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Hegel, analytic philosophy and the return of metaphysics

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Lumsden, Simon
Publisher	Open Humanities Press
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-04-13 08:48:14
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/177934

HEGEL, ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE RETURN OF METAPHYSICS

Simon Lumsden

At issue in Paul Redding's 2007 work, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, and in a number of related papers that he has published since then is a very ambitious project: that analytic philosophy has to take a Hegelian turn if it is to resolve its own ongoing systemic problems. Since it was published, the book has had a considerable impact, such as an author-meets-critic session at the Pacific division of the APA in 2008 with Robert Brandom giving a long, generous, and very positive response. There have also been other panels on this work at other meetings of the APA since then. Paul's research on the need for analytic philosophy to take its idealist turn, and his examination of McDowell and Brandom has continued to promote debate and interest amongst a cross-section of philosophers. I am personally indebted to Paul: since the publication of this book whenever my more analytically-trained colleagues have asked me, "Why do these perfectly respectable philosophers – Brandom and McDowell – have an interest in Hegel?" I am now spared having to give a brief summary of the animating problems of post-Kantian idealism and explaining how these connect to McDowell and Brandom's thought. Now all have to do is direct them to Paul's writings on this issue.

As Redding sees it, the only way to overcome the intractable problems in analytic philosophy that Sellars and others had pointed out, but from which they could not escape, is for analytic philosophy to make a Hegelian turn. For this reason the neo-Hegelian thought of John McDowell and Robert Brandom is the way forward for analytic philosophy, since they both recognise that a core problem with the defining traditions of analytic philosophy has its roots in the response to Kant's Critical Philosophy and they also think, in their own distinctive ways, the only correct response is a Sellarsian-Hegelian one. How successful they are in achieving this is not something I am capable of commenting on.

The neo-Hegelianism of two of analytic philosophy's leading contemporary figures is one of the great ironies in the history of philosophy. The creation myth of the analytic tradition is that its identity is taken to have been forged in opposition to the murky depths of Hegel's thought. Its diverse and rich internal developments since

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then has of course long since abandoned any preoccupation with its fall from Teutonic idealism, nevertheless the spectre of Hegelianism has never been completely exorcised. The principle of non-contradiction, the general abhorrence of the woolly language of post-Kantian idealism as well as the whole cluster of objections that Russell raises against Hegel and the British idealists do still permeate analytic self-understanding.

In *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, and in a number recent essays¹ that further explore the relation of Hegel and the neo-Hegelian thought of Brandom and McDowell to analytic philosophy, Paul demonstrates that this creation myth had *already* been undermined by the analytic tradition itself. Post-Kantian problems had been explicitly present in that tradition in the writings of Frege, Wittgenstein and Sellars, all of whom have been central in structuring subsequent debate in this tradition. In effect Paul argues there is a Hegelian way of confronting problems in analytic philosophy that has always been there, though it is not until McDowell and Brandom that the insufficiencies in Frege, Wittgenstein and even Sellars himself were drawn out in such a way as to show the necessity of the Hegelian turn. So what is this problem?

Kant had attempted to resolve the opposition between empiricism and rationalism by positing receptivity and spontaneity as distinct roles in a unified cognition. The way Kant divided cognition into its receptive and spontaneous arms still, Hegel argued, betrayed Kant's awe of the object. The way he conceived the concept-intuition relation, presupposed a "sensuous reality",² that is, a separate nature that is given cognitive significance through discursivity. In short, for Hegel, the way Kant frames the concept-intuition relation still presupposes the separateness of mind and world. This is why Hegel in the introduction to the *Science of Logic* asserts that Ancient metaphysics is superior to Kant's approach as its claims for thinking are also claims for the truth of objects, not just our thinking of them. The traditional metaphysical approach presented Hegel as overcoming the problem of the thing-in-itself and the dualism of mind and world, which seemed to result from the Kant's formulation of the concept-intuition distinction, by advocating a spirit-monism that is knowable in itself.

The initial transition from understanding Hegel's thought as a reversion to dogmatic metaphysics was set in motion by Klaus Hartmann.³ Hartmann was instrumental in conceiving Hegel's project as a continuation of Kant's critical tradition. Hartmann took Kant's philosophical legacy to be formulated in the following way: human reason does not have to appeal to a transcendent domain of objects, norms or categories in order to justify an action. In Hegel's terminology, thought must be 'self-determining', or reason must be 'self-grounding'. Since the late 1980s, revisionist interpreters of Hegel in the English-speaking world have followed Hartmann in arguing that his thought should be understood as a continuation of the Kantian critical project understood in this way. Reason must be regarded as reflectively setting the norms for its own operations. This self-grounding rationality dispelled the idea that the key notions of Hegel's project (Spirit, reason, the Idea, the Concept) could be understood as the expression of a quasi-divine intelligence. Why this way of interpreting Hegel was described as non-metaphysical was easy to see both in relation to previous Hegel scholarship and in the standard understanding of metaphysics which took itself to be concerned with what most "fundamentally exists" (being and substance), that is, there is some given way in which the world independently exists that philosophical reflection is able to grasp.

Paul's recent work has eschewed the non-metaphysical term and resurrected a "metaphysical ambition," but it is a radically qualified sense of metaphysics, indeed it is a thoroughly Hegelian revival of the term. Following on from Sellars, McDowell and Brandom, we can see the necessity for this. Thought is not representational in the sense of it reflecting "an independently determinate realm of objects" but neither can be it an independent realm of thought determinations, which is how Hartman had taken Hegel's categories to be. Hartmann's category approach fails to avoid the accusation of "spinning frictionlessly in the void". As Paul argues, in order to avoid a dualism of being on the side and categories of thought on the other, "we must be able *somehow* to think these two realms as *one*."⁴ Kant, at least to his idealist successors, had thought he was unable to achieve this. Whatever Hegel means by 'the Absolute', it is clear at least that it is the term meant to capture just such a position. This had been Schelling's project as well. How then to bridge the gulf between thought and being without reinstating pre-Kantian metaphysics?

The usual story that is told about the way Hegel resolves the residual problems in the Critical Philosophy is that he corrects Fichte's and Schelling's inadequate attempts to bridge those problems, Schelling giving a more objective resolution to the problem and Fichte a more subjective resolution. Paul argues that Hegel overcomes this mind-world dualism by appropriating an Aristotelian idea. On the face of it, this would seem an odd strategy to correct deficiencies in the Critical Philosophy since, conventionally understood, Aristotle's thought is the archetype of precisely that style of metaphysics against which the Critical Philosophy defines itself, namely a divine substance. In Paul's reading, however, Aristotle's metaphysics provides the corrective to the deficiencies in Kant's Critical Philosophy as well as in the attempts by Fichte and Schelling to resolve those deficiencies. The Aristotle that Hegel appeals to is not concerned with how the world is, in some definitive sense, but rather his is a metaphysics that is concerned to describe reason's self-production. What reason produces for itself, in the confines of spirit, is a self-correcting movement in which contradictory claims about objects are resolved into more adequate claims. This conceptual self-correction changes how we come to see the world. Critically there is no fact of the matter that is outside this sphere of conceptual contestation to which we can appeal to correct our view; all we have is this rational contestation. This conceptual self-correction establishes the logical structure for the categories of being.

Hegel also recognised in Aristotle's God an ancient precursor to the Fichtean self-positing subject. He sees Aristotle's own account of the *energeia* of the divine as expressing the type of determinate negativity that Hegel appropriated from Fichte as the defining feature of subjectivity. Hegel extends this Fichtean-Aristotelianism such that the negative and the norms it creates are mediated through a socially and collectively constituted set of recognitive relations and institutions which we can, in modernity at least and under a revamped notion of the Christian God, collectively identify as our own. This self-correcting normativity, with no outside that can be appealed to for a God's-eye perspective against which our claims and commitments could be judged, is Hegel's account of objectivity. The contradictions, transitions and competition between competing claims describes just how the world is for self-reflective creatures like us. Just how the Schellingian insights into nature that clearly influenced Hegel's view of the Absolute are transformed into this metaphysical picture is difficult to see on this narrative; perhaps part of the argument here is that Schelling's role for the natural is usurped by the Fichtean-Aristotelianism by which Paul takes Hegel to correct the Critical Philosophy and allow the reconnection of mind and world.

Both McDowell and Brandom have done more than any other figures in Anglo-American philosophy in recent years to connect Continental philosophy, at least in its German variation, back into a unified philosophical project. Certainly they have been far more successful than Rorty in presenting these traditions as concerned with a common philosophical enterprise. The reason for this success, unlike Rorty, and no doubt for reasons internal to analytic philosophy, is that they have focused their attention on probably the defining moment in modern philosophy — the reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy. The work of McDowell and Brandom and now Paul's book has allowed the beginning of the realignment of German idealism and analytic philosophy. Although it is probably not until the first Schelling scholar receives a research professorship at the RISSS at the ANU or an endowed chair at Princeton that we will be able to say that this division is officially over!

The problem with the mythology of the origin of analytic philosophy, particularly in a philosophical approach with minimal interest in history (either its own or any other) — is that it can easily create a new myth-defining moment for itself. Indeed that has already happened; the debate has moved on from a positioning of itself against Hegel and neo-Hegelianism to a broader methodological orientation which positions its claims, form, and scope against those of this post-Hegelian European tradition. This allows a very easy migration of 'whipping boy' status from idealist Teutonic murkiness to French post-structuralist irrationality. One of the great benefits of Paul's book, by refocusing on the reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy, and in particular the receptivity/spontaneity distinction, is that it opens up a genuine path for discussion between figures like Deleuze and analytic philosophy precisely because engaging with this distinction is central to understanding the emergence of post-structuralism. While it is unlikely that Anglo-American philosophy would ever take a Deleuzian turn, at least some kind of conversation is possible now since there is a commonality of interest in

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their confrontation of the problems that plague Kant's thought.

SIMON LUMSDEN is a Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales. He has published widely on German Idealism, phenomenology and poststructuralism, and is currently completing a manuscript on the development of self-consciousness in German Idealism and the critique of the subject in Heidegger and poststructuralism.

NOTES

1. See Paul Redding, “Two Directions for Analytic Kantianism: Naturalism and Idealism”, in Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (eds), *Naturalism and Normativity* (Columbia University Press, 2010); and P. Redding, “The Analytic Neo-Hegelianism of John McDowell & Robert Brandom”, in Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Hegel* (Blackwell, forthcoming).
2. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19XX), 45)
3. Klaus Hartmann, ‘A Non-Metaphysical View,’ in Alasdair Macintyre ed. *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New York, Anchor Books, 1972).
4. Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 222