

THE LIMITS OF METATHEORY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF HEGEL'S SYSTEM¹

by James Kreines

Abstract: *Hegel aims to defend a system of philosophy. So interpreters should consider what is required to interpret this specifically as a system. Once we are clear about this, I argue, we can see what would be involved in reading Hegel's philosophy as a kind of metatheory. This allows discerning the strongest way of developing a reading of Hegel's philosophy as a metatheory. But it also brings out reasons to avoid even the strongest version of that approach, or reasons to read Hegel's philosophy as metaphysics rather than metatheory.*

Keywords: *Hegel; Kant; Rorty; Metaphilosophy; Metaphysics; Metatheory; Systematicity*

My topic in this essay is Hegel's ambition to create a *system* of philosophy, and what is required to interpret this specifically as a system. Once we are clear about this, I argue, we can see what would be involved in reading Hegel's philosophy as a kind of metatheory. This allows discerning the strongest way of developing a reading of Hegel's philosophy as a metatheory. But it also brings out reasons to avoid even the strongest version of that approach, or reasons to read Hegel's philosophy as metaphysics rather than metatheory.

1. *The Key to a System: Metaphilosophy*

I begin with the very idea of a system of philosophy, and with the question of what is specifically required in building a system. Consider a familiar and simple example of a specifically

¹ This article was an invited contribution. For this reason, it underwent review by the journal's editorial board, not a blind peer-review process (editor's note). I thank the participants and audience at the conference 'Hegels Philosophie als Metatheorie'.

foundationalist system. This is not Hegel's kind of system, to be sure. It is just a simple example. The familiar idea would be that what is needed for a system is a first principle that is absolutely or immediately *certain*, *indubitable*, and *infallible*; we could then safeguard all the further steps that will rest on this, and in this way pass judgment on the legitimacy of all knowledge-claims.

But I think that this familiar way of beginning already overlooks something required for a system. To see why, imagine a metaphysician who claims not to care about our system. She claims to be outside it, leaving the system incomplete. For she claims not to care about certainty or infallibility at all. She is simply indifferent to claims about a kind of *knowledge* supposed to be special in those ways. She leaves such topics to epistemologists, while pursuing metaphysics.

But proponents of the foundationalist system above probably meant, from the beginning, to exclude the possibility of any such to claim to be outside the concerns of the system. They will likely hold that epistemological issues about certainty are so fundamental that all philosophers, at least, *must* be concerned about them, even if they do not realize this. So there is here another commitment involved in building a system in this way: we need as well a commitment concerning a kind of philosophical issue supposed to be so fundamental that it is philosophically unavoidable. In this example, we need the commitment that epistemological issues concerning certainty are fundamental in this way. I call this a metaphilosophical commitment, because it is a commitment concerning what is fundamental to philosophy itself. So further reflection on the simple example shows that a metaphilosophical commitment was organizing our simple system from the beginning: it told us where to begin, namely, with something certain; and it told us how to link the elements of a system together, namely, by transition rules preserving this certainty.

Now this is just one example. I have argued on similar grounds that a philosophical system generally requires such an

organizing metaphilosophical commitment². So when we look to the history of philosophy and find an attempt at a philosophical system – as in the case of Hegel – it is important to consider what metaphilosophical commitment is supposed to organize or unify that system.

If we do not consider the question of metaphilosophy, then this can cause mistakes. For an example, I look to Richard Rorty's work, beginning with *Philosophy Mirror of Nature*. Rorty here contrasts systematic and edifying philosophy:

Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms³.

Furthermore, Rorty argues that systematic philosophy includes a commitment about what philosophical questions are most fundamental: it «centers in epistemology», and «[s]ystematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of a science»⁴. Systematic philosophy is fundamentally concerned with security, or certainty, sufficient to provide epistemological foundations. But Rorty argues that such attempts must go awry. Systematic philosophy is an «attempt to answer questions of justification by discovering new objective truths». And:

The primal error of systematic philosophy has always been the notion that such questions are to be answered by some new ('metaphysical' or 'transcendental') descriptive or explanatory discourse [...]⁵.

So there is a metaphilosophical claim that this aim is fundamental to systematic philosophy, and yet that aim cannot be achieved; thus there is an error at the very heart of systematic

² J. Kreines, *Reason in the World. Hegels Metaphysics and its Philosophical Appeal*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2015.

³ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979, p. 269.

⁴ Ivi, pp. 269-270.

⁵ Ivi, p. 383.

philosophy. And this suggests that what we need to do is to turn toward edifying philosophy. So I see something like this line of reasoning at work:

RR1 Systematic philosophy is fundamentally concerned with establishing the immediate certainty of epistemological foundations.

RR2 It is hopeless and useless to try to establish immediately certain epistemological foundations for all knowledge claims.

RR3 Thus, systematic philosophy is hopeless and useless.

Before coming to Hegel, I will take the simpler example of my own views about this line of argument. I do not mean to argue for these views here, just to have an example of some views to interpret. So my position is this: I think that *RR2* is correct; *that* kind of project is hopeless. But I think that *RR1* is mistaken: Systematic philosophy that is ‘constructive’ and ‘offers arguments’ need not be most fundamentally concerned with epistemological certainty or foundations, or even concerned with this at all. I will argue below that Hegel is one example of a systematic philosopher who does not fit this mold; but I think there are many. So I entirely reject Rorty’s pessimistic conclusion about systematic philosophy itself.

But now imagine an interpreter engaging with what I have said:

Interpreter Kreines has a Rortyan philosophy.

Kreines No.

Interpreter Yes. Kreines agrees with Rorty on the absolutely crucial *RR2*.

Kreines But I disagree about the conclusion; I defend the prospects for systematical philosophy.

Interpreter True. I only meant to single out the basic thrust of Kreines’ philosophy. But it is true that there is an inconsistency there, a kind of civil war within Kreines’ view. In accepting *RR2*, the basic thrust of his thinking is moving forward in a Rortyan direction, toward recognition of a primal error at

the heart of systematic philosophy. But Kreines elsewhere backslides into a failure to see the implications of this primal error.

Needless to say, I think this interpreter is mistaken. Perhaps, for all I have really demonstrated here, Rorty is right and I am wrong. But I do not think my position is inconsistent in this way. I don't think my position is akin to Rorty's at all. Granted, *if* we assume Rorty's metaphilosophical standpoint, then what I have said can seem to be at odds with itself. For I have defended systematic philosophy; and yet I might seem to have agreed, in accepting RR2, that systematic philosophy contains a 'primal error'. But this is my point in rejecting RR1: I reject Rorty's metaphilosophical standpoint altogether. If what I write is interpreted from the metaphilosophical standpoint that I reject, then misunderstanding is inevitable.

Now my interest here is really in the interpretation of Hegel. So I note that Rorty's interpretation of Hegel does see a kind of civil war within his thinking. On the one hand, there are at least two respects in which Rorty sees Hegel's thinking as moving in the right directions. First, Hegel is rightly opposed to immediately certain foundations in epistemology, and so manages to avoid the ambition of 'grounding' other disciplines. Second, Hegel does not attempt to separate philosophy from other disciplines, but writes philosophy in a way that engages with other domains. He «made philosophy too popular, too interesting, too important, to be properly professional»⁶. However, Rorty also sees Hegel as tragically failing to draw the implication he could and should draw, namely, a systematic philosophy – that is «constructive» and offers «arguments» – is doomed. If Hegel were true to himself, he would have turned instead toward «satires, parodies, aphorisms»⁷. A good indication of this is Rorty's later position on Hegel's *Logic*:

My favorite remark of Kierkegaard's about Hegel is that if he had ended books like *Science of Logic* [...] with the re-

⁶ Ivi, p. 135.

⁷ Ivi, p. 269.

mark that “this was all just a thought experiment”, he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. [...] as it was, he was a buffoon. The epithet is too harsh, but the spirit of the remark seems right⁸.

Perhaps better, given Rorty’s gloss on edifying philosophy, would be concluding the *Logic* with an aphorism indicating that the preceding volumes were a satire or parody of systematic philosophy. In any case, looking at Hegel through the lens of Rorty’s metaphilosophical commitments, we certainly do find that Hegel’s work is at odds with itself⁹.

Should we conclude from this that Hegel’s work is really at odds with itself? Not on my view. For the appearance of a civil war can arise simply because we choose to view Hegel through the lens of a foreign metaphilosophical commitment. What we should conclude is that understanding Hegel’s system requires additional reflection on metaphilosophy – reflection on what philosophy really is, and really can be. And it requires attention to what metaphilosophy really animates Hegel’s own attempt at a system. I think this always a danger for interpreters of the history of philosophy: we will always be tempted to view history through the lens of a metaphilosophical view that is implicit in philosophical work popular today.

Another way to make these points would be as a way of giving specific content to the distinction between the spirit and the letter of a philosophical system. The unifying spirit is provided by metaphilosophical commitment. But there are always innumerable many ways to attend to the letter in a manner that contradicts the spirit. There is here a problem that seems inescapable for

⁸ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Future*, in H. Saatkamp (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville (TN) 1995, pp. 197-205, here p. 221 n. 2.

⁹ I do not mean to extend my complaint about Rorty’s reading of Hegel to Kierkegaard himself. For I do not see reason to think that Kierkegaard’s criticism requires the premise, which I rejected above, that systematic philosophy is at heart concerned with epistemological foundations. Kierkegaard may have a very different worry about systematic philosophy, and I think this topic is worth more consideration than I can give it here.

those who write philosophy: one must write out all of the parts in order to execute the whole of an organized philosophical project; but regardless of how one does this, each part will be such as could be read by interpreters in a manner contradicting the spirit of the project¹⁰.

I draw four conclusions. First, a system of philosophy requires organization by metaphilosophy that will give it focus, and connect its individual arguments together into a broader project or system. Second, the projects of two philosophers might share any number of individual *claims* without being similar *projects* at all, insofar as they can be organized by opposing metaphilosophies. Third, interpretation of a systematic philosopher requires attention to the metaphilosophy that animates or organizes her project. Fourth, interpreting a system through the lens of an ill-fitting metaphilosophy can give the false appearance of a conflict or civil war within that system.

2. *Hegel's Philosophy as Metatheory?*

Now I want to examine in light of the above a further question: Should we interpret Hegel's philosophy as metatheory? I think that we can now delineate the best of such interpretations, but also a reason to worry about any such interpretation.

To define metatheory, I would look to the distinction between an object-level and meta-levels. Sometimes we talk or write about things specifically insofar as they are in turn about something. We can ask, for example, about thoughts, how it is that they are about anything at all. Where we have discourse about things insofar as they are about something, we have meta-level discourse. Otherwise we have object-level discourse. So a philosophy that is meta-theoretical would be a philosophy about something, specifically insofar as that something is about something. This could be philosophy focused on pursuit of the very possibility of aboutness: how is it that claims, thoughts, theories, etc. are *about* anything at all? Or it could be focused on questions that depend on this aboutness. For

¹⁰ I thank Axel Hutter for questions and suggestions, especially on this topic.

example, it could be a philosophy focused on the question of what it would be for thoughts or claims about something to amount to *knowledge* of that something. And so on.

Now we can ask the question about Hegel: is his philosophy a metatheory? But the results of my first section, above, suggest that we must take care in understanding the question. One way to understand it would be as this question: does Hegel make any meta-level claims? Or, does his philosophy contain metatheoretical elements. This seems to me easy to answer: of course it does. For example, his criticisms of Empiricism¹¹ include criticisms of empiricist epistemology, or empiricist accounts of what makes certain thoughts or claims about objects amount to knowledge of those objects.

But this is, at best, a misleading interpretation of the question. This is akin to asking whether my philosophy is Rortyan, and then answering that it is on account of the claim from Rorty with which I agree. And we know that noting similar claims in two different philosophical projects has the potential to lead us into mistakes about the spirit of the projects. So just noting that Hegel's philosophy includes some claims that would be at home in a metatheoretical project is not enough to establish that it is best understood as metatheory. The crucial question is rather this: is Hegel's *project* itself a project in metatheory? And that is to ask: is Hegel's project organized by a commitment to the fundamentality of metatheory, or some specific metatheoretical problem or issue?

If there is a strong way to read Hegel's philosophy as metatheory, then it would have to answer *these* questions in the affirmative. But what cannot make for a strong approach here is to read Hegel's philosophy as metatheory specifically because one is oneself attracted to philosophical projects organized around metatheory. One might well think that this is the best way for theoretical philosophy to proceed. Or even that it is the only way for there to be anything promising for theoretical philosophy to do.

¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 20, hrsg. von W. Bonsiepen und H.-C. Lucas, Meiner, Hamburg 1992 (Henceforth cited in the text as: *Hegel Enc.*), §§ 37-39.

And one might then be very happy to find claims in Hegel which, undoubtedly, address metatheoretical issues. Still, if a focus on metatheory does not organize Hegel's project, then reading him in light of such a focus cannot be charitable, no matter how strongly one favors metatheory; for reading him in light of a foreign organizing principle can only make his system appear to be at odds with itself.

We do, however, have a very strong reading of Hegel's philosophy as metatheory. The best case, I think, is the one pioneered in Robert B. Pippin's pathbreaking book, *Hegel's Idealism*¹². One thing that makes this reading so powerful is that, although the issues are not raised in these terms, it contains a strong argument concerning a metaphilosophical commitment that is supposed to organize Hegel's systematic project. Hegel is supposed to take as «basic to his project» issues with a unifying «common theme» – «the argument that any subject must be able to make certain basic discriminations in any experience in order for there to be experience at all»¹³. So this would be a philosophical project organized by a commitment to the fundamentality of issues concerning the possibility of experience. These are metatheoretical issues, in the sense that they ask what it is for a state of a subject to amount to experience *of* some object. And Hegel is supposed to borrow a Kantian approach, insofar as he agrees with Kant that these issues must be resolved by appeal to something that the subject actively does. This is what is supposed to organize the whole of Hegel's philosophy, making the parts all variations on a central Kantian theme:

[...] his own theory of the *Begriff*, and indeed the relation between the *Begriff* and reality, or the basic position of his entire philosophy, should be understood as a direct variation on a crucial Kantian theme, the 'transcendental unity of apperception'¹⁴.

¹² R.B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism. The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

¹³ Ivi, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 6.

Now this basic approach has been extremely influential, even while much of the terminology has changed over the years. These passages refer to issues about the possibility of *experience* of objects. But we could consider instead the possibility of any intentional relation to objects at all. Or we could consider the possibility of normative concept use, or the like. And one might take an approach to all of these issues that is Kantian, in the above sense, holding that we must account for these possibilities in terms of a kind of activity. I think all of these approaches has flourished within the space opened up by Pippin's arguments. On any such account, Hegel's philosophy would be, at base, a meta-theory: a theory about how object-level theories relate to their objects.

I think this approach is stronger than its critics tend to recognize. In particular, critics sometimes offer a complaint along these lines: yes, this metatheory is part of what Hegel is doing; but it is important that Hegel is *also* engaging with object-level issues in metaphysics. But, first of all, this criticism offers no rival understanding of the systematic unity of Hegel's project: it rests content with saying that Hegel is doing this *and also* that. The big challenge, in reading Hegel, is to explain what gives unity to the many topics he addresses. To do that, we cannot rest content at the end of the day with an 'X and also Y' formulation. So on this score, the above metatheoretical reading comes out stronger than the criticism: it has a unifying explanation of the project. Furthermore, there is no reason that this metatheoretical approach cannot acknowledge that Hegel engages object-level issues in metaphysics. The basic claim is not that Hegel addresses only one kind of issue. Clearly Hegel addresses a great many kinds of issues. The question is rather what issues he takes as fundamental, so as to organize his approach to all other issues into a system. So the strongest metatheoretical approach can allow that Hegel engages with metaphysics; what it must hold is that Hegel answers metaphysical questions, if at all, then specifically on the basis of his concern with more metatheoretical issues.

However, while this metatheoretical approach is stronger than some critics recognize, I do not myself share this approach to Hegel. Here I will give three drawbacks that dissuade me.

First of all, we have not yet located in Hegel any supposed *argument* for the claim that metatheory is fundamental in philosophy. As it happens, I think Hegel himself explains well how such an argument would have to work, attributing this argument to ‘the Critical philosophy’. But Hegel does so in the course of *criticizing* the argument.

Hegel’s sketch of the argument for the priority of metatheory is this:

It is one of the main viewpoints of the *Critical* philosophy that, prior to setting about to acquire cognition of God, the essence of things, etc., the *faculty of cognition* itself would have to be examined first in order to see whether it is capable of achieving this [...]¹⁵.

I take the argument under discussion to be as follows: All philosophy must think about or cognize something, whether this is God, or essence, or whatever. But whatever philosophy is going to think about, it will have thereby raised the question of how it is capable of achieving thought or cognition of such objects at all. So philosophy requires a metatheoretical account of how cognition achieves this aboutness. And such metatheory is fundamental to philosophy.

But, as I said, Hegel articulates this argument in order to criticize it. In particular, the worry about cognition achieving a relation to its objects, if really so important, would apply on the meta-level as well. That is, it would equally manifest as a worry that cognition might not be capable of taking itself as an object. So *if* it were true that we must not attempt to cognize objects on some domain until we have a prior metatheoretical account of how this is possible, then it would also be true that we must avoid the attempt at a metatheoretical account of the cognition of an object until we have a meta-meta-level account of its possibility. And then the same point applies there too and on an infinitely ascending series of meta-levels. Hegel makes a striking comparison here: the case of the fundamentality of metatheory is «as incoher-

¹⁵ *Hegel Enc.*, § 10 An. (*Encyclopaedia Logica*, translated by K. Binkmann and D.O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010).

ent as the Scholastic's wise resolution to learn to swim, before he ventured into the water»¹⁶. And this seems to me a powerful argument against the case for the fundamentality of meta-theory to philosophy. Hegel shows that there is not in fact good reason to think that philosophy needs or requires to be built around a meta-level theory of the relation of thought to objects. Hegel's intended lesson is clear: we should instead jump in the water. That is, some other kind of issue must organize a philosophical project – not any issue that would give a supposed priority to metalevel reflection. Given the above, it should be obvious that this does not mean avoiding metatheoretical issues; I have noted that Hegel does not avoid them. Rather, the fundamental issues of philosophy will be indifferent to any distinction between object and meta-levels, and will include metaphysical issues on the object level about such topics as God and the essences of things. And that is a first reason why, on my view, we should not read Hegel's philosophy as a metatheory: he himself rejects the required case for the fundamentality of metatheory.

Now I have written about the swimming passage before¹⁷, so here I will push on to second and third reasons to avoid reading Hegel's philosophy as metatheory. The second is an extension of the first. Proponents of a meta-theoretical Hegel will see Hegel as rejecting competing philosophies on grounds that they cannot give a satisfactory resolution of a supposedly fundamental problem on a meta-level. That is, competitors are supposed to lack a satisfactory account of how cognition relates to objects. For example, those who read Hegel in this way can compare his philosophy to contemporary anti-realism and rejections of so-called 'metaphysical realism'¹⁸. We can compare Hilary Putnam's argument: 'metaphysical realism' is supposed to fail to adequately account for *reference*; thus Putnam complains that metaphysical realists assume a «magical theory of reference». Since we should require a better theory of reference – a kind of metatheory – we

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cfr. J. Kreines, *Learning from Hegel What Philosophy is All About*, Verifiche XLI (1-3), 2012, pp. 129-173 and Kreines, *Reason in the World*, ch. 0.

¹⁸ E.g. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, p. 99, p. 148, p. 262 n. 15, p. 280 n. 15.

should reject metaphysical realism, and prefer internalism; we should conclude that «‘Objects’ do not exist independently of conceptual schemes»¹⁹. Note that this like of argument privileges the metatheoretical issue of reference: the topic is supposed to be so fundamental that, if a theory cannot account for this, the theory can be rejected. But, even if successful to this point, systematic pursuit of this line of thought would have to eventually include a demonstration that internalism can provide a satisfying metatheoretical account of reference. Otherwise one might just as well conclude that such a metatheory is equally difficult for both metaphysical realism and internalism, resulting in no privilege for the latter.

I infer from this that, if we read Hegel’s project as metatheory, then we would have to show that Hegel eventually himself distinguishes and privileges a meta-level, ascends to that meta-level, and defends a positive theory there. We cannot go on to say that Hegel does not provide such a theory, for that will be reason to think that the focus of the system was never really on metatheory to begin with. But we cannot read Hegel’s philosophy as metatheory, in this way, because he himself rejects the idea of a dualism between object-level and meta-level. We can see this in the citation above. The viewpoint of the critical philosophy, discussed in that passage, is that philosophical problems concerning cognition emerge on the object-level, whose solution requires an ascent to the meta-level. But Hegel’s response is that the meta-level would be no different with respect to the issues: if those problems were so pressing to begin with, then they will emerge as well on the meta-level. And if they do not prevent theorizing on a meta-level, then they also should not prevent proceeding directly to the object-level, or jumping right into the water. On Hegel’s account, those who privilege metatheory would like a dualism between object- and meta-level to do a great deal of philosophical work that it cannot in fact do. So I do not think that Hegel could organize each step of his system specifically by means of the goal of defending a positive theory *specifically on the meta-level*.

¹⁹ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, pp. 49-52.

A third and last reason to avoid reading Hegel's philosophy as metatheory focuses on the end of the *Science of Logic*. Consider some of the steps Hegel goes through: mechanism, chemism, teleology, life, and then there is cognition and the absolute idea. These conclusions seem to me to involve, at very least, some metaphysical claims on the object level. For example, the 'Life' chapter argues, at least in part, that there are organisms, truly characterized by inner purposiveness²⁰.

I see two ways that a reading of Hegel's philosophy as metatheory might deal with such concluding, object-level metaphysical claims; but neither seems to me promising. On the one hand, there is the approach that Pippin takes in *Hegel's Idealism*. He says that even if there are object-level claims here, they go beyond the conclusions of Hegel's argument in the *Logic*: they are not «playing any significant role in the position defended», which operates on a «metalevel»²¹. Here a meta-theoretical reading threaten to force us to see Hegel's work as again at odds with itself: one strand of Hegel sticks to his argument, within metatheory; but another strand falls back into claims that do not play a role in that argument, or object-level metaphysical claims. But we saw above that this appearance of a civil war can be the result of reading a philosophical project through the lens of a foreign organizing commitment. In this case, reading Hegel's philosophy as metatheory results in a picture of Hegel as internally conflicted. I argued above that this is good reason to consider different approaches to the commitment that organizes a philosophical project.

On the other hand, a metatheoretical reading could take a different approach here. It could agree that there are object-level metaphysical conclusions drawn at the end of the *Logic*, while holding that these conclusions are drawn on the basis of the more fundamental metatheoretical reflection on the possibility of cog-

²⁰ I interpret this section in J. Kreines, *The Logic of Life: Hegel's Philosophical Defense of Teleological Explanation in Biology*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by F. Beiser, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 344-377.

²¹ Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, p. 247.

nition or experience of any object. I think that this is the strategy Pippin favors in recent work²². I see in turn two possibilities here: metaphysical conclusions about the *object* of cognition, as such, and metaphysical conclusions about the *subject* of cognition. One possibility is that consideration of the possibility of cognition of any object might get you a *metaphysics of all objects*. But Hegel's point at the conclusion of the *Logic* is not that *every* object is alive, or characterized by inner purposiveness. Nor is it that objects must be alive in order for it to be possible for us to judge or experience them. On the contrary, Hegel argues that organisms are composed of non-organic parts, and that we can have knowledge of this²³. The other possibility is that metatheory generates metaphysical conclusions about the *subject* of cognition. For instance, perhaps one could argue that we are creatures who can cognize objects, and that we ourselves and our cognition must be characterized by a metaphysical spontaneity²⁴. But this route seems destined to end in a dualism separating the metaphysics of the cognizing *subject* and the metaphysics of the *objects* of its judgments. And this neither fits. For the concluding chapters of the *Logic* are neither about the metaphysics of all objects, nor are they built around a basic dualism between subject and object. Rather, Hegel's conclusion stresses gradual, distinct metaphysical steps, from the lawful necessitation of mechanism and chemism, to the teleology of life, to cognition. So even if the metatheoretical approach to Hegel could support some metaphysics, I do not see how it could hope generate *Hegel's* metaphysics.

²² See R.B. Pippin, *Hegel on Logic as Metaphysics*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. by D. Moyar, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2017, pp. 199–218.

²³ I argue this case in more detail in Kreines, *The Logic of Life*.

²⁴ One way to so argue would be Pippin's powerful argument (*Kant on the spontaneity of mind*, «Canadian Journal of Philosophy», XVII (2), 1987, pp. 449–475) that Kant's own epistemology pushes against Kant's claim to metaphysical neutrality, towards a robust metaphysics of the spontaneity of the subject.

And so I think that there are three excellent reasons to worry about even the strongest approach to reading Hegel's philosophy as metatheory.

3. *An Alternative: Metaphysics and the Dialectic*

It remains to explain why I think there is a better approach to Hegel's project. In particular, I think the challenges of interpreting Hegel's system suggest the superiority of reading Hegel's philosophy not as metatheory, but as metaphysics. There can be no question of adequately defending this other option here; this is the aim of my book *Reason in the World*. Here what is important is to show at least some indication that reading the system as organized by a focus on metaphysics improves matters specifically with respect to the problems concerning Hegel's systematicity, and specifically relative to the drawbacks of a metatheoretical interpretation.

I propose that Hegel takes as fundamental some metaphysical issues, drawn specifically from Kant's Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Critique*. Yet again, the point is not to say that Hegel avoids epistemology, but that he radically and systematically transforms everything else, including epistemology, in light of fundamentally metaphysical issues. We can say that the basic issues concern grounds or conditions, and ultimately the completeness of grounding or 'the unconditioned'. I think that this means an interest in whatever is such that we could appeal to in order to *explain* something, and ultimate in whatever is such that we can appeal to it in order to explain something *completely*²⁵. So we could explain by saying that the fundamental topic of Hegel's project is the metaphysics of complete explanation²⁶.

²⁵ Here I follow M. Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, e.g. p. 2 and p. 144; I. Proops, *Kant's First Paralogism*, «Philosophical Review» 119 (2010), n. 4, pp. 449-495, here p. 455, and my *Reason in the World*, chs. 0 and 4.

²⁶ I thank Luca Illetterati for helpful questions about the precise sense of 'metaphysics' here.

Note that this topic is not specifically meta-theoretical. It applies perfectly naturally at the object level, where we seek objects in the world to which we can appeal in explaining things. But it can also be pursued on the meta-level, where we might seek whatever it is in our cognition that explains how cognition relates to objects. Here the fundamental philosophical issues are indifferent to a dualism between the meta- and object-level; the former is not eliminated, but the dualism is overcome.

Now Kant argues that, although there are metaphysical issues concerning the unconditioned, of basic interest to our reason itself, our attempts at theoretical philosophy in response generate contradictions, preventing us from answering questions that are metaphysical in that particular sense²⁷. But Hegel seeks to show that the contradictions of Kant's Dialectic teach a different lesson, about how to fix metaphysics in that same sense involving the objects of reason. So Hegel's project in the *Logic* is not a meta-theory of how cognition relates to objects – not the kind of theory Hegel sees in Kant's deductions from the Transcendental Analytic. Nor is it like Spinoza's pre-Kantian metaphysics. The organizing focus of Hegel's project is more distinctive: it is to reconstruct metaphysics on grounds of the strongest criticism of metaphysics, from the contradictions of Kant's Dialectic.

Looking back to the conclusion of the *Logic*, I want to single out as an example the 'Chemism' chapter²⁸. Hegel is not here specifically addressing what we would classify under the heading of chemistry; he is addressing any distinct natural kinds that

²⁷ See the A-Preface definition of metaphysics as conflict concerning questions posed by our reason, which it cannot answer. Of course, Kant also seeks to transform (I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Harknoch, Zweite, hin und wieder verbesserte Auflage 1787, p. XXII) metaphysics into a new form, and to answer questions within this transformed metaphysics.

²⁸ I follow here my accounts in my *Hegel: Metaphysics without Pre-Critical Monism*, «Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain», LVII-LVIII (2008), pp. 48–70 and *The Conclusion of Hegel's Logic: From Objectivity to the Absolute Idea*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. by D. Moyar, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2017, pp. 310–336.

fundamentally interact in a manner necessitated lawfully²⁹. Hegel defends this conclusion: to be this kind of thing is to interact lawfully in certain ways with other kinds. In his terms, each kind of lawful thing «is not comprehensible from itself, and the being of one object is the being of another»³⁰. Such a natural kind is, first, such as can be comprehended. It is not an object of sense perception, but of conceptual thinking. It is ‘comprehensible’ or ‘begreiflich’. This is one sense, at least, it is a form of ‘concept’ or ‘Begriff’. But it is, second, not comprehensible *from itself*. So this is a form of metaphysical holism: the being of kind X is such that, to comprehend it, one must think in terms of its lawful interaction with kind Y. And then the same applies to Y, and so on, *to a whole lawfully interconnected network*. So the ‘determinate-ness’ of anything lawful is just one ‘*moment*’ of a larger comprehensible ‘*whole*’, of the concept of the whole: it «is the concrete moment of the individual concept of the whole which is the universal essence, the *real kind* (*Gattung*) of the particular objects»³¹.

Now this seems to me clearly a *metaphysical* form of holism: the point is about the very *being* of a lawfully interacting object, or the what-it-is-to-be that object. *The point does not distinguish a meta-level, and then limit itself to a semantic holism on that level, or a claim that meanings of different terms are dependent on others. Nor does it limit itself to an epistemological holism, holding that the justification for any claim always rests on others within a web of belief.* Nor do I see any reason for thinking that this metaphysics is present as secondary to a point that epistemological, semantic, or otherwise meta-theoretical. The point is not that we should accept this metaphysical holism because we need it to give a meta-theoretical account of how cognition relates to objects. The metaphysical results seem just as much part of the fundamental

²⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, zweiter Band, *Die subjektive Logik. Die Lehre vom Begriff* (1816), in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 12, hrsg. von F. Hogemann und W. Jaeschke, Meiner, Hamburg 1981 (abb.: *Hegel SL III*), p. 148 (*Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by G. di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 645). On chemism and ‘natural necessity’ see *ivi*, p. 155 (p. 652).

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 149 (p. 646).

³¹ *Ibid.*

aims of the *Logic* itself. Again, the very *being* of one lawful thing depends on the *being* of others.

So far, then, the approach to Hegel's project via metaphysics seems to fit well the focus of the chapters near the end of the *Logic*. On this account, Hegel's focus near the crucial transition to the final section on 'The Idea' is on metaphysics, and that is unsurprising because that is indeed (on this account) the focus that is supposed to organize the larger project.

But can this explain as well how taking metaphysics as fundamental might provide the actual organization, connecting and unifying these topics at the end of the *Logic*? I think that the answer is 'yes'. To get a sense of this, we need to note that Hegel sees a contradiction within the lawful reality of chemism. On my account, there are two sides to this: the sense in which Hegel famously leaves a *real contradiction* in the world, and the sense in which contradiction forces the *Logic* from one topic to the next, systematically connecting everything together.

To see the first sense of contradiction, imagine that current natural science were to recognize three basic, lawfully interacting kinds, X, Y, Z. What *is* X? What fixes its identity³²? One can say that X just is the kind defined by attraction (for example) to Y. But this would seem to defer the fixing of identity to Y, raising the question about it. And then it does seem problematic if the same reasons force us to say the same of Y, and so on to all physical reality. Some will say that this is logically impossible. Sometimes they put the point by saying that there cannot be relations without *relata*. Russell finds the impossibility *obvious*:

There are many possible ways of turning some things hitherto regarded as 'real' into mere laws concerning the other things. Obviously there must be a limit to this process, or else all the things in the world will merely be each other's washing³³.

³² I owe this formulation to A. Bird, *The Regress of Pure Powers?*, «Philosophical Quarterly», LVII (4), 2007, Issue 229, pp. 513-534.

³³ B. Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, Kegan Paul, London 1927, p. 325.

Some philosophers continue to see here reason that there would have to be some more independent character to physical reality, even if natural science could never attain knowledge of it. But the pull in that direction is that of what Hegel calls «the metaphysics of the understanding»: the seeming need for something underlying the relational properties here, so that we could bundle all of the relational properties, and say in independent terms what they are properties of. Hegel thinks that physicists tend to give in to the temptation, resulting in their moving beyond physics and into philosophy and metaphysics – but in unfortunate ways. For example, after the successful discovery of gravitation, a philosophical mistake follows: «a physical meaning of *independent forces* is given»³⁴. We imagine physical objects as having independent being, and then want to give independence to forces by thinking of them similarly. Hegel's position is that natural science would be better off being indifferent to such considerations. Philosophers, meanwhile, should recognize that there is a kind of Antinomy contradiction here, to which Russell is reacting, but it is not something that needs solving by hidden substrata; it is something like a contradiction, but rather one that expresses the correct metaphysics of merely lawful reality.

Now that claim about the reality of contradiction is difficult, and requires more attention to resolve. My point here, however, is to turn to the related sense in which attention to contradiction is supposed to move the *Logic* along, systematically connecting everything together. Here the key is that lawful reality now looks explanatorily incomplete³⁵. But Kant and Hegel agree that theoretical inquiry is always guided by the aim of the unconditioned, or completeness of explanation, so that inquiry cannot be indifferent to this. Thus Kant says: «So-called *indifferentists*, to the extent that they think anything at all, always unavoidably fall back into metaphysical assertions, which they yet professed so much to despise» (Ax). I like to compare here the famous joke from Molière:

³⁴ *Hegel Enc.*, § 270 An.

³⁵ I follow here the account in my *The Metaphysics of Reason And Hegel's Logic*, «Hegel-Studien», L (2007), pp. 129-173.

I am asked by the learned doctor for the cause and reason that opium makes one sleep. To this I reply that there is a dormitive virtue in it, whose nature it is to make the senses drowsy³⁶.

My idea here is that inquiry proceeds based, in part, on a commitment to reject such dormitive-virtue explanations as empty, and instead to seek something in terms of which we could explain more completely. But then theoretical inquiry would contradict its own premises if it concluded that physical reality is exhausted by these three forces that we have found, while professing indifference to explanations beyond the fact that x's do what they do on account of this being the nature of kind X, and so on everywhere. Hegel sees this threatened contradiction as a central philosophical problem. And Hegel's view is that Kant responds to such «contradiction» with a kind of «abstract negation»³⁷: Kant concludes that greater explanatory completeness would have to be something entirely beyond the regress of conditions within the lawful, so that greater completeness is grasped first in terms of what it is *not*, as the *un*-conditioned; and Kant concludes that such objects satisfying to reason would have to fall beyond our epistemic limits, so that metaphysical conclusions concerning the unconditioned would be impossible for us. Hegel, by contrast, sees the contradiction as no reason to abandoning the metaphysics that considers reason's objects. For Hegel finds determinate negation here: *specific* failures of completeness within the lawful demonstrate *specific* results concerning a better, positive understanding of the objects of reason. And these are conclusions that force philosophy, given its orientation by reason, to move forward in a specific direction. In this particular case, the contradiction in merely lawfully necessitated reality is supposed to

³⁶ J.B. Molière, *Le Malade Imaginaire*, translation from K. Hutchison, *Dormitive Virtues, Scholastic Qualities, and the New Philosophies*, «History of Sciences», IXXX, 1991, pp. 245-278, p. 245.

³⁷ Hegel *SL* III, p. 246 (p. 745).

show that philosophy must turn its attention to teleology and inner purposiveness.

And we can see in this way how Hegel hopes to follow a unified kind of basic metaphysical issue through *completely* or *systematically* to positive conclusions at the end of the *Logic*. In particular, he aims to justify a reconception of what Kant thinks of as ‘the unconditioned’. To be conditioned, on Hegel’s account, will be to be something that does not determine itself. So the unconditioned will no longer be understood negatively, in terms of the lack of conditioning; it will rather be a kind of *self-determination*. Thus what is lacking in Chemism or lawful reality is that, although we have here a system or linked totality, it is not «it is not yet for itself» a «totality of self-determination»³⁸. And pursuit of this continual refinement in the metaphysics of explanation will lead Hegel through multiple stages, rather than leaving him with a basic dualism. The point will not be that a cognizing subject is self-determining, and all objects of cognition merely determined. The series of contradictions will lead the *Logic* through stages of increasingly more complete forms of self-determining. So these metaphysical concerns not only organize the topics addressed in the *Logic*, but they give it the specifically non-dualist organization that we in fact see at the end of the *Logic*.

4. *Conclusions*

In this paper, I have, first, called attention to the challenges of interpreting a philosophical system. In particular, a system requires a *metaphilosophical commitment* that will organize its parts into a coherent whole. So finding this organizing commitment is a central task in an interpretation of a philosophical system. Second, I have argued that reading Hegel as meta-theory consequently requires attributing to him a commitment to the fundamentality of metatheoretical issues. There is a way to do this, but there are also three important worries about even the best

³⁸ Ivi, p. 152 (p. 645).

way of doing it. Finally, I have argued that these drawbacks do not affect similarly the idea of reading Hegel's project as fundamentally metaphysical in focus. I conclude, then, that it is best to interpret Hegel's philosophy not as meta-theory, but as metaphysics.