

HEGEL, IDEALISM, AND
ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

The nascent analytic turn to Hegel calls attention to his often unsuspected contribution to the problem of knowledge while highlighting deep differences limiting most, perhaps all, effort to appropriate Hegel for traditional analytic purposes. Hegel's interest for the contemporary debate on knowledge is not often recognized since even today his difficult position is still not well understood. He was refuted as part of the emergence of Anglo-American analytic philosophy in England a century ago. He is widely thought to be out of step with our historical moment, and even to have been "overcome," for instance, by the results of modern science.¹

Martin Heidegger, who insists on the crucial importance of coming to grips with Hegel,² was not well informed about contemporary philosophy, other than that of a few twentieth-century German thinkers. He seems not to have understood the extent to which the discussion of his time was deeply dependent on his idealist predecessor.³ Almost thirty years ago Richard Bernstein made a strong case for Hegel as the central figure against whom the main contemporary philosophical movements react. Bernstein had in mind Hegel's influence on philosophies of action or activity, including the Marxist interest in praxis.⁴

A different way of making a similar claim would be by examining Hegel's influence on three philosophical tendencies which emerged around the beginning of the last century, and which later came to dominate philosophical debate: American pragmatism, analytic philosophy, and the so-called phenomenological movement.⁵ Paradoxically, analytic philosophy, which devotes

the most attention to idealism, including Hegel, is also the most critical of it.

In its own way, each of these tendencies reacts against Hegel. C. S. Peirce, the founding figure of American pragmatism, was influenced by Hegel throughout his career, initially negatively, and later to an increasing extent positively, claiming finally that his own view is a nonstandard form of Hegel's.⁶ William James and John Dewey, the other main American pragmatists of the first generation, were also influenced by Hegel, James mainly negatively but Dewey more positively. What has come to be called the phenomenological movement is in fact the large-scale debate set in motion, not by phenomenology, nor even by Hegel, but rather by Edmund Husserl.⁷ Sartre, who knew enough about the history of philosophy to know better, even goes so far as to claim that Husserl invented phenomenology.⁸ Yet before Husserl, Hegel and many others, including J. H. Lambert and even Immanuel Kant, understood themselves as phenomenologists, or exhibited phenomenological tendencies. Husserlian and post-Husserlian forms of phenomenology represent at most variations on a preexisting theme. They have clearly invented new kinds of phenomenology, but not a wholly new type of philosophy.

The most complex interaction between Hegel and later philosophy is found in the current tendency that is least directly concerned with his theories: analytic philosophy. In considering Hegel's relation to analytic philosophy, Bernstein mainly focuses on action, especially action theory. He points out the utter disdain, even contempt, for Hegel that runs like a red thread through Anglo-American analytic philosophy since it emerged in England at the turn of the twentieth century. He further notes that, for reasons concerned with the internal dialectic of the analytic discussion, the possibility of a rapprochement with Hegel now exists.⁹

Bernstein correctly senses a hidden continuity between the founding fathers of analytic philosophy in England, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, and the British idealism against which they rebelled.¹⁰ Bernstein correctly regards analytic philosophers as (like Hegel) also concerned to describe human action,¹¹ but he notes neither the distortion inherent in the analytic reaction to Hegel, nor the way in which, through Wilfrid Sellars, analytic philosophy was already returning to Hegel.¹² And he does not discuss what is philosophically significant in the interaction between Hegel and analytic philosophy.

This book will focus on the complex relation between Hegel, idealism in general, and Anglo-American analytic philosophy. In considering the relation of analytic philosophy and idealism, the book will counter three myths which have long shaped and still shape this encounter: First, there is the approach to idealism as the view that everything is “spiritual,” which is widely but uncritically accepted by uninformed observers including many analytic thinkers, but also by more informed observers such as Peirce. Second, there is the erroneous conviction that the founding members of analytic philosophy were ever idealists in any recognizable sense, despite what they themselves may have believed. Third, there is the widely accepted notion that the founders of analytic philosophy decisively refuted idealism.

The relation between Hegel, idealism, and analytic philosophy is not well known, even to historians of philosophy. Yet Hegel is a key figure in at least three ways for analytic philosophy and analytic concerns: He is a thinker from whom Anglo-American analytic philosophy departs, to whom it is currently making a selective return, and whom it has arguably twice misunderstood. Furthermore, when he is understood in a different way than has so far been the case in analytic philosophy, he turns out to be key to the main theme that he and analytic philosophy share: an interest in the problem of knowledge.

The complex analytic reaction to Hegel includes two main phases. The first is a turn away from British idealism, and idealism of any kind, hence Hegel, which for many analytic philosophers persists to this day, and which concerns the problem of the existence of the external world. The turn was part of the complex process of working out the distinctive analytic approach, encompassing a large number of different positions. This initial misunderstanding was highly productive in the rise of analytic philosophy. The second, currently nascent turn is toward Hegel, among some analytic writers who are concerned with the problem of knowledge in the wake of the analytic critique of classical empiricism. It remains to be seen whether the second misunderstanding, which is only now taking shape, will prove as productive as the first in the further evolution of analytic philosophy.

Discussion of the relation of analytic philosophy and Hegel encompasses three main dimensions: the analytic critique of idealism at the beginning of the twentieth century and its later consequences, the nascent analytic turn (or return) to Hegel for analytic purposes, and consideration of Hegel's theories as such. I have no intention of questioning the importance of analytical contributions to Hegel scholarship.¹³ Though it would be interesting to survey analytic treatments of Hegel, that falls outside the scope of this essay. The present discussion will concentrate on analytic efforts to react to, come to grips with, and appropriate specific Hegelian doctrines by well-known analytic thinkers including Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and other, lesser-known analytic figures such as Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer. The overall aim is to evaluate aspects of the specific analytic interaction with Hegel (and idealism) as part of the further unfolding of the distinctive analytic philosophical perspective.

The detailed nature of my reconstruction of the analytic encounter with Hegel and idealism is justified by its importance

and intrinsic difficulty. As one of the most interesting philosophical developments at the beginning of the new century, this encounter should be handled with some care—in any case with more care than Hegel is often accorded by his critics.

My account of the analytic encounter with Hegel will be critical. It is hardly surprising that analytic readings of Hegel arise out of analytic doctrinal commitments. My critique of such readings will be based on a reading of Hegel incompatible with these commitments, hence incompatible with mainstream analytic philosophy. This alternative reading of Hegel will be developed in the third chapter. Nonetheless, it may be useful to anticipate some of its main points here in order to avoid the impression that the different objections to be raised below are unrelated, arbitrary, or motivated by a gross misunderstanding of or a simple animus against analytic ways of thought.

Analytic observers sometimes attribute the division between analytic philosophy and so-called continental philosophy to the latter's negative relation to science. Michael Friedman, who scrutinizes this division through the lens of the debate, which Rudolf Carnap attended, between Ernst Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos in 1929, regards the division as a divergence between forms of German neo-Kantianism turning finally on different attitudes toward science. According to Friedman, Carnap defends science as a cognitive source against cognitive essentialism enshrined in continental metaphysics, especially post-Kantian German idealism.¹⁴

Friedman's observation, which is arguably correct for some continental figures like Heidegger, is not correct for idealism in general, nor for post-Kantian German idealism, nor again for Hegel. Yet it would be an error to conclude that the differences between analytic and continental philosophy are merely apparent or unreal. Arguably the main difference between them does not lie in respect for science, which is preserved in continental

philosophy, by post-Kantian German idealists like Schelling and Hegel, as well as by more recent figures like Cassirer and Husserl. It is rather situated more deeply with respect to the general problem of knowledge.

Hegel and analytic philosophers share a continuing concern with a rigorous theory of knowledge, but part company with respect to realism. The term “realism” is understood in many different, incompatible ways. A very short list might include metaphysical, scientific, and empirical variations on the general realist theme. Ordinary realism is the naïve, unreflective view, a view which is almost instinctively held by most nonphilosophers, that there is a real world which we know. Metaphysical realism is the more sophisticated, philosophical formulation of this naïve view, associated with Parmenides, Plato (in the *Republic*), René Descartes, and many others, according to which to know is to know an independent cognitive object as it is. Scientific realism is the view linked to scientism, advanced by Carnap, Sellars, and others, according to which any and all knowledge worthy of the name emerges within the framework of natural science, which provides knowledge of what is as it is. Empirical realism is the view worked out by Kant according to which we know only what is given in experience and cannot make any cognitive claim about what is not given in experience.

There is an important distinction between metaphysical and empirical forms of realism. A metaphysical realist claims to know what is as it is in virtue of three assumptions. First, there is a way things are. Second, what we know in no sense depends on the knower or on a link of any kind between knower and known. Third, external objects and more generally the world can be known as they are and not merely as they might appear. This view is often contested. Peirce, for instance, who called it “ontological metaphysics,” declared it “meaningless gibberish.”¹⁵ Un-

like a metaphysical realist, an empirical realist does not claim to know how things are in independence of our experience. An empirical realist claims no more than to know what is given in experience. Thus Descartes, a metaphysical realist, holds that we can bring the mind in touch with external objects in knowing them as they are. But Kant, an empirical realist, admits we can think things as they are. Yet since we cannot experience things as they are, Kant denies we can know them as they are and thereby limits knowledge to experience.

Western philosophy turns on a metaphysical view of realism, or knowing mind-independent reality as it is.¹⁶ This view is widely popular in philosophy of the modern era. For instance, Thomas Hobbes typically writes: “Originally all conceptions proceed from the actions of the thing itself, whereof it is the conception.”¹⁷ Descartes similarly claims that certain ideas about the mind-independent world must necessarily be true.

Hegel, who follows Kant in rejecting both ordinary and metaphysical realism, rejects neither realism as such, nor a concern with objective cognition. Analytic efforts to defend these types of realism are neither post-Kantian nor Kantian, but pre-Kantian, incompatible with Kant’s position and certainly incompatible with Hegel’s. Hegel may be said to favor a successor version of empirical realism in his abandonment of the thing in itself and his conception of the real as given wholly and solely within conscious experience, hence any cognitive reference to external reality as it supposedly is in independence of experience. He does not claim, and after Kant should not claim, to know the real as it is, or even to be affected by it. Analytic efforts to appropriate Hegel along ordinary and metaphysical realist lines do so for aims simply inconsistent with his position.¹⁸

One way to put the point is in terms of the difference between metaphysical realism and epistemological constructivism.

In Kant's wake, many analytic thinkers maintain the traditional, pre-Kantian philosophical commitment to knowledge of the mind-independent world as it is. As a result of the Copernican turn, Kant abandons metaphysical realism in favor of empirical realism based on the insight that we can know only what we in some sense construct, or epistemological constructivism. Hegel further develops Kant's constructivist view of the cognitive object while adding contextualist, historical, and historicist dimensions to the knowing process. Analytic thinkers, committed to analytic themes including metaphysical realism, often appropriate Hegel as if he were an early analytic figure.

The three chapters of this book correspond to successive phases in the effort to clarify the analytic encounter with Hegel (and idealism). The first chapter will be devoted to the nature and significance of the British analytic turn away from idealism, and hence from Hegel. The analytic rejection of British "idealism" is based on a very loose understanding of the term on the part of analytic thinkers. According to Jürgen Habermas, Heidegger is an idealist.¹⁹ Hilary Putnam, who attributes the view that "mind *makes up* the world" to Hegel,²⁰ describes idealism as the idea that "objects that are not perceived make no sense."²¹

Getting clear about the initial analytic reaction to idealism therefore requires clarifying such terms as "idealism," "German idealism," and "British idealism." These terms are mainly used negatively to designate views one rejects. The accounts of "idealism," "German idealism," and "British idealism" will be as neutral as possible, but appropriately detailed.

Stress will be placed on differences between British and German idealist theories, and between these theories and what early British analytic thinkers say about them. Attention will be drawn to the distinction between Frege's influential critique of Husserlian psychologism, and Moore's even more influential

critique of British idealism for allegedly rejecting the existence of the external world.

This phase of the discussion has three main objectives. One is to point out that the early analytic figures, including Russell and Moore, did not understand the idealism they rejected well enough to formulate telling objections against it. The influential criticism formulated by Moore does not in fact undermine the views of any of the main idealist figures, including Hegel. Second, a critical review of the early turn away from British idealism helps to understand the current analytic turn toward Hegel. Third, reviewing the objections formulated by early analytic figures against British idealism opens the way to recovering Kant and Hegel through very different readings.

In the second chapter, a more polemical account of pragmatism, analytic neopragmatism, and Hegel will focus on the selective analytic turn to pragmatism and only then, and on that basis, on Hegel. Attention will be drawn to differences between classical American pragmatism and analytic neopragmatism, and to further differences between pragmatism and Hegel. I will be arguing that Hegel is not a pragmatist and that pragmatism is not Hegelian. Hegel's commitment to history and historicism represents a basic difference between his position and pragmatism. Some pragmatists are concerned with history, but none of them thinks that cognition is intrinsically historical. Examination of the representative analytic readings of Hegel in Sellars, Rorty, Brandom, McDowell, and Stekeler-Weithofer will suggest that analytic thinkers are often concerned to adopt his ideas for aims incompatible with his overall position.

The third chapter advances a reading of Hegel's position incompatible with metaphysical realism. Hegel's emphases on nonmetaphysical, empirical realism, social contextualism, epistemological constructivism, history, and historical relativism are

enormously promising themes for discussion of the problem of knowledge at the present time. Hegel sees something that few of his students have later seen: after Kant, to progress in the debate on knowledge we need to drop metaphysical realism in favor of empirical realism while adopting a constructivist and historicist approach to knowledge.