

Hegel & Skepticism

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Here I discuss Hegel's views on skepticism, and its significance and relation to philosophy. Some particular attention is given to his discussion of skepticism in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (PS).

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1 Who is Hegel?

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is the last of the “classical” German Idealists, and the most systematic thinker of any of the post-Kantians. Hegel attempts to articulate a fully comprehensive system of philosophy, including logic, metaphysics, aesthetics, social and political, and natural philosophy, all from one basic and presuppositionless starting point.

Hegel's early work is significantly influenced by Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and his system of absolute idealism. The two worked closely together in Jena. In 1801 Hegel wrote *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, which argued that Schelling's system of transcendental idealism succeeds where Fichte's (and Reinhold's) systems fail. They also edited an influential, if short-lived, *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, where Hegel published some important early essays, including his “On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy”. Schelling left Jena in 1803, and their friendship was at an end by the time of

the publication of the *Phenomenology*, perhaps in no small part due to criticisms Hegel there seemingly aims at Schelling's system.

Hegel's published corpus consists of several different types of work. First, there are Hegel's two major books: the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *Science of Logic* (1812–18). Second are works that were published at the time as handbooks for use in student teaching such as the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Third, there are posthumous publications, assembled by editors from Hegel's lecture notes and from student transcripts of the lectures as delivered. Finally, there are the various essays and short works published during his career.

While Hegel's philosophy has been enormously influential, it has also been the subject of much criticism and controversy. Recent scholarly debates have centered on the issue of whether Hegel's metaphysics is “pre-critical”, whether it is really even *metaphysics*, and whether or how he should be read as advancing Kant's critical philosophy.¹

2 Forms of Skepticism

Hegel distinguishes between different forms of skepticism in his 1801 essay “On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy”. There is the skepticism that is “one with philosophy” and then the skepticism that is “self-sundered from it” (BKH p. 330; cf. 322-3).

The primary difference between forms of skepticism that Hegel alludes to here is that between a presuppositionless and methodical skepticism and a skepticism that arises due to inconsistencies between some presupposed claim and some other set of claims. Hegel contends that the former sort of skepticism is characteristic of ancient skepticism, while the latter is more distinctively modern.

Ancient skepticism (as, e.g., in Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho, or Agrippa) had both a distinctive method, and because of that method, a kind of presuppositionlessness. The method was, fundamentally, the presentation of rationally opposing positions whose evidence was equal. This “equipollence” of reasons then leads to the suspension of judgment or belief as

¹ For a helpful overview of Hegel's life and the above mentioned scholarly controversies see (Redding 2020). For examples of “metaphysical” readings of Hegel see (Taylor 1975; Rosen 1982; Beiser 2005; Houlgate 2006; Stern 2009; Kreines 2015; Tolley 2017). For “non-metaphysical” readings see (Pippin 1989; Pinkard 1994; Brandom 2019).

One of the defining features of Hegel's philosophy, particularly in contrast to that of Schelling (at least in this period), is his conception of skepticism and the constructive and destructive roles it can play in philosophy. As we will see, Hegel is keen to articulate a philosophical system that is immune to various skeptical worries and methods.

to the what is the case. Thus ancient skepticism, as Hegel sees it, does not arrive at a skeptical conclusion or aporia based on commitment to a prior view of what is true. Instead, it conducts its skeptical investigation entirely through the opposition of grounds for and against a claim.

In contrast to ancient skepticism, Hegel construes modern forms of skepticism to be dogmatically committed to one or more presuppositions that render subsequent philosophical inquiry impossible. In Schulze's case it is an unquestioning commitment to experience. As Hegel puts it,

Mr. Sch[ulze] himself allows the objection to be made against this concept of skepticism, that according to it “*nothing of what experience teaches, can be an object of skeptical doubt, and in particular not the sum-total [Inbegriff] of external perceptions, and only philosophy among all the sciences (since none of the others has to do with the cognition of things outside the compass of consciousness)*” (BKH p. 320)

Hegel's contention that modern skepticism is *essentially* dogmatic also relates to his view that it is *degenerate* and lacks any method.

To be sure, the authentic skepticism does not have a positive side, as philosophy does, but maintains a pure negativity in relation to knowledge, but it was just as little directed against philosophy as for it; and the hostile attitude that it adopted later against philosophy on the one hand, and against dogmatism on the other hand, is quite separate. The turning of skepticism against philosophy, as soon as philosophy became dogmatism, illustrates how it has kept in step with the communal degeneration of philosophy and of the world in general, until finally in these most recent times it has sunk so far in company with dogmatism that for both of them nowadays the facts of consciousness have an indubitable certainty, and for them both the truth resides in temporality; so that, since the extremes now touch, the great goal is attained once more on their side in these happy times, that dogmatism and skepticism coincide with one another on the underside, and offer each other the hand of perfect friendship and fraternity. (BKH p. 330)

The “degeneration” of which Hegel speaks here is the positing of oppositions that cannot be overcome without giving up framing presuppositions of the skeptical or philosophical view. Such framing oppositions include mind vs. body, representation/cognition vs. world, or self-knowledge vs. knowledge of the “external” world. These sorts of oppositions are not motivated by any equipollence of reasons, as with Ancient skepticism. Instead, in each case

the skepticism is motivated by what Hegel sees as dogmatic commitment to the problem-inducing opposition. In this sense “philosophy has become dogmatism” and “dogmatism and skepticism coincide with one another”.²

3 The Problem of the Criterion

In keeping with the privileged position Hegel accords to ancient skepticism, the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* emphasizes the way in which different putatively rational sciences might conflict and inquires into how these conflicts might be resolved.

with regard to a knowing that is not truthful, science cannot simply reject it as just a common view of things while giving out the assurance that it is itself a completely different kind of cognition and that that other knowing counts as absolutely nothing for science; nor can science appeal to some intimation, contained within that other knowing, of something better. Through such an *assurance*, science declares its being to be its power; but untrue knowing just as much appeals to the fact that *it is*, and it *gives out the assurance* that science counts as nothing to it; but *one* arid assurance is just as valid as another. (PS 2:55, §76)

The problem to which Hegel is pointing here is known as the “problem of the criterion”, and is discussed by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Skepticism*. There he says,

in order for the dispute that has arisen about standards to be decided, we must possess an agreed standard through which we can judge it; and in order for us to possess an agreed standard, the dispute about standards must already have been decided. Thus the argument falls into the reciprocal mode [i.e. circular reasoning] and the discovery of a standard is blocked - for we do not allow them to assume a standard by hypothesis, and if they want to judge the standard by a standard we throw them into an infinite regress. Again, since a proof needs a standard which has been proved and a standard needs a proof which has been judged, they are thrown into the reciprocal mode.³

Sextus here points to a basic epistemological problem. When we engage in rational dispute concerning what to believe, we assume a common conception between disputants concerning the marks (or criteria) of truth. But what do we do when these marks themselves are

² For further discussion of Hegel’s conception of these two forms of skepticism see (Forster 1989, chap. 1).

³ (Empiricus 2000, 72)

disputed? It looks like there are only three possible answers:⁴ first, we can simply assume or posit that the criterion is what it is (i.e. is brute); second, we can appeal to some further criterion, and so on ad infinitum; third, we can say that the criterion is self-certifying (i.e. it cannot be demonstrated without circularity). The problem is that none of these options seems satisfying. The appeal to bruteness is irrational—the skeptic rejects that a standard may simply be assumed. The infinite regress of criteria is likewise unsatisfying, though explaining exactly why is worth pursuing. Finally, the skeptic denies that a rationally satisfying reply is available via proof, for proof itself involves the assumption of a standard, which, if it relies on some other proof, falls back into circularity. This is perhaps the most controversial of the skeptic’s moves, for it seems to assume that there are no genuinely self-evident or self-certifying rational claims.

This problem is faced by the two major approaches to justification and knowledge in epistemology—viz. coherentism and foundationalism. Against coherentism, Sextus raises the twin charges of circularity and infinite regress. The worry here is that a principled coherentist position cannot exhibit the difference between a genuine change in what we know—i.e. in the progressive accumulation of knowledge—and mere change in (coherent) belief.⁵ Against foundationalism, the argument raises similar worries concerning circularity, along with the additional charge of dogmatism, so long as one or another “foundational” claim is simply assumed or posited.

4 Starting Points I: Against (External) Critique

Hegel offers twin and related criticisms of much of modern philosophy, insofar as it starts from an analysis of our capacity for cognition (or knowledge). The first of these is Hegel’s criticism of treating faculty of cognition/knowledge as an “instrument” or “medium”:

this fear [of error] presupposes something, and in fact presupposes a great deal, as truth, and it bases its scruples and its conclusions on what itself ought to be tested in advance as to whether or not it is the truth. This fear presupposes representations of cognizing as an instrument and as a medium, and it also presupposes a difference between our own selves and this cognition; but above all it presupposes that the absolute stands on one side and that cognition stands on the other for itself, and separated from the absolute, though cognition is

⁴ This is sometimes presented as the “Agrippan trilemma” after Agrippa (1st to 2nd century CE), after the so-called “formal modes” of skeptical argument he articulated. For discussion of this in the context of German Idealism see especially (Franks 2005).

⁵ See, e.g., (Haack 1993, chap. 3; BonJour 1997, 14–15; Westphal 2009, 2–3).

nevertheless something real; that is, it presupposes that cognition, which, by being outside of the absolute, is indeed also outside of the truth, is nevertheless truthful; an assumption through which that which calls itself the fear of error gives itself away to be known rather as the fear of truth. (PS 2:54, §74)

Here we see Hegel reject the claim that a rejection of metaphysics can begin from an analysis of the nature of our capacity for cognition. However, his argument here is not at all obvious. *That* he is criticizing particular conceptions of philosophy and its starting point is clear. *What* his criticism of these starting points is, is *not*.

Fortunately, the above argument is clarified by things Hegel has to say with in his famous “swimming objection” from the opening of the *Encyclopedia*:

It is one of the main viewpoints of the *Critical* philosophy that, prior to setting about to acquire knowledge of God, the essence of things, etc., the *faculty of knowing* [*Erkenntnisvermögen*] itself would have to be examined first in order to see whether it is capable of achieving this; that one must first come to know [*kennen lernen*] the *instrument*, before one undertakes the work that is to be produced by means of it. For should the instrument be insufficient, all the effort would then have been expended in vain. This thought has seemed so *plausible* that it has elicited the greatest admiration and acclaim and drawn knowing [*das Erkennen*] away from its interest in the *objects* and work on them and drawn it back to itself, i.e. to the formal aspect. If, however, we do not delude ourselves with words, it is easy to see that other tools may very well be examined and evaluated in ways other than undertaking the actual work for which they are determined. But the examination of knowing [*die Untersuchung des Erkennens*] cannot take place other than *by way of knowing* [*als es erkennen*]. With this so-called instrument, examining it means nothing other than acquiring knowledge of it. But to want to know *before* one knows is as incoherent as the Scholastic’s wise resolution to learn to *swim*, *before he ventured into the water*. (EL §10)

Hegel’s mockery of this position is clear. What is his argument? Given his previous analysis of skepticism, we can read Hegel here as saying that view of philosophy as starting with an analysis of our capacity to cognize or know is susceptible to the Agrippan trilemma. Such a strategy is searching for a standard by means of which to evaluate knowledge claims, but this standard itself must be subject to evaluation, and this evaluation is subject to that trilemma.

One question immediately raised by this claim is whether Hegel’s position constitutes a rejection of Kant’s critical philosophical method. Recall here that “critique” consists in the examination and “discipline” of the faculty of reason itself, to which Kant opposes “dogma-

tism”, which “confidently takes on the execution of this task [i.e. metaphysics] without an antecedent examination of the capacity or incapacity of reason for such a great undertaking” (B7). In contrast, Kant’s “critique” of reason provides just such an examination of reason’s capacity to attain comprehension of metaphysical truths. Such a critique will lead to a “discipline” of reason’s reach – of what can be adequately reasoned about, or “comprehended”. As Kant puts it,

[T]hat reason, which is properly obliged to prescribe its discipline for all other endeavours, should have need of one itself, may certainly seem strange, and in fact reason has previously escaped such a humiliation only because, given the pomp and the serious mien with which it appears, no one could easily come to suspect it of frivolously playing with fancies instead of concepts[,] and words instead of things. (A710/B738; see also A738/B766)

But Hegel is not obviously easily placed in either a pre-critical or post-critical box. He would seem to reject all pre-critical positions as unduly “dogmatic”, insofar as they depend upon presuppositions that would be susceptible to one of the horns of the Agrippan trilemma. But he isn’t obviously “post-critical” either, since he explicitly *rejects* Kant’s conception of “critique”, i.e. he rejects the claim that philosophy starts with an evaluation of the capacity of reason to fulfill its role in inquiring into the nature of reality. We might rather say, in true Hegelian fashion, that this dichotomy must be overcome or “sublated”, in that it is not an opposition that withstands its own scrutiny. Kant’s conception of “critique” is both anti-dogmatic in its aim, and dogmatic in its practice.

If the aims of philosophy are not to be satisfied by critique (on Kant’s conception) but we are not to return to pre-Kantian “dogmatism”, what is left? In what sense may metaphysics be set on the sure path of a science?

5 Starting Points II: The Dialectic of Consciousness

One of Hegel’s primary concerns in the *Phenomenology* is to show how the trilemma may be avoided without also falling into any of the skeptical tropes characteristic of modern philosophy. In this sense the PS is a work of epistemology (though it is certainly not *only* a work in epistemology). Hegel explicitly references this problem as follows:

This exposition, represented as the *conduct of science* in relation to knowing *as it appears*, and represented as the *investigation and testing of the reality of cognition*, seems incapable of taking place without some kind of presupposition which underlies it as a *standard*. For the testing consists in the application of

an accepted standard, and in the resulting equality or inequality between the standard and what is tested lays the decision as to whether what is tested is correct or incorrect. The standard, likewise science itself if science were to be the standard, is thereby accepted as the *essence*, or as the *in-itself*. But here, at the point where science first comes on the scene, neither science itself nor anything else has justified itself as the essence or as the in-itself, and without something like that taking place, it seems that no examination can take place at all. (PS 2:58, §81)

What then, is Hegel's solution? Hegel sets out an answer in the rest of the introduction (§§82-9). The crux of his solution, in its broadest outlines, is to treat skepticism, and the problem of the criterion in particular, as an issue that is immanent to consciousness, in that it is present in any structure of representation where there is an opposition between subject and object. As Hegel puts it, "Consciousness in its own self provides its own standard" (PS 2:59, §84). As he goes on to say,

in what consciousness declares within itself to be the *in-itself*, or the *true*, we have the standard which consciousness itself sets up to measure its knowing. If we designate *knowing* as the *concept*, but designate the essence, or the *true*, as what is or the *object*, then the examining consists in seeing whether the concept corresponds to the object. However, if we designate the *essence*, or the in-itself *of the object*, as the *concept*, and in contrast understand by *object* the concept insofar as it is *object*, or insofar as it is *for an other*, then the examining consists in our seeing whether the object corresponds to its concept. (PS 2:59, §84)

Any knowledge claim is going to be one according to which a subject knows (or claims to) something *of* an object. But knowledge of the object is conceived as of a *being as it is in itself*, which is to say, of a being as it is independently of whether it is known or not. In this sense the object is the standard against which knowledge of it is to be measured. We can say something similar about the concept. So there is a kind of duality in the investigation of knowledge, whereby both the concept being employed in the knowledge claim, as well as the object being investigated, have a related structure.⁶

Hegel's view of the structure of knowledge in terms of a subject-object duality is related to several further significant claims. First, he contends that the structure of "natural" or "ordinary" consciousness is *dialectical*, in the sense that it is essentially unstable, containing within itself a kind of "contradiction" that needs to be "sublated" or nullified (*aufgehoben*).

⁶ There seem to be many different ways of expressing what is basically the same idea. For example, Westphal (Westphal 2009) speaks of a dual track of conception and being; Förster (Förster 2012, chap. 13) speaks of knower and known; Stern (Stern 2013, chap. 1) of "conceptions" or "world-views".

However the instability that Hegel contends is present in natural consciousness is not inherently destructive. It is a kind of *constructive* skepticism (it is in this sense that, as Hegel puts it in his skepticism essay, skepticism is “one with philosophy” (BKH p. 330)). Hegel says,

the exposition of non-truthful consciousness in its untruth is not a merely *negative* movement. Such a one-sided view is what natural consciousness generally has of it; and a knowing which makes this one-sidedness into its essence is one of the shapes of incomplete consciousness which lies within the course of the path itself and which will serve itself up in that path. That is, such a one-sided view is the skepticism which sees in the result always only *pure nothing* and which abstracts from the fact that this nothing is determinately the nothing of *that from which it results*. However, only when taken as the nothing of that from which it emerges is the nothing in fact the true result; thus it is itself a *determinate* nothing and it has a *content*. Skepticism which ends with the abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot progress any further from this point, but must instead wait to see whether something new will present itself and what it will be, in order that it can also toss it into the same empty abyss. By contrast, while the result is grasped as it is in truth, as *determinate* negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation, the transition is made whereby the progression through the complete series of shapes comes about on its own accord. (PS 2:57, §79)

Thus the instability of natural consciousness generates a new form of consciousness through a “determination negation” of the previous assumption of the subject-object relation. This leads to Hegel’s second major contention, that this dialectical process leads to a *succession* of different “forms” or “shapes” (*Gestalten*) of

Third, Hegel contends that this succession of shapes of consciousness has an end or terminus in “absolute knowing”. The “Phenomenology of Spirit” is thus the story of the various shapes consciousness takes on the path to absolute knowledge, which Hegel considers the starting point for his scientific system—beginning with the *Science of Logic*. In this sense, Hegel’s original title for the book is perhaps more apt, as a “science of the experience of consciousness”. Hegel characterizes the development of consciousness as following a kind of path (or making a journey), in a sense related to Dante’s allegory of the soul’s journey into despair and ultimately to salvation. Hegel puts it this way in the Introduction:

Natural consciousness will prove to be only the concept of knowing, or it will prove to be not real knowing. But while it immediately regards itself rather as

real knowing, this path has negative meaning for it, and what is the realization of the concept will count instead, to it, as the loss of itself, for on this path, it loses its truth. This path can accordingly be regarded as the path of *doubt*, or, more properly, as the path of despair; on this path, what happens is not what is customarily understood as doubt, a shaking of this or that supposed truth, followed by the disappearance again of the doubt, and then a return to the former truth so that in the end the thing at issue is taken as it was before. Rather, this path is the conscious insight into the untruth of knowing as it appears, a knowing for which that which is the most real is rather in truth only the unrealized concept. ... The series of the figurations of consciousness which consciousness traverses on this path is the full history of the *cultivation* of consciousness itself into science. (PS 2:56, §78)

Hegel thus presents a method for moving from one conception of knowledge to another via the dialectic present within each conception, until one arrives at a stable point, which he contends is that of absolute knowing. In this sense Hegel agrees with Schelling that the aim of philosophy is articulating the absolute, i.e. the indifference point between subject and object. But Hegel importantly rejects Schelling's starting point. Hegel's system,

is something very different from the inspiration which begins immediately, like a shot from a pistol, with absolute knowledge, and which has already finished with all the other standpoints simply by declaring that it will take no notice of them. (PS 2:24, §27)

Natural consciousness must follow the "path of despair" through the various dialectical forms of consciousness until stability (in absolute knowing) is achieved, rather than arriving there as if "shot from a pistol".

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