

Kant, Hegel, Sellars: The Structure of Knowledge

Benjamin Standifer

Abstract

This paper examines the refutation of skepticism elaborated by G. W. F. Hegel in the introduction to his Phenomenology of Spirit. This refutation is motivated by what Hegel sees as a fundamental incoherence in modern philosophy initiated by Descartes and culminates in the 'subjectivist' conclusions reached by Kant. More specifically, the incoherence concerns the inability to categorically represent the thing-in-itself. He approaches the problem by articulating Kant's original unity of apperception as a kind of transcendental comparison of knowledge and being. This, along with a Fichtean elaboration, allows him to frame the distinction of phenomena and reality as a distinction internal to consciousness itself. The thing-in-itself is realized as not some detached, external reality, but a point of orientation, a functional role, against which consciousness of this being is brought into relief. By positing a theoretically inaccessible standard for what counts as knowledge, skepticism is revealed as misunderstanding the very nature of knowing.

The shockwave that was Kantian philosophy left several pivotal epistemological issues unarticulated and, in some cases, unresolved. The chimerical thing-in-itself, as well as the true nature of apperception, was left to be elaborated by a generation of thinkers bearing the moniker of “German idealism.” In a broadly transcendental framework, J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel all set out to articulate and, at times, repudiate critical aspects of Kant’s epistemological doctrine. The most critically successful was Hegel, who, in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, posits a sharp ultimatum: we must either establish that the detached, unreachable thing-in-itself is an incomprehensible notion or admit a fundamental separation between ourselves and the absolute, inevitably leading to skepticism. In this paper, I will outline Hegel’s refutation of this path toward skepticism. I will argue that Hegel frames the notion of an epistemological standard, a standard by which knowledge gauges its validity, as a by-product of the always-apperceptive process of conceptualization. Finally, I will trace the intellectual trajectory of such a view to the 20th-century philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, whose anti-foundationalist views helped usher analytic philosophy into its “Kantian stage” (Sellars 3).

To understand why Hegel felt this refutation necessary, one must first examine Kantian epistemological doctrine, particularly the notion of apperception. For Kant, the ability to represent to oneself an object of perception rests on the ability to subsume a sensuous intuition under a number of categories, conditions for the possibility of objects of experience. Further, correlated with each category is a logical form of judgment. These forms of judgment are forms that propositions must take, insofar as they elicit, a categorical determination. For instance, the category of “being” corresponds to propositions of the form “A is B.”

Now, a crucial aspect of Kant’s system is that judgment, the elementary unit of thought, is fundamentally self-conscious. Kant makes this aspect explicit by describing his notion of judgment as “nothing but the manner in which given modes of knowledge are brought to the objective unity of apperception” (B141). Kant’s point is that to judge is not just to make the judgment but to accompany the judgment with the fact *that* one is doing the judging. This means that for a judgment to count as such requires not only that it be itself an act but also that it be the object of a higher-order level of awareness. This level of higher awareness is the apperceptive “I think.” For judgments or thought determinations to be taking place, an “I” must be present that is always already the nexus of all these thought determinations, otherwise, these determinations do not seem to be made *by* anything. Insofar as judgments are taking place, “I” am the one doing the judging, and insofar as “I” am always doing the judging, the thinking, judging “I” is itself a synthetic unity, a one-in-many. It is the “I”s *being there for all these thought determinations* that constitute

its unity. In this way, knowledge of how one has determined something to be is also the knowledge *that* one has made the determination, and vice versa. A concept, as abstraction, is a determinate expression of the “I think” that is a priori present in all representation.

What Kant is arguing is that all conceptualization is an exercise of the *original* synthetic unity of apperception, that a concept is itself an abstraction on the same order as the “I think.” He all but confirms this with statements like, “The synthetic unity of apperception is... that highest point, to which we must ascribe all employment of the understanding. Indeed, this capacity is the understanding” (B134). Additionally, he writes, “The synthetic unity of the manifold of intuitions, as given a priori, is thus the ground of the identity of the perception itself, which precedes a priori all my determinate thinking” (B134). With this crucial statement, Kant solidifies what before might have been merely implied; determinate thought is grounded in the power of apperception.

Now, it is not without importance to probe briefly the mediating role played by Fichte in facilitating Hegel’s refutation. Fichte, for his part, is often recognized as a transitional figure between Kant and Hegel. This role is at least in part because of his clarification of the nature of apperception as well as its implications for transcendental philosophy. He saw the thing-in-itself as not simply an abstraction from all forms of representation but also the exact thing one is thinking of when one is determinately thinking. In his “Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre,” Fichte writes, “of all possible thoughts I could be thinking, I am [always already] thinking precisely of the thing-in-itself. I have freely made myself into such an object” (84). For Fichte the thing-in-itself was not to be distinguished from the purely abstract ego located at the nexus of all thought determinations. In self-consciousness, one is always thinking of this thing-in-itself just because one is always thinking of *oneself as making the determination*.

This is, to be sure, a crucial development in the chain stretching from Kant to Hegel. In his essay titled “Critical Philosophy” Hegel points out, “[concerning Kant’s categories] Fichte has the great merit of having called attention to the need of... *deducing* them” (31). In this way, “the determinations of thought... would no longer be merely taken from observation and so only conceived empirically, but deduced from [the nature of] thought itself” (31). We can see that for Hegel to have reached such an uncompromising view regarding epistemological frameworks required this pivotal Fichtean contribution. Without it, the notion of a self-supplanting standard for knowledge would not be understood for what it is: an *aspect* of the apperceptive self-positing present in all determinate thinking.

Hegel was willing to accept the significance of the self-relating nature of apperception as presented by Kant but, like Fichte, was in no way committed to the

arbitrary set of categories advanced by Kant nor the ontological implications of a thing-in-itself beyond categorical determination. Hegel begins the introduction to the *Phenomenology* by admitting the natural tendency in philosophy to investigate the medium or instrument of knowing as opposed to directly investigating what there truly is. This admission is aimed at philosophers like Kant who attempted to circumvent tedious ontological classification by formulating epistemic conditions that must be valid of any possible object, whatever. For Hegel, this presupposition by Kant of certain arbitrary categories is unwarranted. He does not deny that we bring to the table forms of thought determination but rather that one cannot simply presuppose these as objectively given themselves. As commentator Robert Pippin writes, “Hegel charges that Kant did not realize that knowledge of the conditions for knowledge could not be appropriately obtained within these conditions” (42). They must be worked through dialectically. The fundamental categories of thought are later worked out in Hegel’s *Logic*; in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* he is merely pointing out the necessity for a system of science that does not itself presuppose blunt, given conditions of possible objects or, correlatively, conditions on *what counts as knowledge* of possible objects. Hegel thinks that the presupposition of such a blunt, given standard for what counts as knowledge is precisely what is at work in the positing of the thing-in-itself. He proposes a system of epistemology that sees such a theoretical standard for what it is: a recurring, functional role in the process by which consciousness moves through higher forms of knowledge.

Another way of framing the issue would be to say that the standard by which knowledge’s validity is gauged cannot be an utterly detached, external thing-in-itself, for this would lead to an absurdity. Such a standard would not be capable of serving as a criterion for what counts as knowledge about it. Any attempt to examine the standard itself would yield only what the standard is *for me*—it would yield yet more knowledge of it, as opposed to what it is in itself. This leads to what Robert Brandom refers to as a “gulf of intelligibility.” For Hegel, squashing skepticism about an external, detached reality depends on the task of demonstrating the internality of the distinction between what the thing is for me and what the thing is in itself. He does this by invoking the fundamentally recursive nature of apperception as a self-relating process by which consciousness establishes higher and higher standards of what constitutes knowledge. Hegel writes, “Consciousness is, on the one hand consciousness of the object, and on the other, consciousness of itself... Since both are *for* the same consciousness, *this consciousness is itself their comparison*” (54, emphasis added).

This last statement cannot be overemphasized as it concisely sums up Hegel’s notion of consciousness as consisting of *moments*. The moments of this self-relating pro-

cess establish what only appears to be a hard distinction between knowledge and reality. The distinction formed between what the object really is and how it is for consciousness is a *comparison* made simply in virtue of the fact that consciousness has an object at all. Consciousness, in having an object, also has an implicit awareness of itself as being the one who has this object, being the one *for whom* the object is. This, of course, leads us straight into the body of the work itself where Hegel begins navigating the different shapes of knowing. Starting with what simply is, he establishes the inadequacy of such a model of being-in-itself by moving out and framing that first level of being as simply for consciousness, a consciousness that was always already there but not yet brought into relief.

One might ask, “[H]ow is it that these ideas have matured over time?” What has been made of them in the time since German Idealism?” The mid-century, analytic philosopher Wilfrid Sellars concludes our story by picking up the intellectual trajectory initiated by Kant and developed by Hegel. Sellars’s project involved exposing certain dogmas held by empiricists, both of the classical Humean variety and the 20th-century logical variety. Empiricism relies on basic, observational vocabularies for forming statements about sensations or qualia, vocabularies that can then be used to construct more general, conceptual vocabularies. In this framework, propositions or reports concerning what is *given* in sensation are considered the ultimate court of appeals. In contrast, Sellars essentially argued that non-inferential reports that come as the result of sense data (immediate sense certainties in Hegelian parlance) do not constitute an autonomous stratum of language. He writes in section VIII of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, “the metaphor of foundation [or ‘givenness’] is misleading... in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the later rest on the former” (78). Observational vocabularies simply cannot stand on their own. Any proposed empiricist observational vocabularies that might serve as the vanguard for subsequent inferences already rely on their semantic content on background conceptual capacities, given that propositions draw directly on conceptual capacities. Even the recognition of something as simple as the color red cannot be recognized *as red* until red already plays a role in a conceptual space. Like Hegel, Sellars advances the radical notion that what is seemingly given in immediate, sensory awareness is, in fact, mediated by evolving conceptual frameworks or shapes of consciousness.

Sellars is perhaps most in lockstep with Hegel when he writes near the end of section VIII of *EPM* that, “empirical knowledge... is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise, which can put *any* claim in jeopardy,

though not *all* at once" (79). It is the dynamic nature of rational knowledge that makes that knowledge immediately *about* an object, for it is the processes of conceptual change that render certain conceptual shapes more or less *adequate*. Only a changing, self-correcting process can allow knowledge to be *about* something outside itself; it is the scrutiny that a concept undergoes which whittles it into an adequate representation. For Sellars, as for Hegel, there is no immediacy without mediacy, no direct contact with an object of inquiry without self-correction. Whatever immediacy amounts to, it does so in virtue of changing conceptual frameworks. This is Sellars' crucial advancement on the Hegelian notion of "consciousness implies self-consciousness." Our consciousness of an object is always already employing structures of knowledge.

To conclude, Hegel demonstrates that skepticism about the in-itself is a misunderstanding about the nature of knowing. Skepticism hypostatizes a merely internal comparison into an actual, external difference between knowing and reality. Hegel shows that this move is simply incoherent, leading to an infinite regress by which we never actually encounter the object. It is, ironically, through this argument for the incoherence of the detached thing-in-itself, that Hegel avoids commitment to any kind of subjective idealism. Rather, as stated above, he is only committed to the view that a detached thing-in-itself cannot serve as a standard for what counts as knowledge about that thing. He does not deny that there are external, enabling conditions (empirical reality), but it is mistaken to take these conditions themselves as determinative of what makes thoughts about them true or false. As Sellars would help show, truth is a notion that corresponds to and appears in virtue of rational processes, processes of conceptual change. Skepticism is revealed as missing the point of knowing entirely. By not fully developing the notion of apperception with its momentary character, the skeptic leads herself into absurdity. As Richard Dien Winfield puts it, "In a sense, all we can acquaint ourselves with is what necessarily holds true of all our representations."

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