

“Deliver us from Kant” Rereading Hegel’s *Science of Logic* in a Post-Kantian World.

By Ryan McIlhenny

“The world is my idea”: this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows, though man alone can bring it into reflective and abstract consciousness. If he really does this, he has attained to philosophical wisdom. It then becomes clear and certain to him that what he knows is not a sun and an earth; that the world which surrounds him is there only as idea, i.e., only in relation to something else, the consciousness, which is himself.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Ideas (Book I)*

By extending Kantian thought to its logical limit, Schopenhauer’s objective as professor at the University of Berlin was to overturn the work of his contemporary, G. W. F. Hegel. While Kant’s epistemology—viz., that our “modes of knowledge” are “awakened into action,” giving “coherence to our sense-representations”—stands as a critical turning point in the history of philosophy, it nonetheless leads to an irreconcilable dilemma: the existence of the realm of appearances (*phenomena*) and the realm of things-in-themselves (*noumena*).¹ Schopenhauer sharpened Kant’s spheres and highlighted the fact that the latter—where beliefs like God, freedom, and justice reside—is not something that exists in the abstract, but as an ideological projection that hides the will’s desire for “more.” Consequently, science, art, religion, and philosophy are mere sublimations that divert the primitive emotive drive of the subject into a highly sophisticated but nonetheless specious enterprise. “The truth,” Schopenhauer continues, “is that a man can also say and must say, ‘the world is my will.’”² Humans are shut up in their own solipsistic blockhouse. The above passage illustrates the perennial gulf between epistemology and ontology inaugurated by Kant’s Copernican revolution. To the present writer, it seems that contemporary thought has done more to dismantle the legacy of Kant than it has Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, or Freud.

The goal of Hegel’s ontology, outlined in the *Science of Logic*, is to overcome the problems of Kantian epistemology. Upon closer examination, according to Hegel, the dichotomy between *phenomena* and *noumena* is a false one. Cognitive faculties, the ego,

even Being fall into the world of the unknown—things-in-themselves. The conflation of the two realms paralyzes Kant. While our categories make “knowing” possible, for instance, what is it that we see when we think? Can we see the *a priori* category that makes seeing possible? The categories that make appearances possible can’t be known in themselves. The *phenomenal* is identical with the *noumenal*. According to modern and postmodern Kantians not only is God dead (Nietzsche), so is man (Foucault). What, then, can be known? The answer is a bit disappointing—nothing.

In a real sense, Hegel invested in Kant’s problem and made a killing. Central to the *phenomenal/noumenal* identity is pure being, the ground of reality. Let’s revisit the post-Kantian questions. What *is* it that we can know? What *is* it that we cannot know? What *is* and *is not*? (Are you getting the picture?) As Hegel points out, what emerges from the dualism is the linking verb to be—“is.” Thus, he begins the *Logic* with the most important proposition: “*Pure being and pure nothing are the same.*”³ The “is,” in reality, unites being and its negative. Being is (to be) Nothing:

Nothing, taken in its immediacy, shows itself as affirmative, as *being*; for according to its nature it is the same as being. Nothing is thought of, imagined, spoken of, and therefore it *is*; in the thinking, imagining, speaking and so on, nothing has its being” (*SL*, 101).

It’s worth repeating that the two are not separate from one another, but identical. Hegel offers a good example of this at the end of chapter one of the *Logic*: “Pure light and pure darkness are two voids which are the same thing” (*SL*, 93). When we stare into pure light—light that allows us to see—we tend to become blind. Even flighty jocks can appreciate Hegel’s dialectic. Repairing sore muscles, BEN GAY ointment is both hot and cold at the same time, the perfect household Hegelian product.

Being and Nothing serve as the initial starting point for Hegelian ontology. If Kant and Schopenhauer are correct—that there *is in fact* or *in reality* the unknown outside the mind—then, by Hegel’s redefinition, there is something. The world is not—indeed, cannot be—the mere imposition of my categories or the projection of my will. Humans do not organize the spray of phenomena arbitrarily. The ontology (being or reality) of Nothing proves that there is something. Saying that there is nothing outside

my own mind is equivalent to saying that there is something outside my mind. Thus, one can know truly that there is an external world. This is the beginning of all knowledge: “the unity of being and nothing as the primary truth now forms once and for all the basis and element of all that follows...determinate being, quality, and generally all philosophical Notions” (*SL*, 85).

Such a situation, however, is never stable. Think about it. If there is immediate being, there is immediate nothing and vice versa. It’s almost like thinking about two sides of a coin at the same time. Thinking about heads means nothing without tails. When you spin the coin the two images merge into something qualitatively different. Individual abstractions cannot stand. Things are produced by their positive and negative. Think about it this way: place your hand in front of a television set and wave it back and forth. What happens? Although your fingers are present, they also “disappear” but nonetheless place a darker film over the projected image. Consequently, the identity of being and nothing is the dynamic “movement of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other: *becoming*” (*SL*, 83). The active unrest or moment of *becoming* necessarily produces something. That something in turn is “sublated only in so far as it has entered into unity with its opposite; in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a moment” (*SL*, 107). Concepts of knowledge (i.e., facts, propositions, basic beliefs, or common sense truths) are only moments—moments of becoming. We must remind ourselves that the beliefs we take as transcendently constant may not be. Consider the various paradigm shifts in Western thinking, from Newton to relativity in physics, from positivism to the linguistic turn in philosophy, from comity and consensus to fragmentation and conflict in history, or from six-day to framework in theology. Fundamentalists of both the left and the right—yes, there are rank liberals that are akin to narrow minded despots—should be mindful of dialectical uneasiness. I’m not suggesting that one should be “open-minded” in an unbounded sense, but that one should be open to the possibility of error. To err is human.

It is important to note, however, that Becoming is the “unseparatedness of being and nothing, not the unity which abstracts,” which Kantians assume it to be (*SL*, 105). It is incorrect to think of the dialectic as separated phases of “thesis,” “antithesis,” and

“synthesis.” Since “*Becoming* is the immanent synthesis of being and nothing,” Hegel warns against using the term “synthesis” as “an external bringing together of mutually external things already there” (*SL*, 96). You can now reconsider what you’ve learned in your history of philosophy class.

How, then, can we make a distinction between things? When I see someone or something, I assume that I know them immediately as a real being apart from me—an “other.” If this is true, then, according to Hegel’s identity, the negative is also a part of me. This is Hegel’s notion of determinate being that will work its way down to the specific quality of a thing. “Determinate being,” Hegel writes, “is the sphere of difference, of dualism, the field of finitude” (*SL*, 157). Each being is the result of the dialectic. A better way to think of this is to say that a subject, say *A*, is defined by what it is not. *A*’s being is defined in *relation* to what it is not, namely, not *being B*. *B*’s being necessarily defines *A*’s being. It is *A*’s negation. Yet if *B* is a pure nothing, then, an absolute “other” would exist. This is where Kant hits the railing. It is incorrect to assume a mere differential relationship, which presupposes isolated things. *A* has within itself the seed of its own negation, what Hegel calls “the relation to its otherness within itself” (*SL*, 408). The same is true for *B*. In the final analysis, *A* and *B* are defined respectively by their own negation, which is retained in their opposite. Thus, “something and other are, in the first place, both determinate beings or somethings ... each and every something is just as well a ‘this’ as it is also another” (*SL*, 117).⁴

At first glance, however, this presents a problem. If my finite qualities are defined in relation to an infinite number of other predicates (i.e., determinate being opening up to the infinite), then my specific being diffuses and becomes swallowed up by the whole, for *A* will be defined by its infinite negation—namely, $\sim B$, $\sim C$, $\sim D$, *ad infinitum*, such that *A* disappears, privileging the “One” over the “Many.” This is a common critique leveled against Hegel—viz., that he is concerned only with the whole, the parts don’t matter. But if we end here, we return to Kant’s dichotomy, for *A*’s being would become an abstract nothing and thus subject to the whims of creative will. To avoid this problem, Hegel returns to the dialectic. Each individual thing retains being/nothing and becoming, which means, for instance, that if a thing retains its own

contradiction, then it must retain an aspect of being that is unique to itself. The parts and the whole maintain their position in the cosmos. A thing strives (another word for becoming) to maintain itself by overcoming its negative —i.e., overcoming the other (immediate or abstract negation) and its own identity (the negation of the negation).

Things must retain specific characteristics that are different from other beings. If all beings were qualitatively the same, then how could one define anything? Here again Hegel offers another “sublated” concept: “The negative relation of the one to itself is repulsion,” which provides “the material for attraction” (*SL*, 168, 173). The force of pulling toward and pushing away, like two magnets, creates a something in between. The double negation is the difference that makes a thing unique, which leads to Hegel’s explication of Quantity (i.e., uniform space) and Quality (i.e., the specific characteristics of something):

Quantity is sublated being-for-self; the repelling one which related itself only negatively to the excluded one, having passed over into relation to it treats the other as identical with itself, and in doing so has lost its determination: being-for-self has passed over into attraction (*SL*, 187).

Frederick Engels illustrated the relationship between quantity and quality in *Landmarks of Scientific Socialism*: “water...at 0 C changes from a liquid to a solid and at 100 C from liquid to gas...thus at both of these points of departure a mere quantitative change in temperature produces a qualitative change in water.”⁵ While a change in quantity engenders a qualitative change, the essence of the thing (e.g., water) remains the same. Thus there is difference with sameness or, like the continuous points on a line, continuity and discreteness (*SL*, 187). The relationship between quantity and quality can also be applied to studies in the humanities. Hegelians have extended this to concepts of racial identity: change over time (quantity) produces a qualitative change in identity. The same could be said of class and gender.

The idea that objects necessarily exist and are both same and unique in their becoming presupposes that one can distinguish between them at given moments. Defining something means to delimit or trace its boundaries against the line of another

thing—“the *being beyond it*” (*SL*, 134). How does Hegel account for the line of demarcation between things? “Limit is the mediation [middle between or frontier] through which something and other each as well *is*, as *is not*” (*ibid*). For a Kantian, where does one thing end and another begin? This, for the Hegelian, is the wrong question. One could argue that the limit is the blended field whereby Being and Nothing fuse and thus blur any explicitly recognizable line. Does this mean, then, that there is no distinction between things, that everything is the same? Not necessarily. To illustrate this point, think about the grain-pile paradox. At what “point” does a pile disappear when sequentially taking away (i.e., negating) a single grain? The logic of such repetitious abstraction, in this case separating a grain from the pile, remains constant, despite the fact that there is a qualitative change. No line exists. Thus, one can be epistemologically justified in believing that something exists, that it is limited, without having to show the exact point of its beginning or its end.

To a large degree, the pursuit of concrete borders, what can and cannot be known in a Kantian sense, has undermined the efforts of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Attempts at fixing the limits of what can be known have in many instances led to contradictions. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle failed to see the inherent contradiction of their own system. The two part strategy for determining true propositions—namely that a statement has to be either analytic or synthetic—cannot be verified by its own criteria. Their standard for truth is neither analytic nor empirical. Indeed, to paraphrase Kurt Godel, a mathematical system pushed to its limit leads to absurdity and complete misunderstanding. The early Ludwig Wittgenstein is a good example of an analytic philosopher who honestly—yet with great anxiety—recognized the inability to arrest the concepts in reality. The error of the positivists was that they reduced everything down to the world of quantity; they tried to fix borders. Once again as the *Logic* shows, thinkers can only posit moments of truth—that is, once a thing is defined, its limit is transgressed and thus becomes a partial or deficient truth. Many scholars find this constant flux unsettling, but for Hegel it is the ground of all existing things. Even analytic logic is refined by Hegelian logic.

But why stop with mid-twentieth-century positivism? What about the contemporary environment? While shattering the hubris of modernism, Hegel's *Logic* warns against the skepticism of studies loosely labeled "post-modern." Arguably, Kantianism is culpable for the specious construction of the alien or marginalized "other." Subjective categories galvanized by dominant mainline discourses are imposed on bodies which over time crystallize and to a degree enslave. Poststructuralists, for instance, are reluctant to "ground discourse in any theory of metaphysical origins" and express incredulity toward both metanarratives and notions of essentialism.⁶ Individual subjects are always already constructed by discourse (systems of meaning). Social texts are immediately imposed on individuals. Cultural and political constructs, for instance, categorize notions of sex, race, and ethnicity.⁷ Thus, claims of autonomous individual agency are self-contradictory, given the fact that such naive appeals have already been presupposed by the one making them. Transgressing the boundaries of language to get at the real—"the true or permanent nature of being"—is either impossible or presupposes that an actual realm exists outside the subjective mind.

Yet at the same time, poststructuralism's opposition to hegemonic discourses contributes to essential identity. Remember, an individual subject contains its own contradiction; it *is* and *is not*. In his book *Identity\Difference*, William Connolly argues that

Identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.⁹ (William Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 64).

Such contention shares an affinity with Hegel's determinate being, in which being unfolds in the realm of difference and opposition.¹⁰ "Difference is the essential moment of identity" (*SL*, 417). It is a "*positedness*, a determinateness" (*SL*, 418). The tension between difference (negation) and the idea of being engender—albeit in an unstable fashion—something. Following Hegel one would have to conclude that a moment of

essence within specific historical contexts could be posited. The inability to trace the limits of or define essence does not mean that essence does not exist.

Hegel's *Logic* saves us from Kant. It provides a cogent ontological argument for the existence of the external world and an epistemological balance between logical extremes. More importantly, it keeps knowledge perennially fresh and vibrant. As we've seen, analytic positivism's inability to limit things and poststructuralism's incredulity toward essentialism makes it ostensibly difficult to establish epistemological satisfaction. This shouldn't cause us to panic, however. Thought and object are in constant motion—becoming. Both are, in a sense, centered by repulsion and attraction, difference and unity. Indeed, the dialectic is the very basis for rational and universal inquiry:

All that is necessary to achieve scientific progress—and it is essential to strive to gain this quite simple insight—is the recognition of the logical principle that the negative is just as much positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into negation of its particular content, in other words, that such a negation is not all and every negation but the *negation of a specific subject matter*, and therefore the result essentially contains that from which it results (*SL*, 54).

This is the essence of the dialectical method and the ontological blueprint for absolute knowledge. As Hegel stated in the *Introduction to the Encyclopedia: Logic*: “Each of the parts of philosophy [as well as thought and existence together] is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself... [t]he whole of philosophy in this way resembles a circle of circles” (*Encyclopedia*, 30).

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* translated by Norman Kemp Smith; with a new introduction by Howard Caygill Houndmills, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 41-42.

2. Schopenhauer's quote from Monroe Beardsley ed., *European Philosophers From Descartes to Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 649.

3. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, A.V. Miller trans., (NY: Humanity Books, an import of Prometheus Books, 1969), 87. From here on references to Hegel's *Logic* will be placed in the text as *SL*.

4. Hegel says much the same thing in his Lordship and Bondage discussion in the *Phenomenology*: "Each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both" (Oxford, 1977), 112. Both subjects are, to use the words of Yale historian David Brion Davis, "undifferentiated extensions of the self." Their qualitative difference changes—the one becoming master and the other slave—when they risk or negate their lives in a "life-and-death struggle" for freedom.

5. Engel's quote from Robert Carneiro's "The Transition from quality to quantity: A neglected causal mechanism in accounting for social evolution" (September 2000), 1. <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/reprint/97/23/12926.pdf>. Carneiro uses Hegel's notion of quantity and quality to discuss social evolution.

6. David Macy, ed., *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 309.

7. See Judith Butler's *Gender Troubles: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, and Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

8. Macy, 309.

9. William Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Demographic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991), 64.

10. Professor John Smith, in communication, University of California, Irvine, February 11, 2004.