

Klaus Brinkmann

Idealism without Limits: Hegel and the Problem of Objectivity.

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Brinkmann's book aims to assess the problem of securing universal and necessary truth and knowledge for self-conscious cognitive subjects, focusing primarily on Hegel's approach (*Phenomenology, Logic*) to establishing non-relative objectivity and normative principles of cognition and action.

Given Hegel's confrontation with ancient thought and his revival of Aristotle, Brinkmann first thinks to begin with the classical issue of objective truth according to its historical development. Instead, he chooses to begin with Descartes' paradigm shift in modern philosophy, viz. that subjectivity underwrites all claims to objective truth. The rationale for this change lies in the legacy of Descartes' subjective turn, which Brinkmann regards as the subordination of the third person to a first person perspective, with all the ensuing philosophical difficulties—in particular, the creation of a hiatus between certainty and truth. From this standpoint Brinkmann sees transcendental philosophy as ratifying the Cartesian turn to assure a viable conception of objectivity by privileging the epistemic subject. He also takes it to reply to the weakness of the Cartesian project, which privileges the individual as the ultimate arbiter of truth, by securing universality and necessity for objective claims to knowledge through our a priori framework of a causally ordered spatio-temporal world.

Chapter 1 shows how the crisis of subjectivity and the quest to defend the objectivity of our subjective interpretive frameworks still dictate the agenda of contemporary North-American (Sellars, Rorty, Goodman, Davidson, Putnam, Rescher) and European (mainly German: Günther Abel and Hans Lenk) interpretationist theorists: if they escape the Cartesian representational model of cognition, they remain 'unable to preserve a satisfactory conception of objectivity based on normative standards of truth' (233). The choice to begin with Descartes thus highlights the contemporary relevance of Hegel's own paradigm shift, from referentiality to intelligibility of thought (233 ff.), as philosopher of the original unity of the structure of intelligibility and reality. In conclusion, Brinkmann considers Hegel's potential contribution to contemporary philosophy regarding practical and moral questions, and underscores how pluralism, identity and difference, integration of opposites and contextualization are involved in the dialectical, determinate unfolding of the original, universal form of the thing through its relation to others (261-6). Brinkmann's main claim is that Hegel's idealism is 'infinite': ordinary perceptual relationships already operate with universals and 'consciousness can have access to sensible particulars only through the mediation of a concept' (109), thus overcoming the limit of a heterogeneous finite material which stands in opposition to a thinking subject, which still infects the subjective idealist framework set forth by Kant.

Relying also on a careful analysis of §26 of Kant's 1787 'Transcendental Deduction' (41-56), Chapter 2 reconstructs, along a straightforward theoretical line 'from Descartes to Kant', the challenges to which Hegel responds as a philosopher of 'radical immanence' through his criticism of Kant's 'Deduction', in which the dualism of matter and form re-emerges as a model of cognition requiring the relation of concepts to a content given independently of them. Within this framework, Chapter 3 details the way in which Hegel overcomes the subject-object opposition of natural consciousness in the 'Consciousness' section of the 1807 *Phenomenology* (100-154), against the background of its methodological presuppositions and achievements (79-100; 189-94), and selectively discusses some 'strategic junctures' in 'Self-Consciousness, Reason and Spirit' (154-89; 194-219). Chapter 4 proposes an ontological reading of Hegel's *Logic* rather than a metaphysical one: categories are objective thoughts which not only 'represent our thoughts about the real, but reveal the intelligible structure of things to us' (245). In sum, Brinkman argues that Hegel's solution completes and radicalizes Kant's Copernican Revolution, rectifying the theoretical impasse of Kant's appeal to an empirical manifold given independently of the cognitive subject, which is not originally part of the transcendental unity of self-consciousness. Hegel rejects 'the idea of a non-conceptual sensible material of intuition' (235), and conceives of mind and world as one original unity of subject and object.

By way of comment, on my view it is important to avoid misunderstandings about any alleged *immediate* identity of concept and sensory content: consider that in the neglected phenomenological chapter on reason, Hegel confutes the position that reason tries to possess itself directly in natural sensible things, showing how reason is in truth *only the universality* of things, their essentiality. Moreover, in the 1831 *Lectures on Logic* Hegel speaks of the connection between the nature of the thing and our own essence even in the simplest of sensory judgments, e.g., 'the rose is red'. At first what lies before consciousness appears as something *totally* sensory, whereas both 'is' as copula, and 'red' as a predicate, are disentangled from a simple undivided sensation and exhibit the character of universality that belongs not to the sensible material of intuition but to our act of assimilating to ourselves an external content. However, our instinctive thinking, universalizing activity is not yet explicit for us; the task is to objectify it for our consciousness and at the same time to transpose sensory outer objects into ourselves. As Hegel puts it, 'two things to be distinguished in representation are its form and content. Its content is twofold: sensory content and thought content'.

Regarding the initial claim that Descartes' turn to subjectivity 'plunged philosophy into a prolonged crisis', Brinkmann maintains that the choice of certainty or indubitability as standard of truth reveals the 'personal' nature of the Cartesian project: 'truth claims need to be certified and endorsed by the individual in order to be recognized as truths...the important point resulting from this turn is the insight that the cognitive subject participates in the generation of truth and assumes responsibility for it' (38). Here lies the germ of the dilemma taken over by Kant, for 'subjectivity is also and at the very same time being cut off from the objective correlates that provide the material conditions that can make those truth claims true' (10), and validation by mental immanence is potentially in conflict with truth claims that are supposed to hold universally (38).

A couple of comments on Brinkmann's strategy and line of argument. On my view it is worthy of note that Descartes begins the *Discourse* by stressing that the first person cognitive perspective does not refer to individuals taken in their spiritual diversity, as particular and empirical subjectivity (according to various degrees of clarity, vivacity, amplitude etc. of thought, imagination, memory) but equally as endowed with the form or nature of reason, or intellect. This distinguishes *in toto* the human species from the animals and is present in its entirety in each of us. The appeal to this common intellective nature—which the Second Meditation sharply distinguishes from imagination and senses and makes solely responsible for conceiving bodies scientifically through thought (*Regulae* I-III)—guides the self-examination of the 'everyman' Polyander in the *Search after Truth*, where the method of doubt maieutically results in the common sense admission of the impossibility of indubitable knowledge of the distinction between chimerae and perceived things or bodies, or between mental images originated by an internal mental activity and mental images originated by the sense-perception of external material things. This prompts the voluntary act of admitting as true nothing which one can possibly doubt.

Descartes points to the *metaphysical* certainty to conclude spiritual rather than corporeal existence based on the inner experience of thinking activity—the only attribute inseparable from the doubting individual, although he affirms that both sensorial and intellectual evidence (*contra the malin génie*) require proof of a truthful God. Hence Descartes maintains that no atheist can know with 'true and certain science', beyond any possible doubt, either memories of state of affairs (e.g., sleeping or waking), or the propositions of mathematics and geometry (cf. Reply to Second Objections). These hold indubitably only for the subject who knows s/he was created by a God who does not deceive. Note that the *epistemic context is the same* for both the cognitive-believer and the cognitive-atheist: both take a truth claim for true, though only the former does so on justified, indubitable scientific grounds; the latter remains unable to secure objective knowledge. Instead of speaking, as Brinkmann does, of the 'certification' of objectivity from the personal perspective of any one particular subject, and of 'participation' of the subject in the 'generation of truth' because 'knowledge requires the active interpretive input of the subject', it would appear closer to Descartes' view to speak of 'persuasion' about truth claims and of the 'sufficiency of signs' (what is coherently reported from senses, memory, intellect) to secure objectivity based on demonstrative knowledge of a truthful God (Meditation Six).

As to Kant's reading of Descartes' subjective certainty, consider that, after Berkeley's criticism of Locke's abstract ideas, Hume (*Enquiry* §12) states that when men follow the powerful and blind instinct of nature they *always* suppose 'the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other'. Hume stresses the lack of any *empirical* (not metaphysical) criterion to demonstrate the real extra-mental origin of the mental representation of external objects, and hence the lack of any rational justification of our instinctive certainty of the independent existence of an outer world. Reformulating Descartes' argument in terms of certainty about a *matter of fact*, that is, the existence of a

cause-effect relation between the mind-independent object and its sensory impression in our mind, on the very basis of *experience*, Hume rejects as rationally ill-grounded Descartes' solution by appeal to the veracity of a transcendent Supreme Being. When Kant attempts to distance transcendental or critical idealism from other subjective forms of idealism (*Prolegomena* §13, Remark III; both editions of the first *Critique*), he considers Descartes as an exponent of an empirical or problematic idealism, apparently endorsing Hume's reformulation. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant writes that Descartes 'thought every one at liberty to deny the existence of the corporeal world because it could never be proved satisfactorily', and in 1787 Kant ascribes to Descartes a position that declares 'the existence of objects in space outside us to be...doubtful and indemonstrable' (B274). Moreover, announcing the 'Refutation of the Idealism', Kant declares that 'it always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us (from which we after all get the whole matter for our cognitions, even for our inner sense) should have to be assumed merely *on faith*, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof'.

To have referred (at least) to Kant's assessment of Descartes' position in the 'Refutation' would have substantially articulated and enriched our comprehension of the theoretical relationship between Descartes and Kant and of its proper role within the economy of Brinkmann's book.

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