

Part Five Hegel on the Historicity of Normativity

Handout for Lecture 18

Confession and Forgiveness, Recollection and Trust

The text that describes the transition to the third stage in the development of Spirit in the concluding eleven paragraphs of the *Spirit* chapter takes the form of a parable, a narrative recounting sequential stages in the relationship between an “evil consciousness” [PG 661] and a “hard-hearted judge” [PG 669–670]: evil [PG 661–662], judgment [PG 662–666], confession [666], refusal of reciprocal confession [PG 667–668], the breaking of the hard heart and confession by the judge [PG 669], forgiveness [PG 669–671], and the achievement of a new kind of community. (“The reconciling Yea, in which the two ‘I’s let go their antithetical existence, is the existence of the ‘I’ which has expanded into a duality.” [PG 671])

The consciousness that judges in this way is itself base [niederträchtig], because it divides up the action, producing and holding fast to the disparity of the action with itself. [PG 666]

We need to be clear about the relations between

1. *Niederträchtigkeit*, as a practical attitude of identification with, hence sacrifice for, the disparity that action and consciousness involve, which *produces* that disparity in a distinctively alienated form;
2. *Alienation*, as a cognitive structure that is defective in making incomprehensible the normative dimension of the activities of individuals and the practices of communities that exhibit that structure (a failure of self-consciousness); and
3. *Asymmetry* of recognition as its characteristic structural defect, and as resulting from practically applying categories of immediacy or pure independence (the conception of authority and responsibility epitomized by the Master).

“Now the judging consciousness does not stop short at the former aspect of duty, at the doer’s knowledge of it that this is his duty, and the fact that the doer knows it to be his duty, the condition and status of his reality. On the contrary, it holds to the other aspect, looks at what the action is in itself, and explains it as resulting from an intention different from the action itself, and from selfish motives. Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity [of the doer]. . . . No action can escape such judgement, for duty for duty’s sake, this pure purpose, is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity. . . . Thus, for the judging consciousness, there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the

action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the moral valet towards the agent.” [PG 665]

The judge still takes it that he can “oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality,” because *he* still perceives that universal aspect. So the assessor and attributor of actions applies quite different standards to his own activities than he does to those of the ones he assesses. This is an *asymmetrical* *recognitive* relation.

The first step toward a symmetrical, genuinely reciprocal interpersonal cognitive relation is taken by the individual who is judged, who *confesses* its particularity and the contingency of its attitudes.

“Perceiving this identity and giving utterance to it, he confesses this to the other, and equally expects that the other, having in fact put himself on the same level, will also respond in words in which he will give utterance to this identity with him, and expects that this mutual recognition will now exist in fact.” [PG 666]

“The confession of the one who is wicked, “I am so,” is not followed by a reciprocal similar confession. This was not what the judging consciousness meant: quite the contrary. It repels this community of nature, and is the hard heart that is for itself, and which rejects any continuity with the other.” [PG 667]

“As a result, the situation is reversed. The one who made the confession sees himself repulsed, and sees the other to be in the wrong when he refuses to let his own inner being come forth into the outer existence of speech, when the other contrasts the beauty of his own soul with the penitent’s wickedness, yet confronts the confession of the penitent with his own stiff-necked unrepentant character, mutely keeping himself to himself and refusing to throw himself away for someone else.” [PG 667]

“It is thus its own self which hinders that other’s return from the deed into the spiritual existence of speech and into the identity of Spirit, and by this hardness of heart produces the disparity which still exists.” [PG 667]

The stage is set for the transition to the next and final stage in the development of self-conscious Spirit by the allegorical judge traversing the four meta-meta-attitudes laid out in my previous lecture:

- a) First, the judge acknowledges that he is adopting a *stance*, rather than simply acknowledging a *fact*;
- b) Second, the judge acknowledges that the stance is a *recognitive* one;
- c) So the judge acknowledges that which stance he adopts *produces* a community of a certain kind;

- d) Next, the judge must acknowledge that acting and judging (acknowledging and attributing, deliberating and assessing) implicitly presuppose (are intelligible only in the context of) *edelmütig* cognitive stances.
- e) Finally, the judge must explicitly adopt such a cognitive stance and institute an *edelmütig* cognitive community.

“The forgiveness which it extends to the other is the renunciation of itself, of its unreal essential being which it put on a level with that other which was a real action, and acknowledges that what thought characterized as bad, viz. action, is good; or rather it abandons this distinction of the specific thought and its subjectively determined judgement, just as the other abandons its subjective characterization of action. The word of reconciliation is the objectively existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself qua universal essence, in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-contained and exclusive individuality—a reciprocal recognition which is absolute Spirit.” [PG 670]

Forgiving, like confessing, is a *speech* act, something done in *language*. It is doing something by saying something. That is why Hegel talks about it in terms of the “word of reconciliation [Versöhnung].” [PG 670] Indeed, all the cognitive relations discussed in the last part of *Spirit* are linguistic performances—from the distinctive language by which the lacerated consciousness gives utterance to its disrupted state to the warrant of sincerity and conviction that is the core of the conscientious consciousness’s claim to justification for what it does. “Here again, then, we see language as the existence of Spirit. Language is self-consciousness existing for others.” [PG 652]

“Spirit, in the absolute certainty of itself, is lord and master over every deed and actuality, and can cast them off, and make them as if they had never happened.” [PG 667]

“The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes.” [PG 669]

Forgiveness is a kind of *recollection* (*Erinnerung*—cf. [PG 808]). What one must do in order to forgive the confessor for what is confessed is to offer a rational reconstruction of a tradition to which the concept-application (theoretically in judgment or practically in intention) in question belongs, in which it figures as an expressively progressive episode.

Characterizing recollecting as forgiving emphasizes that it is not only a *cognitive* and *practical* enterprise—reconstructing judgments and actions—but also the adoption of a *cognitive* stance toward the ones whose judgments and actions are so construed.

“But just as the former has to surrender its one-sided, unacknowledged existence of its particular being-for-self, so too must this other set aside its one-sided, unacknowledged judgement. And just as the former exhibits the power of Spirit over its actual existence, so does this other exhibit the power of Spirit over its determinate concept [seinen bestimmten Begriff].” [PG 669]

“The forgiveness which it extends to the other is the renunciation of itself, of its unreal essential being which it put on a level with that other which was a real action, and acknowledges that what thought characterized as bad, viz. action, is good; or rather it abandons this distinction of the specific thought and its *subjectively* determined judgement, just as the other abandons its subjective characterization of action. The word of reconciliation is the *objectively* existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself qua universal essence, in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-contained and exclusive individuality—a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit.” [PG 670]

The authority of the present judge to recognize is balanced by her responsibility to the past. For her entitlement to that authority derives wholly from her claim to be not innovating (clothing contingencies of her own attitudes in the guise of necessity), but *only* applying the conceptual norms she has inherited. The quality of her recollective rational reconstrual of the tradition is the only warrant for the authority she claims for her own assessments and applications of the concept. And that responsibility of the present judge to the past—to the actual content of the concept in question—is administered by future judges, who will assess in turn the precedential authority of the present judge’s construal of precedent, in terms of its fidelity to the content they recollectively discern as having been all along implicitly setting the standards of correctness of applications and assessments of applications of the concept. So the recognitive authority of the present judge with respect to past judges is conditioned on its recognition in turn by future ones.

Trusting is both acknowledging the authority of those trusted to forgive and invoking their responsibility to do so. Prospective trust that one will be forgiven for what one confesses is the recognitive attitude complementary to forgiveness. Together these reciprocal practical attitudes produce a community with a symmetrical, *edelmüsig* recognitive structure.

“Whomsoever I trust, his certainty of himself is for me the certainty of myself; I recognize in him my own being-for-self, know that he acknowledges it and that it is for him purpose and essence.” [PG 549]

“With this, we already have before us the Notion of Spirit. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: “I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I.” ” [PG 177]

The explicit acknowledgment of this sharing of responsibility for what is done between the confessing and trusting agent and the forgiving community expresses an expanded practical conception of how *happenings* qualify as *doings*. The unity of actions (what defines their identity) that both the agent who trusts and the community that forgives identify with and produce by adopting these reciprocal recognitive stances (relinquishing claims to merely particular subjective authority not balanced by a correlative responsibility) is a complex, internally articulated unity that comprises both aspects of the disparity that action involves. For it combines as essential, mutually presupposing aspects the action as something that qualifies as such only because it has both specifications under which it is intentional and consequential specifications in terms of actual effects that unroll unforeseeably to the infinite horizon. Both the prospective exercise of authority by the agent and the retrospective exercise of authority by the forgiving community are required to bring about this unity: to make what *happens* into something *done*.

“The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes. The self that carries out the action, the form of its act, is only a moment of the whole.” [PG 669]

This third, post-modern normative structure would just be the traditional heroic conception of agency, except that the fact that what the agent has done is understood not just as having made *her* responsible for the doing, but as having made us *all* responsible for it (has imposed a responsibility concretely and practically to forgive it) means that the reachievement of the heroic conception now takes a higher form. That higher form does not essentially involve the tragedy that is a confrontation with an alien destiny. Though the agent cannot know what she does, others are committed to and responsible for its not turning out to be a crime. She trusts that they will forgive, will exercise their power to heal the wounds of the Spirit inflicted by the stubborn recalcitrance of cause, contingency, actuality, immediacy, and particularity, by giving it the form of the conceptual, necessity, normativity, mediation, and universality.