 156). She writes:

The message Hegel seems to want to convey is that the efforts of philosophers to begin with what is common and familiar, with assumptions every rational nature must grant, have so far suffered the same fate. The assumptions we thought we could take for granted at the start of inquiry [...] turn out to be contingent. Critique, as Hegel exercises it, exposes the need to move beyond them. (p. 156)

Although Sedgwick notes that Hegel "never urges us to *abandon* our efforts to think critically", she reads him as holding that we can never achieve the sort of knowledge through critique that Kant claimed. She writes:

[T]he lesson is [...] that we need to adjust our understanding of what critique can achieve. Given that critical reflection occurs always 'within' some 'shape of consciousness', as Hegel says, and given that critique for that reason is invariably carried out in partial darkness, we need to modify our expectation that critique can fulfill Kant's promise of providing us 'completeness' as well as 'certainty' (CPR Axiv). (p. 158)

Sedgwick appends an important footnote to this, a note that clarifies the source and nature of the darkness that inevitably attends critique. In the note she responds to an objection to her interpretation. What about the fact that Hegel claims, in the context of claiming to achieve the standpoint of absolute knowledge at the end of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that Spirit achieves "complete self-consciousness" there? The claim to completeness and absoluteness also occurs elsewhere in Hegel's system. Sedgwick responds by

relativizing all such claims by appeal to the famous passage in Hegel's Preface to his *Philosophy of Right* in which he claims that philosophy is its own time comprehended in thoughts. Sedgwick writes:

But I take Hegel at his word when he writes in his Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that since no philosophy can "transcend its contemporary world", our expectations about what will or will not come next invariably reflect our ties to some particular set of philosophical commitments. Our views about completeness, then, are always relative to some particular set of aims and expectations, aims and expectations that reveal our debt to actual historical conditions. (p. 158n.44)

On Sedgwick's interpretation, the blindness with which we are afflicted in critique ultimately derives from our being situated in time and bound to the conditions of the time in which we are situated.

Here, at the end, I express reservations about Sedgwick's reading of Hegel as insisting upon the limitations and time-bound nature of our knowledge. It's true that Hegel objects fundamentally to Kant's project of undertaking to articulate a set of cognitive forms in advance or independently of the relation of those cognitive forms to the relevant *objects* or *content* of our knowledge, but the attribution to Hegel of the view that our knowledge of the categorical structure of reality is drawn from, or depends on, sense experience is questionable. While it is true that Hegel undertakes to develop a critical procedure that is not, unlike Kant's, on his interpretation, pre-determined by unexamined and unjustified presuppositions, I think the abundance of evidence suggests that Hegel undertakes to develop this procedure *in the service of attaining complete and full self-knowledge*, not in denial of the possibility of attaining such knowledge, as Sedgwick maintains. In a passage quoted above, Sedgwick writes:

On the interpretation I am proposing, one of the mistakes Hegel attributes to those engaged in critique is that of attributing to the critical thinker extraordinary abstractive powers—powers to separate out, at the start of inquiry, the concepts and methods that can be affirmed by all rational natures from those that are merely contingently valid. (p. 153, my emphasis)

The qualification "at the start of inquiry" is crucial. Presented with this qualification, the question naturally arises: what about the *end* of inquiry? Sedgwick writes in the chapter: "critique for Hegel deflates our claims to know ourselves *at the start of inquiry*" (p. 155, my emphasis again). This qualification recurs in Sedgwick's descriptions of the limitation that her Hegel insists upon.

But, according to Sedgwick's interpretation, Hegel deflates our claims to know ourselves *at all*, not just at the start of inquiry. This unqualified limitation follows from the fact that, according to Sedgwick's Hegel, there is no proper *end* to inquiry; every end is, from a succeeding perspective, a new beginning. I mean by a "proper end", not a mere stopping place, but a place where all that is implicitly contained in the beginning is made fully explicit and realized.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes of the absolute, the "living Substance" as subject, that "it is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; only by being worked out to its end, is it actual" (PhdG, p. 23 [Suhrkamp edition]; §18 in Miller translation). According to the Preface, the process of realizing science has the same structure, in the sense that, when it reaches its end, nothing is hidden anymore, and knowledge is completely realized. The realization of science is the realization of substance, insofar as science is the self-knowledge of spirit, and spiritual being is realized through its self-knowledge. According to Sedgwick's Hegel, in contrast, our system of science has no end in that sense, because of the "inherent blindness" or "darkness" that she speaks of. Hegel says in the same context in the Preface, famously, that "the true is the whole" (PhdG, p. 24 [Suhrkamp edition], §20 in Miller), but, if we are always in the position that tomorrow's truth undoes today's, then we are incapable of knowing the whole. It would follow, then, that we are incapable of knowing at all, given that the true is the whole.

The same objection can be expressed in terms of our capacity to know categories as necessary, instead of merely as contingent. As Sedgwick describes Hegel's dialectical method in the quotations above, when the method results in the negation or undercutting of assumptions or concepts or forms of consciousness, what is revealed is their *contingency* and *our need to move beyond them* (see passages quoted above). I think this is not correct. In Hegel's method, we don't "move beyond" any of the forms that prove insufficient; instead they take their place in the whole which is the true. And, as such, they are not contingent, but necessary. Hegel is explicit on this point of method at the end of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The forms of consciousness that are successively generated through the internal criticism of previous forms of consciousness present themselves *to experience* as new and unaccounted for, Hegel writes, but the *philosophical reconstruction* enables *us* to discern the origination of the succeeding form out of the internal criticism of the previous form; this enables us to see the dialectic as "a process of becoming" (see PhdG, p. 80 [Suhrkamp]; §87 of Miller translation). Hegel adds:

Because of this necessity, the way to Science is itself already Science, and hence, in virtue of its content, is the Science of the experience of consciousness (PhdG, p. 80 [Suhrkamp]; §88 of Miller translation).

What the critical inquiry contained in the *Phenomenology* reveals, according to Hegel, is exactly not the contingency of the forms connected and negated through dialectical process, but, rather, their necessity. Moreover, Hegel implies that, without this necessity, the inquiry would not count as science, as philosophical knowing in a proper sense, at all.

Perhaps the crux of the issue is Hegel's understanding of the relation of philosophy to time. I resist Sedgwick's reading of the famous passage in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, in which, admittedly, Hegel seems to say that all philosophy (thus, including his own) is relativized to the time in which it is formulated. Lacking a counter-reading of that passage, one compatible with the more conventional interpretation of Hegel as meaning to bring the history of philosophy to completion, to an end, in his system of philosophy, once and for all, as it were, I would just end with the following question: While, on Sedgwick's reading, Hegel aims to overcome the scepticism he finds expressed in Kant's critical idealism, how does Hegel avoid being himself a more or less confessed sceptic, on her reading? Sedgwick says that, on Hegel's view, we are afflicted with blindness or ignorance "as a necessary consequence of our limited powers of abstraction" (p. 157). How does Hegel himself escape the "chronic condition" of failure that, according to her own reading, Hegel details in his "history of the science of logic and of consciousness"? It seems that he escapes it, if he does, only by *relativizing* his claims to this moment in time, or to his particular take on things. Sedgwick's Hegel, it seems, makes his positive claims with the qualification that he is not asserting that things are absolutely (or in themselves) as he describes them, but only that things are thus and so *from this perspective as located at this moment in time*. Is that not a kind of subjectivism/scepticism as well, as much as Kant's transcendental idealism is alleged to be? The relativization to the subject is different, of course, but it seems no less a relativization of knowledge claims to the knowing subject. How then has Hegel improved on Kant's subjectivism/scepticism?

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*William Bristow is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, US. Bristow's research focuses historically on the philosophy of Kant and on post-Kantian German Idealism and 19th century philosophy in general. He is the author of Hegel and the Transformation of Philosophical Critique (Oxford University Press, 2007).*

Website