

On Schulting on Hegel's Critique of Kant's Subjectivism in the Transcendental Deduction

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DENNIS SCHULTING | 'On Hegel's Critique of Kant's Subjectivism in the Transcendental Deduction', in Kant's Radical Subjectivism. Perspectives on the Transcendental Deduction | Palgrave Macmillan 2017

By Paul Giladi

I would like to begin by thanking Dennis Schulting for his warm invitation to write a response piece to the chapter in his new monograph that deals with Hegel's critique of Kant. I learned a lot from his sensitive reflections on Kant and Hegel; in what follows, I hope my thoughts on the issue of Kant's subjectivism are both coherent and repay Schulting's kindness in sufficient German Idealist currency.

To Kantians, Hegel's investigations into the logico-metaphysical structure of discursive thought have an insulting whiff of the metaphysical tradition Kant had painstakingly criticised; to many Hegelians, Hegel's investigations into the logico-metaphysical structure of discursive thought represents the crowning glory of speculative idealism over Kant's transcendental idealism. Historically, many seem content to *either* just dismiss Hegel summarily *or* uncritically follow him. However, as William Bristow nicely put it, we need to "develop and construct Hegel's objection [to Kant] carefully and critically" (2007:4). The way Schulting develops and constructs Hegel's objection to Kant carefully and critically is by presenting it as a highly complex and invariably true-to-form dialectical concern: Hegel is enamoured with important features of the transcendental insights into the categorial nature of human cognition and experience as well as the apperceptive dimension of judgement; yet at the same time, since *Faith and Knowledge* right through his mature works, Hegel expresses significant revulsion towards Kant's alleged non-conceptualism and his "banal" idealism. Rather than risk overdetermination by focusing my discussion piece on Hegel's charge that Kant is committed to a residual form of non-conceptualism which needs to be excoriated for Kant to be considered a thorough-bred conceptualist à la the Discursivity Thesis, I would like to devote attention to Dennis's interpretation of Hegel's critique of Kantian idealism.

Hegel's main discussion of Kant's idealism appears in *Faith and Knowledge*, the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, and the *Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences*. In the latter text, the following passage is arguably the clearest general criticism of Kant's idealism:

But after all, objectivity of thought, in Kant's sense, is again to a certain extent subjective. Thoughts, according to Kant, although universal and necessary categories, are **only our** thoughts—separated by an impassable gulf from the thing, as it exists apart from our knowledge. But the true objectivity of thinking means that the thoughts, far from being merely ours, must at the same time be the real essences of the things, and of whatever is an object to us. (*Encyclopædia*, §41z [Hegel 1991:67–8])

The basic charge that Hegel levels against Kant here is that formal idealism is subjective. However, as I understand Schulting, Hegel is *not* claiming that the subjectivism amounts to some kind of phenomenalism or Berkeleianism. Rather, the subjectivism of formal idealism, for Hegel, consists in holding that the **structure, order, and unity** of empirical reality are all derived from *us* and that thought and being are fundamentally separate from one another. This reading is supported by Sally Sedgwick, who writes that

[h]ere Hegel challenges not Kant's insistence that the categories derive from the faculty of spontaneity rather than from sensation, but the restrictions he places on their validity. More precisely, Hegel challenges Kant's inference from the fact that the categories must be the contribution of the thinking subject to the conclusion that they cannot therefore also be "determinations of objects themselves". Hegel makes this point again when he writes that, "according to Kant, thoughts, although they are universal and necessary determinations, are still thoughts, and are cut off from what the thing is by an impassable gulf". (1997:30)

In other words, Hegel sees Kant as incorrectly separating thought from being, by regarding the world as only having its conceptual structure by virtue of the application of certain forms, namely the categories, whose origin lies in *us*. For Hegel, what Kant should not have argued was that the necessity and universality provided by conceptual form that constitutes the formal unity and order of empirical reality is not inherent to the world itself. This seems to be supported by the following passage:

Still, though the categories, such as unity, or cause and effect, are strictly the property of thought, it by no means follows that they must be ours merely and not also characteristics of the objects. Kant however confines them to the subject-mind, and his philosophy may be styled subjective idealism. (Encyclopædia, §42z [Hegel 1991:70])

What the separation of thought and being signifies for Hegel is that on Kant's account, the objectivity of representation provided by the pure concepts is not a full-blooded objectivity, i.e. the objectivity is in some sense artificial and contingent: the categories confer on objects the formal characteristics of objectivity (such as causality, substantiality, etc.), but leave us cut off from things in themselves. In this way, the empirically real character of the world depends on this important aspect of transcendental idealism. And it is because the formal characteristics of ordinary objects and the formal structure of empirical reality are derived from us that the Kantian account of the objectivity of representation, for Hegel, is not a full-blooded one: whilst Hegel agreed with the essence of the Transcendental Deduction, namely the idea that 'no' representational content that we could receive in experience can be nonconceptualised, what he aimed to reject was the Kantian idea that 'this' fact about our cognition meant that the given content we receive is itself unknowable/unintelligible *independently* of our minds. In this sense, Hegel can be understood as being critical of Kant's proposed solution to the Myth of the Given on the grounds that Kantian subjectivism *fails to conceive of the content of experience as being in and of itself conceptually articulated*.

As Schulting rightly notes, Hegel's concerns about subjectivism are invariably related to his concern about transcendental idealism's promulgation of dualisms such as the fundamental separation of the 'I' from the world of experience:

On one side there is the Ego, with its productive imagination or rather with its synthetic unity which, taken thus in isolation, is formal unity of the manifold. But next to it there is an infinity of sensations [...]. A formal idealism which in this way sets an absolutely Ego-point and its intellect on one side, and an absolute manifold, or sensation, on the other side, is a dualism. (Faith and Knowledge [Hegel 1977:76–8])

The word 'I' expresses the abstract relation-to-self; and whatever is placed in this unit or focus is affected by it and transformed into it [...] and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded, in other words, idealised. (Encyclopædia, §42z [Hegel 1991:69])

For Hegel, the Kantian understanding of the 'I' is highly problematic here, since (1) subject and object must "coalesce in some incomprehensible way", and (2) in contributing the formal structure of empirical reality, the objectivity we encounter—the "positive reality of the world"—is not *genuinely objective*. By consequence, the type of knowledge we have of the empirical realm is not genuine knowledge of things independent of us, but rather a special kind of self-knowledge: we only have knowledge of what we have put in by our own cognitive forms.

The basic steps of Hegel's argument here can be put as follows: all representational content and formal principles are reliant on our *a priori* mechanisms. In contributing unity and order, etc., the epistemological cost of subjecting the world to our filtering is that what we took to be 'world-knowledge' turns out to be 'self-knowledge'. The transcendental subject, therefore, in being the provider of formal unity, takes us towards some kind of solipsism. However, in calling this 'solipsism', I do not mean that Hegel is charging Kant with either claiming that there are no minds apart from my own (metaphysical solipsism), or that we can only know the contents of our mental states (epistemological solipsism), or that philosophic investigation into the extra-mental realm is posterior to and independent of investigation into our cognitive faculties (methodological solipsism). Rather, Hegel's charge of solipsism consists in the claim that Kantianism leads to the conclusion that what we ordinarily take to be knowledge of an independent world turns out to be a specific kind of self-knowledge.

What I find particularly interesting about the way Schulting articulates all the various features of Hegel's critique of Kant's formal idealism is the way he claims that "[f]or Hegel, [Kant's] metaphilosophical stance smacks of an at heart anti-philosophical philosophy" (p. 350). Though Schulting, at least in my view, does not greatly elaborate what exactly this means and involves, I would like to offer a way of understanding what he may have in mind about Hegel's metaphilosophical critique of Kant's apparent anti-philosophical philosophy.

Our cognitive activity, according to Hegel, does *not* consist in being the sources of the unity in objects and does *not* consist in us being the sources of the unity of the world as a whole. Rather, what this activity consists of is our ability to detect the intrinsic unity of objects themselves and the intrinsic unity of the world as a whole (cf. *Encyclopædia*, §381 [Hegel 1971:11–12]). In other words, for Hegel, our discursive cognitive architecture, from the standpoint of dialectical Reason rather than nomothetic Understanding, is constituted in such a way that it enables the determinations of thought to *reveal* themselves as we refine our cognitive practices through inquiry. The activity of making sense of things through *Begriffe* does not seize the things they are directed at; the way in which Kant

construes discursivity is effectively some kind of *viol cognitif*, where reality is forced to *conform* to concepts. Hegel sees Kant's explanation for the unity of objects as claiming that a transcendental subject encounters a plurality of representational contents and then combines these contents together, to form a unified object:

The 'I' is as it were the crucible and fire through which the loose plurality of sense is consumed and reduced to unity. (Encyclopædia, §42z [Hegel 1991:69])

However, Hegel rejects Kant's position on the grounds that there is no synthesising on our part that gives objects their unity. In contrast to Kant, Hegel claims that objects in themselves are unities, and that we only think of them as being unified by us when we *misconstrue* our own cognitive activity. Our cognitive activity, according to Hegel, involves developing insights into how the world incorporates structures that can *only* be uncovered by thought.

From this perspective, then, I think there seems to be good reason to claim that the issue of subjectivism goes beyond the debate about the derivability and scope of the categories: when Hegel uses 'psychological' as a pejorative way of describing Kant's idealism, the term is meant to highlight Hegel's first-order philosophical concerns about the status of the categories and the formal intelligible structure of reality as well as Hegel's second-order metaphilosophical anxieties about the way Kant's conception of discursivity does not respect the integrity of Being. As such, when Schulting writes that "the difference between Hegel's and Kant's approaches cannot be sublated in a Hegelian-type dialectic, for, despite their shared focus on the synthetic unity in thought, their methodologies and starting assumptions are irreducibly different" (p. 365), I think he is largely right—but not *simply* because of the differences concerning the (in)separability of concept and intuition; there is also a much more substantive and powerful concern about the very function of discursivity and how idealism is best understood at the *metaphilosophical* level.

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