

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37923-6 - Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness

Robert B. Pippin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The idealist background

1

Introduction

The “Hegelian aftermath,” as a recent book calls it,¹ involves a puzzling irony. Simply stated, Hegel seems to be in the impossible position of being both extraordinarily influential and almost completely inaccessible. On the one hand, there is Hegel’s enormous philosophic and historical influence. Although an arguable claim, it is not unreasonable to assert that much of what current academic practice categorizes as “contemporary European philosophy” begins with and is largely determined by Hegel. For the most part, this influence has to do with Hegel’s introduction of the problem of “historical subjectivity” into that tradition, and the way in which his account of that issue decisively altered the traditional understanding of a wide variety of philosophical issues. What before Hegel might have seemed, unproblematically, to be an empirical fact or a conceptual truth or a moral claim now seemed to many distinctly *historical* phenomena – products, in some way, of the activity of human “spirit” – and so to require a very untraditional account. Moreover, even when he was violently opposed, it was Hegel who seemed to set the agenda, and even when he was ignored or held in contempt, his shadow stretched across various debates in ways often not recognized. And, of course, the mere mention of the name of Marx is sufficient to summarize Hegel’s most visible influence on world history.

And yet, on the other hand, Hegel seems to have convinced or enraged so many intellectual luminaries without the existence of anything remotely resembling a consensus about the basic position of Hegelian philosophy. Hegel is one of the most lionized and most vilified philosophers of history, at the same time that it is widely believed that no one really knows what he was talking about.²

To be sure, there are well-known textbook formulations of Hegel’s basic position. It is clear enough that the thesis of Hegelian philosophy centrally involves some claim about what Hegel calls the “self-actualization of the Notion,” a progression fully and finally “realized” in the “identity of Notion and reality,” or in the “Absolute Idea,” that Hegel believes “reality” is the Absolute Idea. But throughout the history of Hegelianism, such a claim has inspired a tradition of commentary often more opaque than the original texts, and there is so much controversy about what such claims mean that there is virtually no consensus about how they might be defended against objections or philosophically legitimated.

Such ambiguity and philosophical confusion are especially obvious in those commentators who treat Hegel as an idiosyncratic Christian, romantic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37923-6 - Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness

Robert B. Pippin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I. THE IDEALIST BACKGROUND

metaphysician, a “world-soul,” or a “cosmic spirit” theologian (some of the German literature refers to Hegel’s “onto-theological metaphysics”).³ Such interpretations vary widely, depending on how traditional a romantic or Christian one finds Hegel, but the essential point of the “metaphysical” Hegel has always been that Hegel should be understood as a kind of inverted Spinozist, that is, a monist, who believed that finite objects did not “really” exist (only the Absolute Idea exists), that this One was not a “substance” but a “subject,” or mental (hence the inversion of Spinoza), and that it was not a static, eternal, Parmenidean One, but developed in time, a development somehow responsible for the shape and direction of human political history, as well as the history of art, religion, and philosophy (all such shapes of Spirit express the unfolding of the Absolute Idea).⁴ And such development was, supposedly, philosophically intelligible only by transcending the limitations of standard “reflective” logic and embracing a “dialectical” logic, a logic of Heraclitean flux, even of “contradiction.” This is, roughly, the textbook version of Hegel’s core position, the Hegel widely taught to undergraduates, and the one that usually comes to mind among philosophers, historians, Marxist theorists, literary critics, and so forth (and, often enough, Hegel specialists) when his name is mentioned.⁵

If, however, such a metaphysical monist or speculative, contradiction-embracing logician is the “real” Hegel, it is not the historically influential Hegel. Indeed, it was the profound obscurity of this standard view that drove so many to the more manageable “edges” of Hegel’s vast system, and it is there, in many of Hegel’s conclusions, rather than in the speculative arguments used to support those conclusions, that Hegel’s real influence lies. Without any systematic attempt to rely on the incredibly opaque details of the *Science of Logic* to understand Hegel’s full or “real” position, his claims about the historical character of human spirit, about the social nature of self-consciousness, about the alienation and fragmentation of modern society, about the limitations of the “moral point of view,” about the modern nation state, or even some aspects of his general antifoundationalist holism, can all be discussed more manageably, in their own right, as independently valuable insights.

Usually the central text in such revisionist accounts is the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the position extracted is some form of philosophical anthropology and/or social theory, whether of a proto-existentialist, historicist, Marxist, or Heideggerean variety (or, in the case of Kojève, all of the above⁶). Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* and *Philosophy of Right* are also leading candidates for a similar approach, one that gestures toward the official Hegelian claim about the indispensability of the speculative position but that attempts to make no real use of that position in its reconstruction of a more contemporary, accessible Hegel.⁷

Thus we have the wide array of current positions on Hegel resulting from this “reception” problem: For many, Hegel is a speculative metaphysician and a failure, either an interesting failure, representative of the failure of philosophy itself (a view started by Kierkegaard and still quite influential

1. INTRODUCTION

in France), or simply a dismal failure, representative only of Teutonic smoke, self-indulgent excess, and the ugliest prose style in the history of the German language. For others, he is a speculative metaphysician of great note, although one whose system is too unusual and radical to be presented in normal, discursive language, and so is resistant, even hostile, to the normal traditions of philosophic commentary. For still others (indeed, most contemporary commentators), he is an extraordinarily uneven philosopher whose analysis of the modern world, or whose ethical, political, or aesthetic philosophy, or whose imaginative, dialectical category analysis, or perhaps whose "method" is invaluable, but whose speculative core is hopeless.

As already indicated, the motivation for both approaches, particularly the latter, is obvious. Hegel's supposedly romantic, spirit monism and the self-moving, speculative logic that goes along with it are so philosophically obscure, and yet so much of what he has to say about the last moments of the Western rationalist tradition in philosophy, and about the unique kinds of problems faced by modern scientific, cultural, moral, and political institutions is so suggestive, that one would indeed want some way to discuss all the latter without the former. On the other hand, merely extracting a conclusion from Hegel, and then reconstructing a way of understanding it and arguing for it that bears little resemblance to Hegel, can easily be a pointless exercise – pointless, that is, if one expects to learn anything from Hegel, if one tries to think along with him. But *that* kind of admission just seems to readmit one to the World of Romantic Metaphysics, with its self-posing Divine Mind ejecting the moments of Spirit's history and the determinations of the natural world.

These alternatives, opting either for the "historical spirit" Hegel or the "systematic," metaphysical Hegel, are familiar ones by now, just as familiar as the problems inherent in each approach.⁸ The metaphysical Hegel looks like some premodern anachronism (or totalitarian bogeyman in some versions), and accounts of Hegel's political and social theory cannot be said, finally, to be genuinely Hegelian without some reliance on the speculative system. Obviously, such an interpretive dilemma could be solved if it could be shown that Hegel's speculative position, basically his theory of the Absolute Idea, his claim that such an Idea alone is "what truly is," could be interpreted and defended in a way that is not committed to a philosophically problematic theological metaphysics. Such an interpretation would deny that the metaphysical position defended by the "right" or Christian Hegelians and scorned by the "left" or revisionist school represents the speculative position Hegel meant to defend, the position that his philosophical anthropology and political philosophy do indeed depend on. In recent years, there has been considerable interest in such a speculative but "nonmetaphysical" Hegel (where "metaphysics" is understood traditionally as a priori knowledge of substance). Some of that interest originates in so-called Hegelian Marxism or from those elements in such a critical theory that take seriously the dependence of Hegel's social analysis on his speculative logic but reject the "mystifying theologian" caricature of the speculative Hegel long prom-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37923-6 - Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness

Robert B. Pippin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I. THE IDEALIST BACKGROUND

inent in the official Marxist tradition.⁹ Much of that interest has been generated by commentators committed to showing that Hegel's speculative logic is a "category theory" with no substantive metaphysical commitments.¹⁰ In this book, I also propose to defend a nonmetaphysical interpretation of Hegel, but one that does not see Hegel as primarily a philosopher of social change or as a category theorist. Put most simply, I want to understand Hegel's speculative philosophy as an "idealism."

At first glance, of course, such a suggestion seems obvious and quite unhelpful. Clearly, Hegel is an idealist (he called himself an "absolute idealist").¹¹ What else could his claims about the reality of the Absolute Idea, that all objects are "in truth" the Notion, that the traditional dualism of subject and object had been overcome, that Substance had been thought as "Subject," and so forth, mean? Moreover, to the extent that treating Hegel as an idealist does not just restate all the obscurities of his position, it gets us nowhere, since Hegel uses the term "idealism" so loosely that he characterizes *all* philosophy worthy of the name as idealism.¹²

But I have a much more specific sense of idealism in mind, although again it is a sense that appears initially unhelpful. Simply put, I propose to take Hegel at his word when he tells us, in an early work, that it was the argument of Kant's Transcendental Deduction that first came close to and made possible the speculative identity theory he ultimately created,¹³ and, in a later work, that his own theory of the Notion, and indeed the relation between the Notion and reality, or the basic position of his entire philosophy, should be understood as a direct variation on a crucial Kantian theme, the "transcendental unity of apperception."¹⁴ I shall claim that these and many other references to Kant's critical idealism are indispensable for a proper understanding of Hegel's position, and that they point to the basic Kantian issue that clarifies the important ways in which Hegel's position extends and deepens Kantian antiempiricist, antinaturalist, antirationalist strategies. That issue, as Hegel again tells us, is the apperception theme, Kant's claim about the "self-conscious," ultimately the "spontaneously" self-conscious, character of all possible human experience.

It might appear that adding "Kantian" to the idealist categorization of Hegel is again either unhelpful or misleading, unhelpful because it is obvious that Hegel relies everywhere on Kant's case for the "constitutive" role of the subject in experience, his denial of the possibility of a foundational "immediacy" in experience, and on Kant's demonstration of the "antinomial" results of traditional, reflective philosophy, but misleading because Hegel so obviously rejects, even scorns so much of Kant, ridiculing his "thing in itself" skepticism and in general his "merely finite" idealism, and transforms the Kantian transcendental subject into an Absolute Subject or Divine Mind, leaving Kantianism well behind. But such standard views of the much discussed Kant–Hegel relation do not, I shall argue, take into sufficient account the numerous details of Hegel's appropriation and do not follow through sufficiently on the issue of how Hegel's appropriation decisively influences his later formulations and so provides for a far different reading

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37923-6 - Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness

Robert B. Pippin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

of these formulations (and of his frequent, odd use of the language of Christian theology) than is standard.¹⁵

Again, this is particularly true of the apperception or self-consciousness theme, the one Hegel points to as the key to his relation to Kant. Indeed, as I shall also try to show, it was not just Hegel who relied so heavily on what Kant called the “supreme” condition of human knowledge. The two other important German idealists, Fichte and Schelling, referred often and reverently to this Kantian origin and, in different ways than Hegel, tried to work out the implications of the claim that all human thought and action is “self-reflexive.” Thus, to understand Hegel not just as a successor to Kant, but as a so-called German idealist, means to understand not only how he understood Kant, but how he agreed and disagreed with his contemporaries’ reading of Kant on the issue that all of them believed defined their project, what they all took quickly to calling, in ways that sound very strange to contemporary ears, the “freedom” of consciousness itself.

To be sure, this whole complex of common issues—the Deduction, spontaneity, apperception, freedom—are not themselves easily appropriated in an attempt to interpret Hegel’s idealism. They cannot at all be taken to mean what they seem to mean in a contemporary context and, indeed, as used by these figures, they can certainly be as obscure as any technical term of art in Hegel. To make use of them at all will require some explanation of their original meaning in Kant; some explanation of their extended meaning in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel; and some assessment of whether those extensions are responsive to genuine deficiencies in Kant’s position, all with the hope that there is some philosophically useful payoff in reading Hegel so intensely in the light of Kant’s actual project.

More to the general and more obvious point, however, much of the standard view of how Hegel passes beyond Kant into speculative philosophy makes very puzzling, to the point of unintelligibility, how Hegel could have been the post-Kantian philosopher he understood himself to be; that is, how he could have accepted, as he did, Kant’s revelations about the fundamental inadequacies of the metaphysical tradition, could have enthusiastically agreed with Kant that the metaphysics of the “beyond,” of substance, and of traditional views of God and infinity were forever discredited, and then could have promptly created a systematic metaphysics as if he had never heard of Kant’s critical epistemology. Just attributing moderate philosophic intelligence to Hegel should at least make one hesitate before construing him as a post-Kantian philosopher with a precritical metaphysics.

Although the results of reading Hegel as, to quote him, “completing” Kant¹⁶ are, I shall try to show, quite complex, such a Kantian focus does immediately and straightforwardly isolate a complex of specific issues in Hegel as basic to his project. Most of Hegel’s significant revisions of Kant involve his transformation of Kant’s theory of *concepts*, his reinterpretation of Kant’s account of the *objectivity* of concepts, and his different treatment of the notion of *subjectivity* relevant to an idealist version of such issues. To a large extent, their common theme involves the argument that any subject

I. THE IDEALIST BACKGROUND

must be able to make certain basic discriminations in any experience in order for there to be experience at all. Accordingly, such basic conceptual discriminations cannot be derived from experience and, if it can be shown that such distinctions are constitutive of the possibility of experience, cannot be refuted by experience. They thus agree that, contrary to the rationalist tradition, human reason can attain nonempirical knowledge *only about itself*, about what has come to be called recently our “conceptual scheme,” and the concepts required for a scheme to count as one at all. Hegel, to be sure, makes use of a far more expansive and dramatic language in describing Kant’s “self-legislation by Reason.” His talk is about thought’s “infinite self-relation,” its “freedom” or complete autonomy, but, as we shall see, Kant and Hegel continue to share a common problematic: a search for those aspects of a conceptual scheme without which there could not be a scheme, and so could not be objects discriminated by that scheme. More to the point of the topic previously introduced, they share a common rationale when defending this claim. They both rely heavily on the ineliminably reflexive or apperceptive nature of any possible experience in making the case for the necessity of such nonempirically based discriminatory capacities (concepts). It is this requirement that provides their common base in rejecting both empiricist and naturalist accounts of such a scheme. For Hegel and his idealist colleagues it is the issue that leads to their most important topic – “ground” – a natural enough topic to raise once the former two alternatives, and Kant’s, are rejected. Once this is understood, their agreements and disagreements about the consequences of such an apperceptive principle, especially for their theory of concepts, will, I think, be easier to see.

Hegel’s revisions of the Kantian account of the *objective validity* of such pure concepts involve the more notorious aspects of his speculative logic, since Hegel interprets the problem in terms of the Schellingean language of the “identity within difference of subject and object.” But that position too can be best understood by trying to understand how it emerges from Hegel’s concrete difficulties with Kant’s position. For Kant believed that there were any number of “logically possible” ways to “unify a manifold synthetically” or to “conceptually determine” the given, that it was not self-contradictory to conceive of all possible objects as substances and attributes, causes and effects, minds and bodies, or in terms of an infinite being and finite beings. The only way of distinguishing between the logically possible and the a priori “really” possible, those discriminations objectively valid of the extraconceptual, was by reliance on intuition, in the case of a priori knowledge, “pure intuitions.” This is a complex doctrine that will be considered in the next chapter, but the result was that Kant thought he could justify claims about the validity of pure concepts *only* with respect to possible objects of human (finite, spatiotemporal) intuition, that all human knowledge was only “of appearances” or phenomena. For a variety of reasons that will be considered, Hegel rejected this reliance on pure intuition, and so rejected Kant’s phenomenality restriction. (He, of course, did not reject the role of sensible received information in much human knowledge. What he objected to was

1. INTRODUCTION

the use to which Kant put the supposedly strict distinction between intuitions and concepts.) And it is at this point that Hegel departs most radically and most controversially from Kant. For it is with the denial that a firm distinction can ever be usefully drawn between intuitional and conceptual elements in knowledge that distinctly Hegelian idealism begins, and Hegel begins to take his peculiar flight, with language about the complete autonomy, even freedom of “thought’s self-determination” and “self-actualization.” (Indeed, it is with Hegel’s, or rather Hegel’s use of Fichte’s, attack on the Kantian doctrine of intuition, together with his continued acceptance of Kant’s idealist rejection of empiricism, that much of later Continental philosophy, with its antiempiricist, antipositivist thrust, from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, to structuralism and postmodernism, began. Without the Kantian “anchor” in intuitions, the Kantian subject is either not restricted by its finite intuitional forms, and so should be considered an Absolute Subject, or, given the perceived collapse of the Hegelian system, it cannot be considered a self-objectifying subject and so is merely empirical, or historical, or individual, or creative, self-interpreting, or “groundless” or, finally, not a subject at all, since it is not opposed to or constrained by anything.) Such a denial leads to Hegel’s account of the “content” of concepts as fixed by their possible relations to other concepts (and not by a “transcendental schematism,” another Kantian use of pure intuitions), his rejection of the claim that we do not know things in themselves and his extensive replacement of Kant’s deduction of the objectivity of these concepts by his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Predictably, it is this aspect of his position that requires the most extensive explanation to the “echt Kantianer” who wants to know how Hegel pulls off such a deduction without resort to the precritical notion of intellectual intuition. (Thus the formula for getting Hegel from Kant would be: Keep the doctrine of pure concepts and the account of apperception that helps justify the necessary presupposition of pure concepts, keep the critical problem of a proof for the objectivity of these concepts, the question that began critical philosophy, but abandon the doctrine of “pure sensible intuition,” and the very possibility of a clear distinction between concept and intuition, and what is left is much of Hegel’s enterprise.)¹⁷

It is an enterprise with an apparently impossible task ahead of it. For the preceding summary attributes to Hegel three claims, each of which is difficult enough to establish but which, *prima facie*, simply cannot be true collectively. First, there is the claim about nonempirical constraints on what could be a possible experience, pure concepts, or Hegel’s “autonomous thought.” Second, there is Hegel’s denial that these are only conceptual forms, that they must be connected with intuitions to be objective; or his claim that such concepts *themselves* determine “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*) as it is *in itself*. Third, there is the fact that Hegel accepts much of Kant’s criticism of the “dogmatic” tradition, and in particular rejects a reliance on the classical notion of intellectual intuition. (He has his own version of that idea, but it certainly is not classical.) Clearly, if (3) were dropped, you could at least

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37923-6 - Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness

Robert B. Pippin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I. THE IDEALIST BACKGROUND

consistently try to maintain (1) and (2); you could be a rationalist of some stripe. If (1) were dropped, you could try for (2) and (3) with some version of empiricism, or even naturalist realism, all depending on what counted as “knowing what there really is.” Or (2) could be dropped, and with (1) and (3) one could pursue some version of the Kantian program. However, with a roughly Kantian program, but without the Kantian concept/intuition distinction, and without the rationalist option of justifying a priori knowledge, what is left?

This is an important way to think of Hegel's project, because, as I shall try to show, the Kantian program (speaking loosely) is quite a powerful one, the rationalist option is foreclosed by it, and yet Kant's use of intuition *fails* in the Transcendental Deduction. It was Hegel who, in the early 1800s at Jena, began to see, with much greater clarity and scope than his colleagues, what all this amounted to, and drew out its implications boldly, imaginatively, sometimes in an extreme and indefensible way, but always “critically,” never, I hope to show, by sliding into precritical claims about cosmic mind.

All of this raises some understandable suspicions. For one thing, such an approach to Hegel might seem so narrow as to be at best anachronistic, at worst simply to miss the point. The framework just outlined appears destined to be incapable of connecting the idealist Hegel, as so defined, with the famous Encyclopedic Hegel. The latter Hegel, the much more well-known historical Hegel, is the one who argued that Western intellectual, religious, and political history had achieved a grand, final synthesis, an ultimate *Aufhebung* or sublation of its prior incompleteness, the suprarationalist Hegel who wanted to argue that Protestant Christianity, or Cartesian skepticism, or market capitalism were “necessary” developments in Spirit's collective attempt at self-consciousness, or who thought that everything from the distinction between plant and animal life to the division of faculties in human psychology was equally necessitated by the requirements of a progressing spirit. And, the objection would go on, the particular slant given to the Kant–Hegel relation previously mentioned simply ignores too much of the historical Hegel, the Hegel who spent most of his early adult intellectual life struggling with Kant's moral theory and philosophy of religion, not with his Transcendental Deduction. The suggestions just made, in other words, look as radically revisionist and fragmentary as any contemporary interpretation of Hegel. Here again we seem to be forced to choose between the presumably historical Hegel, the romantic “totalizing,” absolutist monist or, in this case, that “post-Kantian idealist” *fragment* of Hegel, the Hegel who may have a few interesting objections to empiricism or naturalism, but who can hardly be said to represent Hegel's position as a whole.

Such complaints about the implications of reading Hegel's idealism in the way suggested are far too complicated and important to be addressed briefly here. Although I plan to deal with such doubts in the body of what follows, I should at least note that I do not regard the project of providing an interpretation of Hegel's speculative philosophy, even one that can suggest

1. INTRODUCTION

an appropriate way to connect such speculation with his “Realphilosophie,” to be *thereby committed* to a wholesale reconstruction of his *Encyclopedia*, much less of the content of his many lecture courses. Partly, I simply do not have the space for such an extension. Partly, I do not think it is possible; that is, I do not think that many of Hegel’s reformulations and applications of his speculative position are justified. Indeed, many of his claims in the philosophy of nature and spirit are as ludicrous as they are reputed to be (although many are not), and it does Hegel no disservice to admit that he could be as guilty of overstating what he could demonstrate philosophically as was, say, Kant on the completeness of the Table of Categories or the architectonic necessity of a system of pure reason derived from syllogistic forms of inference. Most importantly, however, I want to argue that there simply *is* a coherent, identifiable position in Hegel on the implications of post-Kantian idealism that runs through the basic argument of his two most important books, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic*, is argued for independently of what Hegel considers to be the implications of that position, to a great (although not decisive) extent alters the way such implications ought to be understood, and is far less obscurantist and far most interesting philosophically than has traditionally been understood. It is that position, Hegel’s idealism, that I want to discuss. Once such an idealist position is developed, and, especially, the significance of Hegel’s theory of historical self-consciousness for that position is defended, its determinate implications for his theory of “objective spirit” or art or religion can, I would argue, be made out much more successfully. Clearly, though, such an idealist reading of Hegel’s systematic and practical works is a major task in itself and depends everywhere on the version of idealism one originally ascribes to Hegel.

The historical criticism raises separate problems. First, Hegel nowhere provides an adequate justification for his numerous critical remarks about Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹⁸ Sometimes he hammers away at a point that almost everyone would agree is indefensible in Kant (especially the claim about the completeness of the Table of Categories) but that no one thinks is as devastating for the important features of Kant’s theory as does Hegel. More often, Hegel tosses off a paragraph here or there, or a Remark in the *Logic*, and clearly assumes that the justification for his dismissal of Kant on some issue is obvious (when it obviously is not). The same kind of brevity occurs in those passages where Hegel reveals his enormous debt to Kant. Clearly, to argue that the Kant–Hegel–idealism theme is the central one in Hegel commits one to showing that Hegel’s own position contains the resources to reconstruct the justification for both the critical and the affirmative remarks; that the details of Hegel’s own account of subjectivity, concepts, objectivity, his own idealism, can fill in the enormous gaps in his official pronouncements; and that his own position can be better understood when it is reconstructed for that purpose. (Given the paucity of detailed Hegelian analysis of Kant, the approach suggested here also implies that the best way to introduce such a view of Hegel – say, as a postcritical thinker