

Hegel's Metaphysics: Changing the Debate

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ABSTRACT: There are two general approaches to Hegel's theoretical philosophy which are broadly popular in recent work. Debate between them is often characterized, by both sides, as a dispute between those favoring a more traditional "metaphysical" approach and those favoring a newer "non-metaphysical" approach. But I argue that the most important and compelling points made by both sides are actually independent of the idea of a "non-metaphysical" interpretation of Hegel, which is itself simply unconvincing. The most promising directions for future research, for those on both sides of recent debates, will require recognizing that Hegel's theoretical philosophy includes a metaphysics, and engaging new debates about the specific character of that metaphysics.

The central claims of Hegel's theoretical philosophy are couched in his famously opaque terminology—the terminology of "the absolute," "the idea," etc. And it is safe to say that recent work on Hegel's theoretical philosophy lacks consensus concerning these central claims—even concerning what sorts of philosophical issues they are meant to address. There can be no question here of complete and even-handed coverage of the many interpretive subvarieties and debates between them all. There are, however, two general approaches broadly popular in recent work. Debate between them is often characterized, by both sides, as a dispute between those favoring a more traditional "metaphysical"

approach and those favoring a newer “non-metaphysical” approach. But I argue that the most important and compelling points made by both sides are actually independent of the idea of a “non-metaphysical” interpretation of Hegel, which is itself simply unconvincing. The most promising directions for future research, for those on both sides of recent debates, will require recognizing that Hegel’s theoretical philosophy includes a metaphysics, and engaging new debates about the specific character of that metaphysics.

1. Two Recently Popular Approaches

The first general approach popular in recent work is the more traditional of the two; I will call it *traditionalism*, following Redding (2002). I think this general view is best introduced in terms of the idea that Hegel aims to revive and modify a form of pre-Kantian metaphysics—namely, Spinoza’s monism.

Traditionalists see Hegel as following Spinoza in holding that everything real must be “in” a single, all-encompassing substance. So Hegel’s “absolute” is akin to what Spinoza calls “substance” or “God.” Spinoza claims that “from God’s supreme power, or infinite nature ... all things, have necessarily flowed” (*Ethics* IP17S1). And Hegel similarly holds that “the absolute” determines, grounds, or organizes everything real.

Like some of his contemporaries, however, Hegel advocates a distinctively *idealist* form of monism, in this sense: he aims to synthesize Spinoza’s account of substance with the emphasis on *freedom* in Kant and later idealists.¹ But at this point there is a divergence between interpretive subvarieties. The most straightforward and vivid story is that Hegel sees substance itself as a mind or spirit (“*Geist*”) or “subject” which is somehow freely self-creating. In Taylor’s

¹For an excellent English-language version of the this version of the history of the development of post-Kantian idealism, see “Part II” of Henrich’s 1973 lectures at Harvard (2003).

version, the “the universe” is supposed to be “posited by *Geist*” or by an all-encompassing “cosmic spirit” (1975, 87ff.). This idea certainly provides a natural way to understand Hegel’s claim that “substance is essentially subject” (PhG 3:28/14).

But a different way of understanding Hegel’s modification of Spinoza is probably more popular in recent work, although it is also more difficult to summarize clearly. The basic idea is that everything real is determined by a fundamental organizing principle of the whole, which interpreters often call a basic “structure.” This is supposed to be what Hegel himself refers to as “the idea.” It is *not* itself a mind; it is an organizing principle which governs both natural and mental phenomena. But this “structure” is *best or most completely* realized specifically in phenomena such as self-consciousness, subjectivity, and freedom. Rolf Horstmann and Frederick Beiser are two, of many, advocates of interpretations of this general sort.²

There is also a recently popular *nontraditional* approach to this material. If there is a single classic work of recent nontraditionalist interpretation, it is Robert Pippin’s *Hegel’s Idealism* (1989); Robert Brandom and Terry Pinkard have long been working along broadly similar lines. The basic view is best introduced in terms of the idea that Hegel’s theoretical philosophy is a continuation or extension of Kant’s critical project, rather than a revival or modification of any form of pre-critical metaphysics. More specifically, Hegel’s project is similar to Kant’s attempt to account for the conditions of the possibility of cognition of objects: Hegel focuses on “forms of thought” which are

² I follow here especially the version proposed by Horstmann; see especially his discussion of a “primary structure” (1991, 177-82) and the similar formulation at (1998/2004; Part 4). And see Beiser (1993 and 2005). See also Stern (1990, especially pp. 110-119) and Wartenberg (1993).

comparable to Kant's "categories."³ And Hegel, following Kant, is interested in the source of the legitimacy or normative authority of these forms of thought; for example, Hegel follows what Brandom describes as a Kantian "shift in attention from ontological questions ... to deontological ones."⁴

But Hegel's project is also shaped by skepticism among post-Kantian idealists about Kant's sharp distinction between concept and intuition. Hegel consequently places great emphasis on the challenge of accounting for *determinate* cognition or thought about objects, without assuming that determinacy is provided by a given manifold of sensible intuition.⁵ This task is supposed to send Hegel in two main new directions. First, he defends a form of holism according to which the "forms of thought" depend for their determinate identity on their places within a larger whole or network. And, second, Hegel argues that the conditions of the possibility of determinate cognition of objects includes the participation by individuals in social life.⁶ So Taylor is right that "*Geist*" is fundamental in Hegel's theoretical philosophy, but this term does not refer to a "cosmic spirit"; it refers to our own historically developing forms of social life.⁷

2. Against the Idea of a Non-metaphysical Hegel

The bone of contention between these two general approaches cannot simply be whether Hegel is more similar to Kant or to Spinoza, as he will likely be

³ E.g. Pippin (1989, ch. 2) and Brandom (1999, 165).

⁴ Brandom (1999, 165-7) see also e.g. Pippin (1989, 7).

⁵ See Pippin (1989, especially p. 38; 2005, 387) and Brandom (1999, especially p. 167).

⁶ E.g. Pinkard (1994, 21) and Brandom (1999, 169).

⁷ Insofar the best evidence for such readings is found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, recent nontraditionalists tend see the later *Science of Logic* and *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as fundamentally dependent on the argument of the earlier *Phenomenology*. See especially Pippin (1989, 13-14).

similar to each in different respects. The question is, what specific respect is at issue? The answer can seem to be this: one approach sees Hegel as offering an account of what really or even absolutely exists; the other sees Hegel as concerned rather with something else—with categories, concepts or conceptual schemes. Insofar as they see the debate in this way, friend and foe alike tend to describe nontraditionalism as a “non-metaphysical” interpretation of Hegel.

The term “metaphysics” can, of course, be used in many different ways, but the idea of a “non-metaphysical” reading of Hegel gains much of its substance from the work of Klaus Hartmann, whose terms are adopted by more recent nontraditionalists. Hartmann explains in a 1972 essay: Hegel advocates a “modest ... hermeneutic of categories,” or “a non-metaphysical philosophy devoid of existence claims and innocent of a reductionism opting for certain existences to the determinant of others” (1972, 124 and 110). These formulations suggest a natural way for us to use the term “metaphysics,” which I will adopt here: “metaphysics” refers to accounts of what truly exists, and to accounts of relationships between “existences” (e.g. reduction relations, and perhaps other forms of dependence or priority). What is so controversial in these formulations, however, is the suggestion about *Hegel*—namely, that he is engaged in an analysis of categories, concepts or their justification which is designed to maintain “modest” neutrality with respect to metaphysics.

My own view is that this general idea of a “non-metaphysical” Hegel is only one strand, and not the most important, in recent nontraditionalist interpretations; be that as it may, however, this specific idea has attracted a great deal of criticism.⁸ And it is easy to see why. After all, if anything comes through

⁸ More recent interpreters sometimes say that they seek new interpretations which differ but remain “non-metaphysical” (Pippin 1989, 6). Brandom employs different but similar terms: Hegel follows a Kantian “shift in attention from ontological questions ... to deontological ones” (1999,

clearly in Hegel's texts it is the great extent of his philosophical ambitions. Surely these include the ambition to defend an account of what truly or really exists. If that point is not already clear enough in the *Phenomenology*, then it is even clearer in the *Science of Logic*, which is supposed to provide an "exposition" of "what ... the thing in itself is in truth" or "what is truly in itself" (WL 5:130/121). Furthermore, Hegel does address different kinds of existences and the relations between them. He does so, for example, in his discussions of "Mechanism," "Teleology," and "Life" at a crucial point at the conclusion of the *Logic*.⁹ Finally, it is simply hard to believe that Hegel's attempt to account for something called "the absolute" is any self-consciously "modest" form of philosophy.

Granted, one might still try to *reconstruct* Hegel's theoretical philosophy in non-metaphysical terms, setting aside those Hegelian aspirations which do not fit the mold. But why? Why prefer a metaphysically-neutral analysis of conceptual schemes to an account of what truly or really exists? Perhaps at one time this might have seemed like a way to reconstruct Hegel in accordance with contemporary philosophical orthodoxy. But anti-metaphysical views—such as positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and their descendents—are currently *controversial*, and do not enjoy anything like the status of philosophical orthodoxy.¹⁰ To seek to defend such views is fair enough. But it is hard to see why we should view *Hegel* through the lens of this particular contemporary ambition, especially given that doing so requires selective reconstruction of his views.

165-6). For some persuasive criticisms see Horstmann (1984, 47) on Hartmann; Siep (1991) on Pippin (1989); and Beiser (1995) on the approach of Hartmann and his followers.

⁹ One indication that these sections are crucial is that they are found immediately before and immediately after "The Idea"; these sections help to explain Hegel's claims about that central term, and provide arguments for his claims. I say more about Hegel on the priority of teleology over mechanism in Kreines (2004).

¹⁰ See Ameriks' (2000, 11) similar point about non-metaphysical approaches to Kant and post-Kantians.

Similarly, we should be wary of the idea that a fault-line between metaphysical and non-metaphysical claims is an intrinsic feature of Hegel's own philosophy, rather than an artifact created by viewing Hegel through the lens of commitments or ambitions in the contemporary debate.

Some nontraditionalists, such as Pinkard, have responded to such concerns by renouncing the term "non-metaphysical" and stressing instead the idea of a "post-Kantian" interpretation.¹¹ But can we disentangle a more compelling strand of nontraditionalist interpretation from the unconvincing idea of a non-metaphysical Hegel? I think we can, and that doing so is the best way to appreciate the most promising avenues open for further advancing and defending nontraditional approaches.

3. A Debate about Hegel's Response to Kant's Limitation of Our Knowledge

What then are the other, more important and pressing, issues raised in recent debates about Hegel's theoretical philosophy? These can best be brought into focus by considering Hegel's relationship to Kant. In short, Kant famously holds that our knowledge is restricted: we can have no theoretical knowledge of things as they are "in themselves." All should agree that Hegel seeks to overturn this restriction, or to establish knowledge which is not limited in this way—to establish knowledge of "what is truly in itself" (WL 5:130/121). But there are two surprisingly different interpretive approaches to Hegel's ambition here.

While I will return to consider traditionalism in more detail below, the basic idea is this: Traditionalists see Hegel as aspiring to *surpass* or to get beyond

¹¹ See the first footnote in Pinkard (1999). Also, Pinkard's compelling (1996) defense of Hartmann and "non-metaphysical" approaches, for example, offers no defense of the idea that Hegel offers a metaphysically-neutral analysis of concepts; Pinkard instead refocuses attention on the core idea that Hegel aims to complete Kant's critical project, rather than to revive specifically pre-critical forms of metaphysics.

Kant's limits. For example, Kant argues that we cannot have theoretical knowledge of the kinds of highest beings of interest to pre-critical rationalists. Hegel asserts knowledge, beyond Kant's limits, that there is such a highest being: there is an "absolute" similar to Spinoza's "God or substance."

Nontraditionalists, by contrast, see Hegel as aspiring not to surpass but to *eliminate* Kant's limits, or to erase those limits from within. That is, Kant denies the possibility of knowledge of the sorts of objects of special interest to pre-critical metaphysics, and Hegel *agrees*. But Hegel takes Kant's denial farther: Hegel aims to justify the conditions of the possibility of thought about objects in a manner which will *deny* or *undercut* the idea that these conditions might block access to a more fundamental type of object or aspect of reality. So our knowledge, though it is conditioned, is not limited or restricted. And the "forms of thought" which condition our knowledge do not merely articulate the way objects appear to us; they are supposed to articulate the way things really or *absolutely* are. For example, Pippin portrays Hegel as aiming to eliminate Kant's limitation of our knowledge by arguing that "'thought determinations of the real' ... *are* what it is to be real." Or, Hegel tries to argue that "what initially can only be *our* way of taking up, discriminating, categorizing the world" can "somehow pass from 'ours' to 'absolute' status."¹²

Furthermore, just as Kant's "Transcendental Deduction" turns on the "transcendental unity of apperception," Hegel's deduction of the "forms of thought" is supposed to be grounded by appeal to some kind of self-conscious or

¹² Pippin (1989, 83) and (1993, 287) respectively. On the later formulation, see Stern's (forthcoming) response. McDowell, though not focused specifically on Hegel interpretation, offers an interesting formulation of the general point: "it is central to Absolute Idealism to reject the idea that the conceptual realm has an outer boundary" (1994, 44). Redding is another nontraditionalist who advances broadly similar claims in a compelling manner. See Redding (2002, 3.2).

apperceptive subjectivity.¹³ Insofar as this form of subjectivity is supposed to ground *absolute* forms of thought, it will itself be *the absolute*. Or, perhaps Hegel thinks that this form of subjectivity must be accounted for in terms of a yet more basic “structure” of historically developing forms of social life (or “*Geist*”); if so, then knowledge of the absolute would be achieved by, as Brandom says, “making that structure explicit” (1999, 182).

Note what makes this strand of nontraditionalism more compelling than the idea of a “non-metaphysical” interpretation discarded above. The point here is not that Hegel *rejects* metaphysical questions about the real or absolute nature of reality *in favor* of questions about our concepts, conceptual scheme, language, and the source of their legitimacy, normativity, etc. The compelling idea is rather that Hegel pursues some kind of consideration concepts and legitimacy which is specifically supposed to *resolve* metaphysical questions about reality, or questions about the way things really or absolutely are.¹⁴

4. Nontraditionalism and the Need for New Accounts of Hegel’s Metaphysics

But what specifically *are* Hegel’s “thought determinations of the real”? And, more generally, what distinctive conclusions does Hegel advocate concerning the way things really or absolutely are? The most promising ways to further develop and defend nontraditionalism will require focusing directly on such questions about the specific character of Hegel’s metaphysics.

Why must nontraditionalists focus on such questions? To begin with, it would be implausible to say that Hegel seeks to justify certain “forms of thought”

¹³ Both Pippin (1989, 18) and Brandom (1999, 168) stress Hegel’s praise of Kant’s “original synthetic unity of apperception” at WL 6:254/584.

¹⁴ So this strand of nontraditionalism can recognize and make sense of Hegel’s ambition to employ some new form of *logic* to resolve old questions about *metaphysics*. See e.g. EL §9An.

as themselves “determinations of the real,” but has nothing further to say about *which* forms or determinations—or about what reality, so-determined, is like. And on this specific terrain nontraditionalists cannot lean on a comparison with Kant. For the content of Hegel’s “determinations of the real” is supposed to differ from the content of Kant’s conditions of the possibility of experience. Hegel *complains*, for example, about Kant’s claim “that cognition has no other forms of thought than finite categories.”¹⁵ And Hegel does not seek a new justification for *Kant’s* account of the extent of our knowledge, adding only the negative point that it is illegitimate to even conceive of anything beyond that extent. Nor does Hegel simply borrow Kant’s account of a causally-determined realm of spatio-temporal appearances and argue that *this* is all there is to reality itself.

Nontraditionalists certainly do have their ways of understanding Hegel’s departure from Kant: they emphasize, as noted above, Hegel’s holism and his account of *Geist*. Both will lead nontraditionalists into debates about the specific character of Hegel’s metaphysics. Consider holism first. Some forms of semantic holism and epistemological holism may well be metaphysically neutral. For example, the former might hold, without saying anything about reality itself, that *our concepts* depend for their *meanings* on their places within a larger whole, network, or conceptual scheme. But the compelling nontraditionalist proposal is that Hegel’s “forms of thought” are “determinations of the real” or “what it is to be real” (Pippin 1989, 83). So if *Hegel* has a holistic account of the “forms of thought,” then this would have to include a metaphysical dimension; it would have to involve some form of the idea that, for real things themselves, “what it is

¹⁵ WL 6:261/589; Also e.g. EL §62An. See also Hegel’s responses to Kant’s Antinomies. For example: it is wrong for Kant and post-Kantians to assume “that cognition has no other forms of thought than finite categories” (WL 5:216/191 and also WL 5:270ff.234ff.; VGP 20:351ff./3:448ff). On the importance of this Hegelian ambition to extend our knowledge beyond Kant’s limits, see Stern (1999, section V).

to be real” depends on their place within some larger whole or network. That would certainly be a substantial claim about the way things really or absolute are, and it certainly could be argued that this claim is Hegel’s. But this raises a further question for nontraditionalists: How would such a metaphysically-committed *holism* differ from the *monism* traditionally attributed to Hegel? That is, how would it differ from the modified forms of Spinozism described in traditional interpretations? Nontraditionalists have an opportunity to advance their case here, but they cannot do so by retreating to non-metaphysical discussion of semantics and conceptual schemes, epistemology and webs of belief, etc. The promising way forward is to focus on the implications of their approach concerning the specific content of Hegel’s *metaphysics*. In what specific sense are real things themselves *dependent*? What is the specific nature of the *whole* or network on which things depend? Those who want a nontraditional interpretation stressing holism need to argue that Hegel’s answers differ in philosophically crucial respects from Spinoza’s answers, and from the answers described in traditional interpretations of Hegel.

Some nontraditionalists might wish to resist the demand for answers to metaphysical questions of interest to pre-critical metaphysicians like Spinoza, pointing out that Hegel *rejects* some pre-critical formulations of metaphysical questions. For example, Hegel dismisses the questions of pre-critical rational psychology, which are supposed to illegitimately treat *Geist* (mind or spirit) “as a thing.”¹⁶ But Hegel’s ultimate goal here clearly is not Kantian in spirit: Hegel does not aim to establish a limitation of our knowledge; he aims to overcome such limitations and to establish knowledge of reality and the absolute. So he certainly

¹⁶ See §389, §389Zu, §379Zu, §34Zu; *VGP* 19:199/2:181. On this point see especially DeVries (1988) and Wolff (1991).

does not hold that *all* metaphysical questions in *all* formulations are unanswerable. For example, if Hegel is a holist, then he must have answers to questions about the nature of the whole, its parts, and their real relations. And, more generally, the defense of any compelling nontraditional approach cannot rest without specifying which metaphysical questions Hegel *does* engage, how Hegel's *answers* differ from traditional portrayals. Perhaps in this way Hegel's theoretical philosophy could be shown to be "non-metaphysical" in a very narrow sense: it might be shown to differ crucially from *specifically pre-critical* forms of metaphysics, such as Spinoza's monism. But, again, making that case would require focusing specifically on the details of Hegel's own metaphysics, in order to differentiate it.

The point applies similarly to nontraditionalists' stress on the idea that *Geist*—in the sense of our own historically developing forms of social life—is supposed to ground Hegel's determinate "forms of thought." Perhaps, as nontraditionalists sometimes suggest, this idea is similar to antirealism or to pragmatism.¹⁷ But surely not to any *non-metaphysical* form of antirealism or pragmatism, limited to claims about (e.g.) epistemology or semantics. For example, Hegel's view cannot be just that the "forms of thought" inherent in our concepts, language, standards or forms of social life determine what can *meaningfully count* as real *for us*—without involving any metaphysical claim, any claim about reality itself, or (as some critics of realism put it) any claim about an "absolute truth" or "one true theory" of the world.¹⁸ Again, nontraditionalists

¹⁷ On antirealism see Pippin (1989; 99, 262, and 267); on pragmatism see Brandom (1999).

¹⁸ Citations from Putnam (1982, 147); see also the concluding claim that metaphysics is "overwhelmingly unlikely" to be revived (165). Granted, there are nearly endless varieties of antirealism and realism debated today, and perhaps more than one way to understand Putnam's claims here. But I see the controversies concerning what antirealism and realism are, and what issues are at stake there, as excellent reason to cut out the contemporary middleman and focus

themselves, at least in their more compelling formulations, hold that Hegel's "forms of thought" *are* supposed to be absolute, or to articulate how things absolutely are. So if nontraditionalists propose that some relationship between *Geist* and the "forms of thought" makes *Geist* so fundamental for Hegel, then they need an account of the metaphysical dimension of this relation—an account of a real relationship between *Geist* (something real, even if not "a thing" in some sense) and reality generally (or "what it is to be real"). And they need to explain how this relationship differs from traditional portrayals, such as those on which *Geist* is supposed to "posit" the universe (as in Taylor's account).¹⁹

In sum, nontraditionalists have promising avenues open to them for the further development and defense of their approach to Hegel, whether they stress Hegel's holism, his account of *Geist*, or some combination. But what these avenues will require most of all are defenses of nontraditional accounts of Hegel's *metaphysics*. My own view is that especially promising indications of the directions in which nontraditionalists can advance their case in this way can be found in Brandom's recent interpretation of Hegel's holism, on which Hegel's account of laws and properties offers a "holistic successor conception to a world of facts—namely, the world as having the structure of infinity."²⁰

more directly at *Hegel*. See also Pippin on how Hegel's antirealism itself amounts to a kind of realism involving claims about reality "as it is in itself" (1989, 99).

¹⁹ Nontraditionalists tend to worry that a metaphysical dependence claim would result in an unappealing form of metaphysical idealism, suggesting there could be no reality without us; they seek to differentiate Hegel's views; see Pippin (1993, 65 and 2001) and Brandom (2001, 82). For an interesting combination of a traditional account of the dependence or positing relation with a nontraditional account of *Geist* as our historically developing forms of social life, see Forster's interpretation: Hegel thinks that truth itself depends on enduring communal consensus, and that we consequently have a "radical freedom, or power to determine what is the case quite generally" (1998, 242).

²⁰ Brandom 2001, 69. See also Westphal on Hegel's "ontological holism" (1989, Ch. 10). And see Redding's suggestive remark about a respect in which Hegel is "at variance with the Spinozistic form of holism on which Schelling had drawn" (1996, 108-9).

5. Traditionalism and Higher Forms of Intellect

In what sense do traditionalists see Hegel as aspiring to surpass or to get beyond Kant's limits, rather than eliminating or erasing those limits from the inside? Consider Kant's view. Our understanding is merely "discursive": we cannot extend our knowledge through concepts alone; we require discrete content provided by sensible intuition.²¹ This limits us to knowledge within the bounds of sensibility or experience, or the bounds delimited by the forms of our sensible intuition—space and time. Kant will argue that this allows knowledge of appearances but not of things as they are in themselves. Such knowledge would require a higher kind of intellect. It would require a non-sensible intuition providing *immediate* access to reality, or what Kant calls "intellectual intuition."²² Kant sometimes further suggests that this sort of immediacy would be possible only for a divine intellect, specifically in the sense of an intellect whose own cognitions were "archetypes," the very ground or source of the reality of the objects known.²³ Kant denies that we can have any knowledge of the existence of such a divine intellect (e.g. A277-8/B333-4). But he stresses the importance of its conceivability: for example, "in the *Critique of Pure Reason* we had to have in mind another possible intuition if we were to hold our own to be a special kind, namely one that is valid of objects merely as appearances" (KU 5:406).

Traditionalists tend to see Hegel as arguing that (i) there really is such a higher non-discursive form of intellect; (ii) there really is some highest thing or

²¹ Our understanding "can only think and must seek the intuition in the senses" (B135). To extend my knowledge, "I must have besides the concept of the subject something else (X) upon which the understanding may rely" (B12), and my source for this "something else" must be sensible intuition.

²² In the first *Critique*, see for example A49/B72, A252/B309, A279/B335. For a broader summary of the different senses of "intellectual intuition" in Kant, see Gram (1981).

²³ See e.g. B68 and Gram (1981, 291).

aspect of reality which can be known only thereby; and (iii) we ourselves can achieve just such knowledge of the absolute.

What does this have to do with monism? Kant argues that our discursive understanding leaves us unable to have theoretical knowledge of an infinite whole of everything; we rely for the content of our knowledge on stepwise successive synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition, and an infinite synthesis could never be completed.²⁴ Here too we can conceive of an intellect not limited in this way, capable of cognition grasping together *immediately* the parts, no matter how complex, of a larger whole; Kant's most direct and extended discussion of this particular point is found in the third *Critique* discussion of what he calls there an "intuitive understanding" (KU §§76-7). Traditionalists see Hegel as asserting, in response, that there is an absolute or highest being to be found in an infinite and unified whole of everything, and that we can gain knowledge of this absolute by achieving something similar to Kant's "intuitive understanding."²⁵

This general approach raises complex issues concerning the development of Hegel's philosophy and his relationships to his contemporaries. To make a long story very short, the clearest supporting evidence is found in Hegel's earliest publications, from 1801 and 1802. Here Hegel certainly does seem to claim that we can have "intellectual intuition," specifically of a highest being akin to Spinoza's substance—or that "God's knowledge is accessible to finite consciousness" (Longuenesse 2000, 263). Hegel portrays himself as thereby defending the philosophy of his friend and collaborator Schelling. But Hegel and Schelling fall out shortly thereafter. And in later publications, beginning with the

²⁴ E.g. A424/B454, A428/B456, A432/B460; A486/B514.

²⁵ For accounts on which Hegel seeks to establish the reality of a modified form of the "intuitive understanding," see Baum (1990, 173); Düsing (1986, 125) and Longuenesse (2000, 234).

1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel consistently emphasizes extremely sharp criticism of appeals to “intellectual intuition” by his contemporaries.²⁶

If the mature Hegel explicitly now *rejects* appeals to “intellectual intuition,” then should we still see him as aspiring to knowledge of a highest being accessible only to a higher form of intellect, beyond Kant’s discursive understanding?

Traditionalists answer in the affirmative. They portray the changes in Hegel’s writings as a reflection of his development of a new way of meeting more or less continuous philosophical goals, goals formed during Hegel’s collaboration with Schelling, and perhaps owing much to the influence of German romanticism. More specifically, the changes involve a new terminology for stating, and a new way of justifying, the basic claim that there is a higher form of intellect and an all-encompassing substance or absolute knowable only thereby.²⁷

But consider Hegel’s specific philosophical complaint about his contemporaries: it is “as prevalent as it is pretentious,” Hegel says, to claim that there is some highest being knowable only by “intellectual intuition,” or only by grasping reality *immediately*; but such claims always beg the question, because they cannot be known in a manner mediated by philosophical argument.²⁸ So the mature Hegel comes to think, as Harris puts it, that “‘intuition’ must be resolved into a truly speculative method of discursive reasoning” (1993, 44). If so, then

²⁶ PhG 3:23/10. Hegel does not name Schelling here, and there is room for dispute about whether Schelling’s account of “intellectual intuition” is his target. But Hegel will later apply the basic complaint here to Schelling specifically (VGP 20:421 ff.). For more on Hegel’s development and his developing relationship to Schelling, see Baum (1986), especially his basic gloss at (32-3) and on the “disappearance of intuition” (225 ff.). On this disappearance of intuition, see also Harris (1993, 44) and Beiser (1993, 18).

²⁷ Beiser (2005) stresses an approach to Hegel via Schelling (59 f.) and German romanticism (34 f.), though he also emphasizes Hegel’s later rejection of intuition (14 and 169 f.). See also the recent accounts of the continuity of Hegel’s basic goals in Longuenesse (2000) and Franks (2005, 6.4).

²⁸ Citations from PhG 15/4. For the clearest presentations of the criticism here, see especially Hegel’s criticisms of Schelling at VGP 20:434-5/3:525 and the extended discussion of Hegel’s contemporaries at EL §61 ff. On this criticism see especially Westphal (2000).

traditionalists seem to me to be in an awkward position: Hegel now specifically seeks to limit himself to claims which can be justified by entirely discursive means; so how could he seek to conclude that there is a highest being which is specifically supposed to be such as could be known to exist only by transcending the limits of the discursive understanding? Traditionalists need to show that a more complex view of the matter resolves this apparent tension. Or they need to shift toward a portrayal on which Hegel argues that the absolute *can* be known discursively; but the latter approach would be a huge step toward the central claim of recent *non*traditionalists: Hegel does not seek to *surpass* Kant's limits, or the limits of the discursive understanding, but rather to *eliminate* the idea that some most fundamental thing or aspect of reality might exceed these limits.²⁹

Traditionalists often see Hegel as always assuming the possibility of the very sort of metaphysics which Kant criticizes.³⁰ So they could say that Hegel's discursive reasoning begins from this assumption, proceeding to the conclusions that a highest being of interest in such metaphysics must really exist, and that we must have the capacities required to know this absolute. But to dispute Kant's views by first *assuming* the contrary of the conclusion for which Kant actually *argues* would be to beg the question, and manifestly so. How could that be meant as an *alternative* to the question-begging, the lack of philosophical argument, which Hegel himself complains about in his contemporaries? This worry has nothing to do with whether Hegel's arguments meet the standards of contemporary philosophy; the challenge is making sense of how Hegel's

²⁹ See especially Pippin on Hegel's development and relation to Schelling (1989, ch. 4). Also Redding: "the very opposition that Kant has between finite human thought and infinite godly thought is suspect" (2002, section 3.2; also 1996, 23-4).

³⁰ See e.g. Düsing: "the possibility of scientific metaphysics, which Kant examines critically, is accepted without question" (1983, 421) and also (Düsing 1976, 119). And Guyer (1993, 171-2 and 204-5). And Siep (2000, 18-21).

arguments are supposed to meet the standards Hegel *himself* employs in criticizing his contemporaries. Here nontraditionalists have enjoyed an advantage: Pippin in particular provides a rival account of Hegel's development and his relation to Schelling (1989, ch. 4)—one which dovetails with a philosophical account focused on explaining how Hegel's arguments seek to engage Kant without manifestly begging the question (1989, 7).

In my view, the most fruitful avenues for future development of traditionalist approaches will be those which respond in kind, linking a more traditional understanding of Hegel's views and their development with new philosophical accounts of how Hegel's arguments function. One especially promising recent approach can be found in Longuenesse's (2000) account of how Hegel draws on resources genuinely present in Kant's three *Critiques* in order to try to justify his claims. Another can be found in Paul Franks' (2005) new account of how Schelling's arguments function, and of how Hegel follows Schelling (371 ff.). And yet another can be found in Horstmann's (2006) account of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a modified form of transcendental argument for metaphysical monism.

5. Conclusion

In sum, interpreters of all persuasions should look beyond debates about the idea of a "non-metaphysical" interpretation of Hegel, focusing instead on debating about the answers to questions concerning the specific character of Hegel's metaphysics. For example, are traditionalists right to see Hegel's "absolute" as akin to the highest beings of interest to pre-critical rationalists like Spinoza, or akin to those objects which (Kant argues) could be known only by a higher form of non-discursive intellect? Or can nontraditionalists make a stronger case that *this* specific kind of metaphysics differs in philosophically

crucial respects from Hegel's contrasting and distinctive metaphysical account of reality and the absolute?

And there is one final advantage to be gained by this shift in focus. The old debate tends to be a zero-sum game, where any advantage for a "non-metaphysical" account is a disadvantage for "metaphysical" interpretations, and vice-versa. Once we focus instead on debating the specific character of Hegel's metaphysics, we open up the possibility of hybrid accounts. For it may be possible to follow traditional accounts of Hegel's metaphysics in some respects while also following nontraditional accounts of Hegel's metaphysics in other respects. If so, then the very best future interpretations might turn out to be those which can recognize and integrate the advantages of both traditional and nontraditional approaches to Hegel's theoretical philosophy.³¹

³¹ I would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of an anonymous reader for this journal.

Primary Texts / Abbreviations

HEGEL: I cite the *Encyclopedia* by § number, with ‘An’ indicating *Anmerkung* and ‘Zu’ indicating the *Zusatz*. All other references to Hegel’s writings are given by volume and page number of *Werke in zwanzig Bände*. Edited by E. Moldenhauer und K. Michel, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970-1. I use the following abbreviations and translations:

PhG: *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translations from A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

WL: *Hegel’s Science of Logic*. Translations from A.V. Miller. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969.

EL: *Encyclopaedia Logic*.

VGP: *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

KANT: Aside from references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, all references to Kant’s writings are given by volume and page number of the Akademie edition of Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-). I use these abbreviations and translations:

A/B: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translations from Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge, 1998.

KU: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translations from Guyer and Mathews. Cambridge, 2000.

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