

Dissertation: *Hegel's Speculative Method*

Empirical knowledge has an ineliminable aspect of receptivity: we do not create the trees that we see or the molecules that we study under a microscope. And even what we do create, axes and railroads and the like, exists independently of us once our crafting is done. Empirical knowledge is not totally receptive, however: according to the Kantian tradition, we supply at least some of the fundamental concepts that we employ in knowing the world (concepts like cause, number, quality). This side of empirical knowledge does not have its source in receptivity, and so it does not have its source in the objects that exist independently of us. And yet we describe exactly those objects using these fundamental concepts. With what right? How do we know that hydrogen atoms are countable, that they can be causes, that they have qualities, if we do not derive those concepts from hydrogen atoms themselves?

In my dissertation, I offer an interpretation and defense of the method of Hegel's *Logic* as a response to this question. In particular, I argue that Hegel's solution to this problem is superior to Kant's: Kant's attempt to solve the problem is hampered by his account of the emptiness of thought taken by itself. This emptiness makes it impossible to legitimately dismiss the threat of parochialism: the threat that we think as we do only because of something parochial to us and not because of how it is with the empirical world. The method of Hegel's *Logic*, I argue, is better equipped to respond to this threat because it reveals it to be literally unthinkable from within the vantage point of the *Logic*.

Both Hegel scholars (e.g. Robert Stern, Sally Sedgwick) and Kant scholars (e.g. Paul Guyer, Steven Engstrom) standardly interpret Hegel's criticism of Kant as having to do with the putative fact that, for Kant, the understanding (responsible for our fundamental concepts) is "external to" our forms of intuition (space and time). As it is typically understood, the externality criticism amounts to the claim that Kant cannot explain why what appears to us in space and time is necessarily subject to the fundamental concepts supplied by the understanding. Those concepts are, on this criticism, mere impositions on what appears in space and time.

I argue that Hegel made no such criticism of Kant. Indeed, I argue that, on his interpretation, Kant successfully explained why what appears within the forms of intuition must be subject to the fundamental concepts of the understanding. And I further argue that Hegel agrees with Kant's conception of the understanding, even with Kant's claim that we cannot derive the forms of intuition from the understanding alone – that the forms of intuition are, in this different sense, external to the understanding. Where Hegel disagrees with Kant is in Kant's claim that the necessary applicability of the fundamental concepts of the understanding to what appears within space and time suffices to avoid the threat of parochialism. In particular, as Kant sees, we cannot exclude the possibility that there are other non-spatiotemporal forms of intuition. But that means, Hegel argues, that the fact that we represent the world as in space and time is a merely parochial fact about us, without any objective legitimacy. What appears in space and time is necessarily subject to the understanding, but Kant cannot explain the validity of the understanding because he cannot explain our right to represent about what appears to us as in space and time.

But if we cannot derive the forms of intuition from the understanding alone, then what alternative strategy remains? I argue that Hegel explains the legitimacy of the understanding not by appealing to our forms of intuition but rather by showing (1) that the fundamental concepts of the understanding necessarily arise within a form of thinking that is logically different from the understanding – speculative thinking. And (2) by arguing that results arrived at within speculative thinking are, by their form alone, objectively valid.

Empirical thought, of course, is not such that every empirical thought is, by its form alone, objectively valid – we can make gross errors within empirical thought, precisely because what we think about exists independently of our thought of it. And almost all interpreters of Hegel

incorporate this aspect of empirical thought into their accounts of his method. For instance, many scholars think that Hegel's method looks like this: we take ourselves to have an account of the fundamental concepts of the world, but that account proves to be contradictory, so we have to revise our account (free it from that error). I argue that any view on which Hegel's method inherits this feature of empirical thought makes it impossible to explain how his account is any better than Kant's: for, according to this interpretation, we can always ask whether our account of the fundamental concepts only gets at how things seem to us. Nothing about the form of our thinking excludes that possibility – indeed, on these accounts, we know that sometimes we do get it wrong in just this fashion (we know that some of our accounts are contradictory, and so do not get at how the world really is). But it follows, I argue, that we can never escape the predicament of needing to appeal to something that we cannot derive from thought alone – the exact predicament Hegel accuses Kant of falling into with his appeal to the forms of intuition.

The only way out of the predicament, Hegel thinks, and so the only way to secure the validity of the fundamental concepts of the understanding, is to articulate a form of thinking which just as such is objectively valid, a form of thinking in which the threat of parochialism cannot arise because we cannot separate the act of thinking from the object thought about. This kind of thinking, speculative thinking, is difficult. But Hegel shows that our right to deploy the most fundamental concepts within empirical thought, and so the very possibility of empirical thought itself, rests on appealing to it.

As one example of speculative thinking, consider the concept of instrumental teleology, or the activity of realizing an end. An analysis of this concept shows that the activity of realizing an end requires appealing to some means: the bird must use twigs to build the nest. Hegel argues that we cannot grasp how the bird has the power to employ means from the concept of instrumental teleology alone. Employing a (broadly) Kantian strategy at this point, we would have to inquire about the conditions for the possibility of employing a means, and instrumental teleology would be restricted in its validity by an account of those conditions. These conditions would not be provided for simply by an analysis of the concept of instrumental teleology alone – they would have to come from elsewhere, from something like a form of intuition, such that we could then wonder about the objective legitimacy of these conditions. By contrast, Hegel argues that we cannot so much as conceive of instrumental teleology without understanding how instrumental agents have the power to employ means, so that we do not need to appeal to anything external to our account of instrumental teleology itself.

He also argues, however, that we cannot grasp how instrumental agents have the power to employ means without progressing to a new concept, richer than instrumental agency. This progress is grounded entirely in our analysis of the concept of instrumental teleology, but that analysis yields a new concept: the concept of life. To understand how the bird has the power to pick up twigs to build the nest we have to understand that the bird, as an instrumental agent, is a living agent. Living is a kind of teleology, but Hegel argues that it is logically different from instrumental teleology: the end of living is logically different from the end of building a nest, in that one can possess the latter end before the nest has come about but one cannot possess the end of living without already having achieved it by living. Hegel argues that it is in virtue of living that the bird is able to build a nest: in living, the bird already has some means at its disposal, its body, and by being embodied it has the power to pick up twigs and build a nest. And appealing to life is the only way in which we can so much as conceive of instrumental teleology.

Moreover, unlike standard interpretations of Hegel's method, this advance does not come with any modification to or revision of our understanding of instrumental teleology. The advance beyond instrumental teleology is precisely what enables us to understand how there can be a power to realize an end through employing means. Because we are simply analyzing a concept and

articulating that which is required to so much as grasp it, there is no room for saying that our account is wrong because it fails to capture the nature of some subject matter or because it contradicts something else we think. By virtue of the kind of analysis in question, one in which we do nothing more than articulate that which is required to grasp the concept in question, the analysis is valid. Because this analysis also articulates the conditions for the possibility of the valid deployment of the concept, it secures the objective validity of the concepts analyzed. And thereby it overcomes the threat of parochialism.