

## HEGEL'S METAPHYSICS AS HERMENEUTICS

Jean-Philippe Deranty

*Hegel's Hermeneutics*, Paul Redding's first book, was a major contribution to contemporary Hegel studies. The book developed a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel and an interpretation of the recognition thematic that were as original as they were substantive. In the following, I will attempt to retrace succinctly the two major threads of Redding's reading: the interpretation of recognition as a hermeneutic scheme and the emphasis of Hegel's reliance on "immanentist" arguments. I will then ask three sets of questions to Paul Redding, which follow on from what I perceive to be some of the most striking implications of his Hegel interpretation.

Recent, non-metaphysical readings of Hegel, and of the post-Kantian idealists more generally, operate on the basis of a simple, common-sense assumption: those philosophers immediately writing in the wake of Kant unanimously and consistently understood their own work as pursuing the theoretical revolution brought about by their great predecessor. Of course, they all thought that Kant's proposal required correcting or complementing in some crucial aspects, if only in terms of presentation (Fichte's initial position). But they all professed to follow in his footsteps in their understanding of what philosophical inquiry was to achieve. How, then, could the successors of Kant return to the kind of naive metaphysical realism that the master had debunked in his first *Critique*, as traditional interpretations and critics alike accuse them of doing? The implication of this simple assumption is therefore that somehow, however difficult the task might be in regards to the often baroque and mystical-sounding texts of the post-Kantian idealists, one has to attempt to read them from the perspective of the great Kantian discovery, which marks the beginning of modern philosophy: namely, that the aim of philosophy is not to describe the world as seen from God's perspective, but to reconstruct the conditions underpinning the validity of knowledge claims. The "absolute" in this tradition therefore does not indicate some fundamental layer or origin of truth somehow revealed to the philosopher's unique and superior knowledge. Rather, it points to the full unity of subject and object already assumed in Kant's idealism, that is, the moment where the knowledge about objects provided by science, and the knowledge about this knowledge, articulated by philosophy, co-incide. Such a coincidence is nothing mysterious since in both forms of knowledge, it is the same faculty, reason, that is at play.

*Hegel's Hermeneutics* is an outstanding example of these modern approaches. The book begins by reconstructing the substantial significance of Kant's "Copernican revolution". According to this fundamental metaphor, which captures the spirit of the idealist revolution, philosophy no longer attempts to uncover some given fact upon which knowledge would be founded (facts of consciousness, empirical data, or fundamental ontological truths seen in intellectual intuition). Rather, philosophy now describes the possibility of knowledge in terms of the conditions through which knowledge claims are achieved. The Copernican scientist is able to explain why the Sun appears to revolve around the Earth, by providing a higher order explanation which accounts for the emergence of the first, apparent knowledge claim, and which therefore relativises and denaturalises it. This simple image is an apt picture of what post-Kantian philosophy sets out to achieve: to describe different, and increasingly complex, modes of categorical articulation, which account for the different modes of knowledge (perceptual, aesthetic, mathematical, physical, chemical, and so on), and the different modes of objectivity studied by the sciences (qualitative, physical, social, and so on).

The most important and most difficult challenge for this kind of transcendental inquiry concerns the nature of the points of view from which knowledge claims are constructed. If all epistemic claims can be in principle relativised from some higher epistemic perspective, which explains them by showing the conditions under which they emerge, the key question concerns the nature of the highest point, if there is one, to avoid infinite regress. Classical metaphysics, based as it was on theological assumptions, had an easy answer to this. But what about a transcendental philosophy which only wants to appeal to structures of reason? It is the varying responses to this question, which distinguish between the different models of post-Kantian idealist philosophy. In Kant, famously, this perspective is defined as a "transcendental consciousness", the pure, universal form of perceptual and categorical synthesis, shared by all knowers. And the link between reality itself and the knowledge achieved via the pure categories of perception and thought secured regulatively through the idea of a thinkable yet unknowable "thing in itself".

The thinkers who immediately followed Kant each devised their own alternative models of the transcendental point of view and of the fit between knowledge and reality. Redding's original proposal is that Hegel developed his answer to the two central questions of post-Kantian philosophy by drawing on a conceptual scheme that was hermeneutic in spirit. Accordingly, as in the classical Copernican move, the "deduction" (the explanation of the possibility) of an epistemic position is arrived at by doubling the initial perspective on an object with a second, external perspective, from the point of view of which the first perspective can be explained and evaluated. In Hegel's solution, however, this second perspective is one that is external to the first yet situated on the same ontological level. This solution is summarised in particularly clear fashion in a passage dedicated to the method used in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "It is by the intermediary of another, opposed consciousness that any one consciousness can get a double bearing onto objects, grasping them from its own particular point of view while simultaneously conceiving them as existing independently of this point of view" (111). Whilst in Kant finite consciousness meets its truth in the opposition to transcendental consciousness, for Hegel it is within finite consciousness itself that the evaluative encounter with universality occurs. This encounter, however, which triggers different dialectical "experiences of consciousness", requires the intervention of the other.

This solution makes recognition central. On this reading, recognition is the process whereby agents, by identifying an external perspective onto the world as a valid intentional one, are able to engage in a decentering of their own claims. Recognition makes it possible for claims that are first "in themselves" to be reflected upon "for themselves". The subject is able to confront the subjectivity, or particularity, of his/her epistemic position with an external perspective, thereby correcting the partiality of the initial position, and achieving a higher degree of universality. Recognition therefore, on Paul Redding's interpretation, is indeed a central notion in Hegel, but primordially an epistemological one.

Furthermore, Redding argues that this hermeneutic, intersubjectivistic correction of Kant's solipsistic transcendental subject is closely related to an "immanentist" model, which aims to get rid of the "thing in itself" hypothesis. Taking seriously Kant's fundamental idealist claim about the unity of subject and object,

## HEGEL'S METAPHYSICS AS HERMENEUTICS

---

requires that one consider reality simply as the totality of perspectives onto it. This thought, well articulated in the pantheistic tradition, Redding argues, is given a rationalistic twist by Hegel, in his revision of transcendental philosophy. Accordingly, instead of setting up an ontological divide between the categorical and the real, Hegel is committed to the idea that there is nothing outside the circle of all the different modes in which forms of objectivity and modes of rationality are reciprocally interrelated. Once again, however, this remains strictly within the boundaries of the Copernican move, that is, without any return to some naïve metaphysical realism. Instead, this immanentist solution thinks of itself as the only one that is true to the Copernican revolution, in rejecting any dualistic opposition of reality and the knowledge of it.

There is not the space here to explicate the many, rich ways that make Redding's hermeneutic and immanentist reading of Hegel an important and original contribution within the field of contemporary Hegel studies. I will only list three of the most salient traits, which will then allow me to formulate three questions, inviting Paul to reflect on the logic and implications of his initial Hegel interpretation.

A first important feature I would like to emphasise is the original meaning of recognition in Paul Redding's analysis. Paul's reading is unique amongst the most significant interpretations of the last two decades in making Hegelian recognition an intrinsically epistemological notion, indeed in seeing in it Hegel's core conceptual innovation within the post-Kantian debates about the exact nature of the transcendental point of view and the definition of idealism. This is linked directly, as was succinctly remarked above, to the tight link Redding establishes between Hegel's concept of recognition and his embrace of a hermeneutic model. Other readings of Hegelian recognition, either note the epistemological/metaphysical dimension of the category, but interpret it in theological terms (Theunissen, Williams); or emphasise only the normative role of the notion, even when they share a post-metaphysical concern and insist on the critical (post-Kantian) dimensions of Hegel's project (Pippin, Pinkard). One would like to hear from Redding himself how he situates his reading of Hegel amongst other significant readings. In a number of footnotes in *Hegel's Hermeneutics*, he distances himself from Pinkard's influential reading of the *Phenomenology*. It would be illuminating to hear more about systematic differences with other key contemporary readers of Hegel and how the epistemological interpretation of recognition differs from the others.

The centrality of recognition, understood as Hegel's key epistemological and metaphysical innovation, leads to an original interpretation of the *Science of Logic*. The thread of this interpretation is Hegel's effort gradually to "whittle away" immediacy and dualistic schemes within conceptions of thought: for instance, notions of judgement defined in isolation from other judgements, or different types of opposition postulated between premises and consequences of thought processes. In every case, it is a matter of showing the interrelatedness of seemingly self-standing elements of thought. The truth of the judgement, as a result, turns out to be the syllogism. A new image of thought emerges: "Neither judgements nor inferences can be found that can root the process of reasoning in some immediately intuited certainty. In place of a linear form of reasoning from well-grounded premises, thought will be faced with a circle" (153). The culmination of this constant increase in "mediation" is the "concrete syllogism of necessity", a figure of thought in which all immediacy has disappeared, including the opposition between the form and the object of thought. This syllogism, Redding argues, is in fact "the concrete and pragmatic *recognitively circular* context within which finite thinking subjects necessarily exist" (157). Being "recognitively circular", this figure of thought realises the hermeneutic taking-other-perspectives-into account. But it also realises the immanentist levelling of ontological realities: "It is the circle within which the circularity of formal reasoning can be redeemed, a circle in which both the thinking subject and the thought object are included such that there can be no idea of some absolute place outside the circle, the place for any transcendent subject whose reasoning and knowledge can stand as an ideal against which all finite reason and knowledge is skeptically judged" (ibid.).

One of the most striking consequences of this reading of the *Logic* is that it enables Redding to propound a "non-metaphysical" interpretation of the book, which however takes seriously all the passages in which Hegel discusses "objective" structures of the world itself, notably those passages in the *Logic's* third book dedicated to

mechanistic, chemical and organic processes. This can be related to the positive assessment earlier in *Hegel's Hermeneutics* of the Schellingian texts of the early Hegel and indeed of Schelling's early attempts at combining the Kantian spirit of the transcendental with explorations in the philosophy of nature. Such positive retrieval of the "natural-philosophy" passages in Hegel is quite striking because the vast majority of "non-metaphysical" readers balk at such passages. Pippin's motto, that we should "abandon the Philosophy of Nature", is highly representative in this respect. The question that arises is the following: Paul Redding has written tantalising interpretations of all aspects of Hegel's work, including, recently, his philosophy of religion. How would the hermeneutic/immanentist interpretation approach the Philosophy of Nature? What might we expect to learn from that side of the system from the perspective Redding's interpretation of Hegel's overall project? Was Redding's second book, dedicated to the logic of affect and the relationships between body and mind from the perspective of the German idealists a way of concretely exploring these issues?

Finally, Redding's "non-metaphysical" reading of the *Logic* also enables him to take seriously Hegel's recurrent claim that his *Philosophy of Right* was constructed on the back of his speculative logic. Once again, this a unique feat as most contemporary interpreters steer well clear of the *Logic* in attempting to make the "objective spirit" part of the system relevant for contemporary social and political theory. In his book, Redding explicitly contrasts his own reading of the 1820 book with a classical representative of this strand of modern interpretation, Allen Wood's *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. It would be fascinating to hear Redding's thoughts on other appropriations of Hegel's social and political theory, which dismiss its speculative underpinning, notably Honneth's theory of recognition.

JEAN-PHILLIPE DERANTY is a lecturer in Philosophy at Macquarie University. He is the author of numerous books, most recently *Beyond Communication. Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition*, and, with Nick Smith, the forthcoming *New Philosophies of Labour*.

ABOUT

PAST ARTICLES

LINKS

EDITORIAL BOARD

SUBMISSIONS

CURRENT ISSUE

Established in 2006, PARRHESIA: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY is dedicated to publishing the latest work on continental philosophy, along with new translations and interviews with contemporary thinkers.

All pieces published in the essay section of PARRHESIA are double blind peer-reviewed.

PARRHESIA is affiliated with the Schools of Philosophy and English at the University of Melbourne, and the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy.

Each year, PARRHESIA publishes a special issue dedicated to the proceedings of the Australasian Society of Continental Philosophy ([www.ascp.org.au](http://www.ascp.org.au))

PARRHESIA is a part of the Open Humanities Press, an international open access publishing collective whose mission is to make leading works of contemporary critical thought freely available worldwide.

PARRHESIA is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. The full license is available [here](#). It broadly states that the copyright for the pieces published in Parrhesia remain with the author, while first publication rights belong to PARRHESIA. The contents of PARRHESIA are free for any and all to use in educational and non-commercial settings as long as their source is properly attributed.

Our ISSN is 1834-3287.

To contact PARRHESIA: for general enquiries, email [contact@parrhesiajournal.org](mailto:contact@parrhesiajournal.org), and for enquiries pertaining to the submission of articles and their status, email [submissions@parrhesiajournal.org](mailto:submissions@parrhesiajournal.org). If you wish to submit articles for publication, or offer interviews, translations or reviews, please take note of the relevant information you will find [here](#).