

Hegel's Conceptions of Mediation*

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Given its centrality to the intellectual thought processes through which the great structures of logic, nature, and spirit are unfolded it is clear that mediation is vital to the very possibility of Hegel's encyclopaedic philosophy. Yet Hegel gives little specific explanation of the concept of mediation. Surprisingly, it has been the subject of even less attention by scholars of Hegel. Nevertheless, it is casually used in discussions of Hegel and post-Hegelian philosophy as though its meaning were simple and straightforward. In these discussions mediation is the thesis that meanings are not atomic in that the independence of something is inseparable from its relation to something else. Hence *being* is mediated by *nothing*, the *particular* by the *universal*, the *individual* by *society*. But does Hegel ever explain mediation in a way which justifies such use of the concept? I want to argue that mediation is, in fact, an equivocal term which in Hegel covers a variety of entirely different conceptual relations. Furthermore, as propounded by Hegel it lacks the rigour which could allow the particular conclusions which the concept allegedly facilitates.

1. Hegel on Mediation

In Hegel mediation explains, in effect, why the properties of certain objects are such as to allow us to move beyond an initial one-dimensional conceptualization. For that reason it might be seen as essential to the possibility of transition. Anyone familiar with the *Logic* in particular will readily appreciate how important that property must

* This is a version of "Hegel, Adorno and the Concept of Mediation", *Bulletin of the Hegel Society Great Britain*, Vol. 39/40 (1999). The revised version (November, 2013) focuses exclusively on Hegel. A substantial and detailed account of Adorno's conception of mediation can be found in Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass. / London: MIT Press, 2004).

be in Hegel's unfolding of certain concepts. If we pay close attention, however, to the way in which Hegel explicitly uses mediation we find a variety of different senses, not all of which contribute to the general function of transition, just mentioned. I want to look at the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* to which Hegel himself refers us in the "Doctrine of Being" section of the *Science of Logic* for a preliminary discussion of the concept of mediation.¹ It seems to me that Hegel's exposition of the concept of mediation gives rise to four different versions of mediation. This is problematical given that Hegel presents mediation as a unified intellectual phenomenon. I name those versions as follows:

- (i) *Elevation Thesis*: mediation is the intellectual mechanism by which we proceed from contingency to necessity;
- (ii) *Transcendental Thesis*: the process of knowledge cannot be coherently explained without reference to a non-immediate element (and that element is mediation);
- (iii) *Contentual Thesis*: the possibility of content is determined by the form of judgment, and that must include mediation;
- (iv) *Genetic Thesis*: since a necessary precondition of any fact is its historical production it is, in this sense, mediated.

Despite the associations that some of these ideas might suggest I do not want to read Hegel as a Kantian of some type. I want, rather, to look at these different theses in the contexts in which they occur without, if possible, making any deeper claims as to what sort of position in general we can ascribe to the logic.

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, trans. A. V. Miller, *Science of Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), p.68.

(i) *Elevation Thesis*

The elevation thesis explains how we can allegedly adjust our attitude to a given content and move from an understanding of it as contingent to an understanding of it as necessary. Hegel does not explore this idea abstractly. Rather this idea arises in the context of his critique of a particular philosophical position. The context of that discussion is therefore important. Hegel establishes the elevation thesis in argument with romantic irrationalism in the form of F. H. Jacobi, who, in particular, holds the position that an exclusively immediate knowledge of God is possible. It is the absolute uniqueness of God, as understood by Jacobi, which leads him to this conclusion. God cannot be known through the conceptualist apparatus that Kant had outlined for cognition in general. Rather, God must be known in a wholly non-conceptual way since concepts are epistemic only when applied to sensuous particularities or serving as general abstractions. The idea is that only if conceptualization can be somehow eluded is a knowledge of God possible. And since Jacobi, like Hegel, holds that knowledge of God is indeed attainable he offers the thesis of immediate knowing. In the course of his discussion of Jacobi's position Hegel uncovers what he takes to be fatal incoherencies in the thesis of immediate knowing. Yet, significantly, Hegel has designated this position the "Third Position of Thought towards Objectivity" (*Dritte Stellung des Gedankens zur Objektivität*) thereby according it a pre-eminence over the previous two positions, (1) naïve correspondence and (2) empiricism and critical philosophy. Hegel indicates that the pre-eminence of the third position – that of immediate knowing – can be appreciated because it alone has preserved "the absolute inseparability of the thought of God from his being" (*EL* §51).²

² *EL* = G. W. F. Hegel, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

Jacobi's contemporary recasting of the ontological argument places him, in Hegel's view, above Kant who famously rejects all arguments for the existence of God. Kant repudiates these arguments in line with of the general commitments of his critical philosophy, commitments which Hegel rejects. The discussion of Kant takes place within the section, "Second Position of Thought towards Objectivity".³ Since his concern is with the Absolute – rather than simple epistemology – Hegel, not unexpectedly, provides a specific examination of Kant's criticism of the arguments for the existence of God. The reason for this is clearly that Kant's criticisms reveal his attitude to the Absolute. The essence of Kant's position is that necessary existence cannot be deduced from contingent being. Furthermore, valid judgments are possible only in the realm of contingent being, thus excluding valid judgements with respect to the Absolute. If Kant is correct then Hegel's philosophy is conclusively misconceived, so naturally Hegel tries to show that, in fact, there is an intelligible way of making the intellectual transition from contingency to necessity.

It is at this point in the *Encyclopaedia* that Hegel first uses the concept of mediation.

He notes that "thinking the empirical world essentially means altering its empirical form, and transforming it into something universal" (*EL*§50). This is not the

³ Kant for a number of reasons is held to have offered a theory deficient in its ability to understand the Absolute. *First*, Kant's investigation of the structure of perception sets out to account for only the subjective components of perception. However the range of what is subjective is extended to all elements of perception. The result is that objectivity is collapsed into subjectivity since nothing can be posited as other than the empirical subject except by the subject (*EL*§41). Thus the empty forms of the categories are determined by a content which, in the form of intuition, is "equally itself merely subjective" (*EL*§43). *Second*, Hegel turns Kant's critique of Aristotle against Kant himself and argues that the categories are haphazardly taken from traditional logic, rather than deduced: deduction alone making then suitable philosophical concepts (*EL*§42). *Third*, because the categories are determined only through sensibility they cannot be employed to explain "the Absolute, which is not given in perception" (*EL*§44). It is interesting note that there is a whole subsequent tradition of philosophy which takes its lead from Hegel's critique of Kant. That is, it follows Hegel in rejecting an overdeterminate category thinking. At the same time, however, it is even less enchanted by the motivations behind Hegel's critique, namely, the need for a philosophy which can rationally express the Absolute. Clearly some strange transformation has taken place.

specialized activity of philosophy, but an ineradicable characteristic of human thought. So when the empirical world is thought, or becomes the object of reflection, it is no longer merely empirical but indeed an object of thought. Hegel describes this thinking as a *negative* activity which brings out “the inner *import* of what is perceived” (EL§50). He claims that the negative moment involves the reflective transformation of the material into the spiritual. In this way the material is allegedly mediated into the spiritual: that is, the being of the world can be explained only as the necessary being of God. By itself, or independently of God, the world is only contingent being. The idea, then, is that the world is mediated through God in the sense that the world achieves its significance only by reference to its truth in God: “This elevation (*Erhebung*) of the spirit means that although being certainly does pertain to the world, it is only semblance, not genuine being, not absolute truth; for, on the contrary, the truth is beyond that appearance, in God alone, and only God is genuine being” (EL§50). On the other side, the existence of God is mediated through the world, in the sense that we must pass to his existence from the contingency of things. However, the passage from world to God is anything but one of interdependence. If it were then the existence of God would be “*grounded* and *dependent*”. This allows Hegel to conclude that “while this elevation is a *passage* and *mediation* (*Vermittlung*), it is also the sublation of the *passage* (*Übergang*) and the *mediation* since that through which God could seem to be mediated, i.e. the world is, on the contrary, shown up as what is null and void. It is only the *nullity* of the being of the world that is the bond of the elevation; so that what does mediate vanishes, and in this mediation, the mediation itself is sublated” (EL§50). The world, understood as independent being, is superseded by God whose existence is the nullification of the independent existence of the world.

The sense in which mediation is intended in this context is crucial to Hegel's ultimate programme. It is a mechanism of reflection which allows us to see that an object – in this case the world – is not independent, and reflection forces us to move to its further condition. Mediation is thus, to use Hegel's word, an elevation, not a lateral implication. Furthermore, and precisely because it is an elevating move, it must eventually end when a certain satisfactory position has been attained: in that way it sublates itself – it becomes what it is through the negation of the prior stages of mediation. (The motion of mediation resembles the triadic structure in which dialectic negates a given judgment and transforms itself into something beyond that judgment.) It is worth noting that the criteria of this sublation are not specified with the result that we do not know what conditions of satisfaction Hegel requires. That is to say, when is a sublation not just a negation? The major difficulty with this account of mediation is that it appears to be a custom built concept serving the process of justifying a certain tradition theological conception of being. The philosophical enterprise of finding conditions, which Hegel takes to be quite natural, becomes, willy nilly, a moment of thinking the Absolute.

(ii) Transcendental Thesis

In the “Third Position of Thought towards Objectivity” Hegel attempts to offer a further refinement of the concept of mediation (*EL*§62). Mediation, Hegel suggests, is a quality of anything comprehended through categories: “these categories are restricted determinations, forms of what is conditioned, dependent, and mediated”. So a mediated object is not unlimited (restricted), not absolute (conditioned), not independent. Categories, Hegel goes on to say, are synonyms of concepts. So to

comprehend – to think through concepts – is to grasp an object (*Gegenstand*) “in the form of something conditioned and mediated”. Mediation has the property, like concepts, of determining an object and in that sense mediation is a formal quality. Hegel adds to this transcendental implication when he asserts that mediation is not a dispensable middle point standing between the object and the subject. It seems, in fact, that the object is rationally unavailable except through mediation. Hegel makes a further claim when he argues that explanation and comprehension are matters of movement from a particular mediation to another particular mediation. We might put this simply by saying that knowledge is ineluctably conceptual. Gathering these thoughts together we can see that two claims are thereby made: that (a) *we cannot know an object except conceptually*, and (b) that *what we can know about objects depends on what mediations are entailed*, rather than what we can directly claim of the object. In making these two claims Hegel is obviously committed to a conceptualism. His position is that the conceptual possibilities of an object determine the knowledge that we might achieve. Mediation is thus no middle point – as concepts or ideas are in realist representationalism – between the judging subject and the indifferent object.

Hegel presents this position transcendently. He demonstrates that if we do not explain knowledge as containing mediation then our language falls into incoherence. This, he contends, is precisely what happens in Jacobi. Hegel argues for the ineluctability of mediation by exploring Jacobi’s attempt to exploit an antithetical meaning of reason and to make it equivalent to faith: “since mediated knowledge is supposed to be restricted simply to a finite content, it follows that reason is *immediate knowing, faith*” (*EL*§63). Hegel’s criticism of this is especially acute. What he wants

to do, in effect, is to show that Jacobi's distinctions are necessarily bogus in that they incoherently claim a realm of thought in which mediation might not be operative. In particular Hegel questions the use of terms for the psychological dispositions that we allegedly have when we attain this immediate knowledge of God. For instance, Jacobi opposes knowing to believing, and yet also claims that believing is immediate knowing. What is the difference between these two senses of knowing? Jacobi, according to Hegel, never explains. Another instance of this confusion centres around Jacobi's idea of intuiting. Jacobi opposes intuiting to thinking (since the latter seems to be suggestive of finitude). But what else is intuiting other than thinking? Surely intuiting has to be an intellectual process. If this is the case then, to finish Hegel's argument, intuiting must also contain mediation. It is interesting to note that this important argument has nothing to say about the Absolute. Instead mediation is presented purely in the context of a necessary structure of knowledge.

(iii) Contentual Thesis

We have already seen that the elevation thesis is explicated in the context of our knowledge of God. This context is also operative for the contentual thesis. In the contentual thesis Hegel argues that immediate knowing is one-sided in that it fails to include the mediated element of knowledge. As something one-sided its very form allegedly reduces its content to one-sidedness and ultimately to abstraction. That is to say, the content is necessarily deformed into a uni-dimensionality. As such it is an abstraction from the concreteness of the original and is thereby false representation. What Hegel is pointing out here is the now familiar idea that a method pre-determines the possibility of the content. Since immediate knowing excludes mediation its objects are objects that themselves contain no mediation. If we were to concede that the

objects were internally mediated then we would already have admitted to a form of knowing that is different in kind from immediate knowing.

This theory introduces two new ideas: the one just stated that (a) form determines contentual possibility, and (b) that a content can have mediational structure. What (b) means is that there are objects in which we discern diversity in unity; a substance as traditional metaphysics would term it. Hegel wants to allow this as otherwise the philosophical account of content would, contrary to certain experiences, always be discrete and atomic. When knowledge of God is considered, however, we discover what a mistake this is since, as Hegel claims, God can “only be called spirit inasmuch as he is known (*gewußt*) as inwardly *mediating himself with himself*. Only in this way is he concrete, living and spirit; and that is just why the knowing of God as spirit contains mediation within it” (*EL*§74). In other words, God, as he is known to us, is not a lifeless abstraction, and that entails that this knowledge is not reducible to the one-sidedness of immediacy. Knowledge of God, then, is always mediation. In this way Hegel offers a complex thesis: in so far as a thing is inherently mediational, it must be known through mediation. Mediation is both the property of the object and knowledge: knowledge, as it were, moulds itself to the object by its own processes of mediation.

We should note that in pursuing this model of mediation Hegel is proposing a theory designed to capture something like the knowledge of God or of the Absolute. Consequently this theory has no interest in particularity since particularity, as we have yet to see, cannot be known as inwardly mediating contents. This is a crucial step of the theory. In its abstraction immediate knowing relates the particular instance to

itself. That is, since it is one-sided it takes the immediate particular to be related to itself alone. But this will not work even for particulars, Hegel argues, since “the particular is precisely the relating of itself to *another* outside it”. The case of God, however, is rather special. Since all knowing contains mediation we might think that God is mediated “to *another* outside it”. But that is not so. God, apparently, is not a particular. As the polemical argument has put it: he is reduced to particularity by immediate knowing, so a method which is not reductive will allow God to be known as a concrete universal. The result of this is that Hegel is required to explain mediation in a different context. The Aristotelian formulation that we have already seen is used to explain the nature of God: “as inwardly *mediating himself with himself*”. So Hegel has to provide an explanation of mediation in which the content – in this case God – is not “the relating of itself to *another* outside it”. At this point some pyrotechnics are introduced: “But a content can only be recognized as what is true inasmuch as it is not mediated with an other, i.e., is not finite, so that it mediates itself with itself, and is in this way both mediation and immediate self-relation all in one”. What Hegel seems to be saying is that when we judge the truth of our knowledge of God it cannot be a matter of referring the content to conditions outside God. That procedure is applicable to particularity. God, however, is unique. The experience of God is immediate in that we do not infer it, but it is mediated in the sense that it is the experience of a unity in diversity, not a flat particular. So the function of mediation as we see it here is entirely that of explaining the way in which God can be known. The argument relies on an unusual sense of the isomorphism of God and knowledge, and, more fundamentally, on an agreed notion of God.

(iv) *Genetic Thesis*

Hegel, as we have seen, argues that the doctrine of immediate knowing adopts an “*excluding posture*” (EL§64) in that it holds that mediation is not only insufficient for knowledge of the Absolute, but should be abandoned. Thus far, the discussion of mediation is related in various ways to the question of the knowability of the Absolute. By means of three examples (EL§66), however, Hegel makes a strikingly different claim to the effect that the genesis of a thing or a state of affairs is its mediation. The senses in which that genesis can be explained are all, apparently, inclusive within what we might understand as the genetic mediation. Examples are of course unusual in Hegel’s logic. They are all the more perplexing here in that the examples he provides give rise to an understanding of mediation which is quite at odds with cognition of the Absolute. Furthermore, the examples are internally problematic, as we shall see, in that they fail to distinguish genesis from validity.

The first example in which we find the genetic thesis examines the case of mathematical knowledge. A mathematician may have sophisticated answers to mathematical problems immediately available, though that sophistication is the product of long education. In that sense the immediacy is apparently inseparable from the conditions that produced it. What mediation does not explain here, however, is the truth status of the uttered mathematical proposition, merely the extra-mathematical and empirical conditions that in a particular sense made it possible. The mathematician’s knowledge and her education are obviously not disconnected, but what are we to make of the connection? The validity or otherwise of those proofs that the mathematician may effortlessly and immediately produce cannot be validated by recounting the process through which the mathematician has come to be a

mathematician. It would, of course, be rather odd were the mathematician to claim that these proofs were known to her independently of education. But even so, their invalidity could not simply be assumed. (It might be said that mediation refers to the process which, to pursue the instance, normally produces a mathematician, though that is to apply an interpretation to Hegel's words which is far from obvious.)

The second example provided by Hegel is that of the parent as offspring. He notes that "the seed and the parents are an immediate, originating existence with regard to the children, etc., which are the offspring. But, for all that the seed and the parents (in virtue of their just existing) are *immediate*, they are offspring as well; and, in spite of the mediation of their existence, the children, etc., are now immediate, for they *are* too". The point here is that the parent is immediately a parent, but mediated ("in virtue of their just existing") in that a parent is the offspring of someone else. Insofar as one is a parent one is simply that. Insofar as one is a human being, in any respect with any determination, one must be a product of parents. Hegel calls this a "trivial" insight. But it is less than that. The conditions in which one is specifically determined as a parent are not to be explained by reference to my other determination as a child of some else.

Hegel takes a further example with respect to spatial location: "That I am in Berlin, which is my *immediate* present, is *mediated* by the journey I made to come here". We might ask why it is an immediate fact as opposed to just a fact. Indeed, given the problem with this case Hegel might want to call it nothing more than a fact. The fact that I am in Berlin might be an immediate fact – unmediated, so to speak – by any condition if, in fact, I was born in Berlin and never left it at any time. Kant's

legendary presence in Königsberg might be an impossibility under Hegelian strictures.

As we see, then, mediation can be used to name the genetic process of any given. Without that process the given simply could not be. Such a claim is not, indeed, controversial, as Hegel points out. But its place within the exposition of the concept of mediation is difficult to understand since the genetic thesis is, in essence, anomalous. First, the crucial point that had been gained as an achievement of mediation – that it is not one-sided – can only have artificial application in the genetic thesis. Second, it has an entirely different application from what we have seen in the elevation thesis in which mediation takes us from contingency to necessity. It is not clear that the elevation framework can be seen in the three expository examples. In a more general philosophical context the genetic thesis suffers from a confusion of genesis and validity. A comprehensive explanation of any phenomenon requires both, though the conditions in which a genetic explanation would be adequate to its object would be impossible to determine: each object may have an infinity of genetic conditions. But that both might form part of a comprehensive explanation does not justify Hegel's collapsing them into each other.

Hegel wants to bring us to the point where we realize that mediation and immediacy are intrinsically connected. The connection is clear enough to Hegel: "It is thereby shown to be a *factum*, that the determination of mediation is contained in that very immediacy, against which the *understanding* (in accordance with its own fundamental principle of immediate knowing) is not allowed to have any objections. It is only the ordinary abstract understanding that takes the determinations of immediacy and

mediation to be absolute, each on its own account, and thinks that it has an example of a *firm* distinction in them; in this way, it engenders for itself the insurmountable difficulty of uniting them – a difficulty which, as we have shown, is not present in the *factum...*” (EL§70). But has Hegel done enough to facilitate this confident conclusion? As we have seen the *elevation thesis* is worked out in the context of the Absolute, or, more specifically, God. When we ascend to the theological explanation of the world a process of mediating the apparently immediate is involved. It is clear, however, that Hegel is using mediation in a way that is specific to this unique transition and for that reason no further conclusions can be drawn about the general nature of immediacy and mediation. The *transcendental thesis* tends to support Hegel’s conclusion in that it demonstrates the difficulties that a position has in expressing itself once mediation has been excluded. Insofar as it is effective against Jacobi who represents immediate knowing Hegel’s claim can be deemed reasonable. The *contentual thesis* once again looks like a custom built thesis designed to facilitate expression of the Absolute. We ourselves cannot apply the findings of that thesis to other phenomena because of what Hegel has said about particularity. So once again we must accept a controversial pre-condition. Finally, *the genetic thesis* certainly allows for the interdependence of immediacy and mediation. But the drawback is that it does so in a context which is both artificial and internally problematic.