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978-1-107-03359-7 - Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity

Brady Bowman

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: “A COMPLETELY ALTERED VIEW OF LOGIC”

... application of the categories to the unconditioned, i.e.,
metaphysics.

(ENC §46)

0.1. Hegel’s metaphysical project

Logic, Kant had famously proclaimed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, has not been forced to retrace a single step since the time of Aristotle, nor has it been able to advance a single step, and it is to all appearances “a closed and completed body of knowledge” (Bviii). Hegel, looking back over the development of German philosophy some thirty years later, suggests that the failure of logic to advance a single step in the space of two thousand years ought to have prompted Kant to draw the opposite conclusion: logic is in need “of a total reworking.” In a related passage he credits Kant himself, alongside Jacobi, with having shown the necessity of such a “completely altered view of logic” (GW 21:35; 15:25). Hegel’s proclamation is clearly at odds not only with Kant’s understanding of logic, but with Kant’s view of his own place in the history of logic. How are we to understand this discrepancy? What is the substance of this altered view, and how might Kant, unbeknownst to himself, have shown the necessity for it?

The short answer to these questions is that from Aristotle’s time down to the emergence of post-Kantian idealism, philosophers had exclusively thematized what Hegel calls “the ordinary logic of the understanding,” which is concerned only with “relations among finite things” (TW 19:241). This logic is constitutive of *finite cognition* and by its very nature it tends to obscure the conceptual structures that are truly at work in our knowledge of reality. Kant, and in a different,

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complementary way Jacobi too, demonstrated that the logic of finite cognition is marked by an essential negativity which, if we do not take pains to become aware of it, divides reason against itself. But to understand the nature of that negativity, and the necessity with which the logic of finite cognition must inevitably arise, a different logic is required that can both trace its genesis and delimit its scope, resolving the distortions inherent to it. This alternative, “speculative” logic can work with theoretical resources that were unavailable to the tradition prior to Hegel; in particular, it can draw on a conception of *absolute* negativity that can both explain and overcome the *aporiae* that arise in the philosophical application of the traditional categories and so-called laws of thought. Thus despite the fact that neither Kant nor Jacobi was willing to embrace the positive alternative of a completely altered view of logic, their criticism of the traditional philosophical use of logic served to demonstrate the necessity of such an alternative if the nature of knowledge and the place of mind in reality were to be grasped. In short, they demonstrated the necessity of a complete revision of metaphysics and philosophical methodology.

This short answer describes a result. As such, it can be fully comprehended and adequately appraised only in light of the arguments and interpretations that make up the substance of this book. On the other hand, the discussions in the coming chapters rely in part for their intelligibility on a broader view of Hegel’s project and its place in the development of classical German philosophy, and in part also on a clear articulation of the basic concepts and assumptions that structure my approach to Hegel’s philosophy. In this introductory section I try to give an account of these basic concepts and assumptions, together with an indication of the trajectory that the following chapters will take.

In the context of recent North American scholarship, one of the more controversial aspects of the interpretation put forward here is perhaps the underlying assumption that Hegel is a metaphysical thinker. Some of his most sympathetic and most influential recent commentators have sought to demonstrate that Hegel can be read as espousing no metaphysical doctrines at all, that as a post-Kantian thinker he thoroughly respected Kant’s interdiction against transcendent incursions into the noumenal realm.¹ However, as I will argue at length in

¹ The most forceful proponents of this reading in the Anglophone world are Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, and, in a different way, Robert Brandom (given their immense

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Chapter 1, I do not think that recognizing Hegel as a post-Kantian thinker commits us *eo ipso* to the belief either that Hegel adopted any of Kant's positive doctrines or that he was engaged in a project that is best described as a "continuation" or "completion" of the project begun by Kant. I do not deny that Hegel *in fact* owes a significant debt to Kant (often via Fichte's reformulation of transcendental idealism, which colors many of Hegel's own pronouncements): central conceptions such as Kantian pure reason, transcendental apperception, the intuitive understanding, and the primacy of freedom for both practical and theoretical philosophy are indisputable cases in point,² and I draw attention to more deeply embedded structural parallels further on in this Introduction. Moreover, there are numerous ways in which Hegel may be seen to give a deeper grounding or more rigorous elaboration of Kantian ideas such as transcendental affinity between the intellect and the empirical manifold. What I do deny is the implication that to be a philosopher self-consciously working in the wake of Kant's "fortunate revolution"³ is necessarily to be engaged in a project that is continuous with transcendental idealism or one that needs to recognize the peculiar limitations Kant sought to impose on thought. *Post Kant* is not necessarily *propter Kant*.⁴

contributions to reintroducing Hegel as a serious thinker to mainstream Anglophone philosophy, this goes virtually without saying). For a critical, but even-handed overview of their "nonmetaphysical" readings versus "traditionalist" views of Hegel, see James Kreines, "Hegel's Metaphysics: Changing the Debate," *Philosophy Compass* 1:5 (2006): 466–80.

2 Cf. Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press 2007), 167–88.

3 Karl Leonard Reinhold, *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (Mannheim: Bender 1789), 1 of the unpaginated Preface.

4 In his overview "Philosophy of Language and Mind: 1950–1990" (*Philosophical Review* 101 [1992]: 3–51, esp. 9), Tyler Burge argues that contrary to Quine's own intentions, the effect of his devastating critique of logical positivism was to have "reopened a path to the traditional fundamental problems of philosophy. The positivists did not succeed in placing any questions ... off limits from rational inquiry." Such cases are not rare in the history of philosophy. Certainly, Jacobi's detailed criticism of Spinoza did more to ignite a whole generation's interest in metaphysical monism than to quell their passion for systematic philosophy, despite his intentions. I am suggesting that Kant holds a similar place in relation to Hegel, who saw him as having devastated the traditional mode of metaphysical cognition in its very foundations and thus to have opened the path to a different, speculative approach to the problems of philosophy. (A similar point is made by Birgit Sandkaulen, "Die Ontologie der Substanz, der Begriff der Subjektivität und die Faktizität des Einzelnen: Hegels reflexionslogische 'Widerlegung' der Spinozanischen Metaphysik," *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus* 5 [2007]: *Metaphysics in German Idealism* [Berlin and New York: de Gruyter 2008], 235–75, esp. 237–41.)

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In German scholarship, *affirmative* readings of Hegel as a metaphysical thinker are hardly unusual.⁵ But neither in the Anglophone literature is such an approach as marginal or as provocative as it might have seemed as recently as five years ago. Several recent publications point to a nascent consensus that Hegel's philosophical concerns and systematic approach exhibit greater continuity with pre-Kantian metaphysical lines of thought than some of his more sympathetic recent commentators have wished to countenance – affinities that might seem obvious in light of the controversies that shaped German Idealism during Hegel's own formative period in the 1790s (e.g. the Pantheism Controversy, the debate about the philosophical theology implied by the new idealism, or the rift between Fichte and Schelling about the legitimacy of *Naturphilosophie*).⁶ Hegel's philosophical contribution can be adequately appraised only in light of the metaphysical debates into which he intervened. For that matter, recent scholarship on Kant has also underscored continuities between pre-critical metaphysics and the doctrines of the *Critique of Pure Reason*;⁷ and as a general observation, mainstream Anglo-American philosophy has

5 See, e.g., the representative collections of Henrich's essays on Hegel and German Idealism in *Selbstverhältnisse: Gedanken und Auslegungen zu den Grundlagen der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1982); Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Die Grenzen der Vernunft: Eine Untersuchung zu Zielen und Motiven des Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain 1991); Anton Friedrich Koch, "Die schlechte Metaphysik der Dinge. Metaphysik als immanente Metaphysikkritik bei Hegel," *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus* 5 (2007): 189–210.

6 In addition to Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique*, see, e.g., Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2005); Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press 2006); Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press 2009).

7 See, e.g., Martin Schonfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Pre-Critical Project* (Oxford University Press 2000), which emphasizes continuities between Kant's pre-critical metaphysics on the one hand and the critical project and the *Opus postumum* on the other. Alison Laywine (e.g. *Kant's Early Metaphysics and the Origins of Critical Philosophy*. North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy 3 [Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview 1993]) has similarly demonstrated the ways in which Kant's pre-critical metaphysics positively illuminate central doctrines of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Eric Watkins, *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality* (Cambridge University Press 2005), shows the extent to which Kant's later views on causality remain positively embedded in a framework specific to German metaphysical discussions of his time. In a different manner, Rae Langton combines interpretation of Kant's pre-critical doctrines with concerns from contemporary (e.g. Lewisian) metaphysics in *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford University Press 1998).

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now re-embraced metaphysics as an indispensable field of inquiry to such an extent that it no longer seems necessary to make apologies for being a metaphysician, either on one's own behalf or on that of any historical figure.⁸ In light of these developments we might well speak today of Hegel's rehabilitation as a metaphysician, just as Karl Ameriks cautiously spoke of his rehabilitation as an epistemologist twenty years ago on the cusp of the most powerful renaissance of Hegelian thought in recent memory.⁹

But what does it mean in this context to insist that Hegel is a metaphysician? What, precisely, is called metaphysics? Given the long history of the term "metaphysics" and its status, at least since Kant's time and especially in the twentieth century, as an essentially contested concept, no definition I could offer here is likely to meet with universal recognition. Moreover, the somewhat pejorative senses that Hegel associates with the term differ from the neutral sense in which I use it to describe Hegel's own thought. I understand by "metaphysics" that field of *a priori* inquiry which is concerned with the fundamental structure of reality as a whole.¹⁰ I contrast it with, among other fields of philosophical inquiry, epistemology, which is concerned with the right definition and proper standards of certainty and knowledge.

Hegel's idealist metaphysics can be summed up in the thesis that mind and reality as a whole are of essentially the same structure. In this respect, it might appear after all that Hegel effectively reduces general metaphysics to philosophy of mind, thus continuing a broadly Kantian trend. This appearance is not altogether misleading as long as we remember that Hegel's thesis differs from Kant's in that it is not restricted to the finite mind, excludes any doctrine of independently existing things in themselves, and is compatible with a philosophy of nature which seeks, inter alia, to demonstrate the necessity with which the finite mind emerges in the physical world. The usual way of expressing this is to say that Hegel espouses an *objective idealism*. He himself expresses allegiance to such a view when, for example, at the beginning of the *Science of Logic* he appeals to Anaxagoras as the first

8 For example Brian Ellis, *The Philosophy of Nature: A Guide to the New Essentialism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2002), and E. J. Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science* (Oxford University Press 2006).

9 Karl Ameriks, "Recent Work on Hegel: The Rehabilitation of an Epistemologist?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52:1 (March 1992): 177–202.

10 Here I am taking a page from E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press 2002), 2–3.

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to have articulated the thought “that *Noûs*, thought, is the principle of the world, that the essence of the world is to be defined as thought” (GW 21:34). From his arrival in Jena in 1801 until the completion of the *Science of Logic* in 1816, Hegel’s main philosophical efforts were directed towards the demonstration of this thesis; it was only in the years after 1817 that he increasingly returned to the themes that had occupied him prior to his arrival in Jena: religion, history, politics, and aesthetics.

The sense in which I understand Hegel to be a metaphysician gains in distinctness when we consider his own use of the term “metaphysics.” In the narrower sense, Hegel uses it to refer to pre-critical or “older” rationalist metaphysics, particularly in its incarnation as the *Schulphilosophie* or “scholasticism” of Wolff and his followers. As he himself emphasizes, however, there is also a broader sense in which “metaphysical” thought is present in every historical period, namely as the belief “that it is *through thinking things over* that the *truth comes to be known* and that what objects truly are is brought before consciousness” (ENC §26). Hegel finds nothing exceptionable in this conviction that to be and to be intelligible are synonymous. The weakness of the metaphysical attitude lies in its uncritical assumption that the form of thought by which the truth is known is the form of the “finite thought-determinations” or, more familiarly, the categories of traditional ontology. This conception of the fundamental, intelligible structure of reality as made up of distinct categories (predicates, as Hegel says) and hence as having an objective existence fundamentally distinct from that of thinking as such is what Hegel finds to be untenable.¹¹

Metaphysics in Hegel’s pejorative sense is therefore any attitude toward reality which takes the categories of traditional ontology (a) as the exclusive and irreducible forms of objective cognition and (b) as the basic forms of the substantially real itself. These commitments need not be held explicitly, nor does Hegel always hold commitment to both to be a necessary condition of the metaphysical attitude. Traditional rationalists, for example, subscribe to both, yet though their critic Kant embraces only (a) while rejecting (b), I will argue

11 Cf. ENC §§28–29. The sense in which the conception of being as a realm of objects or *entia* follows from commitment to the categories as the irreducible forms of being is a topic to be discussed in Chapter 2 of this book; until then, the “hence” in the sentence above is a promissory note.

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later that this is sufficient in Hegel's eyes to brand him as a metaphysician. Borrowing P. F. Strawson's well-known distinction, we may say that "metaphysics" in Hegel's pejorative sense denotes commitment to the categorial scheme that underlies ordinary everyday and scientific discourse about reality, the scheme that we make explicit through "descriptive metaphysics."

By contrast, Hegel's own *speculative* metaphysics is emphatically *revisionary*, as I will be arguing throughout this book. When Hegel affirms Anaxagoras' insight that "*Noûs* is the principle of the world," he is not affirming the notion that the categories of traditional ontology (e.g. quality, quantity, identity, substance, cause and effect, and so on) limn the fundamental structure of reality. Hegel introduces his own unique set of concepts in order to explicate both that structure and the necessity that it appear to the finite mind under the derivative and ultimately inadequate forms of the traditional categories. Chief among these uniquely Hegelian concepts are, first, the concept of the Concept itself, and second, the concept of (absolute) negativity. As I will argue, all of Hegel's operative concepts (for instance determination, determinate negation, sublation, thought-determinations, indifference, Conceptual movement, realization, reflection, and the Idea) can and ought to be understood as so many modifications of the Concept and absolute negativity. So although on my reading Hegel does intend a derivation of the traditional categories and forms of thought that guarantees their necessity and validity within certain well-defined limits, his more fundamental aim is to demonstrate that neither the meaning of those categories, nor the fundamental structure of reality, nor the relation of those categories to reality can be made out prior to a thoroughgoing "speculative" revision of our natural categorial scheme. And in this sense I agree with Hans Friedrich Fulda when he describes Hegel's metaphysics as "a metaphysics without ontology."¹² Speculative philosophy is a systematic critique and overcoming of traditional ontological (categorial) thought in service of an alternative, revisionary metaphysics Hegel calls "speculative science."

¹² Hans Friedrich Fulda, "Ontologie nach Kant und Hegel," in D. Henrich and R.-P. Horstmann (eds.), *Metaphysik nach Kant?* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1987), 44–82, here 49. Contrast Stern's view of Hegel as restoring a form of ontology in the introduction to Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics*, 20–34.

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[More information](#)**0.2. The argument of this book**

Here I would like to pull together the main questions and claims of the chapters to follow, and to exhibit them as constituting a single, unified chain of argument. I should also like to emphasize, however, that although the chapters are linked by a sustained argument, the individual chapters also focus on specific subject matter and treat it in a relatively self-contained manner. This should allow readers with particular interests to focus on the topics they find relevant without too much searching and cross-referencing.

0.2.1. Absolute negativity as the essence of the Hegelian Concept

Chapter 1 introduces the book's conceptual center of gravity, the notion of *absolute negativity*, by situating it in the framework of an essentially *critical* project.¹³ Hegel recognized Kant and Jacobi as having equal share in demonstrating the necessity of a "completely altered view of logic"; they represent the true threshold between pre-critical logic and metaphysics and a new form of critical philosophy.¹⁴ The meaning of this claim is more complex, however, than the standard historiography of German philosophy would immediately suggest; neither is Hegel's conception of critical philosophy the same as Kant's, nor does Kant end up as standing unambiguously on the critical side of the break with pre-critical logic and metaphysics. In specifically different ways, Kant and Jacobi succeed merely in showing the *necessity* of an altered view of logic. From the Hegelian perspective, Kant's demonstration that the categories and logical forms of the understanding lead to antinomies when applied to the unconditional demonstrates that they are not in fact the authentic and fundamental structures of intelligibility, but must themselves be interpreted and reconstructed on the basis of a deeper, dialectical logic that Kant failed to recognize.

¹³ To some extent, my focus coincides with that of Karin de Boer, *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), who also puts negativity at the center of her interpretation. Contrary to my approach, de Boer takes a critical view of absolute negativity precisely to the extent that it serves as a principle of systematic totality. She argues that Hegel recognized a principle she calls "tragic negativity" early in his career, but then shut his eyes to it when he turned to the "speculative science" that ushers in his mature thought. De Boer finds this principle of "tragic negativity," along with a concomitant "logic of entanglement," to be free of the dangers of domination and subordination she associates with Hegel's own explicit principle of absolute, dialectical negativity (cf. de Boer, *On Hegel*, 4–5, 11, and 222n.). I am inclined to take a more positive view than de Boer.

¹⁴ Cf. GW 21:35, GW 15:25.

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Jacobi's critique of scientific rationality as issuing in hard determinism and nihilism ("Spinozism") shows in turn that that form of rationality inevitably tends to conceal and undermine its very presuppositions: the existence of scientific activity as the expression of free and metaphysically robust, personal minds cannot be grasped according to the model of explanation explicitly favored by scientific activity, traditionally conceived. But Jacobi does not recognize the possibility for an alternative form of rationality that would be equal to such a task; indeed, his narrow identification of rationality as such with functional analysis (*avant la lettre*) and explanation leads him to reject it absolutely as a mode of self-understanding. On Hegel's view, then, both thinkers embrace unnecessarily narrow conceptions of rational cognition, thereby overestimate the scope of their critique, and thus fail to see the true significance of their results as pointing toward a different conception of thought, a completely altered view of logic. They fail to be truly critical philosophers in the full sense of the term.

A truly critical philosophy would elaborate a deeper logic (a logic of "reason") on whose basis the logic of the "understanding," toward which Kant and Jacobi were exclusively oriented, could be genetically derived and its scope defined, even as its incapacity for cognizing the real is systematically exposed. "Finite cognition" would thus be replaced by, and become the critical object of, a higher form of cognition, "speculative science." Since Hegel believes that speculative science has consequences for central concerns such as the nature of truth, the place of mind in the natural world, or the possibility and reality of human freedom, it is fair to say that it is a doctrine equally of logic and of metaphysics. Differently from Kant's analysis (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) of the forms of understanding, which issues in theoretical agnosticism about these questions of human concern, and differently from Jacobi's, which issues in fideism and a theoretically unstable intuitionism, Hegel sees speculative science in a position to give substantive and rigorously argued answers.

It is in this broader, in part historically defined context that we must understand the meaning and systematic role of the notion of absolute negativity. In the middle sections of Chapter 1, I draw on work by Dieter Henrich and Rolf-Peter Horstmann to argue for what is, to my knowledge, an original thesis. Horstmann has given a detailed analysis of what Hegel refers to as "the Concept," showing it to be a complex self-relational structure which has for its elements relations that are isomorphic to the whole.¹⁵ The details of his

15 The details of Horstmann's analysis make up the content of Chapter 1, section 1.3.2.

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account are fleshed out in Chapter 1. The important point here is that both the whole and the elements of this relational structure of the Concept can be derived from the logic of autonomous negation first analyzed by Dieter Henrich, that is, the logic of what Hegel himself calls absolute negativity.¹⁶ This is significant because it allows us to identify the Concept with absolute negativity: they are two views or aspects of a single, fundamental reality – the former a static view, the latter a dynamic one: structure versus process. The larger claim is that Hegel holds precisely this structural-cum-dynamic unity to be the unique form of intelligibility. The large tract of cognitive activity critically analyzed by Kant and Jacobi that Hegel calls finite cognition exhibits forms of intelligibility in a merely derivative way. Both the scope and the limits of finite cognition are meant to be chartable by reference to this deeper logic. Put most strongly, the methodological function of absolute negativity is to effect a reduction of the categories and forms of finite cognition to “moments” of the logic of autonomous negation, such that the *prima facie* content of those forms is fundamentally transformed. Finite cognition is not holistically justified in the *Science of Logic*, but subjected to skeptical critique and revision.

0.2.2. *The critique of finite cognition*

Chapters 2 through 5 are concerned primarily with Hegel’s *critique of finite cognition*. They are organized according to the three *a priori* sciences identified by Kant: metaphysics, pure natural science, and mathematics, and I seek to show the ways in which each of these sciences manifests limitations that are interpretable by reference to the logic of absolute negativity. Chapter 6 takes a more positive approach. There I show how the logic of absolute negativity is integral to a Hegelian theory of representational content that simultaneously tackles the Kantian problem of the sensible manifold and the significantly parallel Spinozist problem of the determinateness of substance. Together, these five chapters present a sustained investigation of the ways in which absolute negativity and its derivative concepts such as mediation or determinate negation come together to constitute a powerful metaphysical interpretation of truth and knowledge. They constitute the heart of the book.

16 I discuss Henrich’s reconstruction in Chapter 1, section 1.4.2.