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Paul Redding, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying so much about Meaning and Love Hegel's Metaphysics and Kant's Epistemic Modesty

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Paul Redding, or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying So Much About Meaning And Love Hegel's Metaphysics And Kant's Epistemic Modesty

by Jim Kreines

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Robert Brandom and James Kreines (critics)

On [*Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* by Paul Redding](#)
Pacific APA

[Click here for Redding's response.](#)

In this interest of time, I'll just say something directly: this is an incredible book. Reading it, thinking it through, is extremely rewarding. I haven't read a work of philosophy that had as much impact on me since being in school myself. The book presents you with new ideas and connections and it *forces* you to see philosophy and its history in new ways, even if you (like me) had been quite attached to your old ways. The book got into my head. Now I find myself, in idle moments, arguing with Paul up there in my head; as if there is a little copy of him in there now, making the case for his versions of inferentialism and cognitive contextualism. Fortunately, Paul is in my experience unfailingly nice, generous and sympathetic even in argument—otherwise it might not be as nice to have a copy of him in your head. Still, the copy pales in comparison to the original, so it is great to be here.

I can't do justice to the book. But I will try to proceed as follows. I will try to sketch the general line of thought I find so powerful. Then, I will try to take up my assigned role as critic. The most stimulating thing I can think of to do is to argue as follows: Paul's arguments concerning Kant and Hegel are largely successful, but end up pushing us in directions that are not consistent with the general approach to philosophy, and the general approach to Kant and Hegel, from which Paul himself begins. So we should abandon that general approach. That is what I will try, at least, to argue.

1. Redding's Basic Story about Kant and Hegel

In thinking through the book, I've come to think that there is an important general approach to philosophy that Paul shares with others, but which Paul is further advancing here in fruitful and surprising directions all his own. It has come to seem important to me to try to formulate the basic claim with which that approach begins. I'm not sure how to precisely formulate the claim, and would love some help. But the idea is, I think, that a problem concerning meaning, content and understanding is of fundamental importance to philosophy. It is "fundamental" in that, if we ignore it in pursuing some other project, we risk drawing on covert assumptions about meaning that will be our undoing. I guess I'll call this the "*fundamentality of meaning*" claim, although I'd also love a better name. What is the basic problem? One formulation, from

Paul's discussion of McDowell, is this: how can we [A1] "secure the 'objective purport' of thought" (22)? Or, as Paul cites Brandom: how can we explain our understanding of claims [A2] "without an ultimately circular appeal to semantic concepts such as intentional content, concept-use, or the uptake of representational purport (treated as an explanatory primitive)" (75-6).

With respect to Kant and Hegel, the general and initial interpretive claim (if I understand it) is that they *accept* the fundamentality of meaning. So Kant and Hegel themselves most fundamentally pursue accounts of the meaningfulness of our thought, or its objective purport.^[1] Further, each aims to make good on an anti-skeptical payoff promised by that approach. Kant argues, for example, that the conditions of the possibility of the meaningfulness of our concepts preclude Humean skepticism. But Kant is also supposed to have his own problem in this regard. Kant remains a kind of skeptic about our knowledge of things in themselves. And this is a mistake. The mistake Kant makes is that Kant fails to subject his own theory of things in themselves to worries concerning the most fundamental philosophical problem: the problem about meaning or semantics. So Kant falls prey to the difficulties posed by those worries. In Paul's terms:

[B] ...should not the idea of a conceivable but unknowable 'thing-in-itself' be regarded from the Kantian orientation as itself just as problematic as the conception of it as knowable? Kant's combination of conceivability but unknowability seems to take away with the one hand a quasi-divine epistemic take on the world – the so-called 'God's-eye view' – only to return something like a semantic version of it with the other (222)

So this is one respect in which Kant's own basic project—read as Kant's attempt to account for the meaningfulness of thought—requires carrying further. And that is what Hegel is trying to do. Hegel tries to [c] "restore substantive *content* to philosophy by undermining that residually dogmatically metaphysical assumption responsible for Kant's apparent denial of it." (222) And that is why Paul treats Hegel's project as an extension of Kant's own critical turn, or as "post-Kantian" (13).

What makes Paul's further development of this general approach so successful and powerful, to my mind, is that he doesn't stall out or return us to where we were before beginning to philosophize; he shows how a great many controversial and far-reaching positive philosophical commitments follow in Kant and in Hegel. What's *really* interesting is that Reading shows how all too many commitments follow, in a sense, insofar as some of them will conflict.

What are these commitments?

On the one hand, Kant begins and Hegel completes a line of thought similar to that later explored by McDowell. To put it in contemporary terms: we must reject the myth of the given in understanding perception. But we must also retain the role of perception in securing the objective purport of our concepts. To do so, we must conclude that we have direct experience of a world that is not beyond the conceptual. To my mind, Paul

renders this conclusion wonderfully clear and philosophically compelling by showing that it is a revival of an Aristotelian conclusion: the objects we perceive are supposed to be Aristotelian substances, not “bare pieces of ‘matter’” but rather “individual instances of *thing kinds*.” (31) Paul argues that the roots of this line of thought are half anticipated in Kant, at least in some of what Kant says about intuition. But Kant cannot carry through because he operates with two different accounts of intuition. It is left to Hegel to fully develop the Aristotelian conclusions, especially in the “Consciousness” section of the *Phenomenology*.

On the other hand, Kant begins and Hegel completes another line of thought, similar to that later explored in Brandom’s discussions of inferentialism. On Paul’s account, inferentialism is also a response to a myth of the given—the myth of the “logical given.” Russell and Moore fall prey to this myth just as Aristotle had: they hold a representationalist view that cannot explain and so must just assume the meaningfulness of logical categories:

[D] For Aristotle, it would seem, the categories *reflected in* the logical behaviour of our words reflect structures properly belonging to *being*...

So for Russell... the laws of thought are made true by an ontology. (61)

Kant reverses this mistake: “for Kant the worldly structures – in the sense of the way that they are for us – reflect the logical structures of our judgements” (61). And Paul argues that Kant understands what it is to be a judgment in terms of what it is to be fit to stand in larger explanatory *inferences*. This is what Paul calls the “Kantian source for Hegel’s inferentialism.” Again, Hegel will carry to completion this line of thought, again in his discussion of “Consciousness” in the *Phenomenology*.

But here comes a twist. Even this move away from Aristotle also depends on Aristotle. Paul argues, as we’ve just heard, that Brandom’s inferentialism depends on Aristotle’s term logic.^[2] So far, then, the moral is shaping up to be something like this: Aristotle! Can’t live with him, can’t live without him...

But note the wonderfully Hegelian manner in which at least one unified conclusion already emerges from contradictory views: *whichever* way we go, there is *nothing* to be said for Russell’s claim that Hegel’s philosophy is outdated because dependent on outdated Aristotelian logic. In some senses, Hegel has excellent reasons for reviving Aristotle—reasons that are in no sense outdated but play a big role in philosophy today. In another sense, we do have reason to be suspicious of Aristotle. But this is, ironically, reason to prefer Hegel to Russell! It is reason to prefer Hegel’s inferentialism to Russell’s representationalist account of logical meaning. At this point, all I can do is marvel at the elegance of the way in which the incredibly complex strands of Paul’s argument come together here in a simple, beautiful result.

Coming back to Hegel, Paul argues that Hegel combines the contradictory pro-and anti-Aristotelian commitments. Hegel does so by means of a view that Paul labels “cognitive contextualism.” The idea is that different forms of logic, and corresponding different

forms of negation, are appropriate in different contexts, or different cognitive orientations.[3] But I will come back to this below.

II. Kant's Epistemic Modesty

I find completely convincing what I take to be Paul's central argument about Kant. Kant's faculty of the understanding is responsible for judgment. But it requires positive guidance from the faculty of reason, which is responsible for forming larger inferences in pursuit of *explanations*.

judgement forms are differentiated in terms of the way they function in forms of explanation involving inferences (121)

So a judgment, Paul says, should be

[f] read as *containing* a syllogism which is made explicit in the explanation. All this, I suggest, means that Kant gives a much more *positive* role to reason than is traditionally acknowledged (122)

So the action of the *Critique* is located, more than we would expect from what Paul calls "textbook" readings, in positive claims about the role of reason in the "Transcendental Dialectic".

But I think we've now jettisoned Paul's own starting point. I take it that the faculty of reason does its work by supplying us with *ideas*. In Kant's terms, it most fundamentally provides us with the idea of *the unconditioned*. Reason, then, directs us to seek to *explain* things by seeking their underlying *conditions*. Ultimately, reason directs us to aim for complete explanation by seeking underlying complete or total *unconditioned* grounds.[4] Of course, Kant denies us knowledge of anything unconditioned.[5] Such knowledge would be possible only without our dependence on sensible intuition, or only with intellectual intuition, or only with a divine intellect in this sense. So principles from our faculty of reason can be legitimate only in their role guiding our research, or only as regulative principles. But we cannot claim knowledge that there must really *exist* for everything conditioned some unconditioned ground. I take it that this is to say that we cannot claim knowledge of the truth of the rationalists' principle of sufficient reason. Nor can we claim knowledge of any of the conclusions rationalists generate on the basis of that principle—we cannot claim the rationalists' knowledge of soul, cosmos, or God.[6]

Things in themselves

But note that these resources of the Transcendental Dialectic account of reason, emphasized by Paul himself, are precisely what allow Kant to operate with a conception of something unknowable for us—something that could be known only from a divine point of view.[7]

Granted, perhaps there is reason to worry about the intelligibility of idea of a “God’s eye view” in the sense that seems to so worry Nietzsche (for example): the sense of a perspective on things that takes no particular point of view on things at all. Perhaps Nietzsche’s idea of a God’s eye view is incoherent. Perhaps it would make no sense to desire such a point of view, nor to be disappointed to lack it. But Paul’s emphasis on Kant’s Transcendental Dialectic and our pursuit of explanation leads us to the conclusion that what Kant takes us to desire is something else—we desire completeness of explanatory insight; *that* certainly seems intelligible to me; and Kant has wonderfully principled reasons for thinking that we can’t get it.

By contrast, commitment to the fundamentality of problems concerning meaning inclines Paul to worry that Kant *should not* allow a meaningful concept of anything unknowable. Paul thinks that the same reasons Kant has for denying knowledge should lead him to deny meaning or conceivability. Kant is supposed to illegitimately rely on a “semantic version” of “the so-called ‘God’s-eye view’” and this is a “dogmatically metaphysical assumption”.

It is here that Paul’s own success interpreting Kant leads me to conclude that we should give up the idea that Kant is most fundamentally worried about explaining all meaning or content or understanding. We can’t mistake this point once we follow Paul in recognizing the importance of the account of the faculty of reason and explanation in the Dialectic. Then we see that Kant’s central goal is to save what is worth saving but otherwise to destroy rationalist metaphysics. Kant does so by arguing that the faculty of reason provides us with *meaningful* ideas of goals that guide us in seeking explanation, while our dependence on the faculty of sensibility blocks *knowledge* of whether anything real corresponds to those ideas.

This project also structures much of Kant’s work back in Transcendental Aesthetic and the Analytic, and provides a great deal of motivation for his distinctions between the faculties of Sensibility, Understanding, and Reason. Kant must delicately show that employing concepts of the Understanding without intuition from Sensibility leaves us without *a certain kind of* meaning—meaning in the sense of a relation to a determinate object with respect to which we could determine truth or falsity—it leaves us without possibility of *cognition* and its relation to an objection, and so without theoretical knowledge in any sense.^[8] But Kant carefully allows that unschematized categories of the Understanding can be employed with a kind of meaning beyond the limits of our knowledge: [j] ‘even after abstraction from every sensible condition’ the categories retain ‘a logical significance’ (A147/B186). [k] And ‘the categories are not restricted in *thinking* by the conditions of our sensible intuition, but have an unbounded field’ (B166n).^[9] So [L] ‘I can think what I like, as long as I do not contradict myself’.^[10]

If you instead leave us without any way to think of what we cannot know, then you are not further advancing Kant’s epistemic modesty—you are destroying it. Philosophy has been down that path before: Berkeley claims to be extending epistemic modesty into a way of taking more seriously the modest doctrine of concept empiricism, until we realize that we cannot even have a meaningful or coherent concept of an external material object.^[11] Presto: no more skepticism! But we should recognize Berkeley’s idealism

here as an ambitious metaphysical conclusion. That is fine, in my book. But we should not be fooled into thinking that this is any way to further the cause of epistemic modesty, or that it can be supported by the rejection of dogmatism; anyone truly aiming for epistemic modesty—like Kant—will recoil in horror.

Granted, Kant cannot provide any further explanation of the meaning of the ideas of reason. Reason provides meaningful ideas. Reason is spontaneous in this respect. End of story, as far as I can see. But why should we mind that “end of story”? Kant does not claim to explain the meaningfulness of the ideas beyond this point. And he does not claim to give any kind of complete explanation of any and all meaning. Ideas like the idea of the unconditioned *do* have meaning; now that positivism is behind us, would anyone doubt it? Kant just takes this plainly accessible meaningful idea as basic, and gets stunning results by doing so. Everyone must take something as basic, or given. I cast my humble vote for restricting accusations of succumbing to *myths* of the given for the very different case in which someone *claims* to explain some X and yet really covertly assumes X as given—for example someone claims to explain meaning but does not, or claims to explain epistemic justification but does not. If someone is instead happy to take some kind of meaning as given but you don’t think that this should be taken as given, then it seems to me you need a longer argument against them—perhaps an argument for the premise of the fundamentality and unavoidability of problems about meaning.[\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

Further, what exactly could one charge that Kant is missing? Perhaps an explanation of meaning in terms that do not presuppose meaning? Perhaps more specifically an explanation of the normativity of meaning in non-normative terms? But can anyone do *that*? My sense is that this would be very difficult. For everyone. If so, then everyone will have to take meaning for granted at some point. I see no problem with Kant taking the meaning of reason’s ideas for granted right away, and attacking the problems he finds most pressing. [\[14\]](#)

We should *not* conclude from this that there is some deep tension or fault-line within Kant’s philosophy. [e.g. Putnam in M] Obviously, if someone is fundamentally concerned with explaining meaning or content, then they can look at Kant through that lens, and they can find passages which fit with their concern and passages which do not. But you could look at Kant through any number of lenses and find any number of dividing lines. That’s no reason to think there is a fault-line intrinsic to Kant’s philosophy.[\[15\]](#) We should instead conclude that Kant’s own fundamental philosophical concern is *not* with explaining all possibility of meaning or content or understanding. And, as far as I can see, there is no philosophical reason to think there is anything wrong with Kant on this score.

In sum, Paul’s core case about Kant is entirely convincing. But I draw morals from it that Paul probably won’t like. First, Kant does not succumb to a problem concerning meaning. And Kant does not need completing in this respect—not by Hegel, nor by contemporary philosophical accounts of meaning. And this seems to me an excellent case in which attention to history can teach us important lessons about philosophy generally. For I wonder, further, whether Kant’s successes in pursuit of his own

fundamental goals shouldn't lead us to handle more skeptically the idea that philosophical problems of meaning must always be unavoidably fundamental?

3. An Intolerable Oscillation

Now I think that much the same is true of Hegel: Paul's core case concerning Hegel is entirely convincing. But it forces us in the direction of rejecting the basic philosophical approach with which Paul himself begins.

What I specifically find convincing is Paul's account of Hegel as reviving aspects of Aristotle's metaphysics. This seems to me to fit Hegel like a glove. That is, I think that Hegel takes the sciences to aim at knowledge of these kinds and the natural laws which connect them in relations of material consequence and exclusion. (I like Brandom's examples: it is objectively *necessary* that pure copper melt at 1084° C., and *impossible* for a mass to be accelerated without being subjected to some force.) I think that Hegel seeks to argue that the kinds themselves naturally fall into different groups or levels. And Hegel's metaphysical project is this: he seeks to delineate these groups, and so to establish conclusions about the structure of reality itself.

Further, as Paul notes, this line of thought brings out a solid contact between Hegel and recent analytic philosophy: there has been a

[N] (a) revival of Aristotelian ideas within analytic philosophy in the final third of the twentieth century. David Armstrong, for example, had reintroduced universals into analytic metaphysics in a way that linked them to laws of nature (44)

This line of thought brings us to more metaphysical questions: What *are* these natural kinds? How do they relate to one another? Etc. As far as I can see, there is nothing stopping us, at this point, from focusing our attention more directly on problems in metaphysics, without any special constraint by philosophical considerations concerning meaning.

But Paul seems to me to pull back here. He says that the line he is pursuing—he is specifically talking about McDowell's engagement with Evans—leads not to the sort of Aristotelian metaphysics revived recently by Armstrong. It rather

(b) bears more of a family resemblance to the more explicitly *Kant*-oriented version of essentialism found in the work of Hilary Putnam.⁷² Like Kant, Putnam focuses upon the role played by the subjective conditions of determinacy that allow our thoughts to have a content. (c) Like Aristotle, however, (and like Hegel) Putnam thinks of the conceptual 'kind' structures that individual thought tracks as 'in the world' rather than 'in the head'.

But it seems to me that we are just moving in a circle here. Paul can't sit still with the Aristotelian metaphysics of (a), perhaps because it leaves the fundamentality of meaning behind. So he turns to Kant and talk of subjective conditions as in (b). But he can't sit

still here either. For this would now suggest that we are talking about our conceptual scheme, as opposed to unknowable things in themselves. Paul's focus on problems of meaning leads him to think that this Kantian stance is incoherent. So he moves on to the Aristotelian metaphysics of (c), which looks to me like moving back to (a). My worry is that Paul's initial focus on problems about meaning and content prevent him from going in either direction, and force him to try to land somewhere in between. But I am not yet convinced that there is a stable philosophical position in between. So this seems to me like an intolerable oscillation.

But it seems to me easy to resolve the intolerable oscillation here. We need only drop the idea that problems about meaning are somehow supposed to be so fundamental, and the idea that Kant and Hegel agree and so are most fundamentally trying to explaining meaning. I have already explained why I think that dropping this allows us to better appreciate Kant's philosophical aims and advantages.

Now I will turn to make a similar case with respect to Hegel's very different philosophical project, and its very different and competing philosophical advantages.

IV. Hegel's Metaphysics

First of all, I don't think that Hegel's pursuit of *metaphysical* questions need fall prey to any *epistemological* or *semantic* myths of the given.[\[16\]](#)[\[17\]](#) The reasons are the same as those given above: it is not clear to me that there is anything wrong with taking the meaning of our meaningful words as given, and then using them to try to answer metaphysical questions. As least not as long as we lack an *a priori* reason for thinking that metaphysics should be held hostage to either epistemology or semantics, or cannot begin until the later are complete. Certainly *Hegel* does not think that we need be held hostage in this way. He recognizes that some would want to delay our seeking metaphysical knowledge of e.g. "the essence of things." They would have us delay until we have knowledge of our own "faculty of cognition". Hegel rejects the insistence on understanding our cognition before addressing the metaphysical questions such as those concerning the essence of things: to urge to delay is like what Hegel calls [o] "the wise resolve of Scholasticus to learn to swim before he ventured in the water" (§10An).[\[18\]](#),[\[19\]](#) I take the moral to be that we should address more directly metaphysical questions and concerns, such as those concerning the essence of things.

Convinced as I am by Paul's case about Hegel's commitment to revive aspects of Aristotle's metaphysics, I find myself with worries about each of Paul's account of both of his two cognitive orientations. First, Paul argues that, to deal with problems concerning the perceptual given, something like Aristotle's forms or thing-kinds are supposed to play a direct role in perception. But Paul also worries about the idea of a

[P] world of self-subsistent substances or things-in-themselves ... somehow unproblematically epistemically presented to a subject before whom they stand (Aristotle)[\[20\]](#)

I'm happy to go along with Paul's worry. But the worry does not concern any part of the metaphysics of Aristotelian kinds. The worry concerns an *epistemological* claim about the role of those kinds in perception. The worry concerns the claim that natural kinds are in perception "epistemically presented to a subject." It seems to me that this is an epistemological claim that Hegel emphatically denies. Hegel denies that natural kinds show up directly in perception. For example:

[R] The universal does not exist externally to the outward eye as universal. The kind as kind cannot be perceived: the laws of celestial motion are not written in the sky. (§21Z)

Rather, we seek explanatory knowledge by thinking about what we observe, and drawing inferences about the natural laws and kinds which explain our observations.^[21] So I didn't understand why Paul so closely associated the Aristotelian *metaphysics* with the difficulties encountered in the "Perception" section in the *Phenomenology*. I don't see that any worries about perception (or any worries about semantics or epistemology at all) in any way qualify Hegel's commitment to the *metaphysical* claim for the reality of the natural kinds.

Paul's other cognitive orientation is, I think, a form of holism. It seems to me that a wonderful payoff of Paul's case concerning Hegel and Aristotle is that we need not read Hegel's holism as an attempt to account for meaning or content. We can read it rather as a claim about the natural kinds. So Hegel will argue, especially in the "Reason" section of the *Phenomenology*, that the very nature of the sort of natural kind that figure in the laws of nature will depend on its relations to others in laws—and so on the whole network of laws and kinds. What it is to be acidic, for example, depends on how acids react with bases. For example, the relation between acids and bases, that 'they are only this relation' (Phän 3:195/153).^{[22][23]}

Now clearly there is something disturbing about this holism. To be any particular node just is to stand in certain relations to others. But, if so, then we independently say *what it is* that really stands in those relations! Perhaps if this were a theory attempting to explain meaning, then this problem would show it to be an incomplete theory.

But once I buy Paul's connection between Hegel and Aristotle, then I'm going to want to see this holism as metaphysics. (Perhaps Bertrand Russell thought that things couldn't possibly be like this—they couldn't possibly be the "bowl of jelly" Brandom referred to. But I see no reason to think Hegel would have to agree. I think Hegel argues that SOME things are disturbingly gelatinous. This holism) is supposed to be a *correct* account specifically of *the lower-levels of nature*—of the natural kinds that figure in exceptionless laws of nature. This is disturbing, to be sure. But what is disturbing here is not a theory, whether a theory of meaning or of anything else. Rather, the things themselves are disturbingly insubstantial or gelatinous. There is something confounding and even *contradictory* about the lower-levels of nature themselves.^[24] On the lower levels, everything is dependent. But to say this is to imply that there is ultimately something—some substantial individuals or a substantial whole—that is independent enough for other things to depend on it. But the implication is contradicted by the lack of anything

independently substantial upon which things on this level depend. The parts or notes depend on one another within a whole network, [V] so that the concept or “Begriff of the whole” is “the real kind of the particular object”; but this whole itself merely presupposes the differentiated kinds, or depends on their differentiation as a kind of posit: “the chemical object ... is thus the contradiction of its immediate positedness and its immanent individual concept” (WL 4:430/728).

So once I buy Paul’s argument about Hegel and Aristotle, this seems to me to send us toward a very different account of Hegel’s view of the contradiction in things. A payoff of this approach is that it captures a very different sense in which Hegel is furthering Kant’s critical turn against rationalist metaphysics. Rationalists find the *apparent* lack of substantiality in nature as reason to think that there must be some hidden deeper substance on which things depend. So rationalists assert that the true substance of things is hidden; it could be best appreciated by a deeper insight, a divine perspective. Kant preserves rationalist ideas about the sort of insight we seek, but Kant much more rigorously denies us access to knowledge, concluding that we cannot know whether there is any hidden substantiality to things beyond surprisingly insubstantial matter in space, consisting [x, y] “wholly of relations.”^[25] Hegel has a very different way of leaving pre-critical rationalism behind. Hegel *asserts* knowledge that there is *not* any deeper substance to the lower levels of nature: they are confoundingly insubstantial, even though this amounts to a kind of real contradiction; reason can be satisfied only by the substance of higher-level phenomena: partly by consideration of natural teleological phenomena in biology. But only *Geist* is truly substance. The whole of everything is not substance, insofar as nature is progressively less and less substantial as one descends.^[26]

Paul ends up in a different position. His Hegel embraces two contradictory orientations, and this means that everything in the world turns out to be contradictory. One way Paul has of trying to explain this conclusion is to say that there is after all substance to the world. But not anything akin to Aristotle’s finite substances as stable substrates of change. Rather, there is the substance of something like Aristotle’s divine mind thinking itself, something which does not lack “the principles of ‘life’ and ‘subjectivity.’” Another way is to say that the world is such that we cannot entirely state, from the perspective of either available cognitive orientation, what is the case in the world. The world is rather what shows itself in our thought, even as this is shot through as this is with contradiction. Our grasp of the world as a whole is akin to what Wittgenstein calls “the mystical.” But the moral is supposed to be not that we should, with Wittgenstein, remain silent. Rather: [Z] “Hegel was committed to the project of rendering the whole ‘felt’ in mystical experience explicit.”

But if there is no way to overcome the contradiction between cognitive orientations, then this would mean that we must strive infinitely to make explicit what cannot ever be made explicit. That’s an interesting view, but it doesn’t seem to me Hegelian. (It seems like the sort of “bad infinite” that Brandom mentions and associates with Fichte.)

Further, this kind of view seems to me to result in a position similar to those of Hegel’s contemporaries who Hegel sees as trying to revive rationalist metaphysics and combine

it with mysticism. They argue that there is deeper substance to the whole of everything, even if we cannot grasp it in finite, rational thinking—perhaps because it is alive, or moving, or self-conscious, or self-contradictory, etc. But Hegel seems to me to excoriate such views. His comment on Schelling[27] is typical: “One wants, if one philosophizes, to have proven that it is so”; but with Schelling’s appeal to intellectual intuition of the whole, “the proving of anything, the making it comprehensible, is thus abandoned.”[28] I wasn’t sure, but wanted to ask, how Paul’s “felt” mystical grasp of the world was supposed to differ on this score.[29]

In sum, I find myself completely convinced by what I take to be Paul’s core arguments concerning Kant and Hegel. But I draw morals that I don’t think Paul will like. I think that both core arguments require us to give up the basic approach with which Paul begins—to give up the fundamentality of problems concerning meaning. Doing so allows us to better appreciate Kant and Hegel’s very different positions, and the very different advantages of each. It allows us to appreciate Kant’s prescription of epistemic modesty as the antidote to rationalism, even though this turns on taking the meanings of some ideas as basic or given. And it allows us to appreciate Hegel’s very different attempt to defend a metaphysics that is flatly, and radically different than the rationalists’. It also allows us to appreciate the direct connection between Hegel and the current focus in analytic philosophy on metaphysics.

Probably I have much of this wrong, but I do hope that it is wrong in a way that stimulates discussion. I hope, that is, that I could stimulate debate by explaining to how from Paul’s book I learned a contrarian lesson: how to worry less about meaning and love both Kant’s epistemic modesty and also Hegel’s metaphysics.

End

[1] So the idea will be that Kant's basic goal, in distinguishing concept from intuition, is to account for how it is that our judgments have objective purport, and how that meaning is grounded in experience in some way. If the concept/intuition distinction cannot do *that*, then it will fail to meet its goal. If Hegel can do better here, then he will have good claim to be completing Kant's critical philosophy if he aims to do better in this respect, and succeeds.

[2] This poses a difficulty for Brandom's later development of inferentialism. Brandom leans on ideas similar to Hegel's "determinate negation" in articulating his claims about relations of material consequence and incompatibility. And Paul argues that this idea from Hegel, and inferentialism itself, relies on more Aristotelian views. It depends "on features of Aristotelian logic that have no simple equivalent in the Fregean logic that Brandom endorses." Brandom needs the "mutually excluding contraries of Aristotle's term logic to capture the type of entailment relations that fit his inferentialist account. On asserting that an object is blue all over, for example, we commit ourselves to the further assertion that it is *not* red all over" (83). And Paul extends from here to argue that Brandom cannot have an Aristotle-free alternative to McDowell's account of perception: even Brandom's appeal to the idea of reliable discrimination presupposes objects that are Aristotelian substances: objects of some *kind* that cannot admit contrary properties.

[3] In line with what I have called his cognitive contextualism, Hegel regarded term negation as appropriate in particular contexts and inappropriate in others

[4] : "the proper principle of reason in general ... is to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding" (A307/B364).

[5] For he denies that we can have knowledge of anything unconditioned: knowledge requires intuition; in our case that means intuition from sensibility; and the forms of our sensibility, space and time, will prevent knowledge of anything unconditioned "in sensibility, i.e. in space and time, every condition to which we can attain in the exposition of given appearances is in turn conditioned" (A508/B536).

[6] For example, this principle is the ground on which the 'the entire antinomy of pure reason rests': 'If the conditioned is given, then the whole series of all conditions for it is also given' (A497/B525). And this principle is a version of the principle of sufficient reason: for anything that is not a sufficient reason for itself, or for anything conditioned, there must be a complete series of conditions that provides for it a sufficient reason.

[7] As Kant says in the B-preface summary of the main argument of the *Critique*: That which necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience and all appearances is the *unconditioned*, which reason necessarily and with every right demands in things themselves for everything that is conditioned. (Bxx)

[8] : "all significance (*Bedeutung*), i.e., relation to the object, disappears" (A241/B300).

[9] Adams (1997: 807-8); also Clark (1985). Kant does say that merely 'intelligible objects ... without any schema of sensibility' are 'impossible' (A286/B342). But even right here he continues to introduce a sense of *noumenon* that is 'problematic' in this sense: it is a 'representation of a thing of which we can say neither that it is possible nor that it is impossible' (A286-7/B343).

[10] Bxxvi note. *Some* ideas of unknowable objects generate contradictions. But it is crucial to Kant's project, as he emphasizes, that this claim is restricted to the ideas of the spatio-temporal world as a completed, unconditioned whole: 'The first two antinomies ... are founded on such a contradictory concept' (P 4:341). That claim does not apply to the ideas central to the second two antinomies. Nor does it apply to psychological and theological ideas (A673/B701).

[11] it is plain that the very notion of what is called matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it. (472)

[12] Consider Sellars on the myth of the given. I take it that his central targets are those who specifically seek to provide an explanation of epistemological support or justification. They succumb to the myth of the given insofar as they appeal to given sense-data that cannot play the role of justifying—so they have to smuggle in the justification without explaining it. Perhaps there is an analogous myth of the given with respect to meaning rather than epistemology. To succumb to this myth would be to aim to explain how meaning is possible, while illegitimately smuggling meaning in without explaining it. That would be bad, I agree. But I don't see Kant succumbing to this problem.

[13] Obviously, if we think of a concept empiricist, she would be unhappy with Kant's position. She would demand a further explanation of the meaning of reason's idea of the unconditioned. But it is equally obvious that a concept empiricist won't be able to preserve what Kant thinks he needs saving from rationalism: the guiding role of reason and of the idea which "necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience." And Redding is right that this guiding role is crucially important in Kant.

[14] Furthermore, say a doctrine like concept empiricism threatens to show that concepts like Kant's concept of the unconditioned cannot have any meaning. It seems to me clear that I do have a meaningful concept here. As it has seemed to many philosophers concerned with such issues. My grasp on this meaning seems much more secure than my grasp on why I should buy anything like concept empiricism. Excellent reason, then, to reject such doctrines. A Moorean response to semantic skepticism!

[15] E.g. Putnam: 'Kant has, in a way, two philosophies', because sometimes Kant claims that 'we cannot really form any intelligible notion of a noumenal thing' and yet sometimes Kant claims that 'there is God, Freedom and Immortality' in a real 'noumenal' world (1987: 41-2). It seems clear to me that Kant's goal is a single consistent philosophy that fits neither view seen by Putnam: we must conceive of God, Freedom and Immortality; but we cannot have theoretical knowledge of whether there are such things.

[16] Perhaps one could charge me at some particular point in my metaphysical project with making a specific claim without explaining how that claim could possibly be known to be true. That can certainly be fair. But much hinges here on more specific characterization of the epistemological challenge. Critics tend to help themselves to really powerful challenges. For example, I prefer a recently popular and metaphysically robust account of the laws of nature, which Redding mentions and notes as another form of the re-emergence of Aristotle's influence in philosophy. I think that there are laws of nature, and that these determine what can and cannot happen, thus determining the regularities. So I do not think that laws *are* regularities. It is sometimes said that the regularity view enjoys an epistemological advantage, but this seems unproven to me. Granted, I have no argument that would defeat Cartesian skepticism and show that we can have knowledge that there are such robust laws of nature. But by that standard our knowledge of regularities will be in severe trouble as well. Even our knowledge of the external world will be in trouble! You can try to deploy here inference to the best explanation (IBE) and claim that external objects are the best explanation of our experience. I doubt this really helps with full-blown Cartesian skepticism. But it is fine with me nonetheless, since all I claim to be doing is inferring to the existence of Aristotelian laws of nature are the best explanation of our observed regularities. In any case, my interest remains in which metaphysical claims are the best. If a particular epistemological standard looks to make things equally troubling either way, then epistemology doesn't promise to tell me what I want to know, so I'll feel fine about looking away from epistemology and back to metaphysics.

[17] Perhaps instead the worry is that my metaphysics might not include the elements necessary to explain the meaningfulness of our concepts. But what is the specific challenge here? Perhaps the challenge is that my metaphysics might not include the elements that would allow us to explain the normativity of meaning in non-normative terms. But can *anyone* explain this? Until someone pulls it off, we are all going to be taking meaning or something like it as given—at least at some point. This is great for me: I take it as given at the beginning. I have concepts. I take them to be meaningful, as they seem to be. And I immediately set to work using my concepts to pursue the problems that I take to be most pressing, along with the many in the history of philosophy: the problems of metaphysics.

[18] Granted, I think this aspect of Hegel's project is much more clearly reflected in the organization of his later system, and there is much debate about the relation of this system to the earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the text preferred by Redding. Still, the *Phenomenology* too seems to me clearly about metaphysics—about the nature of reality. Somewhere in the transition from “Consciousness” to “Self-consciousness” we move from the conclusion that an independently active subject is required for there to be any knowledge, and into metaphysical consideration of whether there is anything independently active in the world—and what such a thing would have to be like, and how it would relate to other things.

[19] And Hegel recognizes that the use of epistemological and semantic arguments against metaphysical views is often mere pretense. Empiricists, for example, may attack claims about necessary connections in nature: epistemological attacks would deny us knowledge of whether such claims are true; semantic attacks would deny that we can even have a meaningful concept of necessary connection. But Hegel sees the real motive here as a preference for one kind of metaphysics over another. Empiricists prefer a metaphysics in which everything is loose and separate, as Hume says. A metaphysics according to which there are only things that are entangled in no necessary connections, such as “alterations *that follow one after the other*” and “objects that *lie side by side*” (§39). Hegel suspects, and I agree, that empiricist epistemology and semantics won't really justify the former over the latter. So where empiricism attacks the metaphysics, but it does so “without knowing that it thereby itself contains a metaphysics” (§38An). I take the moral to be that we should bypass the pretense and more directly address the question of which metaphysics is better. And yet, it might be objected, particular metaphysical commitments can nevertheless still be discerned within the philosophy that characteristically develops along with this displacement – epistemology – especially when tied to conceptions of ‘the given’.

[20] And Redding thinks that Hegel sees the need for another cognitive orientation: the more reflective orientation characteristic of the sciences and that he calls ‘the Understanding’ [*Verstand*].

[21] in thinking about things, we always seek what is fixed, persisting and inwardly determined, and what governs the particular” (§21Zu). What does govern the particular? Universal laws and kinds: The empirical sciences do not stop at the perception of single instances of appearance; but through thinking they have prepared the material for philosophy by finding universal determinations, kinds, and laws (§12An).

[22] ‘the chemical object is not comprehensible from itself alone, and the being of one is the being of the other’ (WL 6:430/728). And this will mean that the ‘being’ of such a kind will depend on the whole interconnected network of kinds and laws within which it is a part. In Hegel's terms, on this level of nature the ‘determinateness’ of anything in particular ‘is the concrete moment of the individual concept [Begriff] of the whole, which Begriff is the universal essence, the real kind [Gattung] of the particular object’ (WL 6:430/728).

[23] Wherever we come to basic kinds and laws—although we may now think that these kinds are much lower-level kinds—Hegel's claim is that we will here find kinds that depend on one another: what it is to be an electron is to react in certain ways with protons. Or some yet lower-level story.

[24] We can observe an instance of some physical kind—some acid, for example—and it certainly seems independently substantial. But when we seek to understand what it is we are observing, we find something confusing: it ‘gets lost’ in its relations with others, or dissolved into chains of dependence; it ‘becomes something else than it is empirically, confuses cognition’ (Phän 3:190/149).

[25] All that we know in matter is merely relations (what we call the inner determinations of it are inward only in a comparative sense) ... It is certainly startling to hear that a thing is to be taken as consisting wholly of relations. Such a thing is, however, mere appearance (A285/B341) “*substantia phaenomenon* in space; its inner determinations are nothing but relations, and it itself is entirely made up of mere relations...” (A266/B322)

[26] (This is a claim for a priority of *Geist* or spirit over nature. But we don’t need to read it as a claim for the philosophical priority of problems concerning meaning over metaphysical problems concerning the nature of natural kinds and the like. Rather, the priority claim is part of Hegel’s metaphysics. It is a claim that the kind of thing that understands meaning, the kind of thing that we are, is in a respect higher or more fundamental than the kind of things that does not, like copper, which just melts at a certain temperature but doesn’t and cannot understand why. Our kind is prior in that it is more independently substantial than the kinds that “get lost” in non-terminating chains of dependence.

[27] , or at least on Schelling as he interprets Schelling,

[28] VGP 20:434-5/3:525. On this line of argument see Westphal 1989a and 2000.

[29] In any case, it seems to me that, sooner or later, one must recognize Hegel’s metaphysics. If we read his arguments along the way as addressed to problems concerning meaning, then when we turn to the metaphysics we will find a kind of leap beyond the arguments—just the kind of thing Hegel himself complains about. But the remedy is to recognize that the arguments were, from the beginning, more focus on metaphysics than meaning. Then we can recognize that Hegel is doing what he tells us he is doing: embracing Kant’s critical turn, but reacting to it by arguing for a very different kind of metaphysics.