

Absent History and Dialectic

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I wish to begin by responding, briefly, to Tyson Lewis's assessment of contemporary trends in the philosophy of education that owe their orientation to Hegel's work. I will then say a few words on the nature of the dialectic, and end my response with some remarks about Lewis's very interesting and perhaps controversial conclusion that, to paraphrase, the "teacher should facilitate the proper relation between the student and knowledge as such." Lewis's conclusion speaks to a tension in Hegel's own work between a commitment to an anti-methodology, on the one hand, and a perplexing reliance on logical determinacy, on the other. The latter, it seems to me, deserves some, albeit very brief, consideration for it masks a realism the ethics of the negative may not properly accommodate.

It was not long ago that analytical philosophers ignored Hegel's texts. And, while many today still look at Hegel with suspicion, they acknowledge that he has an important role in contemporary neo-empiricist, pragmatic philosophy. We need only consider the highly influential recent works by Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and Hilary Putnam (in his nineties iteration). In the philosophy of education we are not immune to trends; no doubt they take on their own peculiar characteristics. Lewis's assessment of Hegel's role in contemporary philosophy of education tells an interesting story about our discipline, and how we have worked to domesticate Hegel.

First, we have those, like Rhonda Hammer and Peter McLaren, who, according to Lewis, "have attempted to map the various formulations of dialectical thinking in philosophy in order to reframe these interpretations within a 'critical communicational approach' to education." If he is correct, then Hammer and McLaren have taken Hegel's dialectic and framed it in the fashion of "critical thinking," using it loosely to order disputes in educational thought; *Hegel's dialectic as a form of informal logic!* Of course, Hegel's own position is not prescriptive *in this sense*. He resists any grandiose commitments to a priority. Unlike those working in contemporary logic or "critical thinking," Hegel's dialectic is not an instrument for making us better debaters.

Part of Hegel's aim is to resist transcendental commitments, even those disguised to resist the charge. Lewis quotes Hammer and McLaren,

Educators can employ the dialectic in a number of ways...in helping students to analyze the hierarchical positioning of individuals within the social order on the basis of race, class, and gender; and in acknowledging the asymmetrical ways in which power operates in the larger society to reproduce the interests of the dominant culture organized as an arena of conflicting discourses and material relations and marred by competitiveness and corporate greed.

In analyzing the hierarchies, taking for granted the orienting forces of race, class, and gender, operating with the assumptions of power dynamics in the ordering of society, Hammer and McLaren have taken history out of the dialectic. Their metaphysics is, ironically, one Hegel compels us to reject.

Second, Lewis notes the work of W. Vincent and Michael George. These philosophers graft “stages” of developmental psychology onto Hegel’s theory of state. The basic idea is that the individual’s movement from family to full-blown member of a civil society corresponds to developmental phases. We need only think of something Piagetian, no doubt. Lewis observes that “Vincent and George gesture towards a theory of such development as a form of intellectual labor, they fail to comment on the particular nature of this labor.” Of course, Vincent and George really could not comment on the nature of this labor. If, as they believe, the moments are predetermined by a genetic pull of evolutionary forces, intellectual “labor” amounts to “going with the flow.” Indeed, an account of the kind Lewis requires would miss the mark entirely. In Vincent and George we are left with only nature. More problematic is that Vincent and George, much like Hammer and McLaren, take the historical out of Hegel, reason out of the dialectic. Note that Hegel is explicit in his *Encyclopedia* that *Philosophy of Right* is a progression from the abstract to the concrete, and not the other way around. Tom Rockmore has gone to some trouble to make this point, writing of *Philosophy of Right*, that it “proceeds from the concept of the will, hence from a conception of the human being as active within a social context.”¹ It is important to note that Hegel uses the term “right” (German, *Recht*) in its legalistic form; he wishes to express the force of norms, and the constitutive nature of rules against those who would cast, read *naturalize*, human development away from its historical (and, indeed, rational) moorings.

Against these trends, Lewis observes that “[f]or Hegel, dialectics is not a simple procedure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Rather it is a struggle that contains many affective obstacles that prevent the movement of thought from self-certainty (an immediate *and* intuitive relation to the environment) towards self-determination (as a mediated and rational reconstruction of this relationship via concepts).” I agree that the dialectic is not captured by the famous, *some think infamous*, characterization of Hegelian dialectic in terms of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Indeed, Hegel never puts the matter in this way. Some reflection on Hegel’s philosophy of nature might help us understand Lewis’s thesis.

Against the classical empiricists, Hegel resists an appeal to the “Given.” There are no non-conceptual bits of experience that play an epistemic role in justification. This he takes to be the incoherence in classical empiricism, a theme made famous again by Wilfrid Sellars in the twentieth century. Furthermore, if non-conceptual bits could play a justificatory role, the skeptic has surely won, for parts of reality that we cannot conceive play a foundational role in knowledge.

A popular alternative to classical empiricism takes “social reality” as providing the raw materials from which nature is not only understood, but provisionally built, and provisionally rebuilt, and so on and so on. Think here of the idea that our linguistic practices provide us with the general frame from which we can capture nature. As Richard Dien Winfield puts the matter, “determining cognitive structures always stand in need of critique to overcome their own dogmatic assertion.”² In other words, we not only build nature out of linguistic practices, but also make modifications when it suits our conceptual requirements for consistency and coherence. As

an inversion of Rorty's epistemic attitude, nature is our mirror, rather than our being nature's. Here, as in the case against empiricism, the skeptic wins; truth no longer orients our ontology — our practices do. Hegel rejects this consequence as well. As Lewis puts it, quoting Hegel, consciousness "resists" confrontation "in order to save its own freedom and its own insight, its own authority..." Hegel rejects this resting place, but presumably, an "undisciplined" consciousness of the kind Lewis identifies may not.

Hegel resists transcendental commitments of the sort that work to "orient experience." Think here of Kant's categories and their role in making synthetic a priori judgments possible. Hegel is sympathetic to Kant's intromission that we bring something important to nature; it doesn't present itself to us prepackaged as many an empiricist may think. Still, Hegel believes that nature must still provide its own categories; that our constitution ought not carry nature's internal logic. "Yet," asks Winfield, "how can nature be conceived by thought and be given a content distinct from thought without reverting to metaphysical assurances about the given or to transcendental constructions of a nature receiving its law from the understanding, language or some other privileged conditions of knowing?"³ This is Hegel's challenge. The dialectic is part of the answer.

As many commentators have recognized, for Hegel, all experience is in some way "infected with thought." Having rejected much, Hegel's turn is to logical determinacy. Think for a moment about the beliefs you hold. Do you *hold* any that you *know* are false? If you cannot conceive of such an attitude, then you should accept something about beliefs, namely, that they are *truth-oriented*. Taken as related to other beliefs, your mental life gives the impression of coherent self-organization. You also accept, given this, that you will change some of your beliefs. Sadly, you never know *ahead of time* which beliefs. There is an inherent movement — what Lewis calls "the effort of the notion." For Hegel, ultimate reality will be revealed by this effort.

Lewis remarks, "[i]f dialectical thinking is the labor of tarrying with the negative, then pedagogy itself must be an internal aspect of this movement, helping the acorn grow into the oak tree." Much depends, it seems, on whether we understand Hegel's dialectic as fuelled by historical sense or whether we see the formal elements of the dialectic effective in framing our pedagogies. There is an interesting possibility in Hegel that we can make our own natures. Is there such an option in the dehistoricized dialectic?

1. Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 20.

2. Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Nature* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1998), 53.

3. *Ibid.*