

Georg Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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The Anglophone philosophical world is currently riding a swelling wave of enthusiasm for a big, dense, blockbuster of a book by the previously unknown Jena philosopher, Georg Hegel. His *Phenomenology of Spirit*, originally in German, now available also in English, picks up and weaves together in a surprising and wholly original way a large number of today's most fashionable ideas. Although he never comes right out and says so, I take it that the *main* topic the book addresses is the notion of conceptual content. I say "main" topic—and even that with trepidation—because along the way, Hegel discusses practically *everything*: history, politics, art, literature, religion, psychology, sociology, natural science, and on and on. One of the masterful features of this *magnum opus* is the convincing way in which the arguments and considerations he brings to bear, in the course of articulating criteria of adequacy for an adequate semantics (which he thinks is inseparable from an adequate pragmatics), reverberate and ramify throughout our understanding of human culture generally.

Part of the foundation of the edifice on offer here is an appreciation of the essentially *normative* character of intentionality. This is a lesson we learned already from the later Wittgenstein, who made us sensitive to the issue of how a mental state such as an intention, or a speech act such as a request, could somehow reach out to all possible sequelae to settle which of them would count as being an *appropriate* response in the sense of fulfilling that intention or request (when the mother asks someone to "teach the children a game" and he responds by teaching them to bet

on dice, she says "I didn't mean *that* kind of game." And what she says is true, even though she didn't explicitly think about the matter). Hegel associates the point with Kant. He sees the axis around which Kant's thought revolves as being the idea that what distinguishes the judgments and actions of sapient creatures from those of less capable animals is that they are acts that subjects are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. This deontological criterion of demarcation of intentionality (the sense of "consciousness" Hegel addresses) puts the question of how to understand conceptual normativity at top of the philosophical agenda.

Though he attributes this *question* to Kant rather than Wittgenstein, Hegel offers an *answer* that owes more to Wittgenstein. For he insists that the kind of *normative* statuses that matter for intentionality—what we are responsible for, or committed to, what we have invested our authority in—are one and all *social* statuses. In this, he concurs with the Wittgensteinian tradition that emphasizes social practices ("uses, customs, institutions") as providing the context within which alone we can understand the normative significance even of such mundane items as signposts. But where Wittgenstein is suspicious in principle of philosophical theorizing, Hegel is an ambitious, constructive system-builder (perhaps in this difference lies part of the explanation of his otherwise unaccountable failure to acknowledge this distinguished antecedent of Hegel's views, in favor of earlier precursors).

Hegel's idea is that normative statuses are instituted by *reciprocal recognition*, a particular structure of normative *attitudes*. Recognizing someone is attributing normative statuses: taking or treating that individual as responsible, committed, entitled, or authoritative. Hegel thinks that actually to *be* responsible, committed, entitled, or authoritative is to be recognized as such by those one recognizes

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as authoritative in this respect (other contemporary fans of theories structurally like this—Habermas, Honneth, Darwall, among others, go undiscussed). That is what is required for what he calls “actual self-consciousness”: to be what one takes oneself to be.

Here is a mundane example. Achieving the status of being a good chess-player is not something I can do simply by adopting a certain attitude toward myself. It is, in a certain sense, up to me whom I regard as good chess-players: whether I count any woodpusher who can play a legal game, only formidable club players, Masters, or Grand Masters. That is, it is up to me whom I recognize as good chess-players, in the sense in which I aspire to be one. But it is not then in the same sense up to me whether I qualify as one of them. To earn their recognition in turn, I must be able to play up to their standards. To *be*, say, a formidable club player, I must be recognized as such by those I recognize as such. My recognitive attitudes can define a virtual community, but only the reciprocal recognition by those I recognize can make me actually a member of it; accord me the status for which I have implicitly petitioned by recognizing them.

This story about the relation between normative statuses and normative attitudes is told as part of a vast narrative about the transition from traditional to modern societies generally. In taking modernity as an explicit topic of philosophical reflection, Mr. Hegel signs on to a tradition that has been flourishing since the early nineteenth century—one that has spawned whole disciplines, for instance, political science and sociology. To a first approximation, he thinks that only one big thing ever happened in the history of the world: the titanic transformation of society, selves, and self-consciousness that is the transition from the old to the modern world. Traditional society, beginning with the Greeks and culminating in the *ancient regime*, understood normative *statuses* as objective, written into the non-, pre-, or super-human world as it objectively is independently of any normative *attitudes*. In a gesture patently pandering to contemporary feminist and post-modern orthodoxies, Hegel condemns this view as essentialist. The essence of modernity is to see that the norms we are bound by are not just there antecedently to and independently of our doings. The characteristically modern insight is that norms are not, as traditional forms of life implicitly took them to be, independent of the subjective normative attitudes of concept users. They are, rather, products of our recognitive practices (classical social contract political theories understood this point, at least darkly).

Though the move to modern sensibility, understanding, self-consciousness, and institutions was for him a (indeed, the) decisive advance in human history, Hegel does not see it as a *pure* advance. Something is lost, too. He calls what is lost

‘Sittlichkeit’ (our translator renders this, not very helpfully, as “ethical life”), and the situation we are precipitated into by this loss “alienation,” where to be alienated is to be unable to understand oneself practically as *bound* by norms. Appreciating the role of normative (recognitive) attitudes in instituting normative statuses seems completely to undercut the authority, validity, or bindingness (Gültigkeit, Verbindlichkeit) of those norms; the very thing that according to Kant (and Wittgenstein) makes us sapient, knowers and agents, subjects of intentional states, becomes unintelligible. This problem has a long history. The general form of thought is, again, that the possibility of offering a certain kind of *genealogical* account of the process by which a conceptual content developed or was determined by normative attitudes can seem to undercut the *rational* bindingness of the norms (normative statuses) that have that content. We see it deployed to devastating effect by the great unmaskers of the later nineteenth century, above all, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Suppose that the correct answer to the question why we draw the distinction between right and wrong as we do in some area of discourse is a causal explanation in terms of economic class structure, or a quasi-biological account in terms of the limited number of ways the will to power can manifest itself in the weak, or a description of how early traumas incurred while acting out the Family Romance reliably recathect libido into standard repressed adult forms. If any such genealogy can causally explain why our normative attitudes have the contents that they do—why we make the judgments we do instead of some others—then the issue of the rational justifiability of those attitudes as acknowledging genuine norms seems to lapse. More recently, we have seen similar arguments mounted by Foucault and Derrida—each in his own way following Nietzsche: reason is just the modern form of power relations, or just one more sort of aesthetic play one can engage in with words (it is a measure of his status as lonesome, isolated, self-confident genius that Hegel doesn’t bother to mention these well-known avatars of the disease of modernity he seeks to diagnose and treat). This is, arguably, one of the big problems with which Wittgenstein wrestled as well: how can we see the norms without which our intentionality is not only unintelligible but impossible as genuinely, and rationally, binding on us, once we have seen them as contingent, conditioned on adventitious and parochial features of our particular embodiment, history, and training?

This problematic is recognizably a way of engaging with the question of how norms fit into a natural world. Normative attitudes are part of the causal order. They are caused and can cause us to act (as the debunkers of both the nineteenth and twentieth century emphasize). More recently, thinkers such as Harman (also not referred to in our text) have argued that Ockham’s razor in the form of inference to the best explanation accordingly requires us to

give up the idea that we are answerable to norms (in effect, *Sittlichkeit*), since everything can be explained naturalistically, by normative attitudes (whatever their provenance). In opposition to this contemporary inclination, Hegel seeks to find a place for norms in nature.

What is needed, our author thinks, is some way of reconciling what the ancients knew, that our normative attitudes are responsible to our actual normative statuses, with what the moderns learned, that normative statuses are nothing apart from our normative attitudes. Hegel thinks that in the end his model of reciprocal recognition provides the theoretical raw materials that are necessary and sufficient to make this possible. As already indicated, he thinks reciprocal recognition (a structure of normative attitudes) is what exhibiting a normative status consists in. He accordingly envisages a third stage of human history in which this lesson is explicitly embraced, and the lesson of modernity is reconciled with *Sittlichkeit*, so that alienation is overcome. This post-modern form of self-consciousness he alarmingly calls “Absolute Knowing.” This review, alas, cannot encompass the details of his resolution of this difficulty, astonishing and stimulating as it is.

So much for the grand, world-historical significance of properly understanding the social nature, origins, and structure of the kind of normativity that articulates intentionality and sapience generally. How is it actually supposed to work? That is, what sort of *semantics* goes with the *pragmatics* of reciprocal recognition? Here Hegel decisively distinguishes himself from his unmentioned hero (Deus absconditus) Wittgenstein. Both, it is true, assert the centrality and essential contribution of *language* to sapience and intentionality, the possibility of discursive understanding, knowledge, and agency. Sprache, Hegel says, is the Dasein of Geist,¹ the latter being his term (sufficiently significant to appear in the title of his book) for the normative realm that we make by our activities and that makes us into the kind of being we are—what Kant called the “realm of freedom” (because he thought of being free as being constrained by *norms*, rather than by laws whose bindingness owed nothing to our normative attitudes). But Wittgenstein notoriously insists that “language has no downtown,” that it has no essence, but consists entirely in a sprawl of suburban neighborhoods whose disposition is intelligible in principle only genealogically, in terms of the actual contingent extension of one subpractice to another.

Hegel could not disagree more. Language, he thinks, does have a downtown, a set of practices that make it a *discursive*, which is (following Kant) to say, a concept-mongering practice. The practice is one that Kant had already distinguished as what is required to “synthesize the

original synthetic unity of apperception,” namely, the practice of treating some commitments (normative statuses) as materially incompatible with others, and as having still others as material inferential consequences—by extruding the incompatible commitments and including the consequential ones, from those that are acknowledged (a matter of normative attitudes). Hegel’s idiosyncratic terminology for material inferential and incompatibility relations is “mediation” and “determinate negation.” To be conceptually articulated, for him, is to stand in such relations to other such contents. This is the basis of his response to the reductivists (naturalistic and Romantic, nineteenth and twentieth century—but particularly apposite as a response to Foucault and Derrida). Talking at all involves acquiescing in and employing *inferentially* articulated conceptual contents. It follows that unless one engages in practices of giving and asking for reasons (rationally integrating commitments), one cannot *mean* anything: one cannot use those meanings to exert power, nor to engage in literary play, without implicitly acknowledging the normative force of reasons, in the form of what is incompatible with what, and what is a consequence of what. This understanding of conceptual contents has three notable consequences, all of which connect with claims that have been independently motivated and defended by contemporary philosophers (all of whom, characteristically, go unmentioned by our author).

First, he derives from this conception of conceptual content a radically *holistic* semantics. If the contents of concepts are a matter of their relations of “mediation” and “determinate negation” to other such contents, then our talk of such contents must make reference not only to the judgments such concepts appear in, but also ultimately to the whole constellation of conceptual commitments, articulated by those relations: what Hegel calls “the Concept,” comprising judgments, practical commitments, and commitments regarding what relations of material inferential consequence and incompatibility all the possible commitments stand into one another. Though of course we have had other defenders (not always willing) of semantic holism, Hegel is perhaps the philosopher most committed to rigorously thinking through the consequences of this view: not a coherence theory of *truth*, but of *meaning* (truth *conditions*).

Second, where Quine, our most prominent recent holist² (thinking in no small part of the ontologically holistic British Absolute Idealists), said that “meaning is what essence becomes when it is detached from the thing and attached to the word,” Hegel thinks that *both* subjectively entertained thoughts (conceptual contents subjects can be committed to) and objective states of affairs are alike conceptually articulated. For facts and states of affairs, too, stand to one another

¹ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [A.W. Miller, (trans.), Oxford University Press] paragraph 652.

² Though not mentioned as such in Hegel’s extended development of his own holistic system.

in relations of consequence and incompatibility. That a coin is pure copper entails that it melts at 1084°C and is incompatible with it being an electric insulator. This resolutely non-psychological conception of the conceptual (as coeval with modal realism) underwrites a vision of the objective world, no less than the subjects who know it and act in it, as *conceptually* articulated. In a phrase that we would (though Mr. Hegel, apparently innocent of Anglophone philosophy, does not) associate with McDowell, his view is that “the conceptual has no outer boundary.” If I understand him correctly, he thinks (a view he calls “idealism”) that although of course there can *be* an objective world and the facts that it comprises quite independently of the conceptual activity of sapient, intentional subjects, we cannot *understand* the conceptually articulated world apart from our understanding of what it is to integrate commitments into a rational “original synthetic unity of apperception” that includes inferential consequences and excludes incompatible commitments.

Third, and as a result, Hegel endorses the view (also associated—though not by him—with Wittgenstein, and, not coincidentally, McDowell) that has been called an “identity theory of truth.” When things go well, the content of our thought *is* a fact. As Wittgenstein says: “When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: this—is—so.”³ This whole line of thought is undeniably suggestive, and undeniably controversial. It is defended from the suspicion of parochialism and conceptual conservatism by Hegel’s insistence (downstream, if unacknowledgedly, from Kuhn) that the process by which conceptual contents *develop* is essential to the content they express. That process is the process of rational integration, exhibiting both the *ampliative* dimension of extracting material inferential consequences and the *critical* dimension of resolving material incompatibilities. On this account, the *genealogy* of a particular set of inferential-and-incompatibility commitments—the way they have arisen through the rational rectification of actual prior commitments—is essential to understanding their *validity*, the bindingness of the norms they embody.

We have by no means seen our way to the bottom of things in this vicinity. But in this book Hegel evidently gives us new things to think about, and new lines of thought to pursue, even if many of the raw materials he is assembling in new combinations have by now been around for a while. There is a lot more in this book than I have been able so much as to mention. Among the many other treasures it contains, I

would single out particularly the Sellarsian idea that (holistic) *semantic* considerations significantly constrain our *epistemological* theories (developed in the *Consciousness* section of the book) and the (post-)Davidsonian theory of rational, intentional agency (developed in the *Reason* section of the book⁴).

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an odd, Janus-faced amalgam, looking forward and backward at the same time. It develops a constellation of ideas consonant with the very latest philosophical trends (pursued at least in some rarified circles): a historicized social practice approach to conceptual normativity encompassing a holistic semantics that emphasizes language as the medium in which an already conceptually articulated world becomes explicit for us. The author has not, for whatever reasons or causes, explicitly acknowledged the evident affiliations with contemporary philosophical views that make his claims so resonant and suggestive—indeed, provocative and stimulating. Yet he has not hesitated to present this up-to-the-minute content in the form of a grand, systematic all-encompassing metaphysical metanarrative of a sort that is decidedly out of fashion these days. The tone, too, is oddly out of step with today’s intellectual sensibilities. For although imbued throughout with an appreciation of the tragic aspects of modern existence, it exudes a sunny, optimistic faith that conflict, failure and error are the engines of progress, that there is a kind of philosophically achievable rational self-understanding that when suitably internalized as a form of self-consciousness and externalized as culture can decisively overcome the systemic alienation characteristic of modern selves and their institutions.

This enigmatic combination of ideas and attitudes (think of Dewey as a logical, linguistic rationalist) is too important and suggestive, and bears on too many issues of substantial contemporary significance, for us to ignore simply because of the admitted idiosyncrasies and difficulties of reference and expression that permeate this fabulous, intimidating masterpiece. And I think it is unlikely that we will ever fully digest this rich, original, magisterial, self-consciously contradictory work.

I would love to have written this book. Perhaps, when sufficiently steeped in this timely untimely *Spirit*, like Borges’ Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote*,⁵ some day I will.

⁴ The earlier appreciation of Hegel’s work in Germany has resulted in a fine initial treatment of this topic, by Michael Quante already translated into English, [Quante, Michael, *Hegel’s Concept of Action*, translated by Dean Moyar, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 216 pp].

⁵ He says of his undertaking: “To compose the *Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable undertaking, necessary and perhaps even unavoidable; at the beginning of the twentieth, it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have gone by, filled with exceedingly complex events. Amongst them, to mention only one, is the *Quixote* itself.”

³ *Philosophical Investigations* §95. Frege endorses essentially the same point when he says (in “The Thought”) that “a fact is a thought that is true.”