From an analytical perspective

The outstanding feature of the interpretation of Habermas that Garbis Kortian offers to the English-speaking reader in this book lies in the way in which he situates Habermas's enterprise in relation to its philosophical background, tracing its roots in classical German Idealism, and in particular in Hegel's critique of Kant and in the subsequent transformation of this critique by Marx.

If it is to be taken on its own terms, this, surely, is the only way in which the enterprise of critical theory can be properly understood. Habermas himself lays out his position, in the global statement that he offers in *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, by means of a critique of, among others, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. His own work thus constitutes an attempt to redefine and to carry forward an enterprise which has been going on in European philosophy for nearly two centuries and which has been among the formative ideas of our culture as we now have it.

Notoriously, however, this enterprise has been little appreciated or even understood in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of the last half-century or so; indeed, it has been only rather sporadically represented in English-language culture during the last century and a half. This inevitably makes it difficult for someone from within this culture to gain a familiar sense of the ground-plan of the house of critical theory, a house which is continually being reconstructed through the different variations which the theory undergoes; and this absence of any sense of a ground-plan may make the discussions hard to follow.

And yet the philosophical traditions which run through Hegel have the same roots as those with which the contemporary Anglo-Saxon world is more familiar. We share as sources not only the ancients, but also the Enlightenment and Kant – or Descartes, Hume and Kant, to put it in terms of the usual university syllabus. It should, therefore, be possible to complement Dr Kortian's achievements in exhibiting so convincingly the relation of Habermas's thought to Hegel's critique of Kant by situating this critique in a context already more familiar to readers of English-language philosophy. This, at any rate, is what we attempt in this brief introductory essay.

We may start with one of the central themes of Dr Kortian's book: Hegel's critique of the epistemological enterprise which dominates modern philosophy from Descartes onwards. In this respect the experiences of the two major philosophical traditions, the German and the Anglo-Saxon, have been very different. First, the very terms of epistemological debate underwent fundamental revision at the hands of Kant; and then Hegel aimed at the whole enterprise a blow which was meant to be fatal. In fact, in neither culture did it just lie down and die. For example, it was in different ways central to the preoccupations of the neo-Kantians, of Brentano, of the early Husserl and of Mach, to name but a few of those working in the German-speaking world at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the long-term effect of the Hegelian critique has been to displace epistemology as the organising discipline of thought and the questions to which it gives rise in the German-speaking world. That this is so would be common ground between philosophers of such very different tendencies as, for example, Marxists, Heideggerians, critical theorists, etc.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, by contrast, epistemology was a much longer time a-dying. Until recently, there was a still very lively interest in a widely-held form of sense-data theory, which, it might be argued, was oblivious even of the Kantian critique, let alone of any accounts it had to render to

Hegel. Indeed, it is probably more correct to say that it is not yet dead at all; that for many philosophers epistemological questions go on playing the organising role; that the questions of what there is, of what we can say, of the nature of man, of language, etc., go on being framed so as to fit in with certain answers to the question of what it is to know. This is the case for those philosophers, for instance, for whom the natural sciences remain paradigmatic of human knowledge and even rationality itself; among such philosophers one might surely place such distinguished figures as Popper and Quine – despite the latter's repudiation of traditional epistemology as a foundational enterprise.

Moreover, where epistemology has been dethroned in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is under the impact of quite different arguments from those of Hegel. Here the major force has perhaps been that of the later Wittgenstein, whose undermining of certain dogmas of the epistemological approach has been immensely influential. But Wittgenstein's critique is so different from Hegel's that it provides little help in making it more accessible or more intelligible.

Perhaps, therefore, the most useful point at which to start would be with a sketch of this Hegelian critique of epistemology, a critique which is only tersely expressed in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but which is central to his work.

Epistemology, as we know it since Descartes, involves an attempt to test our knowledge claims and to get clear which of them are really well-grounded and which are specious. The aim is to establish the foundations of knowledge; the search is for that on which our claims may be given a secure basis. If all goes well, the search for foundations will come across basic elements or components which cannot further be broken down or seen to be grounded on something else. At that point everything will turn on how certain we can be of them; or on just what it may be that we know for certain if and when we possess them. For the empiricists, of course, it was the ideas or impressions of conscious subjective experience that played the role of such basic components.

Epistemology conceived in this way seemed to be an enterprise that it was rational to pursue not only for its own sake, but also as providing an indispensable foundation for philosophy itself. For how could any other inquiry – metaphysics, ontology or anthropology – be pursued independently of epistemology? In all these fields we seek valid knowledge claims; and we cannot even know what these may be until we have determined what it is to have properly founded knowledge. The findings of all other inquiries have thus to pass muster according to the canons laid down in epistemology; and it is epistemology which can, therefore, help us to understand something of the form which any successful inquiry must take.

This standard and highly persuasive line of argument has had an immense influence on our culture. In its name, for instance, our sciences of man have been conceived very largely on the model of those of nature, in defiance indeed of many of the intuitions that we have as ordinary men and women. And it is a line of thought which continues to be very persuasive.

It is this line of thought that Hegel's arguments were meant to kill off once and for all. Hegel's point can perhaps be reconstructed in these terms. The epistemological project may sound very legitimate when put in quite general terms, but in order to carry it out, one has to rest it on a number of assumptions. For instance, one needs some idea of what it can *be* to ground one knowledge claim on other more basic ones, of what a basic knowledge claim could actually be. Otherwise, we are in turn in no proper position to ask such questions as: how certain is this or that claim? how certain are our basic claims? what do we know for certain? etc. etc. But, within the epistemological tradition, these crucial assumptions, which necessarily depend on the adoption of some view of the subject and his place in the world, are all made surreptitiously, without recognition of what is involved.

We may take classical empiricism as a prime example.

This was not in fact the target which Hegel has mainly in mind; as Dr Kortian says, his critique was directed above all at Kant. But empiricism is most familiar to philosophers in our culture. Here there was an unchallenged notion of what factual knowledge claims were based upon, namely, sense experience; and there was a definite conception of what this sense experience was like. It consisted of what Hume called 'impressions' or of what have latterly been called 'sense-data' – the conscious contents of immediately present awareness. From this firm base, it seemed unquestioningly possible to pose problems as to the status of our knowledge claims about, for example, the links between cause and effect; one had simply to ask how, if at all, they were grounded in impressions. Thanks to these assumptions as to the nature of experience, the question had an answerable form.

But no one ever asked what justified the assumptions themselves. In fact, they were based on some insufficiently articulated view of the subject's position in the world, a subject conceived as a mind somehow affected by the action of objects in contact with the sense organs belonging to the body with which this mind was in some way linked. 'Impressions' were taken to constitute the most basic elements of experience. We could know them for what they were independently of any other knowledge or assumptions; the rest of our knowledge was indeed to be grounded upon them. Yet the very use of the term 'impression' says a great deal about this view through the image that it contains: the things of the world somehow make their impress on the senses and through them on the mind – and it is in this way that we can come to know things.

Granted such a view of the basic building blocks of perception, one could hope to answer questions about, for instance, the status of causal attribution. Within his own terms, Hume's answer was surely right. If we think of visual space and ask what separate impression may correspond to a distinct experience of power or causal efficacy binding two

events together, we have to reply that there is none. We can understand that a red billiard ball will make a different impression from a blue one; but how can we understand the idea that when A's motion causes B's motion, it makes a different visual impression from that of B's motion simply following upon that of A?

But these arguments rest on sand – unless one can somehow establish the validity of this underlying view of the mind and of experience. In fact it appears to rest on very shaky assumptions. Quite apart from its own internal (and by this time well known) difficulties, it flies in the face of our phenomenological grasp of our own experience. The one obvious advantage it has is a certain commonsense view of what a scientific understanding of perception might, or perhaps must, be – a view then and now applied without much questioning of the relevance that such an account might have for our understanding of experience.

However, the real point at issue is not whether the empiricist anthropology is well or badly supported, but rather that the (unavoidable) need to have recourse to any such assumptions undercuts the whole epistemological enterprise. For this enterprise aims at evaluating our knowledge claims by showing what they are founded on and what the foundations truly establish. But it turns out that the enterprise can only get going on the basis of massive assumptions about the nature of experience, which means in effect about the nature of mind and its place in nature. These assumptions, however, cannot be tested by the canons of epistemology, for they have to be held steady for the very enterprise of generating these canons to get under way.

But these assumptions, far from being unproblematic and commonsensical, are highly conjectural and bound up with very controversial theory. Epistemology as a foundational enterprise is thus hopelessly compromised. It cannot after all lay down the law to other branches of inquiry, since it has itself to presuppose certain views in metaphysics and anthropology in order to get going. And indeed it begins to look

pretty absurd. The epistemologist arrogates to himself the right to pass judgement on the well-foundedness of all knowledge claims, even to the point of judging very severely our common claims to know that there are physical objects before us, or that we are conversing with other conscious beings like ourselves, while in fact his own enterprise and claims are grounded on certain highly conjectural and controversial assumptions. One short answer to Humean epistemology is that we can all be much more certain of the causal link between the player's kick and the goal, between my neighbour's bad driving and the dent in my bumper, than that our experience consists 'at bottom' of (essentially incorrigible) impressions. The absurdity of classical empiricism is that it contrives to make it appear as though the reverse were the case.

Hegel's arguments in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he takes as his examples conceptions of the knowing faculty as an instrument or as a medium, were meant to show the impossibility in principle of epistemology as a foundational enterprise. The very idea of making a critique of knowledge claims from the secure base of some in itself unproblematic notion of experience was in principle mistaken. Any critique has to be directed rather at a whole package: knowledge-claim-cum-view-of-the-object-or-elements-of experience. This is a conclusion on which none of those who stand in the tradition which runs from Hegel through Marx to critical theory have wanted to go back. The 'metacritical dimension' of Hegel's thought, as Dr Kortian calls it, is a basic point of reference for this whole school of thought. This is one of the things that may make it strange for an English-language philosopher.

Of course, the argument in its original Hegelian form is mainly directed at a Kantian target. This may seem somewhat unfair in the light of the above discussion, since some of Kant's most important arguments are directed by his rejection of some of the basic assumptions of the empiricist (and, ultimately, Cartesian) concept of experience. At the same

time, however, he kept a great deal of the basic structure of thought which came to him from the epistemological tradition in which, after all, he still stood as one of its greatest figures. Most notably, he continued to struggle with the notion of a subject affected in some way or another by a realm of things outside it and whose experience has hence to be understood as made up of 'representations'; and so on. He in no way questions the epistemological enterprise as such. Hegel's arguments thus represent a far more radical critique, which, following the precedent of Hamann and Herder (whose attacks on Kant certainly influenced Hegel), we can call a 'metacritique'.

Nevertheless, although originally directed against Kant, the general anti-epistemological argument clearly weighs against empiricism and positivism as well, in particular against the tendency to extract certain paradigms of knowledge from the natural sciences and to treat them as normative for all knowledge, even for rationality as such. This is a tendency which critical theory in our day has repeatedly attacked as a form of thought thrown up by the needs and presuppositions of technological, bureaucratic and, characteristically, capitalist society, a facet of its ideological self-understanding. The claim, like that of Hegel, is that this apparent certainty about the nature of knowledge is grounded on unself-critical assumptions about the nature of the subject and his relation to others and to his world. The supposedly firm foundations of these notions of science and rationality are in reality a sham.

But although this Hegelian 'metacritique' is a reference point for the whole critical tradition, it has been developed in quite different ways. Hegel's way of conceiving it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was vigorously criticised by Marx; and this critique too has been taken up by critical theory.

These differences may be brought out if we start by asking where one can go once one realises the ultimate inadequacy of the merely epistemological approach. One has then

critically to weigh whole packages of knowledge claims taken along with views as to the nature of the knowing (but no longer merely knowing) subject, views of what is or can be known along with views of what it is to know, of the 'criterion' (*Masstab*) of knowledge. The question, then, is: how is one to go about criticising these packages?

It would be understandable, indeed, were one to throw up one's hands in despair and settle for a purely sceptical conclusion. If the very criticism of knowledge depends itself on highly speculative assumptions, then clearly nothing can be firmly grounded, and we can never 'know' which of two fundamentally conflicting views is right.

Hegel proposes a way out of this difficulty, the path of what later came to be called 'immanent critique'. For packages can be criticised on their own terms, tested for their consistency to see whether what they recognise as knowledge is consistent with their own conception of the subject and of what knowledge consists in. If they fail to hold together in this way, then they refute themselves, and on their own terms. There is no need to refer outside them to some external standpoint or criterion to see that they are inadequate.

Hegel starts the dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by bringing to light the inconsistency of our common conceptions of the subject and of knowledge. These, he argues, cannot in fact stand up to systematic examination. Although Hegel does not here go into them, there are certain general reasons why we should expect that an unsystematic or erroneous package will not stand up. For we have to render consistent our view of the subject and its, his or her position in the world (and hence our view of what subjective experience is) with our conception of the role of (subjective) experience in our knowledge of an (objective) world. And this has to be done in the light of what we recognise as criterial properties of experience and knowledge – for example, those explored by Kant in his Transcendental Deduction, namely that experience must be of an object and must be minimally

coherent, or else that invoked by Hegel in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely that we must be able to say what we are certain of. All this constitutes a major task; it would be an equally major achievement if we succeeded in elaborating a single overall view capable of overcoming all the tensions and inconsistencies between our conceptions of experience and its psychology and of what it is to acquire knowledge. Certainly, classical empiricism fails to achieve any such consistency, since while claiming to found all our knowledge of independently existing objects on sensa, of which allegedly we can be certain in a way that we cannot be of the objects themselves, it nevertheless assumes that we are, as embodied beings, sensory objects among objects, receiving sensory input from the things around us. The framework of the material universe surrounding us is already assumed in the supposed reconstruction of knowledge from sensa alone. There is in this way something incoherent in the very idea of such a reconstruction, indeed in the very idea of a sensum, or 'impression', as an epistemologically fundamental item.

But if 'immanent critique' can show the inadequacy of our ordinary conceptions, does this not still leave us in a predicament not very different from that described by sceptics, that is to say in a position in which we can tell that we are wrong but can never know what is right?

Hegel claims not. For in each case the contradiction or inconsistency involved in any particular package takes a quite definite form. There is thus some specific inadequacy to be made up. The method of immanent critique shows us not only *that* a given package or view is wrong, but also *how* it is wrong. In this way, it indicates the possibility of an amended view, altered to take account of the now exposed inadequacy. Of course, this amended view is likely to have its own inadequacy, and so require further amendment. Thus the prospect opens up of a chain of arguments, in which our ordinary conceptions of the subject and of experience are progressively criticised and amended, until we may reach a