

Review Article

The Road Less Traveled: Why It Does Not Make Sense to Ask: 'Is the Absolute Really There?'

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The road more traveled, in Hegel scholarship is a very clear and well delineated path. This road has been traveled so often that some travelers in the past have identified with a certitude that comes with self-satisfaction, what is living and what is dead along the path; what is genius and what is vicious; what remain of a Hegel. This tradition in Hegel scholarship which lives and breathes on a metaphysical interpretation of Hegel is in danger of courting self-sufficiency. Save for some minor variations on classical and manualized Hegelian themes, this path has not made any 'qualitative leaps'. One more work that builds on this capital will not make things any better but might give other philosophers the equally frightful thought that Hegel's friends are, like embalmers, dedicated to immortalizing his thoughts in some maosoleic refuge or theologians devoted to proving the irrefutable.¹ The road less traveled is indicated and

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¹ One must of course make the distinction between the needless repetition of hollowed tradition and the sincere desire to deepen our understanding of his view which is productive even with a metaphysical stance. But then again, we keep Foucault's advice in mind. "What is the point of striving after knowledge if it ensures only the acquisition of knowledge and not, in a certain way and to the

taken by Klaus Hartmann.² He suggests that Hegel is not a Hegelian. Speaking in the voice of a metaphysician, he unravels himself in the voice of a categorial philosopher. In fact, Hegel's greatest and lasting contribution, these essays argue, mining a seam Hartmann first began to excavate in his article more than twenty years ago, lies in his articulation of categorial ontology with a transcendental grounding. The *locus classicus* of this categoriality thesis, may be found in the *Introduction to the Science of Logic* ([18], p. 49).

Philosophy as pure science "contains thought in so far as this is just as much the object in its own self, or the object in its self in so far as it is equally pure thought."

Such is the central argument woven, in various patterns, through this quilt of essays. The charge that the categorial claim is limited only to the *Logic* without any regard to the other parts of the system as claimed by recent commentators ([3]) is put to rest by Aschenberg ([2]), Pinkard ([22]), Howard ([19]) and Engelhardt ([12]) who give a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Art, Encyclopedia and the Philosophy of Right*. These and the other contributors in this volume make one feel the bite and initiative of Hartmann, who frees Hegel from the received misunderstandings and from his own misunderstanding, and to whom the work is dedicated and with whose conceptual capital this work is made possible. Such methodological inventiveness and interpretive variation leads Hartmann and his intellectual children to do away with the hollowed view of Hegel which appears at first to celebrate life but plays the dirge in the end as it stifles and dissipates it. It abandons what Clifford Geertz calls the "sweet sense of accomplishment which comes from parading habitual skills." ([13], p. 88) They take what they call a non-metaphysical path in their approach to Hegel, even if the productive ambiguity of the terms metaphysics and ontology continues to cloud their construal.³ They cherish that not only is this possible

greatest extent possible, the disorientation of he who knows?... What is philosophy today —I mean philosophical activity— if not the critical work of thought upon thought, if it does not, rather than legitimizing what one already knows, consists of an attempt to know and to what extent it is possible to think differently. Foucault, M., *L'Usage des Plaisirs*, pp. 14-15 as cited in ([20], p. 473).

² ([15]) is seen as the declaration of the non-metaphysical turn.

³ Rorty in ([23]) gives a more popular anti-metaphysical reading of Hegel.

but that "it makes more sense of and is more consonant with, the spirit of Hegel's writings than a metaphysical interpretation." ([6], p. 57) This construal sees Hegel as combining "classical ontology's concern with conceptualizing determinations of being and modern philosophies concern with explaining why such conceptualizations must be accepted by the subject as true." ([5], p. 103) Far from playing out the quarrel of the ancients and moderns, Hegel philosophy, construed as ontology of categories with transcendental grounding, initiates a coming to grips with each other.

The Non-Metaphysical Stance: Metaphysics is Epistemology

What is meant by metaphysical and non-metaphysical here is "set over against the history of metaphysical understandings of Hegel as well as the history of the metaphysics against which Kant reacted." ([11], p. 3) This entails refraining from confusing the project of investigating the primary being with the reconstruction of the categorial structure of being. Since the ordering of the categorial structure of being is significant as an ordering of being, Hartmann calls it an ontology. Thus ontology and metaphysics are reconceptualised. ([11], p. 4) G. Khushf, in his paper "The Meta-Ontological Option: On taking the Existential Turn," warns about the danger of calling the ordering of the ontological categories as itself an ontology as this leads us into the pit we have taken so much care to avoid. ([20], p. 137) Thus he opts to call the ordering, meta-ontological. Rockmore, in his contribution "Hegel's Metaphysics, or the Categorial Approach to Knowledge and Experience" identifies two main strands of metaphysics in critical philosophy which Kant referred to as the dogmatic and the critical. The first makes "ontological claims about the nature of ultimate reality itself"; and the second "the science of general concepts valid in the realm of experience." ([24], p. 47) As Hartmann's uses it, the first is metaphysical; the second, non-metaphysical.

Metaphysics is epistemology. It is concerned with reason's apprehension of thoughts' apprehension of being and why this claims to be true. It is not the epistemology of a foundationalist kind for Hegel insists adamantly on its systematicity. Such systematicity eludes the presupposition of any principle as it includes all principles. It is concerned with the project of transcendental philosophy, that is, the avoidance of the problem of a first instance in the justifi-

cation of all claims to knowledge. ([20], p. 123) Rockmore argues that Hegel's view of metaphysics becomes relevant if it is understood as "an epistemological theory intended to reach full knowledge of what is given to mind from the vantage point of the categorial framework." ([24], p. 47) Rockmore, justifies his assertion that Hartmann's view is correct but that his use of the term non-metaphysical is unhegelian by giving way to the ludic rights of genealogy of the term metaphysical. What is non-metaphysical should be called metaphysical since from Hegel's construal the hermeneutic of categories is metaphysical. ([24], p. 45) Hegel's project then, as construed by Hartmann, is transcendental in that same sense construed by Kant, the knowledge and justification of the most basic determinations of thought. Thus

it makes no sense to ask: "Is there really identity?" as if one were asking: "Are there really cows in that field?," because there is not such *thing* as identity. It is not appropriate to think of identity in terms of the opposition of consciousness, for the question is whether we are justified in thinking in terms of identity. If we can think in terms of identity, there is identity. It is a question concerning our conceptual framework, and once the question has been resolved for thought, it makes no sense to look at the world and ask: "Yes, but is it really there." ([8], p. 22)

Freed from the metaphysical project of investigating the primary being, Hegel's philosophy cannot be interpreted as articulating ontically distinct entities. The proclivity of the manuals of philosophy to depict Hegel in such a manner is anachronistic and in Hegel's view, pre-modern as it signifies a return to the representative consciousness. ([2], p.83)

Are Hegel's Categories the same as Kant's?

... we all have same idea of what a limit is, but if called upon to explain we may well resort to a picture of, say, a line dividing two areas, or the edge of something. But a limit is not itself an object like a rose or a cow, it is something which can only be thought — it is a category with which we make the world comprehensible to ourselves. ([8], p. 22)

Categories work in this way. In a general manner, this fits a description of most of our concepts functioning in synthetic a posteriori propositions. ([5], p. 105) Hegel however wishes to think of

categories in a more specialized manner, that is, in so far as they claim to conceptualize being as being, in so far as they claim to make anything comprehensible at all. We have to supersede Kant's categories which are inadequate to the task of knowing things-in-themselves. While epistemologically sound, Kant's categories as subjective forms of the understanding are ontologically incapable.⁴ Philosophy as Hegel conceives it conducts its reflection in the form of Concept (*Begriff*) of reason rather than the subjective representations of the understanding. The satisfaction of reason is hinged on the consideration of all those concepts which are necessary for thought's self-understanding. These concepts should have nothing beyond to which they refer. Their validity is absolute. Hegel's categories

are not determinations of some particular region of being but principles of all particular determinations of the real, because as categories they are not determinations of some particular region of being but principles of all particular determinations of the real, and all particular regions of being. They also claim to be principles in that they ground the intelligibility of being, as Aristotle remarked of the principle of non-contradiction. The categories of substance, quality, subject, etc., claim to conceptualize determinations of what being per se, and to be true of being apart from being propositionally asserted of, or referred to, particular substances, or qualities, or subjects, etc. In epistemological terms, they claim to be logically presupposed by synthetic a posteriori propositions. ([8], p. 105-106)

Unlike Kant's categories, which in fact clouds the intelligibility of being, Hegel's categories ground the intelligibility of being.⁵ The categories are available only through representations. In going about its business, philosophy translates the representations of common experience into concepts by giving these representations the form of concepts. They are reconstructed from the standpoint of reason.

⁴ "...it would be mistaken to think, as Kant would have us think, that the fault of the categories lies in their subjective character. See ([6], p. 61).

⁵ ([6], p. 61-63), discusses the tenability of Kant's position, Hegel aside.

Dialectics is Reconstruction⁶ is Hermeneutics

Objects and contents which we cognize already in the intentional modes of intuition and representation are translated from a specifically philosophical perspective into the form of thought and are thus thought through (*nachgedacht*), i.e., reconstructed categorially in their truth; in virtue of this reconstruction they are explicitly recognized (There would be no difficulties in reformulating this dthought of reconstruction, which Hegel grasps in the mentalistic language common to early modern philosophy, into the language of linguistic analysis, and thus speak of kinds of language games, forms of discourse, etc. instead of modes on intentionality) ([2], p. 80).

The task of reconstruction is to analytically interpret that intentional form or mode which serves as the operative medium of a category: *Vorstellung*, which Hegel considers the first level of intelligibility ([6], p. 66; [8], p. 22) in order to assure that what they conceptualize is the case. It is not difficult to see that *Vorstellung* is instinctively preoccupied "with that universal medium through which anything that is an object of consciousness becomes intelligible in a fundamental though preliminary sense" ([6], p. 66), that is, language and in a more specific sense, word meaning.⁷ The categories are not totally unfamiliar. In fact Hegel holds that we are familiar with them and that it is because of this that we do not fully understand them like the idea of what a limit is.

Reconstruction is a translation.

Being a form of translation, reconstruction is only possible from one language to another. The philosopher needs ordinary language to provide him with the general ideas he pol-

⁶ This concept is derived from Hartmann. Adorno nuances it in an almost similar manner. See ([15])

⁷ "Word meaning constitutes the meaning of *Vorstellungen* taken in its specific sense. But word meaning must not be viewed as a correlate of the word as sign (as Locke interpreted the relationship of *signifiant* and *signifie*). Rather word sign and meaning coalesce into one ad their synthetic unity is the name (by which Hegel means the general noun. It is names with which natural thinking is primarily familiar...hence it is justified to say that according to Hegel the universal homogeneous medium through which anything has meaning for consciousness is constituted by language." ([6]), p. 66)

ishes into precise determinations of thought, but he also needs it as a source of inexplicit categories... Philosophy is second level reflection on first-level discourse which has reality as its object... So philosophy is not thinking about reality, but thinking about what to think about reality. ([8], p. 23)

One can of course assert the categories and not give any reasons at all why they must be accepted as true. We have not gone beyond asserting the categories and its claims. This is not enough to show that they are categories. It just shows that they are metatheoretical. Moreover the categorial claim of Hegel as construed by Hartmann entails a transcendental claim for it claims that being is as the category structures it to be. ([5], p. 106) Are they necessary? Why should they be required for anything to be accessible to explanation or intelligibility? Or to rephrase the question: Can the claim that they govern our knowledge of being be justified?

"Can the categories be justified?"

This is a necessary step in the Hegel's account of the ontological categories. The reconstruction must progressively show their necessity in the form of a priori.⁸ Hartmann holds that this is successfully explicated in the *Science of Logic*, doubts about which Thomas Bole sets out to ascertain or clear in his article "The Cogency of the Logic's Argumentation: Securing the Dialectic's Claim to Justify the Categories" in the same volume. The question can only be satisfied if there is a "reciprocal relation of justification between the knowledge in question and the basis which grounds the knowledge." ([20], p. 123) Furthermore, this basis must be internal and transparent to thought. ([20], p. 123) In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel begins with the proposal to consider thought, also understood as self-reflexivity, figure of subjectivity or reflection ([9], p. 147) as such. Only through the medium of *thought* can the categories and their determinations of being be accounted for because everything else outside of thought presupposes that being is intelligible. Devoid of all elements, it necessarily serves as an immanent or non-external beginning of the transcendental project. Thought left to itself is faced with the incontrovertible fact that it *is*. Hartmann's profound views

⁸ The transcendental justification of the categories is the second part of the reconstruction process. ([2], p. 80)

on existence as elaborated by Khushf ([20], p. 122) extricates us from the problematic about why Hegel believed that only thought could account for being and why the categories are determinations of being.

The *difference* between the world of existence and the world of thought is otherness. A category is then that function of thought which specifies the specificity of determinateness of existence. As such in terms of its ordinary function, a category specifies for thought the unity of thought and being given in existence. To the degree that existence is thought, to that same degree the thought of existence is one with existence. A category specifies the nature of this unity by specifying the degree of thought in the being of existence... Different modes of existence depend upon the degree of thought content. At the extremes there are brute facticity (the "now" and "this" of existence) and pure thought. In specifying the unity of thought and otherness, a category specifies the mode of existence. But a category also exists. It is the mode of existence which is pure thought. ([20], p. 122)

The justification of the categories will show that "thought is constituted by successful appropriations of or unities with being." ([9], p. 149) Thought's account of the categorial determinations of being is done systematically. Having brought together all the categories involved, thought accounts for each concept in virtue of which being is accessible to it. When one wishes to account for a category then one is referred to the categories it excludes or is related to it. The necessity of the categories is shown intracategorially. Bole reconstructs Hegel's reconstruction in the *Science of Logic*.

Since the account must be worked out intracategorially, it must begin with a category. On the other hand, because the account must be presuppositionless, it cannot simply assume being's categorization but must provide a warrant for saying that being admits of categorial explanation. The structure of the account must commence therefore with the categorization of the intrinsically uncategorized, i. e., unexplained, character of that which is to be categorized. It must show that that which is itself indifferent to categorial explanation is nonetheless subject to the jurisdiction of the categories. It first shows categorially that, if being is not nothing, it must admit of determinations that are immediate, i.e., indifferent to each other and to that which being makes of them. This is the so-called doctrine of being. But even as indiffer-

ent, they are differentiated for explanation. The Logic therefore proceeds to a phase in which categorial determinations are intrinsically related to each other, so that one pole of the relation is the explanans in terms of which the determination of the other pole is explained, but in which the significance of this relationship is not itself explained. This is the doctrine of essence. Because the Logic must explain both why categorial determinations can be explained in terms of their relations to one another and its own status as categorially explanatory, it culminates in a phase in which the status of categorial explanation is itself explained, the doctrine of the concept. ([5], p. 107-108)

The method by which thought moves from one category and of drawing the logical relation⁹ between categorial determinations is the dialectic. Each category is accounted for by its relation to another category and its place in the larger systematic whole. The dialectic organizes the categories for the systematic satisfaction of reason. It is the immanent rationale of the categorial hermeneutic. ([20], p. 130)

The dialectic then is not:

(1) a force immanent in the material of reality (2) a force immanent in history, or (3) a force by which ideas compel the mind. The dialectic may be regarded as a way of rationally reconstructing history from a particular content-full standpoint. ([11], p. 5)

Not only is Hegel's philosophy a hermeneutic of the categories but is at the same time their transcendental critique. The method used is none other than the method of thought. The method, crite-

⁹ "The nature of the dialectic and the rationale for its employment are dictated by what it means to say that a category has a logical function in the account of explanation. We have suggested that the logical functions of the categories are the roles they play in explicating the categoriality of thought and thus explaining explanation... Understood as logically functional, therefore, the categories are renderings of beings in terms of explanation. To say that the categories possess logical functions is to say that they mark off the differences that being makes to explanation by figuring as one of its moments, and the differences that explanation makes to being by rendering being in terms of explanation. The dialectic is the procedure for construing categories so as to make their logical functions explicit." ([5], p. 109).

ria, and object of the whole exercise is thought. Hegel as construed, puts and end to the aims of transcendental philosophy and it is a great achievement. At this point, we remember Holderlin, a good friend of Hegel and rephrase him: "Of what use is a non-metaphysical Hegel in a postmodern world?"

Of what use is a categorial Hegel in a postmodern world?

Is Hegel's philosophy simply a luxury? Does Hartmann's retempering of Hegel simply make it more luxurious than the received view? Doesn't Hartmann's construal build another castle that only fails to convince Hegel to move from Søren's dog house? Is it a castle rock entertainment for thought but does not bite in reality? What answers does it give to the problems of a "new world order" which seeks to find its future in "meanings drawn from past cultural convictions, ethnic bonds" (or even militant religion) and not in a universal content-full narrative? What reply does it have for the increasing diversity and difference of a post-modern world? ([11], p. 12) The response to these again lies in Hartmann's construal and development of Hegel's philosophy as an immanent categorial reflection. This collection of articles not only explicates Hartmann's interpretation but also shows the effectiveness of Hartmann's method as it increases our familiarity with Hegel and makes Hegel significant again; significant to contemporary philosophy and to ordinary level concerns. It brings up the relevance of some of Hegel's arguments to contemporary debate about language and the world ([20], p. 131).¹⁰ Pinkard's reflections show how Hegel's thoughts can contribute to understanding "how motivation and morals can be at home with each other in politics." ([22], p. 180) The fruitfulness and indispensability of Hegel's thought to post-modernism is evinced by the articles of Khushf, Pinkard, Engelhardt and Howard. We take Engelhardt's concerns in his Introduction.

In all of this the question is posed: is the universal narrative merely contingent? First and foremost, one must lay hold of the core Hegelian theme that all reflection, even the reflection that affirms post-modernity à la Lyotard or con-

¹⁰ "It enables one to discuss the relation between thought and existence... the *Philosophy of Right* gives a foundational philosophy for addressing "questions of right... The system thus helps make clear what one is talking about when one is talking about something." ([19], p. 131).

tingency a la Rorty is a reflection that presupposes the ability of reason to reflect and to place content within the ordering concerns of reason. The content-full character of those ordering concerns will always be marked by the particularities of contingency and the character of history. That there are ordering concerns and that they have the dialectical character of moving from less explanatory and more one-sided accounts to more explanatory and less one-sided accounts, is not dependent solely on the character of history. That such concerns are taken seriously is dependent on contingent historical circumstances and on a particular history. But what is disclosed is the perspective of reason, which is available to be taken, albeit when it is taken, it always has a particular, contingent, historically conditioned character. ([11], p. 13)

Pinkard finds Hegel's reply to the problem of diversity and difference in the post modern world in Hegel's theory of art. In Ancient Greece, art encapsulated the truths of the society. In our times, art could only present the truth of a part of a culture because of the pluralistic nature of our society, i.e., truths that can be presented artistically are too many and much varied. ([22], p. 169) It does not exhaust all truths that can be presented aesthetically.

For example the 'truths' underlying the life of the Catholic ascetic may be completely at odds with those underlying the secular jazz man. An artist may present either set of truths in a fashion that allows the other side to see its attractions without in anyway making the two compatible. ([22], p. 169)

The plurality of narratives can be understood and appreciated without having to impose one set of narrative over the others.

Is Hartmann Truthful to the Sources?

Does Hartmann's retempering of Hegel go against Hegel or does it argue the way Hegel did things? Is Hartmann's reading truthful to the sources? Hartmann admits that his reading of Hegel's writings does not always accord with Hegel's writings. ([20], p. 132) One often comes across passages which show that Hegel asserted metaphysical claims, i.e., those that involved existence. Hartmann is not bothered.

The problem can be tackled in this way; the fault of Hegel's may be not so much that his is categorial thought, but that he makes concessions to existential considerations...in its

light, Hegel can be censured to the extent that he... engages in metaphysics. ([10], pp. 119, 123)

Hartmann's interpretation though worked within the limited restrictions of Hegel's texts unravels the absoluteness of the Absolute and invites a deconstruction of the hollowed and manualized construal of the received view. The one thing that is going for Hartmann is that his revisioning and re-presentation of Hegel's philosophy increases our appreciation and understanding of his (Hegel's) works and is fruitful in its applications. It succeeds in opening the whole range of Hegel's works in way that a metaphysical interpretation cannot. It unchains the capacities of Hegel's writings to speak to us and nurtures our present philosophical inquiries. Thus, even if they do not lead to conclusions Hegel himself endorsed or even when they do not fully conform to Hegel's account Hartmann's construal cannot be said to be unjust to Hegel's writings. Allen Wood in his valuable work *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, speaks about the value of reading Hegel against his (Hegel's) own misunderstanding.¹¹ Authentic interpretation requires doing "violence" to the texts. Hartmann shows that Hegel has something to say and that not everything about his reflective thought has been determinatively explicated. However one encounters the bad old Hegel at great intervals in the sources, one cannot be deaf to the insistence of the categorial philosopher in between. □

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¹¹ "... To read him in some measure against his own self-understanding... is nevertheless the only way in which most of us, if we are honest with ourselves can read him seriously at all." ([25], p. 8)

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