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Review of “Sally Sedgwick, Hegel’s Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity,” Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

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Sally Sedgwick

Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

240 pages

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Sally Sedgwick's *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity* is superb; everyone working in German idealism or any related field should read it immediately and repeatedly. She provides expert interpretations of key arguments from Hegel's early Jena-period essays and from some later works, liberating Hegel from a series of long-dominant but flawed interpretations and bringing new attention to an overlooked aspect of his teachings on conceptuality, sensibility, and the mind-world relation generally. No book can satisfy all its readers' demands, and an important book will perhaps satisfy the fewest, instead opening brand new avenues for their dissatisfaction. Sedgwick's is an important book, and the dissatisfactions its persuasive, detailed, and powerful arguments make possible will provoke new work in response for years to come.

In scholarly-historical terms, Sedgwick attempts to overturn and replace a series of interpretations of Hegel's critique of Kant that, she claims, miss the force and scope of that critique. (And for Sedgwick, Hegel's criticisms of Kant constitute precisely a *critique*: a determination of the limits of Kant's thought.) Among the highpoints of her interpretation are an illuminating reading of Hegel's remarks on Kant's so-called restriction thesis, whereby Kant limits our knowledge to appearances, and a patient discussion of Hegel's comments on the Transcendental Deduction of the first *Critique*. The ultimate aim all her arguments serve is the exhibition of what she regards as Hegel's core complaint: that Kant's dualisms rest on an unwarranted 'thesis of absolute opposition' between (conceptual) form and (sensible) content, a thesis motivated by an exalted and demonstrably false estimation of our powers of abstraction. Running the length of her discussion is an innovative reading of Hegel's appeal to the Kantian 'intuitive intellect', an appeal Sedgwick construes as aimed at recovering a more modest view of our philosophical powers than the one on which Kant relies.

In advancing this interpretation, Sedgwick also engages some recent debates in Anglophone philosophy of mind, insofar as her Hegel pairs his frequently-discussed conceptualism with its dialectical partner, resulting in a position committed to the robust mutual dependency of conceptual form ('spontaneity') and sensible content ('receptivity'). Thus while Hegel indeed holds that pure, isolated, passive receptivity can make no intelligible contribution to knowledge, cognition, or experience, his criticisms of Kant expose parallel difficulties with any alleged pure, isolated, active spontaneity. No non-conceptual content, then, but no non-intuitive form, either.

Sedgwick begins (Chapter 1) by exploring Kant's conception of our discursive cognition, contrasting it sharply with his parallel conception of an intuitive intellect, and showing convincingly that Hegel's summaries of the Kantian position and arguments are designed to be, and when read correctly are, uncontroversial. Next (Chapter 2) she turns to the links between Kant's conception of organic unity and the organically unified cognition and experience available to a Kantian intuitive intellect. Hegel's interest in organic unity, Sedgwick tells us, comes from his doubts about Kant's entitlement to his fundamental dualisms—an entitlement Hegel thinks rests on an excessively sanguine view of our power, through reflection and abstraction, to divide our initially unified cognition and experience cleanly and neatly into concept and intuition, form and

content. For Sedgwick's Hegel, all thinking involves some reflection and abstraction, some generalization and distinction, but no thinking can carry such abstraction to the final, ultimate dualisms on which Kant so famously insists. She develops (Chapter 3) her reading of these Hegelian doubts by considering his attacks on the 'subjectivity' of Kant's philosophy (about which more below), before turning (Chapter 4) to Hegel's much-discussed treatment of the Kantian 'original synthetic unity of apperception'. Here she aims to undermine the (broadly conceptualist-coherentist) interpretation on which Hegel reads Kant as claiming that the understanding generates both the forms of intuition and the categories. Next (Chapter 5) she presents an interpretation of Hegel's critical method and his own account of conceptual form, before turning (Chapter 6) to his remarks on the second and third Antinomies as test cases for her interpretive approach.

As this summary suggests, two motifs recur throughout Sedgwick's book: that Hegel was an astute, rather straightforward reader of Kant, and that he was wholly and single-mindedly opposed to Kant's claim that philosophy achieves *a priori* insight into the timeless, necessary, and universal conditions of all human cognition. Much of the book's persuasive power lies in Sedgwick's careful presentation of Hegel's objections to seemingly modest Kantian claims as rejections of the genuinely extravagant Kantian commitments underlying those claims. Her reading of Hegel's attack on Kant's restriction thesis is an instructive instance. According to the restriction thesis, it follows from the discursive nature of human cognition that our knowledge is restricted to appearances, and is therefore not knowledge of things in themselves. Hegel objects to this thesis, insisting that we do indeed have knowledge of things in themselves. His objection is often ascribed to his alleged inability to grasp, or unwillingness to heed, Kant's frequent warnings that the (idealist) distinction between appearances and things in themselves is wholly different from the (empiricist) distinction between secondary (mind-dependent) and primary (mind-independent) qualities. Hegel didn't understand Kant's basic point, consequently didn't understand his arguments in support of it, and ultimately offered only obtuse and irrelevant objections—so the usual story goes.

Sedgwick calmly and deliberately shreds this story to bits, arguing that Hegel's objection traces Kant's restriction thesis back to another, deeper Kantian thesis, the 'thesis of absolute opposition'. According to this deeper thesis—one he shares, according to Hegel, with Locke, Hume, and others—the form of objects and their content or matter are absolutely opposed: the empirical world 'gets its form *as appearance* from our *a priori* forms of intuition, space and time, [and] its form *as a thinkable content* from our *a priori* concepts or categories' (83), but that form 'is taken to owe nothing of its nature and origin to the realm of the empirical' (71). This thesis, says Sedgwick, is itself based on two Kantian assumptions: that we cannot 'trace the form of our experience back to sense impressions, since [that] form... is indebted to what... gets added by thought' and 'that since form gets added in this way, it cannot be grounded in that independent content itself' (91). Thus what Hegel rejects is first and foremost this complex of deeper views, according to which form is radically distinct from content and philosophical abstraction is capable of accessing, and reflecting upon, pure form. The restriction thesis is thus merely a specifically Kantian outgrowth of this more deeply rooted assumption in modern philosophy. Hegel thus does not 'depriv[e] objects wholly independent of our concepts of any role to play in our knowledge'; rather 'the very idea of a realm of pure thought is for Hegel an abstraction' (97) to be replaced by his 'new account of conceptual form' (125).

In further developing this new Hegelian account of conceptual form, Sedgwick emphasizes Hegel's (often overlooked) arguments against purely formal thought and his competing conception of philosophical analysis. For Sedgwick's Hegel, such analysis is not aimed at underwriting the

assumptions upon which our presumptively valid claims are based but rather at revealing ‘that the assumptions with which our inquiry set out are not what we initially took them to be’ and that we are thus ‘mistaken in our initial self-understanding’ (155). Ultimately, then, Hegelian analysis ‘does not serve the purpose of finally grounding the supposedly universally and necessarily valid assumptions with which we begin; it instead makes their contingency explicit’ (155). This contingency is demonstrated through the ‘history of false starts in the efforts of philosophers to ground their science’, a history given in the *Phenomenology* and *Logic*, one that reveals ‘a chronic condition’ of ‘blindness or ignorance’ that is itself ‘a necessary consequence of our limited powers of abstraction’ (156-7).

On this view, Hegel’s early Jena claims that our cognition involves an ‘original identity’ do not attribute to us a divine creative power, but rather express the inherent dependence of form and content, spontaneity and receptivity, concept and intuition. In light of this dependence, Hegel’s commitment to a (broadly Kantian) rejection of non-conceptual content is essentially joined to a commitment to the claim that our concepts ‘depend on an independently given sensible content... for their nature’ and for the material to which they apply. If Hegel is correct, we must reject the myth of the given in both its exogenous (non-conceptual content) and endogenous (empty formalist) versions, and affirm that while our concepts cannot be ‘products of mere receptivity’, they are also ‘not products of pure spontaneity’ (160-1, note 47).

There are difficulties and puzzles here, to be sure. If Hegel infers (inductively?) a *necessary* limitation on our powers of abstraction, how is that inference better warranted than Kant’s inferences to necessary limitations on our use of the understanding? How does the mutual dependence of form and content play out in terms of the sociality at work in every moment of Hegel’s thought? How does it play out in terms of the technical content of Hegel’s treatment of formal logic? Is it really fair to collapse the differences between the argumentative strategies of the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology* into single ‘history of false starts’? How are we to understand Hegel’s own (very Kantian-looking) faculty psychology in light of this interpretation? What about his exalted claims for absolute knowing? Do Hegel’s criticisms of Kant really not evolve at all after the early Jena essays? Yet to point to these puzzles is not to complain about Sedgwick’s book; it is to be driven by it to a fresh encounter with a newly challenging old friend.

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