

FREDERICK C. BEISER

Introduction: Hegel and the problem of metaphysics

Few thinkers in the history of philosophy are more controversial than Hegel. Philosophers are either for or against him. Rarely do they regard him with cool detachment, weighing his merits and faults with strict impartiality. Hegel has been dismissed as a charlatan and obscurantist, but he has also been praised as one of the greatest thinkers of modern philosophy. As a result of these extreme views, Hegel has been either completely neglected or closely studied for decades.

Whether we love or hate Hegel, it is difficult to ignore him. We cannot neglect him if only because of his enormous historical significance. Most forms of modern philosophy have either been influenced by Hegel or reacted against him. This is true not only of Marxism and existentialism – the most obvious cases in point – but also of critical theory, hermeneutics and, if only in a negative sense, analytic philosophy. Hegel remains the watershed of modern philosophy, the source from which its many streams emanate and divide. If the modern philosopher wants to know the roots of his own position, sooner or later he will have to turn to Hegel.

Hegel demands our attention for more than historical reasons. If we consider any fundamental philosophical problem, we find that Hegel has proposed an interesting solution for it. He claimed that his system provides the only viable middle path between every philosophical antithesis. He held that it preserves the strengths, and cancels the weaknesses, of realism and idealism, materialism and dualism, relativism and absolutism, skepticism and dogmatism, nominalism and Platonism, pluralism and monism, radicalism and conservatism. Indeed, the more we study Hegel the more we find that his system seems to accommodate every viewpoint and to anticipate every objec-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38711-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Hegel

Edited by Frederick C. Beiser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HEGEL

tion. Of course, it is at least arguable that Hegel solved any of these problems. But can we safely ignore his claims to do so? Hegel's sheer presumption challenges us to make a closer study of his philosophy.

But if Hegel is important, he is also problematic. The Hegel renaissance, which began in the 1960s and continues today, has still not removed him from all suspicion. One of the chief reasons Hegel remains suspect lies with his notorious obscurity, which has put him at odds with the premium placed upon clarity in contemporary philosophy. Another, more important reason is Hegel's apparent indulgence in metaphysics, a subject that has been much discredited by the legacy of Kant and positivism. Hegel seems to fly in the face of every stricture upon the limits of knowledge, blithely speculating about such obscure entities as "spirit" and "the absolute." This image of the irresponsible metaphysician began with Russell's famous contention that Hegel's entire system rests upon a few elementary logical blunders.¹

Not only contemporary philosophers have difficulty coming to terms with Hegel's metaphysics: Hegel scholars also remain deeply divided over its status and worth. Broadly speaking, there have been two antithetical approaches to Hegel's metaphysics. There is first of all the traditional historical approach, which accepts Hegel's metaphysics as a *fait accompli*, and which attempts to explain it by describing its relations to its historical antecedents. For example, Hegel's metaphysics is described as "inverted Spinozism," "dialectical neo-Thomism," or "monistic Leibnizianism." This approach can be found mainly in the older German studies of Hegel, especially those by Dilthey, Haym, Haering, Rosenkranz, and Kroner. Opposed to the historical approach is the more-modern positivistic approach, which tends to dismiss Hegel's metaphysics as a form of mysticism or speculation, but which values him for his many ideas in the fields of epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. According to this modern approach, we can find much of "philosophical significance" in Hegel, but it has nothing to do with his metaphysics, which is only the "mystical shell" of the "rational core." This approach to Hegel can be found in the Marxist tradition, in the Frankfurt school, and also in those recent studies that regard Hegel's philosophy simply as a form of "categorical analysis."²

Both of these approaches suffer from obvious difficulties. If the historical approach lacks a philosophical perspective, virtually invit-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38711-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Hegel

Edited by Frederick C. Beiser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Hegel and the problem of metaphysics 3

ing us to suspend our critical faculties, the positivistic approach has an anachronistic or tendentious conception of Hegel's "philosophical significance," relegating almost 90 percent of the actual Hegel to the dustbin of history. Apart from their separate difficulties, both approaches suffer from a common shortcoming: they fail to see that Hegel himself regarded metaphysics as a very problematic undertaking in need of legitimation, and that he accepted the Kantian challenge to metaphysics, insisting that "any future metaphysics that is to come forward as a science" must be based upon a critique of knowledge.

The main task of this introduction is to address the chief problem confronting the understanding and evaluation of Hegel's philosophy: the problem of metaphysics. It will do so by examining, if only in rough outline, Hegel's defense of metaphysics, his response to the Kantian challenge. If we investigate Hegel's own justification of metaphysics, we will be able to avoid the pitfalls of the traditional approaches to Hegel. We will not have to accept his metaphysics as a *fait accompli*, nor will we have to reject it as mysticism or speculation. Rather, we will be able to appraise it on its own merits, seeing whether it really does meet the Kantian challenge. The chief advantage of this approach is that we should be able to produce an interpretation of Hegel that is neither obscurantist nor reductivist, that neither regards his metaphysics as speculation about the supernatural nor reduces it to mere categorical analysis.

Any introduction to Hegel's metaphysics should answer four basic questions. 1) What does Hegel mean by "metaphysics"? 2) What does he mean by "the absolute"? 3) Why does he postulate the existence of the absolute? 4) How does he justify the attempt to know it in the face of Kant's critique of knowledge?

Before we examine Hegel's defense of metaphysics, we need some account of what he means by "metaphysics." The term is notoriously vague and ambiguous. It can refer to several different kinds of discipline: to an ontology, a study of the most general predicates of being; to a theology, a study of the highest being; or to a cosmology, a study of the first principles and forces of nature. Rather than defining his use of the term, however, Hegel refuses to adopt it. When he does use the term, it is almost always in a negative sense to refer to the antiquated doctrines and methods of the rationalist tradition,

4 THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HEGEL

the metaphysics of Descartes, Leibniz, and Wolff, which had been discredited by Kant's critique of knowledge.³ The term "metaphysics" had fallen into disrepute by the early 1800s, as Hegel himself noted,⁴ so reviving it would have been impossible without invoking negative connotations. Nevertheless, even if Hegel avoided the term, he had a conception of philosophy that can only be described as "metaphysical." In his early Jena years, and indeed throughout his career, Hegel saw the purpose of philosophy as the rational knowledge of the absolute.⁵ This conforms to one of the classical senses of the term "metaphysics," a sense given to it by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the attempt to know the unconditioned through pure reason.⁶

If we define metaphysics as the knowledge of the absolute, we are still far from a clear understanding of its purpose and nature. For, to address our second question, what does Hegel mean by "the absolute"? Although Hegel himself never provides a simple definition of the term, one is given by his former philosophical ally, F.W.J. Schelling. According to Schelling, the absolute is that which does not depend upon anything else in order to exist or be conceived.⁷ Both in its existence and essence, the absolute is independent of, or unconditioned by, all other things. In other words, the absolute is *causi sui*, that whose essence necessarily involves existence. The historical antecedent of this concept is Spinoza's definition of substance in the *Ethics*: "By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself; in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception."⁸ Making no secret of his debt to Spinoza, Schelling readily followed his definition by calling the absolute "the infinite substance" or, less eloquently, "the in-itself" (*das An-sich*).

Schelling and Hegel did not hesitate to draw Spinozistic conclusions from this definition of substance. Like Spinoza, they argued that only one thing can satisfy this definition: the universe as a whole. Since the universe as a whole contains everything, there will be nothing outside it for it to depend upon; for anything less than the universe as a whole, however, there will be something outside it in relation to which it must be conceived. With these Spinozistic arguments in mind, Schelling wrote in his 1800 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*: "The absolute is not the cause of the universe but the universe itself."⁹ Hegel too embraced Spinoza's conclusions. As

Introduction: Hegel and the problem of metaphysics 5

late as the 1820s, he paid handsome tribute to the Spinozistic conception of the absolute: "When one begins to philosophize one must be first a Spinozist. The soul must bathe itself in the aether of this single substance, in which everything one has held for true is submerged."¹⁰

If we keep in mind Schelling's and Hegel's Spinozistic conception of the absolute, we can avoid some of the vulgar misconceptions surrounding their metaphysics. According to one common conception, metaphysics is a form of speculation about supernatural entities, such as God, Providence, and the soul. Such a conception has nothing to do with Schelling's and Hegel's metaphysics, however, for their metaphysics does not concern itself with a specific kind of entity. Their absolute is not a kind of thing, but simply the whole of which all things are only parts. No less than Kant, then, Schelling and Hegel warn against the fallacy of hypostasis, which treats the absolute as if it were only a specific thing.¹¹ Schelling and Hegel also insist that their metaphysics has nothing to do with the supernatural. Their conception of metaphysics is indeed profoundly naturalistic. They banish all occult forces and the supernatural from the universe, explaining everything in terms of natural laws.¹² They admired Spinoza precisely because of his thoroughgoing naturalism, precisely because he made a religion out of nature itself, conceiving of God as nothing more than the *natura naturans*.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceive of Schelling's and Hegel's metaphysics in purely Spinozistic terms. In the early 1800s Schelling developed a conception of the absolute as "subject-object identity" a conception whose ultimate meaning is *anti*-Spinozistic. What Schelling meant by describing the absolute as "subject-object identity" is *apparently* Spinozistic: the mental and physical, the subjective and objective, are only different attributes of a single infinite substance. Nevertheless, Schelling gave this doctrine a further meaning that would have made Benedictus turn in his grave. Contrary to Spinoza's rigidly mechanistic conception of the universe, Schelling conceived of the single infinite substance in vitalistic and teleological terms. Following Herder,¹³ who insisted on breathing life into Spinoza's dead and frozen universe, Schelling saw substance as living force, "the force of all forces" or "primal force." According to Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*,¹⁴ all of nature is a hierarchic manifestation of this force, beginning with its lower degrees of organization and development in minerals, plants, and animals, and ending

6 THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HEGEL

with its highest degree of organization and development in human self-consciousness. The absolute is not simply a machine, then, but an organism, a self-generating and self-organizing whole.

Schelling thought he had good reason to conceive of the absolute in organic rather than mechanical terms. Only an organic conception of nature, he argued, agreed with all the latest results of the new sciences. The recent discoveries in electricity, magnetism, and biology made it necessary to conceive of matter in more dynamic terms. Rather than regarding matter as static, so that it acts only upon external impulse, Schelling felt it necessary to see it as active, as generating and organizing itself. Spinoza's more mechanical conception of the absolute was, then, only the product of the sciences of his day, which were now obsolete. Schelling also saw his vitalism as the solution to a problem that had haunted philosophy ever since Descartes: how to explain the interaction between the mind and body. According to Schelling, the mind and body are not distinct kinds of entity, but simply different degrees of organization and development of living force. Mind is the most organized and developed form of matter, and matter is the least organized and developed form of mind. Such a theory, Schelling argued, avoids the pitfalls of both dualism and mechanistic materialism. Since living force has to be explained in teleological terms, the mind is not merely a machine; and since force embodies itself only in the activity of matter, it is not a ghostly kind of substance.

Hegel inherited this organic conception of the absolute from Schelling in the early 1800s, the period of their collaboration on the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* (1802–04). Hegel accepted the broad outlines of Schelling's conception of the absolute. He agreed with Schelling's definition of the absolute: that which has an independent essence and existence. He also followed Schelling in conceiving of the absolute in organic terms, so that the mental and physical are only its attributes or degrees of organization and development. Nevertheless, even during their collaboration, Hegel began to have serious doubts about some of Schelling's formulations of the nature of the absolute. In his *Presentation of My System, Bruno, and Philosophy and Religion*,¹⁵ Schelling sometimes spoke of the absolute as if it were nothing more than "subject-object identity," the single infinite substance or "the point of indifference" between the subjective and objective. But this limited way of speaking about the absolute

Introduction: Hegel and the problem of metaphysics 7

suffers from a serious difficulty. If we conceive of the absolute as only subject-object identity *apart* from the apparant dualism between the subject and object in our ordinary experience – if we see it as only the infinite substance *without* its finite modes – then we seem to exclude the realm of the finite and appearance from it. Contrary to its definition, the absolute then becomes dependent in its essence, conceivable only in contrast to something it is not, namely the realm of appearance and finitude. Hence, in the preface to his *Phenomenology*, Hegel felt that it was necessary to correct Schelling's restricted formulation of the absolute. Since Schelling's absolute excluded its modes, which determine the specific characteristics of a thing, Hegel likened it to "a night when all cows are black." If we are to remain true to its definition, Hegel argued, then it is necessary to conceive of the absolute as the *whole* of substance *and* its modes, as the *unity* of the infinite *and* finite. Since the absolute must include all the flux of finitude and appearance within itself, Hegel called it "a Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunken."

Hegel's ridicule of Schelling should not blind us, however, to his deeper debts to his erstwhile colleague. All his life Hegel adhered to Schelling's organic conception of the absolute, attempting to work out some of its implications. What Hegel was objecting to in the preface of the *Phenomenology* was more Schelling's formulation of the absolute than his underlying conception. Although he vacillated, Schelling himself would sometimes conceive of the absolute in more Hegelian terms, explicitly including the realm of finitude within it.¹⁶ When Hegel later insisted (in the preface to the *Phenomenology*) that the absolute is not only substance but also subject, he was not so much attacking Schelling as attacking Spinoza through Schelling. By conceiving of Spinoza's substance as living force, Schelling had laid the ground for seeing the absolute as subject. Hegel's philosophical development in his formative Jena years consisted not so much in a "break with Schelling" as in a persistent attempt to provide a better epistemological foundation for his views.¹⁷

Now that we have examined Schelling's and Hegel's conception of the absolute, we are in a much better position to understand their belief in the possibility of metaphysics. Because of their conception

8 THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HEGEL

of the absolute, Schelling and Hegel believed they were justified in exempting their philosophy from much of Kant's critique of metaphysics. The target of Kant's critique – the victim of all the "ambibolies," "paralogisms," and "antinomies" – was the old metaphysics of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school. But this metaphysics was in the service of a deistic theology, which conceived of the absolute as a supernatural entity existing beyond the sphere of nature. Schelling and Hegel happily agreed with Kant that metaphysics in this sense is indeed impossible. They had, however, a different diagnosis of its impossibility: it is not because the supernatural is unknowable, as Kant thought, but because the supernatural does not exist. All of Kant's worries about the unknowability of the noumenal world were, in Schelling's and Hegel's view, simply the result of hypostasis, of conceiving of the absolute as if it were only a specific thing. If we conceive of the absolute in naturalistic terms, Schelling and Hegel argue, then metaphysics does not require the transcendent knowledge condemned by Kant. All that we then need to know is nature herself, which is given to our experience.

Schelling and Hegel were convinced of the possibility of their metaphysics chiefly because they regarded it as a form of scientific naturalism, as the appropriate philosophy for the new natural sciences of their day. They rejected any sharp distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, insisting that their metaphysical principles be confirmed through experience. And, as we have already seen, they insisted on banishing all occult forces from nature and explaining everything according to natural laws. Although, to be sure, they conceived of the laws of nature in teleological rather than mechanical terms, they were adamant that the purposes of nature be conceived as internal to nature herself and not as imposed by some external designer. For Schelling and Hegel, then, the question of the possibility of metaphysics depended in no small measure upon the possibility of *Naturphilosophie* itself. We ignore this dimension of Schelling's and Hegel's philosophy only at the risk of positivistic anachronism.¹⁸

Seen in its proper historical perspective, Schelling's and Hegel's metaphysics should be placed within the tradition of vitalistic materialism, which goes back to Bruno and the early free-thinkers of seventeenth-century England.¹⁹ This tradition attempted to banish the realm of the supernatural, yet it was not atheistic. Rather, it

Introduction: Hegel and the problem of metaphysics 9

conceived of God as the whole of nature. Although it held that nature consists in matter alone, it conceived of matter in vitalistic rather than mechanistic terms. Matter was seen as dynamic, having self-generating and self-organizing powers.²⁰ The similarities with Schelling's and Hegel's metaphysics are apparent. But Schelling and Hegel should also be placed within this tradition because they shared some of its underlying moral and political values: a commitment to egalitarianism, republicanism, religious tolerance, and political liberty. If it seems strange to regard Hegel as a materialist, given all his talk about "spirit," then we must lay aside the usual mechanistic picture of materialism. We also must not forget that for Hegel, spirit is only the highest degree of organization and development of the organic powers within nature. If it were anything more, Hegel would relapse into the very dualism he condemns in Kant and Fichte. It is noteworthy that this materialistic element to Hegel's metaphysics was not lost on his contemporaries, who were quick to praise and damn him accordingly.²¹

If we consider Schelling's and Hegel's naturalistic conception of metaphysics, it might seem as if there is no point of conflict between them and Kant after all. It is as if Hegel engages in a kind of metaphysics that Kant himself would approve, a metaphysics of nature. But this would be a premature conclusion, one which misses the real point at issue between Kant and Hegel. For, in claiming that we can know nature as an organism, as a totality of living forces, Schelling and Hegel were flying in the face of Kant's strictures upon teleology in the *Critique of Judgement*. In this work Kant argues that we cannot confirm the idea of a natural purpose through experience, and that we attribute purposes to nature only by analogy with our own conscious intentions. The idea of an organism has a strictly heuristic value in helping us to systematize our knowledge of the many particular laws of nature. We cannot assume that nature *is* an organism, then, but we can proceed only *as if* it were one. In the terms of Kant's first *Critique*, the idea of an organism is not a "constitutive" but only a "regulative" principle. Rather than describing anything that exists, it simply prescribes a task, the organization of all our detailed knowledge into a system. Here, then, lies the basic sticking point between Kant and Hegel: Kant denies, and Hegel affirms, that we can know that nature *is* an organism.

10 THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HEGEL

We have now come to our third question: Why postulate the existence of the absolute? In other words, why give constitutive validity to the idea of nature as an organism? Hegel's answer to this question comes in his first published philosophical writing, his 1801 *Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*. The thesis of this early work is that there is a fundamental difference between Fichte's and Schelling's philosophy, and that Schelling's system is superior to Fichte's. Such a thesis would have been news to Schelling himself, who had collaborated with Fichte for the previous five years and regarded their positions as the same in principle. Hegel's tract was instrumental in effecting Schelling's break with Fichte and forging the alliance between Schelling and Hegel.²² The essence of Hegel's argument for the superiority of Schelling's system is that we can resolve the central outstanding problem of Fichte's philosophy only if we assume the existence of Schelling's absolute, that is, only if we give constitutive status to the idea of nature as a living organism. To understand Hegel's argument, then, we must first have some idea of Fichte's problem and of his difficulties in finding a solution to it.

The fundamental problem of Fichte's early philosophy, the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794,²³ began with the Transcendental Deduction of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this notoriously obscure section of his enigmatic masterpiece, Kant raised a question that would haunt the entire generation after him: How is empirical knowledge possible if it requires a universality and necessity that cannot be verified in experience? This problem arose in the context of Kant's dualistic picture of the faculty of knowledge. According to Kant, empirical knowledge requires the interchange between universal and necessary concepts, which provide the *form* of experience, and particular and contingent intuitions or impressions, which supply the *matter* of experience. While these concepts originate *a priori* in the understanding, a purely active and intellectual faculty, the intuitions are given *a posteriori* to our sensibility, a purely passive and sensitive faculty. The question then arose: If our *a priori* concepts derive from the understanding, how do we know that they apply to the *a posteriori* intuitions of sensibility? Or, more simply, if these concepts do not derive from experience, then how do we know that they are valid for it? Kant's answer to this question – if we can summarize in a few words the extremely involved and intricate argument of the Tran-