

Hegel's Idealism With Respect To That of Kant

I offer two characterizations of Hegel's idealism, both as situated in metaphysics generally and as situated relative to Kant's critical philosophy: a more orthodox account of its emergence out of a critique of Kant's everywhere-mediation, and a slightly odder account involving Roman Jakobson's metonym-metaphor dyad. The positions that (a) Kant was a thinker whose radicalism was missed by Hegel and (b) Kant was radicalized by Hegel are in the orthodox account suggested to be mutually exclusive; I would like to suggest that both are in fact true, that Hegel comes to his properly radical critique of Kant by eliding what is more subtly radical in Kant—what in Kant deviates from what one ought to expect of an idealism.

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Let us take the word *metaphysics* in the Kantian sense, as denoting the entire system or scaffolding of *a priori* truths which the I (I avoid *subject* because of its overtones involving subjection, hierarchy, which I believe are not present in the German, and *self* because such a notion only comes about when the I has already been taken as an object) takes with her into her experiencing.¹ Familiarly, a metaphysics is called *idealist* if it asserts the mind-dependence of reality, though it has been pointed out that really the word should designate any theory that is realist about some entities that might fairly be described as "mental"—whether this denotes the inside-the-mind-ness of a belief or idea or the impenetrability to anything but mind of, say, a Platonic Idea.² I would however like to here work with a stricter conception of the word, as denoting a metaphysics which posits a total structural congruency between the I and her

¹ This is, at least, the conception Kant lays out in the *Groundwork* (4:388); Beiser reads a different definition (54).

² See Dunham, Grant, and Watson, *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy*, 6-8.

environment (i.e. *Umwelt*, which is to be distinguished from the world). What exactly the nature of this structural congruency ought to be is up for debate, but might for example be posited to be a *grammatical* congruency: any true statement analyzing the I may be converted into a true statement analyzing the environment simply by substituting some terms for their coordinates in the other regime. (Robert Brandom, for example, seems amenable to a procedure much like this one, with *coordinateness* further explained as *reciprocal sense dependence*.³)

We may further elaborate this definition, along Hegelian lines,⁴ into a distinction between *subjective* and *objective* idealism: the former writes structural congruency as unidirectional, mechanistic, the I constructing or bricolaging her environment into the only structure she intimately knows, i.e. her own; while the latter writes structural congruency as an imperative visited upon both I and environment "from beyond," though of course this *beyond* may denote an entity either transcendent or immanent. In both cases, three parties are involved: the *I*, which is never *part* of its environment insofar as it is traditionally agent, but also insofar as it has the faculty to encounter, to look upon this environment as *an* environment, and so "from outside" in some sense; the *environment* as a manifold which is always in some measure fallen, which has a component of mere appearance rather than actuality, contingency and coincidence rather than necessity (fallen also in the sense that there exists no imperative to render the system back into actuality—that actuality will only exist inside it and not of it, through it);⁵ and some entity which establishes a relation between the I and her environment, whether this relation is one of construction, as for the subjective idealists, or one of subjection to some order, as for the objective idealists. A characterization of this third entity as *nous* would be conceding the point to the objective idealists, and a characterization as *apprehension* would be conceding to the

³ See Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 194-199.

⁴ See *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 90.

⁵ *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 33-4.

subjective idealists; I prefer the term *language*, which, though certainly rather suggestive, allows for the conception of the entity as both something that may be wielded by the speaker and something that imposes its own exigencies upon speech, lays out a finite list of permitted motions within it. Hegel does in fact gesture toward language so traversing, so defining a perpendicularity through I and environment alike: for him, what each sentence appropriates to itself are precisely universals, which are the waypoints of thought.⁶ Language, that is, traces thought.

It is important to make clear that in Kantian subjective idealism the I's construction of the environment is not *free* in any substantive sense: she is laborer rather than artisan; she is working by a plan which has already been provided to her. After all, she is modelling the world upon herself, and she did not model herself. This patently fails to betray any meaningful subjectivism in the Kantian schema. What Hegel finds "subjective" in Kant really reduces to Kant's idea that language has two clearly separate functions: *aesthesis* and *analysis*; narration and thought; prose and poetry. First I come upon a description of the world—an intuition—then I think with this description, take the sensory data that is given to me by it and come to universals or universal judgments, "do literary criticism." For the first step of this two-step process to be valid, language, *contra* Hegel, must be suitable for the recounting of representations, particulars, and not solely universals; it is this first step which ensures that any operation by which one is-in-the-world, which in our current scheme is a linguistic operation, would by the nature of language be mediated.

For Hegel, too, the study of thought in itself, and so the study of language, will result in the production of a complete account of the workings of all three components of the world (I, environment, language). Both thinkers agree on the necessity of some sort of thinking into

⁶ *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 52-3.

thought or arriving at language: for Kant, this is analysis; for Hegel, *thinking over*. But for Hegel a thinking into language in its accessibility to us is already a thinking into the environment insofar as the latter is actuality and not appearance, insofar as the latter partakes in the same Absolute as I do, given that the Absolute is self-similar.⁷ After all, in Hegel's words, "was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich, und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig":⁸ here, *vernünftig* does not comfortably correspond to its usual translation *rational*, given that the latter indicates taking what one might call a statistical perspective, a coming to structure thanks to reasons, to arguments—mediatedly—while the former indicates a more conceptually primitive, pure, total grasping, taking up, perhaps of a literary or mathematical nature. There is a univocity between language as it is taken up, worked over, and happenings as they play out.

Thus, while language in Kant is an inherently private thing which I use to make my world livable and at least have an understanding with myself, language in Hegel is a reliably communicatory entity, a coin valid wherever one might go. After all, Hegel does not tolerate the *Spaltung* between the problematic (that which demands treatment by thought) and assertoric (that which permits treatment by thought)—the *Spaltung*, the *Grenze* named the *noumenon*, which is defining of the topology of Kantian metaphysics;⁹ by the grace of the Absolute, by its ever-willingness to cooperate with us,¹⁰ we are free of epistemological limitation: our conceptual space is unbounded, not finite. I would argue this to be equivalent to the (seemingly indefensible) claim that what may be explained in poetry will always also be explicable in prose, since poetry is language's mechanism for coping with a terrain it can grasp and wield but not fill in, populate; explicate but not explain: a pure antinomy, for example, like the Trinity. Epistemic

⁷ See *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 43.

⁸ *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 33.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A255/B310-11.

¹⁰ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 47.

conditions,¹¹ on the other hand, are promulgated during and as a consequence of aesthesis—the one practically private (because not dealing with universals) mode of language—for the constraining by form of formless manifoldness is a placing of constraints upon the forms of knowing more broadly. Then, Hegel's argument against the form-content dyad—against that formless content which is to make up the environment, and which is then aesthesized, given form—against manifoldness at large—functions by promulgating a labeling of aesthesis a fictional process.¹²

Under this interpretative regime, the Hegelian advancement upon Kant is suggested to be precisely a rejection of the admittedly attractive thesis of epistemic conditioning in exchange for the thesis of the inherent structuredness of nature and the immediacy of our access to such, also attractive in its jettisoning the *manifoldness* concept, its evading thereby the standard realist criticism of constructivist metaphysics: of what do we construct our worlds? what *is* this entity called manifoldness, this isolated and unparalleled residue betraying the failure of Kant's system to be entirely systematic? (Goodman, I think, had the right idea in characterizing this *manifoldness* out of which we hew our own world-versions as simply a clutter of already-made alien world-versions,¹³ a solution obviously in no way anticipated by Kant.) In other words, Hegel eliminates a "good residue"—the noumenon—in his eliminating from metaphysics of residuality entirely, which for him is both good in itself and does away with a particularly sticky "bad residue"—manifoldness.

Of course, characterization of the noumenon and manifoldness as *residua* is already conceding the point to Hegel; an account that is fair to Kant will point to the residuality of the concepts obscuring some vital function of theirs, one that Hegel elides. I briefly and broadly

¹¹ The term is Henry Allison's.

¹² This broadly follows Sally Sedgwick's apprehension of the Hegelian critique of Kant.

¹³ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 6.

sketch an attempt at this in the sequel.

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Hegel's attack on Kant's maintaining of the form-content dyad is, I claim, really an attack on Kant's maintaining of the far more immediately defensible I-environment dyad. After all, what we call *objects* attain their objecthood, their over-against-ness, in their standing in some sense *between* I and environment; and this betweenness is in no case symmetric. Consider, for example, the body: I do not think it possible to draw a dividing-line between the body and the I, though patently the body is not felt to be exactly the I; but clearly one can mark where the body terminates in skin and what is environmental begins. An encountered, foreign object, on the other hand, presents as clearly distinguishable from me, but cannot be so distinguished from the environment, being enworlded. We might call the object an *interface* between the I and the environment; then it is clearly an important philosophical question to characterize the interfaciality of the interface.

Obviously, the interface can only exist if there exists a heterogeneity between whose poles it might interface; in Hegel, then, there are no interfaces: no *ob-jects*. Kant, on the other hand, implicitly and cleverly characterizes¹⁴ the interface as that which broadcasts closure to one pole and openness to another: the body, for example, is closed to the environment and open to the I with which it is correlated. A more deflationary and reciprocal restatement: the interface is simultaneously one pole's openness to the other and the other's closure against, rebuff of the one; the body is my openness to the environment taken together with its closedness against me, and the foreign object is the environment's openness to me (perhaps in the sense later explicated by

¹⁴ The argument I have for this is very long and oblique and so I will not present it here. It's possible that there's a more directly exegetical one I'm not aware of.

Heidegger) taken together with my closedness against it. It may, I think, be demonstrated that manifoldness in this conception takes its station as articulation of the openness between the foreign object and the environment, and that the noumenon is some idea of this environment; it may more radically be argued that the closednesses in this model, which I call *skins*, are structurally congruent, homeomorphic to the conceptual skin which is the *Spaltung* between problematicity and assertoricity, the noumenon considered as *limit to pretension*.¹⁵ That is to say, what to Hegel are mere residua in the Kantian system are really Kant's way of accounting for the residua—Hegel's *appearances*—that do seem to populate our world.

Of course, the openness-closedness (content-form) dyad only emerges if there is already an I-environment dyad for these opennesses and closednesses to exist along. Perhaps this is the most profound sense in which Kant's metaphysics is a "metaphysic of grief and longing":¹⁶ Kant conceptually begins at a substantial alienation of the I from her environment which Hegel (who, at least in Brandom's interpretation, holds the current alienation of the I to be purely contingent¹⁷) is not willing to concede.

Roman Jakobson has observed that work in any discipline whose medium is the word (and perhaps in certain other disciplines: art, film...) may be classified as either primarily *metonymic*, grounded in relations of contiguity, explication between words and syntagms (Jakobson gives the example of a *hut* being associated with the phrase *burnt out*), or *metaphoric*, grounded in relations of synonymy between words and syntagms (Jakobson gives the example of a *hut* being associated with the phrase *is a poor little house*).¹⁸ It is clear from the above analysis that Hegelian absolute idealism is entirely metaphoric; as I have suggested, I believe that it is in

¹⁵ A phrase Kant actually does use for the notion (which he claims is not even a concept but something more exotic: a boundary-concept), See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A255/B310.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, 85.

¹⁷ See e.g. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, 472.

¹⁸ Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *Questions of Literary Theory*.

this capacity that Hegelian thought is an idealism in the first place. It might seem that the metonymic pole is occupied by the most truculent physicalisms, those which seamlessly integrate man as part of a mechanistically functioning natural whole; however, in this very integration the part-ness of man is lost: in a real metonym, there always exists a skin circumscribing the part and defending it against—a process distinct from the Hegelian *dividing it from*—the whole. The skin, that is, appears precisely in a metonymic theory; and, as I have implied, critical idealism might be said to be that out of which emerged the original and exemplary skin. This suggests, in my view, that Hegel is an idealist *exactly insofar as he is against Kant*.