

## Hermeneutics and German Idealism

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Draft chapter for Michael Forster and Kristen Gjesdal (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2018.

The hermeneutic and idealist traditions developed in close proximity in Germany from around the end of the eighteenth century, and while often in polemical opposition to each other, relations between them might be likened to those found between factions within some particularly fractious family. Sometimes hostilities cannot be contained in any way and the family becomes one in name only and all communication and interaction lost. But sometimes compromises are made. Relations can remain civil, and even productive, if certain topics are avoided.

The particular “family” in question here, I take to have its patriarch in the figure of Immanuel Kant as the initiator of a distinctly modern project—that of bringing philosophical thought back to bear on the world—that is, back to *this world* in which we act out our lives together, a project he conceived as involving a “critique” of the “pure reason” that can seem to be directed as some *beyond*. And in *this* sense we might, borrowing a term from J. G. Hamann, describe both hermeneuticists and idealists as having conceived of their own particular projects as “metacritiques” of Kant’s, intending to free Kant’s critiques from remnants of the other-worldly metaphysical tradition—that “purism” of reason—that still clung to Kant’s attempt to escape it. While at the most general level each faction would accuse the other of falling short of the goal of applying genuine thought to the world, there would nevertheless be local agreements, alliances and borrowings that rule out any simple list of differentiating factors neatly dividing the two traditions. One key focus for this presentation will concern differing stances taken to the relation of *thought* to the form of that communicative medium mediating the life of a community—its language.

In the following sections I start with the metacritiques with which Hamann and his successor J. G. Herder extended the idea of Kant’s “critique” of transcendent metaphysics to Kant’s own “critical philosophy,” and then examine some of the responses coming from Kant and his idealist followers, especially those of Fichte and Hegel.

## 1. The Early Hermeneutic Metacritique of Kant's Critique of Metaphysics

In 1784, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), a key figure in the so-called *Sturm und Drang* period of German culture of the late eighteenth century, fired the first shot in what would become a drawn-out dispute in German philosophy extending into the present. In *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*,<sup>1</sup> a short article first circulated among friends only three years after the publication of the first edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>2</sup> Hamann gave expression to ideas that would inform later hermeneutic thought: on the one hand they would suggest a language-based critique of the type of philosophical *rationalism* exemplified in Kant's critical project, on the other they would promote a range of more *empirically* based humanistic disciplines sensitive to the particularities of the cultures and languages within which human life is made determinate. While the originality of the role of Hamann here has been challenged,<sup>3</sup> for our purpose of understanding the hermeneutic thinkers' critique of idealism, as well as the responses of the idealists to this critique, Hamann's short text is a convenient place to start.

Hamann is probably most well-known *via* Isaiah Berlin's characterization as an initiator of a reactionary "counter-enlightenment" of the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Berlin's view has had its critics, some even portraying Hamann as a "radical enlightener" devoted to combatting the anti-liberal dimensions of the picture of "reason" promoted by other more

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Hamann, "Metakritik über den Purismus der reinen Vernunft," in *Schriften zur Sprache*, ed. Josef Simon (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976), English translation, "Metacritique of the Purism of Reason," in *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 205–18.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Michael N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch 2.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1994).

mainstream “enlighteners” of the time.<sup>5</sup> Most agree, however, that Hamann’s challenge to enlightenment thought, here represented by the figure of Kant, was tightly bound up to his critical attitude to the Enlightenment’s valorisation of abstract reason over tradition, and philosophy over religion and literature, and that central to these critiques were his beliefs about the relation between thought and language.

Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* had *itself*, of course, been directed against a certain rationalist conception of a “pure reason” that pursued a super-sensuous knowledge of things “in themselves,” and with his “metacritique” Hamann meant to suggest that Kant’s “critique” was insufficiently critical according to its own lights. It required its own *higher-level* critique. Thus Hamann delineates three dimensions of Kant’s own “*Purismus*”—three lines of the *purification* of thought resulting in the empty abstractions of metaphysics. First is the attempt to make reason “independent of all inheritance, tradition, and any faith in them,” next is its alleged “independence from experience and its everyday induction,” and third, is its purported independence from *language*, “the only, first, and last organon and criterion of reason, with no credentials but tradition and usage.”<sup>6</sup> In *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant had toyed with the analogy of the architectonic of reason as akin to the grammar of a language,<sup>7</sup> and Hamann takes this analogy literally. In a twist that clearly paralleled Kant’s idea of reason’s own self-deception by the “transcendental illusion,” Hamann had added that while being the *foundation* of reason, language was also “the centrepiece of reason’s misunderstanding of itself.”<sup>8</sup> Thus in his linguistic analogue of the

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightenment*, trans. Roy A. Harrisfield and Marc C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Hamann, “Metacritique,” 208. While Hamann’s metacritique is sometimes described as advocating the dependency of *reason* on *language*, this is expressed by saying that for him an individual’s activity of reasoning is somehow dependent on the capacities making up his or her ability to speak the *particular* language that he or she speaks. He was thus a linguistic *particularist*, antagonistic to any ideas about “universal language” popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and that some of Kant’s followers would embrace.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>8</sup> Hamann, “Metacritique,” 211. Hamann continues: “Not only is the entire faculty of thought founded on language ... but language is also the centrepiece of reason’s

transcendental illusion Hamann alludes the type of empty metaphysics which “abuses the word-signs and figures of speech of our empirical knowledge by treating them as nothing but hieroglyphs and types of ideal relations. Through this learned troublemaking it works the honest decency of language into such a meaningless, rutting, unstable, indefinite something = X that nothing is left but a windy sough, a magic shadow play.”<sup>9</sup>

Any chances of Hamann developing the ideas sketched and circulated in his *Metacritique* were cut short by his death in 1788, but the original piece was eventually published in 1800, a short time after the publication of another similarly titled *Metakritik* of Kant, *Understanding and Experience: A Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason*, authored by Hamann’s long-term friend and protégé Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803).<sup>10</sup> Herder, a student of Kant in the 1760s, who carried the influence of his teacher’s “pre-critical” thought and who was to play a key role in the emergence of the modern humanistic disciples of cultural history and anthropology,<sup>11</sup> had not been sympathetic to the change that had given rise to Kant’s more rationalistic critical project. Moreover, he had published in 1772 a work, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, appealing to language as a precursor of thought in ways broadly similar to that alluded to later by Hamann.<sup>12</sup>

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misunderstanding of itself... Sounds and letters are therefore pure forms *a priori* ... they are the true aesthetic elements of all human knowledge and reason” (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> Hamann, “Metacritique,” 210.

<sup>10</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol 8, ed. Günter Arnold, Martin Bollacher et. al. (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–), 303–640, parts translated as “Selections from *A Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason*,” in Jere Paul Surber (ed.), *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2001), 89–130.

<sup>11</sup> See especially, John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Forster, *After Herder*, ch. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache,” *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 1. English translation, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” in Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65–164. Speculation over the origin of language had been started by Abbé deCondillac’s “Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge” in 1746 and had intensified over the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Herder continued the major thrust of Hamann's critique of Kant's transcendentalism. The human mind "thinks with words," thinking being simply "inner speaking."<sup>13</sup> Echoing Hamann, Herder describes language as the "criterion of reason, of every genuine science, as well as of the understanding."<sup>14</sup> In the central parts of the work Herder purports to give his language-based alternative account of Kant's transcendental aesthetic and transcendental logic with the implication that this architectonic of thought becomes radically historicised. It had been the invention of signs that are divorced from experiential sources of meaning that had produced the vacuous *a priori* systems of traditional metaphysics, but rather than attempt a "critique of pure reason," reason needs to "turn to the origin of its endowment ... and ask the question. 'How did you come to yourself and to your concepts: how have you expressed these and employed, linked, and unified these; how is it that you attribute to them universal, necessary certainty?'" That is, metaphysics becomes a "*philosophy of human language*."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Herder's *Metacritique* of 1799 had appeared towards the end of a series of increasingly acrimonious exchanges with Kant following Kant's negative review of a work that would become important in the growth of later hermeneutic historiography: the first instalment of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* of 1784.<sup>16</sup> Kant had condemned Herder's approach to history as an exercise in the type of dogmatic metaphysics which the *Critique of Pure Reason* had, Kant thought, put to rest. In particular he was critical of Herder's *explanations* of the development of human reason in terms of the interactions among *natural forces* that were regarded as continuous with those shaping the biological world. Here he was particularly critical of the idea that human progress from a state like that of other animals to one of rationality and freedom could be understood as the result of factors *external* to human reason, a theme developed in his later review of Part Two of Herder's *Ideas*.

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<sup>13</sup> Herder, "Selections," 95.

<sup>14</sup> Herder, "Selections," 128.

<sup>15</sup> Herder, "Selections," 90.

<sup>16</sup> Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 6, English translation, *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London: Johnson, 1800). Kant's two reviews can be found in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, second enlarged edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

When it appeared, Herder's full-frontal attack on Kant in the *Metacritique* provoked a vigorous and at times vicious counter-attack by Kant's followers, especially by those Jena- and Berlin-based idealist and romantic thinkers who, under the influence of Reinhold and Fichte, saw themselves as followers of the spirit if not the letter of Kant's critical philosophy. It had been in the context of this reaction to Herder that Hamann's original sketch came to be published by a supporter of Kant in an effort to discredit Herder with the charge of plagiarism. But the war between Kant and Herder had introduced tensions within the allegiances of the Jena romantics themselves, many of whom had been very sympathetic to Herder's ideas.

Leaving aside questions of justification, what the response of the idealist camp signalled in particular was how central, by the late 1790s, the theme of the relation of thought to language had become for *them*. Thus the various romantic projects of the likes of the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Friedrich von Schleiermacher and others had attempted to integrate a linguistic dimension into the idealist project. The background for such an engagement with language had been the effective collapse in the early part of the decade of *the first* phase of post-Kantian thought: Karl Leonhard Reinhold's attempt to ground Kant's philosophy *psychologically* in a representational theory of consciousness.

The fate of the Reinholdian phase of German idealism is well-known. Reinhold's work had attracted the rebuke of a Humean skeptic, G. E. Schulze, writing under the name of *Aenesidemus*, this criticism in turn provoking a long reply by J. G. Fichte (1762–1814),<sup>17</sup> which effectively initiated the next phase of post-Kantian idealism that would be centred around Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* project of 1794–5.<sup>18</sup> For Fichte and his followers,

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<sup>17</sup> J. G. Fichte, "Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Hrn. Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie," *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Hans Gliwitsky (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann, 1964–), Band I,2. A partial translation can be found in, J. G. Fichte, "Review of Aenesidemus," in *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, (eds) George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 105-35.

<sup>18</sup> J. G. Fichte, "*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre als Handschrift für seine Zuhörer*," *Gesamtausgabe*, Band I,2, English translation as *Foundations of the Entire*

Schulze's criticisms of Reinhold had brought out irresolvable problems inherent in Reinhold's idea of the "representational" character of consciousness, and it is not surprising that the post-Kantians, and especially the Jena romantics, would focus on the necessity of language for thought. Jena romanticism would effectively collapse at the end of the decade, but the Berlin-based Schleiermacher would go on to create an explicitly "hermeneutic" framework for the interpretation of texts, while Wilhelm von Humboldt would construct a distinctly Kantian theory of language that, in contrast to those of Hamann and Herder, would focus on its purportedly universal features.<sup>19</sup> In the 1800s, the idea of thought's need for linguistic form to be *determinate* would appear in Hegel's work as he continued on at Jena, although this was clearly an idea with which he would struggle in the attempt to integrate language into the systematic form taken by his idealism. Schelling, who in the late 1890s had developed his own version of the Fichtean program had also engaged centrally with the issue of the embodiment of thought in language and other material symbolic systems, that would influence the hermeneutic thought of the philologist and Plato scholar, Georg Anton Friedrich Ast, the first to formulate the idea of the "hermeneutic circle."<sup>20</sup> However, of the idealists, it was Fichte himself who had first broached the issue of the relation of thought to language in the most direct way in an essay in 1795 that could be thought of as extending Kant's critique of Herder's "externalist" conception of the development of human rationality onto Herder's own turf—language.

## 2 Post-Kantian Idealism Responds: Fichte on language

In *On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin of Language*, Fichte describes language, somewhat conventionally, as the "*expression of our thoughts by means of arbitrary signs*"<sup>21</sup>—

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*Science of Knowledge* in *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> See in particular, Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chs 3 and 4.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Ast, *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* (Landshut: Jos. Thomann, Buchdrucker und Buchhändler, 1808).

<sup>21</sup> J. G. Fichte, "Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache," *Gesamtausgabe*, Band I,3, English translation as "On the Linguistic Capacity and the Origin

an idea that seeming could have been expressed by Locke or even Aristotle, in which the representational capacities of *language* seem to depend unilaterally on those of *thought*. However, Fichte's account departs from any mentalistic view when he refuses to treat language as the "arbitrary" signification of the mind's *natural* signs. He thus criticizes Locke's idea of a pictorial image as a *natural* representation because of the resemblance involved. For Fichte, a drawing of a fish, for example, is to be regarded as just as arbitrary as the word "fish": "whether signs have any natural resemblance to what is significant is totally irrelevant."<sup>22</sup> One might think that this would lead to an *entirely* conventionalist account of language that could in turn be sympathetic to the determining role of a cultural "tradition," but this too would be subject to Kant's critique of the idea of any origin of language outside of reason.

*Methodologically*, Fichte's approach to the question of the *genesis* of language has parallels to Kant's response to Herder in his 1786, *Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History*, although here Fichte's particular opponent here is the *Populärphilosoph*, Ernst Platner: "One must not resort to hypothesis, to an arbitrary list of the particular circumstances under which something like a language *could have arisen*." Instead, "one must deduce the *necessity* of this invention from the nature of human reason; one must demonstrate that and how language must have been invented."<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to interpret Fichte's "just-so story" concerning the origin and growth of language that follows as living up to an account of how language "must have been invented." Fichte's story in fact starts with an account of natural signs understood in terms of causal connection—the roar of the lion coming to be taken by humans as a sign of the lion's presence. But Fichte is not interested in the roar as it comes from the lion, but rather as an *imitated roar* coming from humans who use it to warn others of the lion's presence. Such imitations can be compounded, as when an imitated *roar* is followed by an imitated *snore* that signals that the lion is sleeping, for example.<sup>24</sup> Such compounding produces strings of sounds with a degree of syntactic differentiation, in particular, that between subject and predicate. Here, the degree of grammatical *mediation* is taken as directly proportional to that

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of Language," in *Language and German Idealism: Fichte's Linguistic Philosophy*, ed. Jere Paul Surber (New York: Humanity Books), 120.

<sup>22</sup> Fichte, "On the Linguistic Capacity," 120.

<sup>23</sup> Fichte, "On the Linguistic Capacity," 119, emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Fichte, "On the Linguistic Capacity," 134–5.

of the *detachment* of individual sounds from their originally particularistic purchase on the world. With the “roar–snore” compound a type of “hieroglyphic” proto-language had come to exist, and the task was now to show how a type of teleological boot-strapping could lead from this proto-language into a “purely audible language” in which the mode of signification has become *fully* conventional.

Fichte’s idea is that the conventionality of the sign relation implies its maintenance by a type of collective act of *the will*,<sup>25</sup> and so the iconicity of hieroglyphic language—what Locke had taken to constitute a natural sign—is eventually overcome in favour of the medium of the free expression of human thought in such a way that anything *non-voluntary* concerning the choice of the sign itself has been eliminated.

At the heart of this teleological account is thus an idea central to Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*—the conception of the human subject as an essentially *self-positing* “I=I,” ideally free from external determination. Such a conception has the human being seeking “to subjugate the power of nature” in an effort to free itself from determination by what is given in experience as the *not-self*.<sup>26</sup> The approach here is clearly rationalist: one *subjugates* this external power, gains a power *over* the external world, when one integrates one’s judgments about it into a logically coherent structure centred on the self-identical, self-positing “I=I”—Fichte’s version of Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception.

The hermeneutic thinker will surely here see Fichte’s account of the *origin* of a rational human language out of the *Ur-Sprache* as question-begging. In this account it becomes evident that what is needed for rational language is not only a linguistic analogue for general *empirical* concepts but also genuinely “universal” ones taken to apply to “supersensibles”—concepts such as that of an enduring “substrate” underlying the perceivable changes of substances, or one adequate to the representation of the subject *doing* the representing—the “I.” Here Fichte seems simply to revert to the traditional thesis of the *inessentiality* of language for thought. The concept of something supersensible, he notes, “must have been present before a signification for it could have been sought.”<sup>27</sup> It is therefore far from clear that Fichte could easily accommodate the type of critique levelled against Kant by Hamann and Herder. Nevertheless, when Herder’s “metacritical” critique of idealism appeared in 1799, the official response of the idealist camp was to come from a Fichtean

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<sup>25</sup> Fichte, “On the Linguistic Capacity,” 126-7.

<sup>26</sup> Fichte, “On the Linguistic Capacity,” 121.

<sup>27</sup> Fichte, “On the Linguistic Capacity,” 131-2.

intent on developing something like a linguistified version of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*: August Friedrich Bernhardi (1769–1820), who has been described as the “last and perhaps most brilliant representative of Kant’s “critical” philosophy within linguistics of the Berlin Late-Enlightenment.”<sup>28</sup>

In a savage review of Herder's *Metacritique*, published in the Schlegel brothers' *Athenaeum*,<sup>29</sup> Bernhardi took on Herder on the very terrain of language itself, attacking him for his lack of a scientific understanding of language and for his ignorance of the developments in critical philosophy since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Bernhardi had already published a work on Fichte's language essay, and in the year following the Herder-review would publish the first volume of a work, *Sprachlehre* [Grammar], in which he attempted to join Fichte's linguistic thoughts to the central ideas of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in a more successful way than Fichte himself had achieved.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1784–5 *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte had rejected any *external* account of reason by describing a *circle* “in which any finite understanding is locked,” a circle that exists when “the faculty of representation exists *for* the faculty of representation and *through* the faculty

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<sup>28</sup> Joachim Gessinger, “August Ferdinand Bernhardi,” in Hans Josef Niederehe and Konrad Koerner (eds), *History and Historiography of Linguistics: Volume 2: 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 562. Jere Surber points to the role of Bernhardi, as well as translating his review of Herder and fragments of *Sprachlehre* in Surber, *Metacritique*. While the role of Bernhardi in accounts of the development of post-Kantian idealism and romanticism had been long ignored, the importance of his philosophy of language has been underlined by Angela Esterhammer in *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), chapter 2, and Brigitte Nerlich and David D. Clarke, *Language, Action and Context: The Early History of Pragmatics in Europe and America, 1780-1930* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), ch 2.

<sup>29</sup> August Ferdinand Bernhardi, “Verstand und Erfahrung. Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft von G. G. Herder,” in *Die Athenaeum: Einer Zeitschrift von August Wilhelm Schlegel und Friedrich Schlegel*, Band 3, 266–281, English translation as “Review of Herder's *Metacritique*” in Surber, *Metacritique*, 138–56.

<sup>30</sup> August Ferdinand Bernhardi, *Sprachlehre* (Berlin: Heinrich Frölich, 1801), partial translation as “Theory of Language,” in Surber, *Metacritique*, 157–70.

of representation.”<sup>31</sup> Construed in a psychologistic way, this would appear to be prone to the same problems affecting Reinhold’s “principle of consciousness,” but in his *Foundations of Natural Right* of 1786,<sup>32</sup> Fichte had discussed a subject’s “recognition” of another’s intention in that other’s *act*, implicitly offering an *intersubjective* reading of such a circle. Bernhardi could thus construe Fichte’s “circle,” *Kreis*, explicitly as a *communicative* circle in which the active speaker, the passive interlocutor, and the presented state of affairs being talked about all found their distinct forms of representation.<sup>33</sup> With this, Bernhardi comes close to the idea of the “hermeneutic circle” later developed by Ast and Schleiermacher.

One important modification of Fichte’s theory added by Bernhardi was the development of the idea of a “second language.” In his review of Herder, Bernhardi had noted Herder’s idea that the first objects of linguistic presentation were objects of sensible nature, “where the spheres of the singular signs [*einzelnen Zeichen*] are given as completely determined by conformity with the sensible impression,”<sup>34</sup> but such a restricted “semantics” is far from adequate to Kant’s architectonic of reason. Thus in his *Sprachlehre* Bernhardi added the idea of a *second language* developing *out of* the first, a language whose “domain [*Gebiet*] is produced and enlarged by the self-activity of spirit itself” [*von der Selbsttätigkeit des Geistes selbst*]. It is this expanded circle that is the place of what he calls “*free* presentation,” that contrasts with the “bound presentation” of the “first language.”<sup>35</sup> This, of course, was a version of Herder’s own ideas of how the coining of new languages could result in the *empty* vocabularies of rationalist metaphysics, but for Bernhardi there was no reason why *only* this negative consequence should be drawn. The idea of *working on* the “first language” in this way was further developed by Fichte.

In 1807, when the German states were being invaded by Napoleon’s army, Fichte returned to the theme of language and its relation to a self-governing people in a series of

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<sup>31</sup> Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> J. G. Fichte, “Grundlage des Naturrechts,” *Gesamtausgabe*, Bänden I,3&4, English Translation as *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Bernhardi, *Sprachlehre*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Bernhardi, “Review of Herder,” 141.

<sup>35</sup> Bernhardi, *Sprachlehre*, 101–2.

public lectures, *Addresses to the German Nation*.<sup>36</sup> Here he took up the issue of the conditions that allowed a language that originally spoke only of sensuous things to develop the resources for thought about supersensible “spiritual” things—effectively what Bernhardt had discussed as the creation of *second language*. Fichte draws on and extends his earlier speculative account of language, but here with a more definite assertion of the primacy of language: since “it is very much men who are formed by language, rather than language being formed by men,” Fichte asks his addressees to “join [him] in a consideration of the essence of language in general [Wesen des Sprache überhaupt].”<sup>37</sup>

What had distinguished the Germans from other European tribes, he suggests, was that they had continued to speak their original language without interruption, and in doing so had cultivated [*fortbildeten*] it.<sup>38</sup> In this process, particular words originally used for sensuous objects will be treated as resources for talking about supersensibles by a type of metaphorical extension—as, for example, when the ancient Greeks had employed the metaphor of *vision* for the conception of “ideas.”<sup>39</sup> Fichte suggests that somehow such associations between the sensible and supersensible meanings contribute to the capacity to *use* such abstract vocabulary, and contrasts this natural growth of language to a situation in which an invaded people has imposed upon it the language of their invaders. Under such conditions, imported foreign words used to talk about spiritual matters will be bereft of those organic ties to the everyday life of the community, and thereby will become empty and dead abstractions.

With this idea of the meaninglessness of abstractions cut off from *linguistic life*, Fichte adopts some of the earlier linguistic critique of “empty” metaphysics found in Hamann and Herder, a critique that would also be found in the mid-twentieth century in certain strands of “ordinary language philosophy.” But while with these lectures Fichte is often seen to be veering in the direction of a type of linguistic nationalism associated with Hamann and Herder, a careful reading reveals certain *cosmopolitan* themes in this work as well. The

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<sup>36</sup> J. G. Fichte, “Reden zu die Deutsche Nation,” in *Gesamtausgabe*, Band I.10. English translation, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans., intro and notes by Isaac Nakhimovsky, Béla Kapossy, and Keith Tribe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Fichte, *Addresses*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Fichte, *Addresses*, 47. The theme of the “Bildung”—education, formation or cultivation—of the nation is central to Fichte’s *Addresses*.

<sup>39</sup> Fichte, *Addresses*, 48.

“universalising” dimension to the idealists’ critique of the hermeneutic thinkers had not been completely submerged. An attempt to integrate both particularistic and universalistic dimensions here can be found in the work of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831).

### 3. The Early Hegel: An attempted at hermeneutic form of idealism?

A prominent feature of Hegel’s social thought was his use of the notion of “*objektiver Geist* [objective spirit]” to suggest the dependence of an individual’s style of thinking on the historically and culturally specific form of life to which he or she belonged—an idea showing similarities to Fichte’s position in *Addresses to the German Nation* and ultimately traceable back to Herder. It was a notion that was to become central to Dilthey’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century contrast between the hermeneutic “*Geisteswissenschaften*”—the sciences of “spirit”—and the *Naturwissenschaften*, the natural sciences.<sup>40</sup> Thus, drawing on the early Hegel, Dilthey was to use the contrast of spirit to nature to provide an distinct epistemological frame for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, attempting thereby to isolate those “good” parts of the early Hegel from the “bad” systematic metaphysician from the Berlin period. Such a partitioning of Hegel’s oeuvre continued to be employed into the second half of the twentieth century. Thus Habermas, for example, was to use Hegel’s idea of “recognitively” mediated intersubjectivity to extract ideas closer to the hermeneutic tradition from Hegel’s metaphysics,<sup>41</sup> as was Gadamer to draw on Hegel in his otherwise Heideggerian attempt to establish a distinctly hermeneutic conception of philosophy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 168–263.

<sup>41</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “*Arbeit und Interaktion. Bemerkungen zu Hegels Jenenser Philosophie des Geistes*,” in H. Braun and M. Riedel, (eds), *Natur und Geschichte. Karl Löwith zum 70. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967), translated as “Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s Jena *Philosophy of Mind*,” in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 142–169.

<sup>42</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge der Philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), translated as *Truth and Method*, trans.

Dilthey had appealed to Hegel's writings while at Jena, a period in which Hegel had closely aligned his approach with that of Schelling, who was pursuing his own somewhat "hermeneutic" approach to idealism focused on the role of linguistic and other forms of symbolism.<sup>43</sup> In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807,<sup>44</sup> Hegel was effectively to break with Schelling, and while some exclude this text from those Jena texts that *best* represent a type of language-based "hermeneutic" dimension, a sensitive reading of it can still find a rich source of ideas concerning the structuring effects of language on "spirit." Because Schelling's work of this period was effectively to take him *away* from the philosophical stance of idealism, we will restrict our attention here to Hegel's approach to language and understanding. A focus on his attitude towards the *Fichteian* notion of recognition will be a useful place to start.

Fichte had introduced the recognition theme in *Foundations of Natural Right* to "deduce" the social existence of humans within relations of mutual recognition as a necessary condition of their self-conception as beings with *rights*. When we look to Hegel's treatment of recognition in chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology*, I suggest that what find there is not, as is often assumed, Hegel's own theory of recognition, but his *critical* appropriation of *Fichte's* account of the role of recognition in "self-consciousness."<sup>45</sup> And as the problems inherent in Fichte's conception of recognition were bound up with similar problems in his account of the relation of language to thought, Hegel's critical appropriation of Fichte's concept of recognition was to have consequences for the understanding of his conception of the thought-language relation, although this would only become explicit later in that work.

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William Glen-Doepel, Donald G. Marshall, and Joel Weinsheimer (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Whistler, *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes in Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1969), vol. 3, translated as *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Paul Redding, "The Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: The Dialectic of Lord and Bondsman in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in F. Beiser (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 94–110.

That Hegel has Fichte's self-positing "I=I" in his sights from the very start of Chapter 4 is made clear by his use of this very formula. Here Hegel starts with the question of the nature of the "object" capable of satisfying some (self-conscious) *desire* [*Begierde*]. Nothing less than another self-consciousness, it would seem, could be an adequate vehicle within which one might recognize oneself *as* a self-consciousness.<sup>46</sup> Fichte had postulated that one subject, being driven by the need to free itself from the subjugation of nature, could recognize this rational drive in the actions of another such being, and this, of course, suggests that the latter could also so recognize the former. In short, each subject would recognize the other as an instantiation of the ideal "self-positing" I=I that resists external determination by nature.

Hegel brings out the contradictions in this scenario, as each subject could only recognize such an attitude as expressed in the *empirically observable* actions of the other, and here the problems of Fichte's Kantian starting point emerge. Kant's transcendental idealism posits an unbridgeable divide between a transcendently located subject and the contents of the empirical world *given to* this subject. For Fichte's finite subject, any other subject must thus be empirically presented *as* a piece of nature to be simply overcome in its struggle for freedom.

The master-slave scenario that results from the struggle in Hegel's parable shows how the slave, in accepting the status of the natural objectivity of *non-humanness* in relation to the master's subjectivity, inadvertently stumbles on the *actual* path to a freedom that cannot be reached from the master's starting point. The ultimate triumph of the working slave over the master is thus more refutation of Fichte's idea of subjectivity than anticipation of Marx's idea of the proletariat as universal class. The master-slave scenario exemplifies the same Kantian based problems that are seen to affect Fichte's sketch of hermeneutics in the language essay. There he had stated that the capacity to recognise the purposiveness of another's action in response to one's own actions would lead to attempts to *communicate* one's intentions to another for the purpose of preventing and correcting their misunderstandings of the meaning otherwise expressed in the original actions: "How easy it is for me to misunderstand the well-intentioned act of another and respond with ingratitude. But the better I come to comprehend his intention, the more I will want to correct my mistake and, to this end, be better informed about his thoughts in the future ... Thus arises the task of *inventing fixed signs by which we can communicate our thoughts to others.*"<sup>47</sup> But for Hegel, the embodiment of intentions in

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<sup>46</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 175.

<sup>47</sup> Fichte, "On the Linguistic Capacity," 124, emphasis added.

empirical language cannot be *secondary* to their existence in thought. Thoughts expressed in language need the articulation achievable there *to be* thoughts.

This move towards an essentially Hamannian–Herderian linguistic thesis is clearly stated in the section “Spirit,” where Hegel describes language as the *Dasein*—the determinate external existence—of Spirit, in a passage clearly aimed at Fichte’s I=I.

Here again we see *language* as the existence of spirit (die *Sprache* as das *Dasein* des Geistes). Language is self-consciousness existing *for others*, self-consciousness which *as such* is immediately *present*, and as *this* self-consciousness is universal. It is the self that separates itself from itself which as pure ‘I’=‘I’ becomes objective to itself, which in this objectivity equally preserves itself as *this* self, just as it coalesces directly with other selves and is *their* self-consciousness. It perceives itself just as it is perceived by others, and the perceiving is just *existence which has become a self*.<sup>48</sup>

The Fichtean struggle *for* recognition, for the recognition as having one’s will regarded as authoritative, had been resolved when one of the antagonists accepted the role of being an effectively *will-less* instrument *of* the other’s will, but from Hegel’s perspective, there is already a contradiction at the heart of this arrangement. The slave had accepted the role of will-less instrument of another, but paradoxically, this has to be seen *as* an act of *will*, as the slave had made a choice, trading freedom for being absolved from the immediate threat of death. Hence to be a slave is, in contradictory manner, to continually *will* the state of *will-lessness*.

With this simple pattern of social life in place as a crude model of actual social relationships, we might ask after some of the minimum requirements for the master-slave relation to function. At the very least, it might be said, this institution would require the capacity for the master to convey the contents of his will to his slave—this community will surely have to be a *linguistically* mediated one, a consequence of Hegel’s later explicit characterization of language as the “*Dasein*” of spirit. Looking at the roles of master and slave from a communicative point of view, we might think of these roles as differentiated by the type of speech act that each can employ. Most simply, only the master can utter imperatives. Only the master can *perform the speech act* whose consequence is that the one to whom it is directed *thereby* acts in a certain way, the way *specified* by the content

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<sup>48</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 652.

expressed in the sentence. But the slave's understanding here gives the lie to his overt "objectivity." In needing to understand, and act on the will of the *master*, the slave shows himself to be implicitly capable of the master's intentions. From a hermeneutic point of view, the "master-slave" institution will indeed be self-contradictory and, for Hegel, will be replaced in history by a more symmetrical one.

#### 4. Puzzles of the Later Hegel: Metaphysics or hermeneutic critique of metaphysics?

If *Phenomenology of Spirit* brings Hegel's Jena period to a close, then it also seems to end any efforts to incorporate a hermeneutic dimension into idealism. Hegel's post-Jena philosophy is effectively that of his *system*, which falls into three component parts: the "science" of logic, and the "philosophies" of nature and spirit. While the separation of the *latter* two disciplines might give the hermeneutic thinker hope, given the clear distinction that is set up between the spheres of "Natur" and "Geist," *both* presuppose and are meant to be structured by the results found in his *Science of Logic*.<sup>49</sup> This work presents itself as tracing the self-unfolding of the pure "thought determinations." It will, therefore, from a hermeneutic perspective, appear to base the rest of his philosophical system on what Hamann called a "magic shadow play."

While the traditional "metaphysical" reading of Hegel finds no place in his mature philosophy for anything like a hermeneutic *metacritique* of Kant's *critique* of metaphysics, this traditional reading has nevertheless been contested by a variety of readers of Hegel since the mid-twentieth century. One of the earliest was John N. Findlay who, identifying certain parallels between Hegel and the later Wittgenstein, described Hegel's philosophy as "one of the most anti-metaphysical of philosophical systems, one that remains most within the pale of ordinary experience."<sup>50</sup> More recently, the Kantian "critical" dimensions of Hegel's critique of Kant's own residual metaphysics,<sup>51</sup> as well as the *hermeneutic* aspects of Hegel's critique

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<sup>49</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vols 5 and 6, English translation as *Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> J. N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), 348.

<sup>51</sup> Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

of Kant,<sup>52</sup> have been stressed, contesting the traditional reading of Hegel. More specifically, signs of this hermeneutic dimension can be found in a preface written for a second edition of the *Science of Logic* in 1831, the year of Hegel's death and almost two decades after the work's initial publication. There Hegel's notes that "the received material, the known thought-forms, must be regarded as an extremely important model or template [*Vorlage*], even a necessary condition,"<sup>53</sup> for the project of unpacking the logical structure of thought undertaken there. By this "*Vorlage*," Hegel seems to mean what has been handed down to us in the logical texts of our philosophical tradition. Qua "logician," then, Hegel might be read as addressing the actual history of one form of those "cultivations" of natural language to which Fichte had alluded in his *Addresses to the German Nation* and that are understood as ultimately rooted in the language of the everyday life of the nation.

It is significant that Hegel follows these methodological remarks by what probably amount to his most explicit comments on the relation of *language* to thought to be found in his works, comments which seem to give expression to something close to the Herderian point of view. Forms of thought, he goes on, "are first set out and stored in human *language*," which penetrates "everything the human being has interiorized, ... everything that in some way or other has become for him a representation."<sup>54</sup> Logic may be "natural to the human being," but languages, he says, differ to the degree that they provide logical expressions within which "thought determinations" can be expressed. Here Hegel counters any Humboldtian linguistic universalism, and points to the particular importance of *the German language*, with its developed provision of substantives and verbs.

A similar engagement with hermeneutic issues in Hegel's later writings is a lengthy review written in 1828 of the publication of Hamann's *Schriften* which Hegel uses as a context within which to say something about Hamann's original linguistic *metacritique* launched against Kant.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Hegel's review itself can be read as a simultaneously hermeneutic and philosophical engagement with Hamann's writings.

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, "Hamanns Schriften," in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol 11, translated as "The Writings of Hamann," in *Hegel on Hamann*, trans. Lisa Marie Anderson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

Hegel devotes around three and a half pages to Hamann’s “curious” but “clever” *Metacritique*, listing Hamann’s central theses and concludes his discussion with a summing up of his “concrete principle” which states that it is the nature of words to “belong, as visible and audible, to *sensibility* and intuition, but also, according to the *spirit* of their employment and meaning, to *understanding* and to *concepts*, and are thus both pure and empirical intuitions and pure and empirical concepts.”<sup>56</sup> Hegel presents Hamann’s linguistic principles as analogous to Kant’s transcendental idealism, and using one of Hamann’s metaphors that goes back to an ancient Stoic saying on the nature of thinking, describes him as having made only a “balled fist” and having left it to the reader to “unclench” it into an “open hand”—that is, to reveal the properly *conceptual* connections in the text—indirectly suggesting that this is what *he himself* had undertaken in his own *Science of Logic*.<sup>57</sup> Even the late Hegel, it would seem, might not have been the type of abstract metaphysician that the hermeneutic thinkers had condemned.

In the foregoing we have focused on writings of a particular time and place, those “twenty five years of philosophy” in Germany<sup>58</sup>, that came to have a profound effect on modern European thought and culture. The dynamic between these two modes of thinking observed there, however, might be considered to have continued to operate well beyond that historical context, although perhaps not under these particular names, and to have contributed to the shape philosophy and the humanities up to the present.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hegel, “The Writings of Hamann,” 38.

<sup>57</sup> I have explored this further in *Thoughts, Deeds, Words, and World: Hegel’s Idealist Response to the Linguistic “Metacritical Invasion”* (Aurora, Colorado: Noesis Press, 2016), 65–73.

<sup>58</sup> Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> I’m grateful to both Michael Forster and Kristin Gjesdal for very helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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