The German Triangle:

From Kant to Marx (and Back Again)

According to one of his graduate students, the seminars of the famous Frankfurt School philosopher, Theodor Adorno, followed a simple, seasonal pattern: "In the Winter Semester we would read Kant and say `Hegel was right'; in the Summer, Hegel and say `Kant was right'".

It is my argument that the tension between those standpoints is fundamental to the tradition of modern German philosophy. My aim in this talk is to offer an account of the origins of that tension. It is my claim that, between the years 1781 and (say) 1850, a set of doctrines and dilemmas emerged in Germany which was to provide the basic framework for the intellectual activity of German philosophy down to our own day. Not simply confined to neo-Marxists, such as Adorno, it is equally important, in my view, for the existentialist-hermeneutic followers of Heidegger and Gadamer. This is not to deny that there have been significant later developments, of course, but such developments, I maintain, found their place essentially within those original boundaries. In what follows I shall present a perspective from which later developments can be understood as part of an extended argument with the basic doctrines of Kant's Critical Philosophy, specifically with positions taken by Kant originally in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

This view of the central importance of Kant was in fact held very early in Germany itself. Kant was still alive when the poet Hölderlin (a close friend of Hegel's – and an important philosophical thinker in his own right) proclaimed: "Kant is our Moses!" Kant had, that is to say, led his people out of bondage – but he himself would not be the one to lead them into the Promised Land. If Kant was a leader and a prophet then not for this or that particular novel philosophical argument but, much more profoundly, for having proposed a

novel conception of the goals, style and place of argument in philosophy itself. Before examining the nature and distinctiveness of that conception, let me say something briefly about the impact and influence of Kant on his place an time. This is an interesting and illuminating subject in itself, but I do not raise it here simply as a historical aside. It is, rather, I think, indispensable to appreciate the context in which Kant was read in order to see why his ideas were interpreted in the way that they were.

Of the magnitude of Kant's impact there can be no doubt. In his own lifetime more than 2000 items were published on his work in German alone. His funeral in Königsberg was attended by 20,000 people – a town 370 miles north-east of Berlin, whose inhabitants numbered 54,000 in 1781, the year of the *Critique of Pure Reason*'s publication. Kant himself never visited Berlin. Indeed, he never left the borders of East Prussia and the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself was published in Riga, even further than Königsberg from Berlin, Paris or Edinburgh, the acknowledged intellectual centres of the time.

But it is in these very extremes and contrasts that a substantial part of Kant's significance lies: the contrast between the modesty of his origins (his father was a strap-maker) and the austerity and poverty of much of his life, with the unmistakable pride of his claim to have solved the philosophical riddle of the ages; the contrast between the provinciality of a life of practically eighty years spent within twenty miles of Königsberg and the cosmopolitanism of the self-proclaimed "world-citizen" are a part of Kant's identity. He was the archetype of the bourgeois intellectual – the "whitewashing spokesman of the German burghers" as Marx calls him with characteristic good temper. Kant's life stands, then, as a representative symbol of the power of ideas to conquer the distances of space and social status at time when that power was at last being felt in even the most obscure, provincial outposts of Europe. Heinrich Heine captures this aspect of Kant in a memorable image. Kant,

he says, was like a mussel which, however far you take it from the sea, still opens and closes with the turning of the tide.

It is from this background that I propose now to substantiate the claim that I made earlier: that Kant is a true philosophical revolutionary who proposes a novel vision of the place and practice of argument in philosophy and, in turn, of the place of philosophy in the wider body of human knowledge. I shall do so by drawing attention to three central (and celebrated) analogies or metaphors used by Kant as general statements of his enterprise.

(1) The first of these appears in Kant's call (issued both at the beginning and at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) to set up what he terms the "court-house of Reason". It is, he says, "a call to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of all tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge and to institute a court-house which will assure to reason its lawful claims and dismiss all groundless pretensions not be despotic decrees but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. This court-house is none other than the *critique of pure reason*". (NKS, 9)

Kant's legal analogy carries important implications for the way in which the task of philosophy is conceived. The metaphor suggests, first, that philosophy is a *normative* discipline. Like a court, it has to adjudicate disputes brought before it according to rational principles. Kant's metaphor is aimed in particular against Locke and his successors. Although Locke's *Essay* had aimed to draw boundaries for human knowledge – it aspired, Locke wrote, to "inquire into the original, certainty and extent of human knowledge" – the method it used, Kant charges, was psychological and descriptive, a "physiology of the mind".

The disputes brought before the courthouse, one might note, are not simply the result of the quarrelsomeness and speculative excesses of philosophers themselves. They arise in the course of the everyday operation of the human intellect – they are part of what Kant calls its "natural dialectic". So philosophers are not parasites on the intellectual community.

Although philosophy cannot, Kant thinks, provide the kind of substantive knowledge which metaphysicians have traditionally aimed at, their function is an indispensable one in setting standards and establishing boundaries.

The court-house metaphor carries, too, an implication for the manner in which philosophical issues are to be resolved. They are neither to be decided *dogmatically* – in response to some authority which is accepted without question – nor to be *sceptically* avoided. Kant, his thinking interwoven, as ever, with the political vision of the Enlightenment, compares philosophy's role in bringing peace to the "battlefield of metaphysics" with the political order of the *Rechtsstaat*, the rule of law, established with the foundation of civil society:

> The critique of pure reason can be regarded as the true court-house for all disputes of pure reason, for it is not involved in these disputes – disputes which are immediately concerned with objects – but it is directed to the determining and estimating of the rights of reason in general in accordance with the principles of their first institution. In the absence of this critique reason is, as it were, in the state of nature, and can establish and secure its assertions only through war. (NKS, 601-2)

The important question, however, is, obviously enough, where do such *legitimate* principles come from? What makes a set of laws not just *effective* but *right*? To answer this we must move to the second – and perhaps most famous – of Kant's metaphorical descriptions of the undertaking of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: namely, that of the Copernican revolution.

(2) Kant identifies his project with Copernicus in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He writes:

> Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to

them *a priori* by means of concepts have... ended in failure. ...We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge... We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis."

(B xvi, NKS 22)

Now, at first sight, what Kant is describing might appear to be the exact opposite of Copernicus. Copernicus's cosmology, after all, had displaced human beings from the centre of the cosmos; Kant, in attempting to tie the question of the *nature* of reality to the way in which human beings can come to *know* it, seems to be aiming to restore them to their former estate. But in fact the contrast is not so abrupt. For one must realise that what Copernicus displaced was not, as is often thought, an anthropocentric view of the cosmos, flattering to man's self-esteem. On the contrary (as A.E. Lovejoy pointed out in *The Great Chain of Being*) the geocentric view was part of a view of reality as a divinely ordained hierarchy, a ladder on which earth represented the middle point in the descent from heaven above to hell below. What the Copernican cosmology called into question was an ordered structure in which authority did not come *from* man but descended from the Highest Being, the *summum bonum*, towards which, as reason showed, all things were ultimately moving. From this point of view, Kant can be seen as completing, not contradicting, the Copernican revolution with a new, alternative source of authority – human reason itself.

To return to Kant's call to reason, it was, you will remember, "to undertake anew the most difficult of all tasks, *namely that of self-knowledge*". It is this which takes us to the heart of the Copernican revolution – and, at the same time, to the beginnings of the German tradition in philosophy. On the one hand, Kant is, of course, echoing the ancient injunction: *know thyself*! But the self that is to be known is, crucially, ambiguous. It is not the empirical

individual with her hopes, fears and particular, dated and located life-history. It is *Reason* which is to be both the source and the object of philosophical activity. As Kant puts it:

> [Metaphysics] is nothing but the inventory of all our possessions through pure reason, systematically arranged. In this field nothing can escape us. What reason produces entirely out of itself cannot be concealed, but is brought to light by reason itself, immediately the common principle has been discovered.
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> (NKS, 14)

The central idea is that what we have made we ourselves can know. Kant (like Vico, whose work he apparently did not know) seems to subscribe to the doctrine that it is human activity that is the most knowable aspect of reality for human beings. But who is this "we"? If it is not the ordinary, conscious individual then it must be something deeper, more mysterious – and more problematic; another *transcendental* subject, buried but active below the surface of reality as we know it.

(3) Putting these two ideas, the courthouse of reason and the Copernican Revolution, together, we have at least an initial idea of the *method* of the Kantian philosophy. The final concept to which I wish to draw attention explains something of its task, for it is the concept of *critique* – *Kritik* – itself. The centrality of this notion for Kant's enterprise is too obvious to need argument; its significance is rather less so, I think. The term "critique" is, indeed, a term of art introduced into English philosophical terminology precisely to render the distinctiveness of the German concept of *Kritik* and to separate it from the English concept of "criticism" with its familiar (but unhelpful) associations of, on the one hand, the practice of assessing and appreciating works of art, and, on the other, of derogation or denigration. Although neither of these senses are entirely absent from the German concept of *Kritik*, there is much more at issue when Kant writes:

> Our age is in especial degree the age of *Kritik* and to *Kritik* all things must submit. Religion through its sanctity and law-giving through its majesty may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they awaken just suspicion and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.
>
> (NKS [?])

To understand the notion of *Kritik* it is helpful to recognise its affinity to a cognate concept, that of *crisis*. Both concepts come from the same Greek root – *krinein*, which means to divide or separate, and it is this sense of the division between what can, and what cannot, as Kant puts it, "sustain the test of free and open examination", which gives the Kantian concept of critique its radicalism. Heine expresses this Kantian radicalism in an extreme analogy. Kant, he writes, is a German "Robespierre"; where Robespierre had executed the aristocracy, Kant used, says Heine, a "guillotine of ideas" to cut down received doctrines and authorities.

But Kant's intentions, drastic though they might sound, were not wholly destructive. To be sure, speculative reason is denied what Kant calls its "pretensions to transcendent insight". But the result, Kant believes, is also to protect what truly matters from attack. As he expresses it in a famous phrase: "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith" (NKS, 29). Kant's special insight is that both speculative metaphysics and its direct denial – dogmatism and scepticism, as he puts it – are two sides of the same coin, and that, if the claims of religious faith are to be retained at all, it can only be by abandoning the attempt to underpin them with metaphysical argument. For, paradoxically, it was that very attempt which had initially left them open to attack. As Kant writes, "*Kritik* alone can sever the root of materialism, fatalism, atheism, free-thinking, enthusiasm [*Schwarmerei*] and superstition" (NKS, 32, translation modified)

Kant's own preferred image – less drastic but in its way more heroic than Heine's sanguinary one – is that of the explorer, the voyager, the pioneer, the surveyor, the guide. He reviews progress in these terms at the conclusion of the *Critique*'s "Transcendental Analytic":

> We have now not merely explored the territory of pure understanding, and carefully surveyed every part of it, but have also measured its extent, and assigned to everything in it its rightful place. This domain is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth – enchanting name! – surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion. (NKS, p.257)

In summary, then, we have seen that, for Kant, the concept of the court-house of reason stands for a normative conception of philosophy, aimed against the dogmatism of metaphysics and the scepticism which is its partner. The method of the critical philosophy is the Copernican Revolution, the attempt to locate the source of the order and structure of our experience in a subject, operating below the surface of experience as it immediately presents itself. In the course of its activity, critical philosophy is led to re-order and reorganise the traditional domains of human knowledge and belief. But if it dethrones the pretensions of the metaphysician it does so only to install a harmonious and orderly regime, an intellectual analogue of the social order of "civil society".

When we come to compare this programme with the philosophy of Hegel, as represented, say, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1806, it might seem at first sight that the contrast could not be more complete. On one level, the *Phenomenology* represents a total rejection of the conception of experience on which the whole of the Kantian epistemology rests. According to Kant, our experience is composed of two elements: a *content*, received

from outside, from a "thing-in-itself" whose intrinsic nature is unknowable to us, and a *form*, imposed on that content by the unconscious, "synthesising" activity of the mind's own basic structure. The mind sets limits on possible experience and philosophy, by examining the character of the mind's activity, gains knowledge of the structure of reality, insofar as it can be given to us.

For Hegel, this conception of philosophy rests upon a model – of the mind imposing its form on an essentially non-mental reality – which is psychological rather than philosophical in origin. Despite Kant's claim to reject philosophies that try to discover the limits of human knowledge by a purely psychological description of the mind's operation Kant himself, Hegel charges, makes just the same mistake. In a famous passage of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel accuses Kant of misconceiving the mind as if it were an instrument or medium, something which comes between the self and the world and which – if we could discover its structure – ought to be "subtracted" in order to leave us with the residue of reality in itself.

And Hegel goes on to reject other central doctrines of the Critical Philosophy. Against the idea of *Kritik*, he sets that of *speculation* – explicitly rejected by Kant as part of the old, dogmatic metaphysics – and, where Kant had denied that it was possible to have knowledge of the objects of metaphysics from concepts alone, Hegel remarks that this can only come from failing to distinguish *der Begriff* in the speculative sense from the common "one-sided" understanding of it (*Enz*. para. 9)

And yet, however radically he rejects the Kantian conception of experience, Hegel does not believe that he is simply returning to what Kant would have called "dogmatic metaphysics". At another level, the *Phenomenology* is deeply Kantian in inspiration. Hegel, too, aims to disclose the governing structures underlying experience. The slogan that he advances in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* captures this in an aphorism: *was bekannt,*

darum nicht erkannt, which one might translate as: what we are acquainted with we do not therefore know; or: what we know we do not recognise. Now, for the reasons given, it would plainly be inconsistent for Hegel to proceed by trying to isolate the form of experience and treating it as something to be analysed independent of its content. Instead, in his search for underlying structures, he adopts a historical approach. The *Phenomenology* sets out to trace the different forms which mind's relations to the world take at each stage of historical development. Now the mind Hegel is dealing with he calls *Geist* – standardly translated as "Spirit". But *Geist* is not the isolated individual mind but that common intellect in which, he claims, all men, as individual intelligences, participate. And thus men's political and cultural relations are as much a part of the *Phenomenology*'s subject-matter as the traditional questions of body and mind, and so on.

But there is an objection – or, rather, two related objections – to all of this. Hegel, as I have said, rejects Kant's "psychologism" – the belief that by examining the forms through which we perceive the world he can establish, once and for all, a set of concepts which necessarily play a role in any coherent experience, and, hence, set the limits for any knowable human reality. But what is being put in its place by Hegel is the *description* of a succession of historical forms. The first question that arises is, what is the status of these forms? What is to choose between them? What is to say that any particular one is “better” or “more adequate” than another? The second objection connects to this first objection and radicalizes it. It is the question: what would knowledge of such forms give us, anyway? Remember that for Kant it is the Copernican revolution – the restriction of our knowledge to reality insofar as it is given to us through experience – which makes awareness of the formative activity of our mind so crucial. It is just because of this restriction that knowledge of the forms becomes knowledge of reality insofar as it can be reality for us. But if, like Hegel, one is aiming to provide philosophical knowledge of ultimate realities, what use is it simply to record the historical

forms taken by human experience? Surely, without that Kantian assumption that the limits of knowable reality are set by the forms through which experience is received, the study of the historical forms taken by experience is too weak to give any conclusions about the structure of reality as such.

Now it is at this point – in answer to those points – that we meet the most notorious of Hegel's philosophical doctrines: his doctrine of the Absolute. If what were being traced through in Hegel's *Phenomenology* were simply a history of mental structures, one after the other, operating without reference to the ultimate structure of non-human reality, then the *Phenomenology* might seem to be, at best, an exercise in historical psychology or cultural history. Although Hegel is, as a matter of fact, very often read in this way, that is far from doing justice to his ambitions. Instead, he claims that, in the course of reconstructing *Geist*'s development, the reader discovers two things. The first is that, however it may seem (or have seemed) as an actual historical process, the development from one form of experience to another is a necessary one: each transition has a logical force in the sense that the succeeding stage is, to an extent, a completion of the one that preceded it. But, what is more, as *Geist* develops, it becomes apparent that it is more than just a psychological or logical structure which *human beings* have in common. It is indeed something that human beings have in common – that much is true – but not in the sense of a common property that simply happens to be shared. On the contrary, at the highest point of *Geist*'s development, the point which Hegel terms "Absolute Knowledge" the opposition between *Geist* and external reality is set aside – in Hegel's famous technical term *aufgehoben*, that is, raised up and both removed and preserved – and knowledge of *Geist*'s structure shows the latter to be at one with reality. With this awareness, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has completed its task.

Bearing this in mind, the problem for the German tradition of philosophy is now set; the jaws of the trap are closing. On the one side, Hegel's criticism of Kant seems to be all too

cogent. But is the alternative then to embark on a path which leads, ultimately, to the inflated realms of speculative metaphysics?

For those who immediately followed Hegel this was just the issue. One could not, they thought, endorse Hegel's criticism of Kant without committing themselves to his doctrine of the Absolute – Hegel without the Absolute was like Hamlet without the Prince (or Frankenstein without the Monster). To escape from its embrace would mean not simply rejecting Hegel's philosophy but a rejection of philosophy *as such*. And this, in their different ways, is what Hegel's three most famous nineteenth-century critics attempted to do. Kierkegaard accuses the philosophers of "building a palace of ideas but living in a hovel at the gate"; Nietzsche gives his book "The Twilight of the Idols" the sub-title "How to philosophize with a hammer"; Marx says of philosophy that it "relates to the real world as masturbation does to true sexual union".

But the problem, as Adorno realized (and I might note that he was no mean expert on Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche) is that, however radical your rhetoric, philosophy may not turn out to be so easy to escape from. You may expel philosophy with a pitch-fork, if you like, but it will still find its way back. And there is no clearer example of this than in the dilemmas posed by the interpretation of the works of Marx himself. In *The German Ideology*, Marx proclaimed the rejection of philosophy in favour of a scientific approach to society which would not operate in the cloudy realms of philosophy but which would give a positive, scientific account of that sphere itself. Marxism gives a political derivation of the existence of an autonomous sphere of philosophical discourse, so it hardly seems that philosophy has the right to call Marxism itself to account in its claims to scientific knowledge. But does that then leave Marxism as a science whose methodological and conceptual apparatus is beyond criticism? If so, on what basis does it claim to be scientific? If not, from where are the standards derived according to which criticism could be made? It appears that we have

simply returned to that *naturalistic* conception of philosophy against which Kant's normative conception had been originally aimed, a sociological version of the Lockean descriptive enterprise that Kant had dismissed as a mere "physiology of the mind".

So here, in conclusion, is the dilemma of German philosophy. The Kantian conception of philosophy requires, as we have seen, an account of that transcendental subject whose activity below the surface gives structure to and sets limits for our experience. Interpret that agency in the Kantian way and it seems like a purely psychological mechanism, imposing itself mysteriously on a reality whose true nature must always be unknown to us. Interpret it in a Hegelian way, however, as *Geist*, and one escapes from the Kantian problem only at the price of endorsing Absolute Idealism – committing oneself to the existence of a World-Spirit whose structure can be known by the pure activity of speculative philosophy. But, finally, reject all of this, with Marx, for example, and one seems to come back to a point *before* Kant: a point at which philosophy is not yet – or, rather, no longer – able to play the critical role assigned to it in assessing and validating knowledge-claims and nothing else has been put in its place.

For twentieth-century German philosophy – for the Critical Theorists, Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas; for the existentialists and hermeneuticists, Heidegger, Gadamer and their followers – it has been a prime necessity to show how philosophy could escape from this cycle. How, and how successfully, they did so, is not the topic of this talk. Instead, I shall close by adapting a famous slogan of Marx's to summarize their dilemma: Hegel's critics only tried to abolish philosophy in various ways; the problem, however, is to interpret it.

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