

Hegel, Naturalism and Transcendental Philosophy

Hegel, naturalismo y filosofía trascendental

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ABSTRACT

The intention of this presentation is to offer an account of Hegel's philosophical system as conditional upon a synthesis of naturalism and transcendental philosophy, the general features of which shall be elaborated. Despite his long-standing reputation as a critical successor to Kant's idealist project, Hegel's understanding of the dynamic relation between philosophy and empirical science cannot be easily accommodated within the formalistic horizons of Kantian transcendentalism. At the same time, however, Hegel credits philosophical reason with a synthetic function which few contemporary naturalists would recognise. As such, Hegel's methodology combines features of philosophical persuasions often considered fundamentally irreconcilable.

Such a synthesis of naturalism and transcendental philosophy is made possible by Hegel's rejection of any Kantian dichotomy between a heteronomous animal nature and an autonomous rational freedom, and his proposal that mind or Spirit be understood as the 'truth' or self-fulfilment of nature, rather than its antithesis. For Hegel then, nature's conformity to rational principles of synthetic unity need not be explained as necessarily conditional upon a priori criteria of intelligibility originating in a non-natural subject. Rather, Hegel maintains, nature grounds the ontological possibility of a Spirit which grounds the possibility of nature, so that nature and Spirit ground one another.

Keywords: Hegel, Kant, naturalism, transcendental philosophy, synthesis, reason, subjectivity, a priori, absolute idea, absolute idealism.

RESUMEN

La intención de esta presentación es ofrecer una descripción del sistema filosófico de Hegel como condicionado a una síntesis del naturalismo y la filosofía trascendental, cuyas características generales serán elaboradas. A pesar de su reputación de larga data como sucesor crítico del proyecto idealista de Kant, la comprensión de Hegel de la relación dinámica entre filosofía y ciencia empírica no puede acomodarse fácilmente dentro de los horizontes formalistas del trascendentalismo kantiano. Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo,

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Hegel atribuye a la razón filosófica una función sintética que pocos naturalistas contemporáneos reconocerían. Como tal, la metodología de Hegel combina características de las persuasiones filosóficas a menudo consideradas fundamentalmente irreconciliables.

Tal síntesis de naturalismo y filosofía trascendental es posible gracias al rechazo de Hegel de cualquier dicotomía kantiana entre una naturaleza animal heterónoma y una libertad racional autónoma, y su propuesta de que la mente o el espíritu se entiendan como la 'verdad' o la autorrealización de la naturaleza. en lugar de su antítesis. Para Hegel, entonces, la conformidad de la naturaleza con los principios racionales de unidad sintética no necesita explicarse como necesariamente condicionada a criterios a priori de inteligibilidad que se originan en un sujeto no natural. Más bien, sostiene Hegel, la naturaleza fundamenta la posibilidad ontológica de un Espíritu que fundamenta la posibilidad de la naturaleza, de modo que la naturaleza y el Espíritu se fundamentan mutuamente.

Palabras clave: Hegel, Kant, naturalismo, filosofía trascendental, síntesis, razón, subjetividad, a priori, idea absoluta, idealismo absoluto.

Introduction

Although it is no longer commonplace for Hegel's interpreters to attribute to him a pre-Critical dogmatic metaphysics of almost comical grandiosity, scholars of his thought remain divided over the extent to which he may be understood as a transcendental philosopher. One's opinion on this matter – which is vital to making sense of Hegel's relevance to contemporary philosophical debates – is likely to depend in large part upon how one interprets the relationship between Hegel and the Critical philosophy. To those for whom Hegel's idealism represents a continuation and radicalisation of Kant's Copernican revolution in metaphysics, according to which any residual Kantian commitment to the thing-in-itself is to be jettisoned as inconsistent with the autonomy with which the rational subject legislates to the object, Hegel is a more authentically transcendental philosopher even than Kant. For those, however, who emphasise Hegel's affinities with Schelling and the project of *Naturphilosophie*, which de-centres the constitutive function of the subject with respect to the natural domain, Hegel represents a departure from Kantian transcendentalism and the articulation of a speculative position which attempts to derive subjectivity from objectivity. Any adequate treatment of his relation to the Critical philosophy must, however, offer an account of how Hegel understands the latter to be 'sublated' in his own system of absolute idealism – that is, of how the Hegelian position is supposedly implicit in the Kantian, and may be understood as its organic self-development, or as the self-overcoming of its own incomplete development. As such, it would seem, Hegel must understand his own idealist position *both* as the completion, realisation, or 'truth' of Kant's more 'embryonic' transcendental philosophy, *and* as the refutation of trans-

centualism. For Hegel, then, transcendental philosophy must somehow be something preserved, developed, and, at the same time, overcome.

The already complex matter of Hegel's relation to transcendental philosophy is further complicated, however, by the related issue of his proximity to naturalism – a position which Kant describes in his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* as holding that “nature is sufficient unto itself”,² without, therefore, needing to rest upon the a priori constitutive activity of the transcendental subject. As a number of scholars, such as Pinkard and DeVries, have remarked, Hegel shares much in common with certain forms of naturalism, particularly in terms of his apparent commitment to the continuity of humanity with the natural domain. However, insofar as naturalism is widely understood to be antithetical to transcendental philosophy, it may seem that the closer Hegel comes to either position, the further he must therefore depart from the other. Whereas transcendentalism is generally associated with a commitment to the project of first philosophy and the a priori grounding of the natural sciences, naturalism is frequently thought to champion the continuity of philosophical and empirical modes of understanding and explanation. Transcendentalists often lean towards a species of idealism and are dubious of the prospects available for a naturalistic understanding of consciousness and representation, whereas naturalists are typically inclined towards forms of realism and are more willing to treat mind and meaning as natural phenomena. In these respects and others, naturalism and transcendental philosophy appear entirely incompatible, and to defy even Hegel's impressive capacity for the synthetic integration of apparently opposed positions.

The following offers an interpretation of how Hegel may be understood to integrate naturalist and transcendentalist themes within his overarching system of absolute idealism. Special emphasis is given to how Hegel proposes to complete Kant's Critical project by showing the alleged efforts of reason to limit its own speculative ambitions to be self-defeating, so that Kant in fact presupposes an Absolute viewpoint which he does not properly make thematic. From the perspective of the Absolute, however, Hegel maintains, the difference between nature and subjectivity is overcome, so that there is no dramatic separation between the naturalist and transcendentalist perspectives. Ultimately, it shall be claimed, Hegel proposes to overcome the limitations of Kant's transcendental project *from within* by showing how the final synthesis to which reason aspires may be achieved and the radical duality of subject and object overcome in the unity of the Absolute Idea.

² KANT, IMMANUEL, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, translated by James W. Ellington, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001, p. 363.

1. Naturalistic Interpretations of Hegel

In a remarkable reversal of interpretations of his work standard, at least amongst analytically-trained commentators, since the early twentieth century, it is no longer unusual to find Hegel claimed as a 'naturalist' of sorts, who renounces supernatural entities of every description and seeks to accommodate rational norms, processes and ideals entirely within the scope of the natural domain. Whereas Taylor's landmark 1975 study is characteristic of a period during which even those who were sympathetic to Hegel understood his idealism as a speculative metaphysical position which downgrades the ontological status of natural phenomena to mere appearances ancillary to the super-sensible process of an Absolute Mind's self-articulation, such 'spirit monist' interpretations are very much out of favour amongst contemporary Hegelians.³ Far more representative of current trends in Hegel scholarship is Pinkard's account of Hegel's idealism as a naturalistic position concerning the social and historical operations by which agents are able to emerge from within the natural domain and develop a self-conception, all without recourse to super-sensible agencies, whether divine or otherwise.⁴

For Pinkard and other such 'naturalistic' interpreters of his system, Hegel acknowledges no field of entities ontologically independent of that discovered to agents by means of sensible experience, nor does he recognise any demand for noumenal or intelligible characteristics of the subject in order to account for the possibility of freedom and practical reason. Such Kantian manoeuvres, intended to safeguard practical reason and moral agency against intrusions from a deterministic natural domain, are redundant, it is maintained, given a less restrictive conception of nature than Kant is prepared to countenance, at least outside of his *Critique of Judgement*, and it is therefore unnecessary to look elsewhere than to naturally- originating explanatory resources in order to make sense of how freedom and responsibility are possible. According to such naturalistic interpretations, nature need not be understood as a by-product of an Absolute Mind's self-contemplation in order for it to be recognised as accommodating, rather than foreign to, reason and rational norms.

All the same, even the most enthusiastic champion of a naturalistic interpretation of Hegel would acknowledge that Hegel's naturalism is importantly distinct from that which is standardly opposed to transcendental philosophy, at least amongst contemporary analytic philosophers. Certainly, it is very misleading, to say the least, to claim Hegel as an ancestor of Quine, whatever

³ TAYLOR, CHARLES, *Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

⁴ See, for instance, PINKARD, T., *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

interesting similarities may be identified between these two philosophers. Indeed, where commentators have spoken of Hegel's 'naturalism', they have very often distinguished between 'conservative' or 'exclusive' and 'liberal' or 'inclusive' naturalist positions, identifying Quine with the former and Hegel with the latter.⁵ According to McDowell, for instance, in terms of its anti-nominalistic and anti-scientistic credentials, Hegel's naturalism has far more in common with Aristotle's than with Quine's.⁶

Even assuming that his naturalism is of a more inclusive and reconciliationist variety does not, however, by itself eliminate the aforementioned concern about Hegel's relationship to transcendental philosophy, for there remain several issues upon which the transcendentalist and the liberal naturalist appear to be at odds and to resist the general Hegelian integrationist strategy. One particular point of contention concerns the relation of philosophy to the empirical sciences. As DeVries noted as long ago as 1988:

A fight has been brewing amongst Hegel scholars, one that has been kept quiet because the field is small. It is not quite the old battle between left and right Hegelians, which centred on religious and social issues, but a new (though related) battle centred on the correct Hegelian treatment of the empirical sciences. The disagreement is over whether philosophy itself emerges out of them and depends on them in some real sense (this would be the position of the Hegelian left, I suppose) or comes to the empirical sciences from outside, with a fund of knowledge both independent of and superior to that of the empirical sciences (the position of the right).⁷

After declaring for what he here presents as 'the Hegelian left', DeVries announces that "I read Hegel as a great naturalist, as one who saw man as arising out of and continuous with nature and capable of being understood only in this natural context".⁸ This, presumably, would leave a priori transcendentalist interpretations of Hegel's position with respect to the natural sciences occupying what DeVries indicates to be 'the Hegelian right'. Certainly the disagreement which DeVries identified over thirty years ago has become more high-profile with more recent scholarly interest in Hegel's philosophy of nature and its relation to his philosophy of spirit. Here Stone's 'strong apriorist' interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of nature may be contrasted with Pinkard's a posteriori approach for a helpful indication of the

⁵ See, for instance, DE CARO, M. y MACARTHUR, D., *Naturalism in Question*, Harvard, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2008, for comparisons between naturalism of 'conservative' and 'liberal' forms.

⁶ See, for instance, McDowell (1994) and McDowell (2009).

⁷ DeVries (1988) xii.

⁸ DeVries (1988) xii.

scope for disagreement in this matter.⁹ Such disagreement might also serve to illustrate the difficulties of reconciling transcendentalism and naturalism even within Hegel's omnivorous system.

2. Hegel and Kant

Hegel's debt to the Critical philosophy is well-captured in Moore's observation that:

Hegel believes, just as Fichte believed, that a bald naturalism cannot do justice to the phenomenon of subjectivity. For subjectivity cannot be understood merely as an epiphenomenon of objectivity, certainly not of the objectivity of the natural world. Rather, as Kant's Copernican revolution has taught us, the objectivity of the natural world must itself be understood as grounded in subjectivity – if only as one half of a mutual grounding of each in the other. The natural world is itself constituted in part, by the concepts that we use in thinking about it. To deny this would in Hegel's view be retrograde.¹⁰

According to Moore (who describes Hegel's metaphysics as 'transcendentalism cum naturalism'), Hegel applauds the object-constitutive function which Kant introduces into rational subjectivity and celebrates this as a monumental advance in the philosophical understanding of humanity's awareness of its own autonomous and self-determining status. What is more, insofar as the concepts in terms of which the natural world is intelligible to the subject are, at least in their general outlines, identifiable a priori by means of a logic which precedes the philosophy of nature in Hegel's system, this too marks a point of continuity between Hegel and transcendentalism. As Stone explains in her 'strong apriorist' approach to Hegel's philosophy of nature, Hegel may be understood therefore as identifying certain a priori conceptual forms to which natural phenomena must conform while remaining at liberty to introduce into such outlines an a posteriori content of their own.

Moore is quick to point out, however, that the subjectivity in which the object is grounded is for Hegel something infinite, rather than something finite, as for Kant. For Hegel, of course, 'infinity' is a term more properly ascribed to that which is not limited by something 'other' to itself than to

⁹ See STONE, A., *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy*, Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2005; and PINKARD, T., *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁰ MOORE, A.W., *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 167.

a mathematical series to which units may be added indefinitely. Hence, by calling the subjectivity in which the natural domain is grounded 'infinite', Hegel means for it to be understood as 'including' nature within itself, rather than opposing it as some alien 'other' by which it is thereby confined.

Such an understanding of subject and object as non-oppositionally related –so that neither excludes the other– is, moreover, crucial to making sense of how it might be possible for Hegel to integrate features of both naturalism and transcendentalism and how, depending upon the perspective from which Hegel's system is examined, he might be claimed either as a naturalist or as a transcendentalist. More specifically, Hegel can be seen to understand naturalism as the fulfilment of transcendentalism and transcendentalism as the fulfilment of naturalism. That is to say, a properly developed naturalism is, for Hegel, a species of transcendentalism and a properly developed transcendentalism is a species of naturalism. Whether one begins from the perspective of the object or from that of the subject then, one shall, according to Hegel, be naturally led to the other. Hegel's philosophy of nature is intended, of course, to trace the logical process by which object-centred thought becomes subject-centred, and hence of why one cannot properly conceive of nature without giving an account of the subject. For Hegel, however, one can no more give an account of the subject without giving an account of nature than one can give an account of nature without giving an account of the subject. Hence, it is important to make sense of why, according to Hegel, the subject-centric perspective must transform itself into an object-centric perspective, or why naturalism is the 'fulfilment' or 'truth' of transcendental philosophy. This, however, is very close indeed to explaining why Hegel understands Kant's philosophy to be 'sublated' in his own.

3. Hegel's Idealism as the Self-Completion of Kant's

It is a central commitment of the Critical philosophy that human reason assigns itself tasks the solutions to which it is absolutely incapable of providing. For Kant, human reason is permanently condemned to the awkward predicament of seeking to determine the unconditional grounds of empirical phenomena when the scope of its possible knowledge is necessarily restricted to the domain of appearances conditioned by the subject's a priori forms of sensible intuition. What is more, it is not because of any faulty reasoning - which might therefore be corrected - that reason finds itself repeatedly tempted to speculate about matters of which it can know nothing. Rather, it is precisely because of humanity's capacity for reason that it experiences the temptation to explain the ultimate conditions of the synthetic unity of

the system of nature as a whole. Because of the finitude of the human intellect, however – its dependence upon deliverances of sensible content from a source exterior to itself – human reason is therefore left constantly straining against its own boundaries. Reason's only consolation in the unenviable scenario which Kant portrays is that it is entitled to a purely regulative employment of its ideas of the unconditioned, and hence to think of the world 'as if' it were so structured that further scientific investigation would constantly approximate an ideal of complete systematic unity, which must nonetheless remain as a target to be approached but never reached.

For Hegel, of course, such an account of reason's predicament is wholly inadmissible, and reason sets itself no tasks which it cannot accomplish. That he thinks Kant's merely regulative role for reason intolerable is apparent when Hegel remarks, in the *Science of Logic*, that:

In reason, the highest stage of thought, one ought to have expected the Notion to lose the conditionedness in which it still appears at the stage of understanding and to attain to perfect truth. But this expectation is disappointed. For Kant defines the relation of reason to the categories as merely *dialectical*, and indeed takes the result of this dialectic to be the *infinite nothing* – just that and nothing more. Consequently, the infinite unity of reason, too, is still deprived of the synthesis, and with it the beginning [...] of a speculative, truly infinite Notion; reason becomes the familiar, wholly formal, merely regulative *unity of the systematic employment of the understanding*. It is declared to be an abuse when logic, which is supposed to be merely a *canon of judgement*, is regarded as an *organon* for the production of *objective* insights. The notions of reason in which we could not but have an intimation of a higher power and a profounder significance, no longer possess a *constitutive* character as do the categories, they are *mere* Ideas; certainly we are *quite at liberty* to use them, but by these intelligible entities in which all *truth* should be completely revealed, we are to understand nothing more than *hypotheses*, and to ascribe absolute truth to them would be the height of caprice and foolhardiness, for they- *do not occur in any experience*.¹¹

For Hegel, it would seem, to admit for reason no more than a regulative status is to concede the impossibility of completing the task of synthesis which conceptual thought assigns itself in the face of any manifold. The Ideas of pure reason, to which Kant denies any object-constitutive function, are not in his view historically contingent representations but originate a priori in the capacity for rational thought and form a part of the thinking subject's conceptual inventory because they are necessary to complete the work of synthesis

¹¹ HEGEL, G.W.F., *Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller, Amherst, N.Y: Humanity Books, 1969, pp. 589-90.

which begins with the faculties of sensibility and understanding. By refusing to allow that human reason can complete its self-assigned tasks, Kant advances a position which is, in Hegel's view self-frustrating and a classic example of the internal tensions which must befall any philosophical outlook short of his own absolute idealism. On the one hand, Kant's self-critique of reason is intended to fix the boundaries of its own legitimate employment. On the other hand, Kant presents reason as incapable of respecting those very limits which it sets for itself. Thankfully, according to Hegel, the key to overcoming such an account of reason as self-frustrating is already implicit in Kant's own position, and needs only to be further developed and elaborated. Once this is done, however, and it is seen how reason is not prevented from completing its self-assigned tasks, transcendental philosophy need no longer be understood as necessarily opposed to naturalism.

The key step to overcoming the finitude of Kant's idealism, according to Hegel, is to recognise that the very project of self-limitation by means of which Kant intends to circumscribe a realm of possible knowledge distinct from a domain of which one can know nothing is itself self-undermining. In Hegel's view, the cognitive capacities by means of which a boundary is drawn between the knowable and the unknowable cannot themselves fall within the boundary in question, so that the very act of drawing such a boundary implies that one must have done so from a perspective external to that boundary. Hence Hegel remarks that "Even if the topic is that of finite thought, it only shows that such finite reason is infinite precisely in determining itself as finite; for the negation is finitude, a lack which only exists for that for which it is the sublatedness, the *infinite* relation to self".¹² With the recognition, however, that reason cannot permanently confine itself to a finite sphere excluded from certain forms of metaphysical understanding there are no grounds to suppose that reason is necessarily incapable of completing its self-assigned task of grounding the synthetic unity of the system of nature in unconditional grounds.

Rather, as Hegel maintains, whatever finite sphere reason happens to operate within at a certain time and place must be the result of reason's not yet having achieved an explicit consciousness of its total autonomy – of its not yet being for-itself what it is in-itself.

With the achievement of such an absolute standpoint, however, and the Ideal of Pure Reason – which Kant presents as the unconditional ground common to subject and object – the subject loses that priority which, for the transcendental philosopher, it enjoys in relation to the object, both being

¹² HEGEL, G.W.F., *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 385.

grounded in a deeper source of synthetic unity. Contrary to the allegations of some of his most vocal critics then, Hegel escapes the limitations of Kant's transcendental idealism not by resorting to a pre-critical dogmatic metaphysics but rather by seeing the transcendental project through to completion in such a fashion that reason is finally able to complete its self-assigned tasks.

The outcome of that idealist project which Kant initiates and which is ultimately realised in Hegel's own system is not therefore, according to Hegel, a spirit monism which eliminates the independence of nature. Rather, it is a refined species of naturalism whereby the finitude of the subject is overcome from within and its unity with nature grasped as grounded in the unconditioned Idea. Indeed, according to Hegel, the supposed dichotomy between naturalism and transcendental philosophy is, like that alleged to obtain between liberalism and communitarianism, a mere appearance resulting from the failure to recognise the unconditional grounds of the synthetic unity of two positions which, viewed independently of such grounds must seem incompatible with one another. Far from belonging to an antiquated era of speculative metaphysical excess then, Hegel is directly relevant to on-going debates between naturalists and transcendental philosophers and, it might be hoped, be able to contribute much of value in mediating a viable reconciliation between contemporary forms of naturalism and transcendentalism.

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