



Hegelian Thought in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

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HEGELIAN THOUGHT IN CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

1.

Let me start with a general remark: *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom's very influential book, fundamental for the current analytic philosophy, has been characterized as »an attempt to usher analytic philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian stage«.¹ This is interesting as long as we bear in mind that this philosophy originated precisely in opposition to Hegelian idealism. Bertrand Russell wrote in *My Philosophical Development*:

»It was towards the end of 1898 that Moore and I rebelled against both Kant and Hegel. Moore led the way, but I followed closely in his footsteps. I think that the first published account of the new philosophy was Moore's article in *Mind* on *The Nature of Judgment*. Although neither he nor I would now adhere to all doctrines in this article, I, and I think he, would still agree with its negative part – i. e. with the doctrine that fact is in general independent of experience. I think that Moore was most concerned with the rejection of idealism, while I was most interested in the rejection of monism. The two were, however closely connected. They were connected through the doctrine as to relations, which Bradley had distilled out of the philosophy of Hegel«.²

In opposition to Bradley's philosophy, Russell called his position logical atomism. The contradiction between Bradley-like Hegelian monism and logical atomism was basically reduced by Russell to the question of whether there are many different truths or only one Truth. Of course, for Hegel, »Das Wahre ist das Ganze«. Can this statement of the German philosopher be valid again?

I would not venture to answer this. Nevertheless, it is possible to point out some intermediary stages on the analytical way from Kant to Hegel. One of them would be, I think, Wilfrid Sellars's attack on what he describes as the Myth of the Given. Developed in his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1956, 1963), Sellars's critique can be read as a critique of the twentieth century empiricism represented by, among others, B. Russell, G. Moore, or J. A. Ayer. According to this stance, we should base our knowledge on the simplest irreducible elements, namely sense data. However, when Sellars speaks of the given, he means not only the concept of sense data. Many things have been said to be »given«; besides sense data, there are universals, propositions, first principles, and intuitions. Consequently, we can speak about the framework of givenness.³ According to Sellars, the critique of sense-datum theories is only the first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness. The framework relies on the assumption that there are epistemic primitives – beliefs or other mental states that have some positive epistemic status, but they are

1 Richard Rorty, »Introduction«, in: Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, London 1997, 8.

2 Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, London 1975, 42.

3 Cf., Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 14.

non-inferential, conceptually simple and epistemically independent and efficacious. Such simple and independent knowledge can serve as the foundation for the rest of our knowledge.

The point of Sellars's critique is his attack on concepts of direct knowledge, because the given is given to us directly (in Sellarsian terms it is »non-inferential«). There is a difference between inferring that something is the case and, for instance, seeing it to be the case. It must be emphasized, however, that the direct/indirect distinction is noncontroversial on the level of ordinary language, but as a component of professional epistemological discourse, the distinction seems to be questionable. As an epistemological category, the given should explicate the fact that the empirical knowledge rests on the foundation of non-inferential, and thus immediate, matter-of-fact knowledge. This is, however, what Sellars finds impossible. Those who are influenced by the Myth of the Given confuse two different things when they refer to immediacy. It might be said that there are two senses of immediacy. According to Sellars »*S* knows *p* directly« is ambiguous, with two possible readings: (1) *S* knows *p* without inferring *p* from anything else. It means that there is no causal intermediary between *S* and *p*, where a causal intermediary can be things that, for example, detect properties we could not otherwise observe. (2) *S* knows *p* and *p* is justified for *S* independently of anything else *S* knows. To say that *p* is directly justified or known is then to say that it requires no further premises to be derived from. Such directly known premises, if there are any, would be self-evident. In other words, there is no justificatory intermediary that *S* knows *p*.⁴

Sensory impressions can be known directly in sense (1) but not in sense (2). These two senses in which knowledge can be direct – the causal sense and the justificatory sense – have often been confused. We can obviously think that experiencing a specific set of sensations is a direct *cause* of a person's knowledge of a particular physical object or event. This is probably the reason why some philosophers have held that these sensations constitute a body of evidence that also serves as a justificatory intermediary for such knowledge. Crucially, however, evidence itself can justify only if it is known. It does not follow that what serves as the direct cause of knowledge must itself be directly known. According to Sellars, empiricism, which generates the Myth of the Given, is based on misunderstandings about the nature of justification and the nature of sensory experience. Sensory experiences are objects or events in a way that a table or a rainbow is an object or an event. Because sensing particulars (having sense impressions) is non-epistemic and non-inferential, sensory experiences are not judgments and they don't have a propositional form. As such, a sensory experience cannot secure premises or reasons in an argument any more than a table or a rainbow could. Only truth-evaluable propositions can have a positive epistemic status. A sensory experience may be necessary for acquiring perceptual knowledge, but it is not itself a primitive kind of knowing. Those who are under the spell of the Myth of the Given confuse the realm of causes with the realm of reasons.⁵

Sellars's master argument that the Given is a Myth focuses on the two requirements: (1) that the knowledge of the Given is epistemically independent of all other knowledge and (2) that it is epistemically efficacious, i. e. it can justify or provide an epistemic support for all other empirical knowledge.⁶ According to Sellars, the given element in experience must be either something non-propositional (e. g. a sense datum) or something propositional (e. g. the first principle). If it is non-propositional, it cannot serve as a premise or a reason in an argument, because only truth-evaluable things with a propositional form can have a positive epistemic status, as we noted before. Suppose

4 Ibid., 15–17. For a more detailed discussion see Willem A. Devries, Timm Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind and the Given. Reading Wilfrid Sellars's »Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind«*, Indianapolis 2000, 6–16.

5 Cf., Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 21–22.

6 Cf., Devries, Triplett, *Knowledge, Mind and the Given*, XXXI–XXXII.

that the given is propositional. Whatever is propositional can be epistemically efficacious, but it cannot be epistemically independent. Any proposition within an epistemic system must either be the result of an inferential process, or not. If it is inferential, then it is epistemically dependent on those premises from which it has been inferred. Even the putative non-inferential presupposition, for example »This is green«, can have a positive epistemic status only if there are other propositions that support it. So we cannot know the truth of the observation report »This is green« if we are just capable of reliably producing such reports. We must know that our reports are reliable, but then our knowledge of our reliability supports our observational knowledge, which therefore cannot be epistemically independent. Hence nothing propositional can be epistemically independent, and since the non-propositional can be a given as well, then nothing can be a given.

I think Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given is by nature Hegelian, and it can be compared with the first three chapters of *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Sellars mentions Hegel four times or so and with a bit of distance calls his own reflections »Meditations Hegeliennes«. It might be said that for Sellars Hegel was an exemplary critic of the Myth of the Given.

In Chapter I, »Sense-certainty« (*die sinnliche Gewissheit*), Hegel claims that the sense-certaintist (for example, Russell with his appeal to acquaintance, we could say) thinks of what is immediately given as »the truest knowledge« and as »the richest kind of knowledge«. The objects of sense-certainty are meant to be things given *immediately* in experience, and are meant to be given as the singular referents of a type of mental demonstrative – each presented as a »pure This« (*reines Dieses*). But Hegel writes »An actual sense – certainty is not merely this pure immediacy, but an instance (or an example [*Beispiel*]) of it«⁷. Anything purportedly present to us »as a bare *this* is nevertheless present as an instance of the determination of singularity, an exemplification of »thisness« in general. Consider an example Hegel gave. Asked what is now, we shall answer, for instance, »Now is night«. We write down this truth. If now, at noon, we look at the truth we have written down, we shall see that this truth vanishes. Indeed, the »now« remains, but as something that is not night any more. Also in relation to the day that it is at present, the now is something that is not the day, which entails that the now is generally something negative. The »now« which still continues is then not something immediate, but something mediated. A similar example could be encountered in sections 14–16 *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* concerning John, a necktie salesman. John has to learn to cope with the fact that new electric lighting has been installed in the tie-shop, and that ties, which seen in daylight appear blue, when seen in the shop he calls green. When the customer asks for »this green tie«, John's answer is: »It is not green. It looks green, but take it outside and see. In fact, it is blue«. Sellars claims that statements such as »This is green« have both a fact-stating and a reporting use. Once John learns to stifle the report »This necktie is green« when looking at it in the shop, there is no other report about colour and the necktie that he knows how to make. To be sure, John says »This tie is blue«, but he is not making a reporting use of this sentence. He uses it as the conclusion of an inference. The concept of being green or blue involves knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its colour. Sellars argues that to say that a certain experience is a *seeing* that something is the case is to do more than describe the experience. »It is to characterize it as, so to speak, making an assertion or claim, and – which is the point I wish to stress – to *endorse* that claim«.⁸

Let me return to Hegel, especially to his notion of the determinate negation. The collapse of sense-certainty as a cognitive attitude will result in its being replaced by a new shape of consciousness, »perception« (*die Wahrnehmung*). The object of perception is »the thing with many properties«. In the first instance, says Hegel, the properties will be taken as simply inhering in the

7 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford 1977, § 92 (3.83).

8 Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 39.

medium in a way that makes them »indifferent« to each other, but if all such properties were in fact »indifferent« to each other in this way, they could not be determinate »for they are only determinate in so far as they *differentiate* themselves from one another, and *relate* themselves to others as to their opposites«. Hegel writes: »white is white only in opposition to [*in Entgegensetzung gegen*] black, and so on«. ⁹ The very existence of things determinately coloured A presupposes the existence of things determinately coloured non – A. The point of singularity, therefore, must »radiate forth into plurality«. In his critique of the »given« Hegel insists that an individual as such is grasped in terms of the categorical determinacy of »singularity«, and that that category, as a concept, is to be understood in terms of its relations to other categories such as particularity and universality.

2.

In the second part of my presentation I would like to pay attention to the other Hegelian strand in contemporary analytic philosophy that is connected with Sellars's attack on the Myth of the Given. I mean here John McDowell and his book *Mind and World* (1994). McDowell does not want to succumb to the Myth of the Given, but at the same time he discerns a risk in embracing an equally problematic conception of the spontaneity of concept application, in which «exercises of concepts threaten to degenerate into moves in a self-contained game«. ¹⁰ He sums up the central dilemma of the recent debate in analytic philosophy, emphasizing a tendency to interminably oscillate between two opposed and equally untenable positions: »on the one side a coherentism that threatens to disconnect thought from reality, and on the other side a vain appeal to the Given, in the sense of bare presences that are supposed to constitute the ultimate grounds of empirical judgments«. ¹¹ He calls the latter position the epistemological fundamentalism. McDowell wants not so much to solve the dilemma as to evade it. In this evasion he is aided by Kant and Hegel.

Sellars and Davidson, who can also be seen as another critic of the Given, have shown that the idea of the non-conceptual given is useless for explicating how extra-conceptual and extra-linguistic elements can get in the space of reasons and serve as presuppositions for inferences. According to McDowell's reading, the idea of the Given is the idea that the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere. But when we accept that the realm of reasons is more extensive than the conceptual sphere, the result is a picture in which constraint from outside is exerted at the outer boundary of the expanded space of reasons, in what we are committed to describing as a direct impact from the exterior. This picture ensures that we cannot be blamed for what happens at that outer boundary and for the inward influence of what happens there. This slightly Fichtean depiction culminates in a conclusion that the idea of the Given offers excuses (exculpations) where we wanted justification. ¹² If we want to be *answerable* to experienced reality, we must reinterpret our notion of experience; we need to recognize that experiences themselves are states or occurrences that inextricably combine receptivity and spontaneity. This leads us to Kant's philosophy, which is the first challenge to the Myth of the Given. His notion of experience makes it possible to avoid another risk, different from that of the Myth of the Given, namely, the coherentism that disconnects thought from reality. As Davidson expressed it, the only thing capable of justifying a belief is another belief. From the standpoint of experience, Kant did not conceive of intuitions as making a *separable contribution* to the co-operation between

⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 120 (3.100).

¹⁰ John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge 2003, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Cf.*, *ibid.*, 8.

receptivity and spontaneity (= the involvement of conceptual capacities), and thus for him »experience does not take in ultimate grounds that we could appeal to by pointing outside the sphere of thinkable content. In experience we take in, through impacts on the senses, elements in a reality that is precisely not outside the sphere of thinkable content«. ¹³ But Kant avoids the Myth of the Given, as it were, at the cost of the given, because in his transcendental perspective, »receptivity figures as a susceptibility to the impact of a supersensible reality, a reality that is supposed to be independent of our conceptual activity in a stronger sense than any that fits the ordinary empirical world«. ¹⁴ In short, the *Ding an sich* is what is given. In this context, post-Kantian philosophical debates on the concept of the-thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) seem to be relevant to analytic philosophy.

It is very important how we understand »co-operation« between receptivity and spontaneity. According to McDowell, it is wrong to think that receptivity can be sharply distinguished from spontaneity in such a way that it is the source for non-conceptual data and that this receptivity is only conceptualized when spontaneity comes into play. Rather, the conceptual capacities are always already drawn on in receptivity. Pure receptivity that is free from all involvement of conceptual capacities is a fiction. As Brandom emphasizes, »anything that does not have concepts does not have perceptual experiences« and conversely »anything that does not have perceptual experience does not have concepts either«. ¹⁵ In fact, »one must already have concepts in order to have experience«. Hence, »concept use and perceptual experience are two aspects of one achievement«. ¹⁶

McDowell points to Hegel, whose critique of Kant was entirely different from those of Fichte or Jacobi. Generally speaking, for him Hegel's response to the myth of the given is more to the point. Towards the end of Lecture II of *Mind and World*, McDowell seems to approximate Hegel, when he notes that »it is central to Absolute Idealism to reject the idea that conceptual realm has an outer boundary, and we have arrived at a point from which we could start to domesticate the rhetoric of that philosophy. Consider, for instance, this remark of Hegel's: ›In thinking, I *am free*, because I am not in an *other*«. ¹⁷ This expresses exactly the image McDowell has been using, in which there is nothing outside the conceptual. He compares Hegel's remark to the following remark of Wittgenstein from *Philosophical Investigations*: »When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this-is-so*«. ¹⁸ Wittgenstein calls this a paradox, because »thought can be of what is not the case«. But at the same time he says that the remark has the form of a truism. What is crucial here is that for Wittgenstein there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is what is the case. Since the world is everything that is the case, as Wittgenstein himself wrote in the *Tractatus*, there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. But to say this is, for McDowell, just to dress up a truism in high-flown language. One can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that very same thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case. But this is a truism and it cannot embody something metaphysically contentious, like slighting the independence of reality. The high-flown language is, for example, the statement that the world is made up of the sort of thing one can think. This formulation can make people suspect we are renouncing the independence of reality – as if the world were for us a shadow of our thinking or even were made of the same mental stuff. Yet according to McDowell, we might just as well take the fact that the sort of thing one can think is the same as the sort of thing

13 Ibid., 41.

14 Ibid., 41.

15 Robert Brandom, »Non-Inferential Knowledge, Perceptual Experience, and Secondary Qualities«, in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*. Edited by Nicholas H. Smith, London, New York 2002, 93.

16 Ibid., 93.

17 McDowell, *Mind and World*, 44.

18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 95.

that can be the case as an invitation to understand the notion of the thinkable in terms of a supposedly prior understanding of the sort of thing that can be the case. In fact there is no reason to look for a priority in either direction.¹⁹

This is what McDowell sees as Hegel's merit. Indeed, he has also been accused of slighting reality, but it does not amount to anything »metaphysically contentious«. It is contentious if the relation between thought and the world is considered in one direction only. McDowell speaks about Hegel's conception of the »equipoise« between thought and its subject matter. In other words, if judgment can be rationally constrained in empirical experience, it must be the case that what does the constraining is both worldly and conceptual, and it was Hegel who provided a way of thinking on how this can be so.

In opposition to Sellars and Davidson, who insist that we cannot take experience to be epistemologically significant except by falling into Myth of the Given, McDowell claims that we should not renounce empiricism. We can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking, but only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness. It is precisely what he calls »a minimal empiricism«. It is the idea that experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are. The conception of experience as a tribunal is the normative account of experience in which it can play a role in justification. According to McDowell, Sellars and Davidson renounce empiricism because they renounce the idea of experience as a tribunal. But McDowell thinks that this rejection of empiricism will not work. He thinks that doing so will leave the traditional philosophical questions still looking as if they ought to be good ones. Modern philosophy since Descartes has operated in a framework in which we distinguish what is out there from what is somehow in our minds. This metaphor of what is »inside« and »outside« is also present in our everyday language. McDowell wants to show how deeply misleading this picture is, and how it ensnares us in all sorts of pseudo-problems.²⁰

According to him, we can find a perspective that eschews the deceptive division into the »inside« and the »outside«. And he finds it in the conception of a second nature, according to which the acquisition of a moral character and the acquisition of the ability to have perceptual experiences are both examples of initiation into conceptual capacities. McDowell says:

»Such initiation is a normal part of what it is for a human being to come to maturity, and that is why, although the structure of the space of reasons is alien to the layout of nature conceived as the realm of law, it does not take on the remoteness from the human that rampant Platonism envisages. If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at a notion of having one's eyes opened to reasons at large by acquiring a second nature. I cannot think of a good short English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*«. ²¹

The concept of a second nature (*Bildung*) thus holds, generally speaking, that the shape of our experience, and consequently also of our knowledge, is influenced not only by stimuli from the outside, but also by our breeding, milieu, language and tradition. Briefly: by what we call culture, which Hegel called *Bildung*. All these factors co-mould our perception of the world. Empirical knowledge, like experience itself, thus becomes something that is historically, culturally, and in a sense also socially, mediated. Hence empirical knowledge remains subject to changes and possible corrections. McDowell's reference to the German tradition of *Bildung* can also be read as a Hegelian trace, a »domestication of Hegel« as McDowell himself called it. And that is why it is not

19 Cf., Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, New York 2007, 51.

20 Cf., Richard J. Berstein, »McDowell's Domesticated Hegelianism«, in *Reading McDowell*, 15.

21 McDowell, *Mind and World*, 84.

surprising that in his *Preface to Mind and World* McDowell writes: »I would like to conceive this work as a prolegomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*«. ²²

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22 Ibid., IX.