

Review Essay: Forward to Idealism: On Eckart Förster's *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*

Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*. Trans. B. Bowman
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I think it is indisputable that Kant and Hegel are, respectively, the *alpha* and *omega* of German Idealism, and also the most important and seminal thinkers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy – Hume, Mill, Bolzano, Frege, Kierkegaard, Marx, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche notwithstanding. Moreover, without Kant and Hegel in our intellectual and cultural past, it would be *the end of twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy as we know it*, or more accurately, without them, then twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglo-American and European philosophy would have been *radically* different and in certain fundamental respects simply *unrecognizable* to us, philosophically constituted as we now are. So whether or not one actually agrees with Kant or Hegel, to take them both seriously and to study them both carefully and critically, with an eye to later developments, is to study our own philosophical origins and to learn who we really are as philosophers. To fail to do this is to fail to pursue our classical Socratic project of self-knowledge.

Primed by such thoughts, Eckart Förster's *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*

is an attempt to grasp and understand the *single* thought that philosophy begins in 1781 [with the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*] and ends in 1806 [with the completion of the MS of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*]. (p. x)

That single thought was also collectively expressed by Kant and Hegel themselves. Kant claimed in 1797 that 'prior to the development of Critical philosophy there had been no philosophy at all' (*MM* 6: 206), and Hegel correspondingly claimed in 1806 that '[h]erewith, ... history of philosophy comes to an end' (*TW* 20: 461).

Sadly, these are the sorts of claims that make contemporary philosophers roll their eyes and shake their heads in sarcastic dismay. And I can

certainly see how, from a certain point of view, such claims might seem philosophically ludicrous. But in reality *the joke is on the eye-rollers and head-shakers*, and Förster's brilliant book shows us precisely why. This is not only a book that should be read and studied by every student of German Idealism in particular and of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy more generally, but also a book whose core philosophical message should be delivered daily as a direct online feed from *Philosophical Papers*, or posted on the main office door of every philosophy department in the world: 'The future of a philosophy "that will be able to come forward as a science" has only just begun' (p. 377).

In other words, to the extent that philosophy *really is* a rational metaphysical and epistemological enterprise, capable of yielding a *priori* knowledge of necessary truths about the nature of reality, including rational human animals themselves, then the scientific philosophy of the future must be some or another appropriately refined and updated version of Kantian or Hegelian idealism, and not some or another appropriately refined and updated version of classical rationalism, classical empiricism or classical scepticism. *Forward to idealism!* I strongly agree with that core message, all those contemporary eye-rollers and head-shakers notwithstanding.

Not that I agree with *absolutely every single part* of Förster's interpretative exposition, or of his larger argument, however: indeed, in due course I will formulate a few minor interpretative disagreements and express one deeper philosophical worry too.

The Twenty-Five Years is divided into two parts. Part I covers Kant's Critical philosophy in its contemporary philosophical and intellectual-cultural context (including Goethe, Herder, Jacobi, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Reinhold, etc.), and part II covers Fichte, Schelling, Goethe, and finally Hegel. In the interstices between topics, Förster also includes a number of fascinating short historical-philosophical riffs on the main line of interpretation and argument – thirteen riffs in all, by my count – each one under the rubric of 'historical excursus'.

What, more precisely, is Förster saying? Before I get down to that, here is some philosophical background. In my opinion, ten fundamental philosophical themes run throughout the German Idealist tradition from Kant to Hegel:

- I. Kant's discovery of the inherently two-sided or dualistic nature of rational human cognition, as (i) sensible and non-discursive (non-conceptual, non-logical, non-intellectual) or *intuiting/perceiving*, and (ii) non-sensible and discursive (conceptual, logical, intellectual) or *thinking/judging*, and his corresponding thesis that only a divine and non-human mind would be capable of 'intellectual intuition',

- i.e. thinking/judging that creatively yields the actual being or existence of its objects.
2. Kant's dualistic ontological distinction between (i) the sensibly perceived spatio-temporal objects of rational human cognition (appearances, phenomena) and (ii) the supersensibly conceptualized or thought non-spatio-temporal objects of rational human cognition (things-in-themselves, noumena), and his corresponding metaphysical and epistemological restriction of the classes of meaningfully cognizable, properly intended and scientifically known objects of rational human cognition to appearances or phenomena that are either empirically intuited alone, i.e. to *objects of the senses*, or else both empirically intuited and also empirically thought/judged, i.e. to *objects of experience*.
 3. Kant's 'transcendental idealist' solution to the general problem of the possibility of rational human mind's *a priori* factive reference to objects/truth-makers, which postulates that the essential structures of the perceived and empirically known world necessarily conform to the innate and non-empirical (a.k.a. *transcendental*) non-discursive and discursive structures of the rational human mind, instead of the converse, as per classical rationalists, classical empiricists and classical sceptics, together with his basic cognitive-semantic thesis that *synthetic a priori truth and knowledge* are encoded in correct propositions and justified judgements about these essential structures.
 4. Kant's thesis that the rational human mind is inherently active, spontaneous, reasons-guided, free (i.e. causally efficacious 'from itself' and self-determining), self-conscious and self-constrained by its attempts to adhere to an unconditionally obligatory, absolutely universal, *a priori* moral law and its various sub-specified moral principles – but that it is also set into cognitive and volitional operation only if it has been naturally causally triggered by what is receptively 'given' to it by nature through human sensibility: the external material world and human desires.
 5. Kant's discovery of the inherently dialectical (i.e. fallacious and illusory) and dialetheic (i.e. antinomous, paradoxical or hyper-contradictory) nature of rational human thinking when it fails to recognize the phenomena/noumena distinction, and purports to know noumena.
 6. The Fichtean and also Hegelian idea that the rational human mind is merely a partial expression of a single universal supersensible rational mind, or Spirit, that corresponds $I-I$ to the supersensible essential reality of the world, and creatively posits its own object in thinking.
 7. The Schellingian and also Hegelian idea that non-human physical dynamics and biological/organismic life are merely the externalizations of the creative thinking of Spirit, together with Hegel's own idea that

- human historical dynamics and cultural/social life are also merely externalizations of Spirit's acts, states and processes.
8. Hegel's recognition that Kant's cognitive dualism of sensible intuiting/ perceiving vs. non-sensible thinking/judging can be overcome in order to make possible a direct intuition-like rational *a priori* knowledge of supersensible reality (a.k.a. 'intuitive understanding' or 'non-discursive thinking') if and only if the rational human mind is *essentially* discursive and conceptual but *also* capable of direct insight into complete, coherent systems of essence-disclosing concepts, including the single *universal* complete, coherent system of essence-disclosing concepts, the Notion.
 9. Hegel's metaphysical thesis that thought and being are identical, a.k.a. *absolute idealism*.
 10. Hegel's epistemological thesis that dialectical and dialethic holistic thinking is the one true method by means of which an 'intuitive understanding' or 'non-discursive thinking' of the global essential structure of supersensible reality (a.k.a. the Notion) is possible, together with his moral thesis that rational human freedom is an individual's historical self-realization in the larger ethical community of rational human cultural/social life.

And here is what Förster saliently presents in front of that philosophical background. Very conveniently, in the final section of the book, 'Epilogue: An End of Philosophy', he presents a chapter-by-chapter, twelve-step summary of his own expositions and arguments with such admirable crispness that it cannot really be improved upon, especially the five final steps dealing with the Fichte, Schelling, Goethe, and Hegel parts. So what I will do from here on in is just quote step-by-step from Förster's own summary, and also provide a running critical commentary on and elaboration of the first seven steps, those dealing specifically with Kant's philosophy.

First

Philosophy (metaphysics) claims to be cognition of the world purely on the basis of thought. It thus presupposes non-empirical, but nonetheless veridical reference to objects. In order to investigate whether and in what way such a thing could be possible at all, Kant inaugurates transcendental philosophy, which accordingly abstracts from all given objects in order to consider the human cognitive faculty by itself. Before it arrived at the results of its investigation, philosophy as a science was not possible (Ch. 1). (p. 373)

In other words, this is Kant's familiar 'Copernican Revolution', or 'Transcendental Turn', in philosophy. An extremely important feature of Förster's exposition of it, however, is the emphasis on transcendental idealism as the one and only (or at least, the best overall) solution to the problem of how 'non-empirical, but nonetheless veridical reference to objects' is possible. Basically, Kant's argument for transcendental idealism then runs as follows.

1. We assume that rational human cognition is capable of *a priori* veridical reference to objects (including individual objects and truth-makers).
2. On the further general assumption, shared by classical rationalists and classical empiricists alike, that rational human mind conforms to its objects, then *a priori* veridical objective reference is not explicable. For either our cognitive reference to objects is metaphysically mysterious and/or question-begging (rationalism), or else it is *a posteriori* (empiricism). In either case, the referential connection between rational human *a priori* cognitions and their objects is merely contingent or 'lucky', hence fully open to scepticism.
3. Therefore the general assumption that rational human mind conforms to its objects is false, and the converse thesis that objects necessarily conform to the rational human mind is true, i.e. transcendental idealism is true. QED

Boom boom boom! Transcendental philosophy doesn't get much better than this. More explicitly and less colloquially, this is a beautifully clear, distinct and (I think, with suitable qualifications) *sound* argument for the necessity of transcendental idealism from the existence of factive *a priori* cognition.

Importantly, however, this is *not* how Kant presents the argument for transcendental idealism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, either in the A (1781) or B (1787) edition. Instead it is the argument Kant presents in the crucial letter to Marcus Herz of 1772. Förster's exposition shows us, basically, that every edition of the first *Critique* should include the letter to Herz as a necessary prologue to the A and B Prefaces and Introductions.

This in turn brings out another extremely important feature of Förster's exposition. Alone among recent and contemporary interpreters (as far as I know), Förster presents the first *Critique* in three distinct stages: first, monocularly, *in its A edition version exclusively*, just as contemporary readers would have read it between 1781 and 1787, and explicitly bracketing out of consideration all the material that was added or revised by Kant in the B edition; and then second, differently but still monocularly, in its *B edition version exclusively*, just as contemporary readers would have read it after 1787 until the combined scholarly editions started to appear in the early twentieth century, with the exclusively A edition material bracketed

out of consideration; and then third and finally, binocularly or stereoscopically, i.e. *our way of reading it*, including all the material from both editions, and with all the B edition's additions, deletions and revisions now being fully considered. This 'monocular A, monocular B, binocular A/B' way of reading and interpreting the first *Critique* is a genuine historico-philosophical revelation. Among other things, it clearly and distinctly shows how philosophically uncanny and weird the A edition must have seemed to its contemporary readers; and it also equally clearly and distinctly shows how very much and how very surreptitiously Kant changed his mind (or in any case, further developed his views) between 1781 and 1787 about the ontological and epistemological strengths of idealism and the phenomena/noumena distinction.

Second

The first characterization of transcendental philosophy proves upon reflection to be insufficient. On the one hand, it is not possible to abstract from *everything* that is given, since the objective reality of the categories cannot be demonstrated without an a priori determination of the *empirical* concept of matter. On the other hand, it turns out that the conditions under which a metaphysics of morals is possible is no less in need of explanation than are the conditions that make a metaphysics of nature possible, since the highest principle of morality still requires proof (Ch. 2). (p. 373)

Between 1781 and 1787, Kant published three other important books: the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* in 1783, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785, and *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* in 1786. I think that Förster is absolutely right that each of these books respectively adds a brand-new idea to the A edition of the first *Critique*. What are these three new ideas?

First, the *Prolegomena* reformulates the fundamental problem of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows: Given that we have synthetic *a priori* truth and knowledge in mathematics, in natural science, and (at least presumptively) in the metaphysics of nature, how is this possible? Then transcendental idealism is wheeled in as the best overall explanation of synthetic *a priori* propositions and judgements. This argument effectively replaces Kant's earlier boom-boom-boom argument for transcendental idealism, and it is a real philosophical pity (and, in effect, a real philosophical tragedy) that it does, since I think that the boom-boom-boom argument is sound *whether or not there are such things as synthetic a priori truths or knowledge*, provided that there is *some kind of a priori* truth and knowledge,

whereas the soundness of the second argument is forever hostage to all-too-familiar sceptical worries about the intelligibility and existence of both the analytic-synthetic distinction in general and the synthetic *a priori* in particular.

Second, it is a philosophically sad fact that the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding (a.k.a. the categories) in the A edition has a serious gap in it. It fails to show that necessarily, all objects of empirical sensory intuition (a.k.a. ‘objects of sense’) whatsoever fall under the categories, and shows only that necessarily all objects of empirical sensory intuition *that are also concurrently objects of empirical conceptualization and judgement* (a.k.a. ‘objects of experience’) fall under the categories. More precisely, the A Deduction does not show that any and all objects of empirical sensory intuition *not* concurrently falling under empirical concepts and judgements must also fall under the categories, and it does not show that there cannot be any objects of empirical sensory intuition that *essentially fall outside* concepts, judgements and the categories. In *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* Kant tries to rectify this problem by showing in detail what a material object of the natural sciences essentially is – i.e. an inert movable substance in space, subject to external attractive and repulsive forces – and how it must necessarily fall under Newtonian natural laws and the categories. Following on from that line of argument, the B Deduction shows that necessarily, any object of empirical sensory intuition that is capable of falling under empirical concepts and judgements (i.e. every possible or actual object of experience), must also fall under the categories. But it still does not show that there *cannot be* any objects of empirical sensory intuition that *essentially fall outside* concepts, judgements and the categories. In short, the B Deduction *narrows* the gap left open by the A Deduction, but still does not *close* it.

Third, it is an equally philosophically sad fact that, although in the Third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had shown that transcendental freedom is possible if transcendental idealism is true – since transcendental freedom as a noumenal property of objects, and natural determinism as a phenomenal property of objects, are both logically and metaphysically compatible – and although he had also argued that practical freedom requires transcendental freedom, he had not shown or even attempted to show what the precise connection between practical freedom (including transcendental freedom) and the highest principle of morality (i.e. the moral law, i.e. the categorical imperative) really is, nor had he even attempted to prove the highest principle of morality. In the *Groundwork*, he argues

- (i) that the highest principle of morality, at the very least, requires an agency-legitimizing belief in the noumenal concept, or *Idea*, of freedom in both the transcendental and practical senses, and also

- (ii) that it is also a synthetic *a priori* truth that, given freedom, there must be a highest principle of morality, and also
- (iii) that given the highest principle of morality, freedom must be possible in order to act for the sake of that principle.

In other words, in the *Groundwork* Kant argues, beyond anything he had argued in the first *Critique*, that it is synthetic *a priori* true and knowable that freedom and the moral law prove each other. But how can *this* new kind of synthetic *a priori* truth and knowledge be made to cohere with synthetic *a priori* truth and knowledge in mathematics, natural science, and the metaphysics of nature?

Third

In this way, it becomes necessary to expand transcendental philosophy in two directions. It requires (a) proof of the constructibility of the object of outer sense; (b) the discovery and justification of the highest principle of morality. Since in the case of morality objective reference as such is unproblematic, transcendental philosophy must now be defined more broadly as an investigation into the possibility of synthetic propositions *a priori* (Ch. 3). (p. 373)

Förster's extremely important point here is this. By the time of the B or 1787 edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the combined philosophical impacts of the *Prolegomena*, the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, and the *Groundwork* in effect collectively yielded a significant elaboration and expansion of transcendental idealism, but it is not at all clear that a merely revised edition of the first *Critique* can bear all this new philosophical stress and weight without the theoretical superstructure and substructure of transcendental idealism ultimately cracking up and falling apart.

Fourth

With Lessing's assertion that Spinoza's philosophy is the only possible philosophy, a competing alternative to transcendental philosophy arises. For according to Spinoza, the criterion of scientific knowledge is the ability to derive the properties of an object from its essence or its proximate cause (*scientia intuitiva*) (Ch. 4). (pp. 373–4)

Enter Kant's contemporaries, struggling mightily with the leftover problems of transcendental idealism. One important line of revisionism,

introduced by Lessing, leads back to Spinoza's idea that intuitive or non-discursive rational insight into noumenal essences is the epistemic foundation of all genuine science. This also very nicely anticipates a more general 'Spinozistic turn' in Kant's later philosophy.

Fifth

In the meantime, the integration of morality into transcendental philosophy entails a twofold problem: Since the moral law is to be realized in the sensible world, and since the sensible world is subject to a causal determinism that rules out the existence of purposes, a conflict arises between the legislation of practical reason and that of theoretical reason, which thus appear as disjoint and indeed as incompatible (Ch. 5). (p. 374)

As Förster very insightfully points out, Kant's *Groundwork* argument that it is synthetic *a priori* true and knowable that freedom and the moral law prove each other is in direct opposition to the Kantian thesis that it is *also* synthetic *a priori* true and knowable that the natural world in which rational human agents live, move and have their causally efficacious being is a deterministic, mechanistic totality of material objects and events under strict natural laws. In other words, while Kant's official metaphysical and theoretical stance on freedom and natural determinism is that they are *compatible*, the entire drift of his moral and practical philosophy is that they are *incompatible*.

Sixth

Only in the supersensible substrate of appearances is it possible to unify these two legislations with each other and with a nature that agrees with them, which in turn is necessary if reason is to accord with itself. Contrary to its original conception, transcendental philosophy thus comes to have its foundation in the object of outer sense and the condition of its internal unity in a supersensible substrate (Ch. 6). Moreover, precise consideration of the reflective power of judgement also shows that we are compelled to conceive of the supersensible as something unconditional in which thought and being, what is and what ought to be, mechanism and purpose are inseparably one.

Contrary to standard interpretations of Kant, there is not only a pre-Critical Kant and a Critical Kant: there is also a *post*-Critical Kant,

especially in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and in Kant's drafts of his unfinished 'Transition from the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science to Physics' project in the *Opus postumum*. Above all, in the post-Critical period, Kant was looking for ways to unify non-deterministic, vitalistic/non-mechanistic, teleological freedom on the one hand, and deterministic, inert/mechanistic, non-teleological nature on the other, and also trying to solve the two other fundamental leftover problems of transcendental idealism: the nature of synthetic *a priori* truth and knowledge across theoretical and practical philosophy, and the gap in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. Förster is absolutely right, I think, that Kant addresses the freedom/nature dichotomy by postulating a single underlying material substrate – the dynamic aether, constituted by a structural system of attractive and repulsive forces – that is somehow at once the metaphysical ground of living organismic systems (including rational human free agents) and of inert, mechanistic systems alike, and also immanently mirrors the supersensible noumenal concept of a world created and governed by an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. In other words, this is the post-Critical Kant's version of Spinoza's *deus sive natura*, now updated to solve the freedom/natural determinism incompatibility problem of transcendental idealism.

Of course, not everything can be done in a single book, but in this particular connection, it would have been very good to see more from Förster about how the other two fundamental problems of transcendental idealism are *also* supposed to be solved by Kant's post-Critical Spinozism. My own view about those, for what it is worth, is this. First, I think that the problem of the nature of the synthetic *a priori* across theoretical and practical philosophy is supposed to be solved by the implicit post-Critical Kantian thesis that empirical and pure intuition now respectively pick out the objective content and a *priori* form of the total dynamic aether, which I think would entail that an *a priori* formal representation of organismic life, including the essentially embodied mental life of rational human free agents, along with the formal representations of space and time, will *also* count as a formal intuition that ground the cognitive semantics and epistemology of the synthetic *a priori*. The formal intuition of organismic life is then the cognitive-semantic bridge from the theoretical synthetic *a priori* to the practical synthetic *a priori*. Second, I think that the problem of the gap in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories is supposed to be solved by the implicit post-Critical Kantian thesis of *affirming the gap and fully accepting non-conceptualism*, that is, by explicitly restricting the categories to deterministic, mechanistic material nature, the total object of discursive empirical thinking, and by fully accepting the existence of objectively valid essentially non-conceptual empirical intuitional representations of living

material systems, including all non-minded living organisms, non-human minded animals, and rational human free agents. In other words, *freedom is immanent in material nature by virtue of its being a special form of animal life*. Correspondingly, limiting the categories to the deterministic, mechanistic parts of material nature is just a way of reaffirming the deep original Kantian insight that it is necessary to put limits on theoretical ‘scientific knowing’, or *Wissen*, in order to make room for ‘faith’ or *Glaube*. Not all natural facts are deterministic, mechanistic, reductive Newtonian natural facts, and the non-deterministic, teleological, emergentist non-Newtonian natural facts are all grasped by essentially non-conceptual cognition – as per Samuel Alexander’s later notion of ‘natural piety’, and George Santayana’s later notion of ‘animal faith’.

Seventh

Although it is a conceptual necessity, Kant continues to insist that the link between the sensible and the supersensible is fundamentally beyond human cognition. In order to prove this, he contrasts the human cognitive faculty with something which, according to him, it is not and cannot be: intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding. In this way, though, he also gives the first precise characterization of these two faculties (Ch. 6). Yet by doing so, Kant also casts doubt on his own assertion that they are inaccessible to the human mind and that the supersensible is therefore necessarily beyond human cognition: According to Fichte, we realize an intellectual intuition in every single self-intuition of the I; and Goethe sees that he has already realized Kant’s intuitive understanding by basing his study of the metamorphosis of plants on it (Ch. 7). From this point on, the question of the knowability of the supersensible takes centre stage.

Here is where Förster’s core theme of the ‘intuitive understanding’ or ‘non-discursive thinking’ begins to emerge. The basic subjunctively conditional idea is this: *if*, contrary to Kant’s own belief, rational human animals really *were* capable of intuitive understanding or non-discursive thinking, *then* they *would* be able to know the supersensible substrate of freedom and nature, and thereby solve the fundamental problems of transcendental idealism. Fichte, Schelling and especially Hegel basically all take up this idea, and run with it. Just for the record, and now anticipating my final critical comment, I do think that this is a *true* subjunctive conditional. But I also think that it is a *counterfactual*, i.e. I do also think that its antecedent is false.

Eighth

According to Fichte, the essence of the I is that it (a) is what it is only *through itself* (self-positing); and that it (b) must be what it is *for itself* (self-consciousness). This, however, entails further that (a') the I knows its being as its deed, and this consciousness of the unity of thought and being, is not a receptive intuition, but a productive [one], an intellectual intuition. And (b') the determinate actions that the supersensible I must perform in order to posit itself can be brought to consciousness step by step and made into objects of cognition. In this way, what was for Kant an unfathomable root in which the sensible and supersensible worlds are united, becomes, in the case of the human I, a legitimate object of investigation (Chs. 8, 9)

Ninth

However, if we must conceive of the supersensible as something unconditional, in which thought and being, spirit and nature are inseparably one, then Fichte's philosophy of freedom is only a first step toward its cognition. Schelling therefore insists on an exposition of nature's origination from the common root (Ch. 9).

Tenth

Schelling's attempt to base the method of his *Naturphilosophie* on Fichte's intellectual intuition inevitably leads to the dissolution of intellectual intuition. For in order to employ it for cognition of *nature*, it would have to be possible to abstract from the subject of intuition in the act of intuition itself. With this step, intuition ceases to be productive, however, and becomes intuitive understanding (Ch. 10).

Eleventh

It was Goethe who elaborated a methodology of intuitive understanding based on Spinoza and Kant. It consists in bringing together related phenomena and grasping them in such a way as to form a whole. In a further step, the transitions between the phenomena must be recreated in thought in order to tell whether the whole was already at work in them or whether the parts are only externally connected. If the former is the case, then an idea becomes accessible to experience as the

ideal whole to which the sensible parts owe their existence and their specific character (Ch. 11).

Twelfth

Hegel applied this method to philosophy itself in order to achieve philosophical knowledge of the supersensible. Since philosophical consciousness is a consciousness that makes a truth claim, he began by setting up a complete series of such shapes of consciousness in order to make the transitions between them reproducible in thought. (Whether or not the series is in fact complete can be determined only by actually going through and trying to reproduce the transitions one by one.) When the philosophical consciousness of the present now looks back over its past shapes and reproduces the transitions between them in thought, it grasps what it thereby experiences as the knowledge of something that consciousness itself has not produced but merely aided in making visible. This is a self-moving, spiritual content which, although discoverable only in the thinking subject, exists independently of it and is objectively real. In this experience, consciousness apprehends the effects of a supersensible spiritual reality. In this way, it has attained the standpoint of *scientia intuitiva* (Chs. 12–14).

Finally, Förster ends *The Twenty-Five Years* with a bold question and an even bolder two-part answer. This is the bold question:

What remains open, however, is the question of the legitimacy of the assumption with which the last chapter [14] ended: the question whether Hegel's presentation of the transitions in his 'science of the experience of consciousness' – and hence also the introduction to the standpoint of science – is correct. (p. 375)

Now the first part of Förster's even bolder two-part answer to that question is *yes*, and contrapositively, those who have claimed that Hegel's 'science of the experience of consciousness' failed are simply mistaken:

Hegel's project could ... only be said to have 'failed' if no necessity whatsoever was to be found in the 'science of the experience of consciousness', and if instead the transitions between the shapes were contingent and thus might have happened differently. But that assumption is unwarranted,

as I hope to have shown in Chapter 13 despite the undeniable imperfections in my presentation. (p. 376)

And the second part of Förster's even bolder two-part answer is that, even if we challenge the specific *philosophical claims* of Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, nevertheless there is still good reason to believe that Hegel's *philosophical method* of 'intuitive understanding' or 'non-discursive thinking' is defensible and feasible in a contemporary context and indeed lays claim to being the one true route to the scientific philosophy of the future:

Consider Kant's starting point one last time. The existence of an antinomy proved to him that discursive thought, shaped as it is by sensibility and dependent as it is on sensibility, leads to contradictions as soon as it is applied to anything other than sensibility. This led Kant to conclude that the supersensible cannot be known. That, however, is an incomplete disjunction. One can as easily conclude that, if supersensible reality is to be known, non-discursive thought is required. What I have tried to show in this book is that between 1781 and 1806 a *philosophical* justification was worked out, demonstrating that this is not idle speculation but a real possibility – a possibility whose potential has still to be realized. (p. 377)

To this amazingly clear, distinct, and philosophically ambitious assertion I would like to give the Critical philosopher's characteristically careful reply: *Yes in one sense, and no in another sense*. Yes, I do completely agree with Förster that the German Idealist philosophical tradition from Kant to Hegel shows us that a certain kind of idealistically driven scientific philosophy really *is* viable, and I also completely agree that this thought 'is not idle speculation but a real possibility – a possibility whose potential has still to be realized'. But also no, I do *not* think that the Hegelian idea of an 'intuitive understanding' or 'non-discursive thinking' that holistically and essentialistically grasps supersensible reality via grasping the single universal complete, coherent system of essence-disclosing concepts is the meta-philosophical key that unlocks this philosophical door.

Instead, I think that the meta-philosophical key is the realization that the kind of 'science' that philosophy truly is is *not* a super-powered version of *natural or formal theoretical science* – as it were, physics, mathematics and logic from God's own standpoint, with special reference to Hegel's famous or notorious assertion in the *Science of Logic*:

[L]ogic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth as it is without veil

and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind. (G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 50.)

On the contrary, I think that truly scientific philosophy is nothing more and nothing less than a synoptic *moral science* (*Geisteswissenschaft*), i.e. a *rational anthropology* that consists in synthetic *a priori* knowledge of necessary truths about rational human animals, specifically understood as ‘human, all too human’, in relation to themselves and to non-rational animals, and also to all the other manifestly real living and non-living inhabitants of a thoroughly *nonideal* actual natural world.

But perhaps this is only to say that I just find *Kant’s* fundamental *radically agnostic* thought – that it is *a priori* knowable by us that the supersensible cannot be known by creatures like us, necessarily constrained as we are by our sensible, animal and essentially embodied nature – to be a better overall explanation of all the relevant facts and phenomena than *Hegel’s* fundamental *radically non-agnostic* thought that the supersensible reality of the world and ourselves can be *a priori* known by creatures like us via ‘intuitive understanding’ or ‘non-discursive thinking’. Nevertheless, like Förster, I am also convinced that the future of truly scientific philosophy must be some or another appropriately refined and updated version of Kantian or Hegelian idealism, and not some or another version of classical rationalism, classical empiricism or classical scepticism. Kant’s critical and dialectical diagnosis of those projects, even when they are thoroughly refined and updated by the latest post-Kantian and post-Hegelian developments in the natural and formal sciences, and even when they are dressed up in the emperor’s shiny new clothes of an impressively well-funded, institutionally powerful and state-mandated *scientism*, is correct. The time has come for philosophy to go forward to idealism, and finally realize the full promise of ‘the twenty-five years of philosophy’.

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