

Hegel and Analytic Philosophy

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It is generally thought that analytic philosophy has very little in common with the philosophical approach of Hegel. After all, doesn't Hegel's 'absolute idealism' proclaim the universe to be ultimately some kind of mind, and is this not simply a reflection of a pre-modern religious consciousness rather than an approach in line with a modern, scientific view of the world? From the point of view of many contemporary interpreters of Hegel, such a view may be little more than a caricature, but it is still a widely held one, and can be traced back to the earliest days of analytic philosophy.

Given the general invisibility of Hegel within the analytic tradition for most of its history, it is sobering to be reminded that when Bertrand Russell first went to Cambridge in 1890 he found a philosophical culture dominated by the followers of Kant or Hegel (Russell, 1959, p. 30). In his earliest philosophical endeavours Russell himself worked within the Hegelian tradition, but after a time came to be convinced that recent developments in logic showed the deep flaws in Hegel's thought. Besides this, Russell had become influenced by G. E. Moore who had swung from being a follower to an opponent of the idealist F. H. Bradley. In his criticism of 'idealism' Moore had seemed to run together elements of Kant's idealism about 'form' with Berkeley's idealism about 'matter', and this confusion between the idealist doctrines of the Germans and the immaterialist doctrines of Berkeley has seemed to persist within the analytic tradition. Ironically, Hegel had been one of the most powerful critics of the 'way of ideas' conception of the mind on which Berkeley's immaterialism was premised. In fact, it was just this anti-subjectivist dimension to Hegel's philosophy that came to be appreciated by some thinkers within the analytic tradition in the second half of the twentieth century, during a period in which analytic thought moved away from the more empiricist orientations that had characterized its earlier phases.

Thus when Wilfrid Sellars in his celebrated set of lectures of 1957 later published under the title of 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' has an imaginary interlocutor (a 'logical atomist') refer to Sellars's own account as his 'incipient Meditations Hegeliennes' (sic) (Sellars, 1997, §20), he was not being entirely flippant. In its early years analytic philosophy had gone through a 'linguistic turn' in which the capacity for thought had been tightly linked to the capacity for language—a turn similar to that in German intellectual life in Hegel's time (Lafont, 1999; O'Neill Surber, 2006). From such considerations, by mid-century a number of leading analytic philosophers were coming to advocate a type of conceptual holism opposed to the 'logical atomism' with which Russell had attacked Hegel. Moreover, philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin and Wilfrid Sellars were stressing the social and pragmatic dimension of language in ways that again recalled Hegel's attempts to ground thought in historical patterns of human interaction. It is such 'Hegelian' dimensions of the thought of Sellars and Wittgenstein that has been recently taken up in two influential works of analytic philosophy: John McDowell's Mind and World

(McDowell, 1994) and Robert Brandom's Making It Explicit (Brandom, 1994).

In the light of the framework elaborated by Sellars and his followers, it has become easier to grasp certain parallels between Hegelian and analytic thought. Thus, Willem deVries, stressing that the central idea of Hegel's idealism was that of the 'autonomy of reason', has pointed to the vast gulf between Berkeley's immaterialism and Hegel's idealism.¹

What is at the heart of the idea of the autonomy of reason is not reason's separateness from something (or anything) else, such as material nature, but the self-determination of reason. ... Hegel does not defend the autonomy of reason by running to a substance dualism but by pointing out that there is a 'logical space of reasons' within which all our discourse occurs and which has a structure uniquely and irreducibly its own. In particular, the salient structures in the logical space of reasons are normative structures of justification and enlightenment; they are distinct from the causal structures of the physical and even the historical realm, though such causal structures can (indeed, must) be exploited by and for the justificatory and illuminatory purposes of reason. (deVries, 2009, pp. 231-2)

The idea of the thought inhabiting this 'logical space of reasons' in virtue of the social norms governing verbal reactions to a sentence expressing it was central to Sellars's alternative to the form of empiricism that had flourished in the early decades of analytic philosophy. Opposing the type of empiricist epistemology of the early Russell and others, in which a 'foundation' for empirical knowledge was conceived in terms of the mind's 'acquaintance' with 'Givens' such as Russellian 'sense-data', Sellars denounced as 'mythical' the idea of a certain and presuppositionless knowledge of something 'given' immediately in sensory experience: the 'Myth of the Given'. As an alternative he proposed a conception of judgments as fallible assertions made in the context of 'language games' involving 'giving and asking for reasons'. Inquiry is a rational enterprise not because truth can be transmitted to beliefs by sound logical inferences from purportedly certain 'foundational' beliefs; it is rational because fallible claims can be corrected in the face of criticisms within a linguistic community holding itself to shared rational norms that are themselves open to correction.

The most systematic attempt to develop Sellars's project in ways that retrieve Hegel's philosophy is undoubtedly that of Robert Brandom's 'inferentialist' and 'pragmatist' approach to semantics (Brandom, 1994 and 2002). The retrieval of Hegel within analytic thought in projects like that of Brandom's is in its comparative infancy; they may, however, give cause to reassess the dismissal that Hegel had suffered at the hands of Russell in the early years of the analytic movement.

Russell, Hegel and the Logical Revolution

In the context of his early work on the philosophy of Leibniz (Russell, 1900), Russell had come to the opinion that an inadequate treatment of relations had been crucial not only to the philosophy of Leibniz himself but also to the 'systems of Spinoza, Hegel and Bradley' (Russell, 1959, p. 48). Leibniz, he claimed, had conceived of every relation as 'grounded in the natures of the related terms', (ibid., p. 43) and this idea had been a consequence of his adherence to traditional logic in which 'every proposition attributes a predicate to a subject and ... every fact consists of a substance having a property' (ibid., p. 48). But this conception of logic had been swept away by the logical revolution of the late nineteenth century initiated by Frege's Begriffsschrift published in 1879 (Frege, 1967). The new logic permitted multi-placed ('polyadic') predicates, and so allowed the representation of relational facts. Relying on the Aristotelian monadic conception of predication, the ontological systems of Spinoza, Hegel and Bradley could only conceive of relations as 'internal' to some unitary, absolute substance.

Mr. Bradley has worked out a theory according to which, in all judgment, we are ascribing a predicate to Reality as a whole; and this theory is derived from Hegel. Now the traditional logic holds that every proposition ascribes a predicate to a subject, and from this it easily follows that there can be only one subject, the Absolute ... Thus Hegel's doctrine, that philosophical propositions must be of the form, 'the Absolute is such-and-such,' depends upon the traditional belief in the universality of the subject-predicate form. This belief, being traditional, scarcely self-conscious, and not supposed to be important, operates underground, and is assumed in arguments which, like the refutation of relations, appear at first sight such as to establish its truth. (Russell, 1914, p. 48)

The application of the new logical resources became central to the method of 'analysis' with which thought could be freed from the dead hand of Aristotelian logic. Analysis preceded by a type of retranscription of claims from out of the 'subject-predicate' grammar of everyday language into a more adequate logical form. Here the model was a treatment of universally quantified affirmative judgments allowed by the new logic. From a logical point of view, a judgment such as 'all Greeks are mortal' should not be thought of as saying something about a type of collective subject, all Greeks, on the model of the way 'Socrates is mortal' says something about Socrates. Rather, the former should be analyzed as a universally quantified conditional. 'All Greeks are mortal' tells us that if something is a Greek, then it is mortal, and the same principle can be applied to claims about 'everything', undercutting the idea of the type of absolute substance that Russell believed he perceived in Hegel.

Russell's celebrated version of this style of 'analysis' was that found in his 'theory of descriptions' contained in the essay of 1905, 'On Denoting' (Russell, 1956). There Russell used this type of retranscription to bear on sentences that seemed to express a meaningful thought about non-existent objects. Frege had

claimed that the ‘thought’ or proposition expressed by a sentence had to be either true or false, but while the sentence ‘The present king of France is bald’ seemed to express a thought, there was at that time no present king of France, the state of whose skull could make that thought true or false. Russell then brought ‘analysis’ to bear on this problem by transcribing the sentence into the new logical syntax so as to eliminate the offending subject definite description in a similar way to that in which he had eliminated collective terms like ‘all Greeks’ in the sentence ‘all Greeks are mortal’ (ibid. p. 482). That is, ‘a reduction of all propositions in which denoting phrases occur to forms in which no such phrases occur’ (ibid.) eliminated the problem of phrases which only purportedly denoted.

The new logic had provided an exceptionally clear way of showing how logical reflection could aid in the solution of philosophical problems, but Russell exaggerated the revolutionary status of ‘analysis’, was overly optimistic about how the new logic could be reconciled with traditional empiricist assumptions, and misinterpreted Hegel as an easy target of the new analytic critique. In retrospect, it is clear that the germs of the new method of analysis, along with the recognition of the problems it posed for empiricism, were already present in the idealist tradition that Russell had condemned in terms of its fatally flawed ‘logic’.

An Idealist Anticipation of ‘Analysis’ in Philosophy

When recounting his early history in 1959, Russell told of first learning of the treatment of universally quantified judgments as conditionals from the Italian logician Giuseppe Peano, although he attributes the insight to Frege (Russell, 1959, 52). But in a footnote to the original ‘On Denoting’ (Russell, 1956, p. 43n), he had attributed the idea to Bradley’s The Principles of Logic, which he had read and studied in the 1890s, while Bradley himself linked his account to the Kantian J. F. Herbart’s treatment of categorical judgments as hypotheticals in the early nineteenth century (Bradley, 1883, bk. 1, ch. 2). Indeed, behind Herbart, the basic idea can be found in Wolff and Leibniz (Korte, et. al, 2009, pp. 522–6). Moreover, as for the more general strategy of ‘analysis’ modeled on it, while the new logic provided a way of making this type of logical reparsing of judgment forms explicit, the principle behind it was not novel. The idea, I suggest, had been clearly present in Hegel’s conception of ‘reflection’, and earlier in Leibniz’s conception of the making ‘distinct’ of clear but ‘confused’ ideas—a procedure that he termed, ‘definition’ or ‘analysis’. Moreover, the use of such ‘analyses’ in Leibniz and Hegel was bound up with that aspect of their thought that came to be celebrated by Sellars, their critiques of the ‘Myth of the Given’.

Leibniz’s version of the critique of the ‘Myth of the Given’ can be found in his criticism of Locke in New Essays on Human Understanding (Leibniz, 1996), and in his own ‘logical’ interpretation of Descartes’ theory of ‘clear and distinct ideas’. Speaking of the coldness and hardness felt in a piece of ice, or of the whiteness seen in a lily, Locke declares that “there is nothing can be plainer to a man than the clear and distinct perception he has of these simple ideas” (Locke, 1975, volume one, bk. II, ch. II). But Leibniz insists that a sensory idea thought of as ‘red’, say, would be ‘clear’ but confused (Leibniz, 1996, p. 255). To be made

distinct it would need to have its ‘inner structure ... deciphered’ (ibid). All clear ideas ‘are distinguishing ... but only those which are distinguished, i.e. which are in themselves distinct and which distinguish in the object the marks which make it known, thus yielding an analysis or definition’ are distinct (ibid, pp. 255–6).

For Leibniz, then, one perfects knowledge by progressing from some initially clear and confused perceptually given representation of an object to a clear and more distinct one. Leibniz’s idea of the critique of a foundational role for perceptual givens, as well as a conception of knowledge as progressing via the replacement of immediate and thus confused ideas by mediated and distinct ones, is also found in Hegel, as can be seen in his discussion, in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit from 1827–8, of the movement from ‘representation [Vorstellung]’ to ‘thought [Denken]’ (VGeist (Hegel, 2007), §§ 451–68).

Hegel describes the content of representation is ‘given [gegebenen]’ and ‘immediately found [unmittelbar Vorgefundenes]’ (VGeist, p. 195, (Hegel, 2007, p. 213)). Representation is ‘essentially different from concept [Begriff] and thought [Gedanken]’ and to have a representation ‘means that I do not yet know the object in its specificity [or determinacy [Bestimmtheit]’ (VGeist, p. 196, (Hegel, 2007, p. 213)). While representation involves concepts, here the universal is ‘not yet a genuine universal but in fact itself merely a particular in opposition to other particulars’ (VGeist, p. 224, (Hegel, 2007, p. 236)). In Leibnizian terms, what Hegel calls ‘representations’ are clear but confused. Going beyond representation to fully conceptual thought involves ‘definition’ in which ‘I state the species, the universal, and also state the determinacy, the essential determination [die wesentliche Bestimmtheit]’. And ‘in so doing, I have gone beyond the form of representation to the determinations of the concept [zu den Bestimmtheiten des Begriffs]’ (VGeist, p. 196, (Hegel, 2007, p. 213)). In comparison to representation, such contents are, we might say, clear and distinct.

The threefold distinction within forms of theoretical intentionality that Hegel gives in the lectures (intuition, representation, thought) has a parallel with his discussion of the three ‘shapes of consciousness’ twenty years earlier in the opening chapters of his Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel 1977; PhG). In chapter 1, Hegel criticizes the assumption that knowledge can be constructed on a firm basis of what he calls ‘sense-certainty’—effectively, a type of phenomenally given content akin to Locke’s notion of a simple idea of a colour (and equivalent to ‘intuition’ in the discussion of theoretical spirit). As has been noted by Willem deVries (deVries, 1988 and 2008), Hegel’s treatment of sense-certainty has clear parallels with Sellars’s critique of the ‘Myth of the Given’ (Sellars, 1997). In Sellars’s version, the ‘Given’ is conceived along the lines of Russellean ‘sense-data’, ‘acquaintance’ with which supposedly grounds all propositionally contentful ‘knowledge by description’ (Russell, 1912). Sellars’s point seems to be that purported knowledge of simple sensory givens like those of colour cannot serve as a foundation for knowledge because they cannot be quarantined from general theoretical beliefs about the world. A viewer’s knowledge that this tie is blue, for example, is contingent upon assumptions about the conditions under which it is viewed: were the lighting conditions abnormal, one might mistake a blue tie for a green one. Furthermore, as McDowell has stressed (McDowell

1994), that experience can play a justificatory role in judgment suggests that it must have an internal articulation, such as a propositional content—the content of experience must be more akin to that known in ‘knowledge by descriptions’ than bare ‘acquaintance’. That any purported atomic knowledge of immediately given perceptual ‘objects’ is ultimately dependent on some more encompassing theoretical knowledge of the world is also a central factor of Hegel’s account of the progression of the shapes of consciousness in the opening chapters of Phenomenology of Spirit.

Hegel’s critique of the ‘Given’ in the Phenomenology of Spirit goes through three stages. First, he attempts to show that the purported objects of sense-certainty cannot be conceived as free of contradiction. Importantly, to be free of contradiction is Leibniz’s anti-Lockean criterion for a ‘true’ simple idea (de Pierris, 2002).² For Hegel it would seem that the contradictory nature of simple phenomenal Givens is consequent upon the tensed character of the way they are demonstratively picked out as perceptual objects. I am aware of ‘this’ content, present here and now, but with the passage of time it turns into something else, as when the ‘now’ of night turns into day twelve hours later (PhG, p. 64, (Hegel, forthcoming, §95)). That is, a sense-datum simply picked out demonstratively could not be the subject of predication for a judgment with a stable truth-value. That the purported objects given in these shapes of consciousness turn out to be self-contradictory requiring their replacement by a different ‘shape’ is the motor driving the transitions between the successive ‘shapes’, and the new ‘Given’ that had come to replace that of sense-certainty that Hegel calls ‘perception’ (seemingly more like an Aristotelian substance than a Lockean determinate simple idea) suffers a fate similar to sense-certainty itself. In turn, then, ‘perception’ is replaced by ‘the understanding’ whose ‘Givens’ are conceived more as theoretical ‘posits’ such as forces than substances (PhG, p. 94, (Hegel, forthcoming, §152)). But, of course, a theoretical posit is not ‘given’ at all. It is posited by a subject as part of an explanation of what had been considered as given. The next transition in Chapter 4 is from ‘consciousness’ to ‘self-consciousness’ in which the subject is aware of its own positing activity.

Sellars’s approach to mental life was to model it on linguistic activity, and with this we can think of the progress through the Hegelian ‘shapes of consciousness’ as a series of reconsiderations of what components of mental content are akin to referring parts of speech. Sense-certainty is modeled on the bare demonstrative as that which links talk to the world. ‘Perception’ might be thought as perhaps modeled on an Aristotelian ‘this-such’ (deVries, 2008), a combination of a demonstrative and a sortal term. The movement from perception to the understanding might therefore be thought as akin to classical Russellian analysis in which a sentence with an only apparently referring term as the subject of predication is replaced with a sentence of different logical structure. Behind Russell’s understanding of analysis was a conception of an ultimate end point in which sense-data were arranged in ways akin to Lockean patterns of determinate simple ideas. But this analysis was premised on the problematic ‘Myth of the Given’, the inadequacy of which had been shown in the Phenomenology’s Chapter 1. In contrast, Hegelian analysis might be seen as leading in the direction of later, more holistic and pragmatic approaches to language like that of Quine.

In Quinean analysis, proper names came to undergo the fate that definite descriptions had suffered in the hands of Russell. Self-consciously reviving the medieval tradition of treating singular terms as ‘universals’ (Quine, 1960, p. 181), Quine, was to treat proper names as predicates. All talk of singular reference was, as Quine put it, ‘only a picturesque way of alluding to the distinctive grammatical roles that singular and general terms play in sentences’ (ibid., p. 96).’ A singular term ‘need not name to be significant’ (Quine, 1961, p. 9 emphasis added). With regards to reference itself, Quine was explicit: for him the parts of natural language closest to referring terms were relative pronouns like ‘that’ or ‘who’, the informal equivalents of the variable. For Quine, everything we talk about should properly be regarded as a ‘posits’, like the imperceptible posits of our most successful scientific explanations. While Russell had reacted to the problems of the objects of the Phenomenology’s Chapter 2 by going back to the start of Chapter 1, Quine seems to have pushed on to the radical conclusion of Chapter 3. Meanwhile, with Sellars’s contextualization of linguistic forms within pragmatically conceived ‘language games’, we might regard ‘analysis’ as having been taken into the territory explored in Hegel’s intersubjective grounding of consciousness and self-consciousness in the Phenomenology’s Chapter 4—an idea central to Brandom’s interpretation of Hegel.

At the start of the twentieth century, analytic philosophy had commenced by radically breaking with an Hegelian-styled philosophy that had thrived during the last decades of the nineteenth. Within just half a century, however, analytic philosophy itself had changed to such a degree that the idea of an irreconcilable opposition between its own approach and that of Hegel was starting to be questioned. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, any significant reconciliation may still have a long way to go, but the chances of this happening seem much stronger than at any time hitherto.

¹ DeVries had done his PhD on Hegel under the supervision of Sellars.

² De Pierris points out that Leibniz had *disambiguated* Descartes’ ambiguous approach to clear and distinct ideas in which phenomenological and logical issues had been conflated. Leibniz interpreted the idea of distinctness in an entirely *logical* way, while empiricists such as Locke had understood it in a *phenomenological* way.

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