

Précis of *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*

A Spirit of Trust deciphers the philosophical metavocabulary Hegel develops in the *Phenomenology*: the language he deploys to enable us to talk and think about discursive practice, the use of ground-level empirical and practical concepts. *Sprache* (language), he tells us, is the *Dasein* (the concrete existence) of *Geist* (what his book is a phenomenology of).¹ I read him as offering a broadly *pragmatist* theory of *meaning* in terms of *use*. Hegel's pragmatics of rationality is structured by dual social and historical axes. He understands the normativity of discursive practice as instituted socially by practical attitudes of reciprocal recognition. He understands the (semantic) determinate contentfulness of concepts in terms of the (pragmatic) activity of retrospectively recollectively rationally reconstructing their actual applications so as to give such contingent sequences of doings the shape of expressively progressive traditions (turning a *past* into a *history*). That is revealing them as the gradual emergence into explicitness of norms that show up as having all along implicitly governed the process of applying the concepts.

On the ground floor of Hegel's intellectual edifice is a non-psychological conception of the conceptual. This is the idea that to be conceptually contentful is to stand in relations of material incompatibility and consequence (his “determinate negation” and “mediation”) to other such contentful items. The relations of incompatibility and consequence are denominated “material” to indicate that they articulate the *contents* rather than *form* of what stands in those relations. This is his first and most basic semantic idea: an understanding of conceptual content in terms of modally robust relations of exclusion and inclusion.

This understanding of the conceptual is *hylomorphic*. Conceptual contents, understood as roles with respect to relations of material incompatibility and consequence, are amphibious: they show up in two different forms. They have a *subjective* form and an *objective* form. The subjective form articulates what things are or can be *for consciousness*, and the objective form

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articulates what things are or can be *in themselves*. The second is the form of empirical *reality*; the first is the form in which that empirical reality *appears* to knowing subjects. On the side of thought, these are *deontic normative* constraints: one subject *ought not* to have incompatible empirical and practical commitments and *ought* to acknowledge the consequences of those she acknowledges. On the side of being, these are *alethic modal* constraints: one object *cannot* have incompatible properties and *necessarily* has the properties that follow from its other properties.

They are related as the two poles of the intentional nexus: what can be *known* and the attempted *knowing* of it, noumena and phenomena. Subjectivity and objectivity are both conceptually articulated, and the *same* conceptual content can show up both in the subjective normative form of thoughts and in the objective modal form of states of affairs. Genuine knowledge occurs when one and the *same* content shows up in *both* different forms: the subjective form of thought and the objective form of fact. I call this view “bimodal hylomorphic conceptual realism.”

Conceptual contents of the two forms stand in a broadly *representational* relation to one another, as subjective *representings* of reality and the objective realities represented. Hegel’s second semantic idea is this consequence of the hylomorphic development of the first: the two forms of conceptual content stand to one another in *representational* relations. These two dimensions of semantic contentfulness, the conceptual and the representational, can be thought of as Hegelian versions of the Fregean metaconcepts of sense and reference (*Sinn* and *Bedeutung*): thoughts and what thoughts are about, what can be *expressed* and what can be *represented*.

Hegel’s semantic explanatory strategy is to explain the second, representational dimension of conceptual contentfulness in terms of the first, expressive dimension. What it is to represent something is to be understood in terms of relations among conceptual contents. The idea of a noumenal reality is to be explained in terms of how phenomenal appearances point beyond themselves, in virtue of their relations to one another. (This, too, is a sense in which his book counts as a “phenomenology.”) The semantic relations between these two forms of conceptual content are understood in the pragmatic context of processes and practices of

intentional action. (“Reason is purposive agency.”²) Regarded *prospectively*, practical agency is the experience of coping with cognitive error and practical failure. Regarded *retrospectively*, it is reconstructed by the exercise of recollective rationality as the actualization and determination of a governing intention, which both provides standards for assessments of correctness and success (on the deontic normative side of the knowing subject) and to which the process is subjunctively sensitive (on the alethic modal side of the known object).

Hegel explains the representational semantic dimension of conceptual content (relations between thought and things, phenomena and noumena, appearance and reality) in terms of this essentially temporally biperspectival pragmatics of rational agency. The historical process by which conceptual contents are determined (prospectively *made* and retrospectively *found*) exhibits the structure of co-ordinate, reciprocal authority and responsibility characteristic of the institution of normative statuses by mutual cognitive attitudes. It is a *social, cognitive* process. The normative pragmatics explains the interrelations among the inferential, social, and historical holisms characteristic of Hegel’s semantics.

Reasons, in the form of objective conceptual norms, show up retrospectively as acknowledged in the attitudes of practitioners, hence as setting normative standards articulating the contents of the commitments they undertake and the authority they claim, within each generous, forgiving recollection exhibiting a progressive tradition of imperfect, but cumulative, ever more explicit, and ultimately successful expressions of those concepts. Particularity, contingency, and immediacy enter during the prospective phase of experience, making themselves felt as practitioners find themselves falling into error and failure by applying their current conceptions, find themselves with theoretical and practical commitments incompatible by their own lights, which normatively call for the alteration of those conceptions and the reconstrual of that tradition. What is, when it appears, still irrational (the moment of difference), the immediate eruption of causes into the mediating realm of concepts (the exercise by particulars of authority over universals), shows up in the breaks, the ruptures, the caesuras between the Whiggish *Erinnerungen*. The first is the construction of concepts, the second is the incorporation into them of the initially nonconceptual immediacy and contingency in virtue of

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which those concepts are determinately contentful. The recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness, followed by confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in subsequent forgiveness of that failure, is what ties these phases together, articulating the internal fine structure of the relations between the moment of rational unity and the moment of determinate disparity. Under the heading of *Vernunft*, Hegel is putting forward a new metaphysics of meaning and intentionality, a highly structured story about the pragmatics of semantics: about the sorts of *doings* that are the necessary background for *saying* or *intending* anything determinately contentful, and about the sense in which concepts can be thought of as having determinate contents.

Hegel's story about how determinate conceptual *content* arises out of normative *force*—what it is by recollecting to *take* objective conceptual norms to be acknowledged as binding in the attitudes of discursive practitioners, and thereby to *make* those attitudes properly intelligible as the adoption of normative statuses, the undertaking of commitments and responsibilities that outrun the conceptions of those whose statuses they are—is accordingly supposed to be at once a theory and a fighting faith for the first generation of moderns for whom intellectual history came to seem a central and essential undertaking. It is, remarkably, a *semantics* that is *morally* edifying. For properly understanding the conditions of having determinate thoughts and intentions, of binding ourselves by determinately contentful conceptual norms in judgment and action, turns out to commit us to adopting to one another practical *recognitive* attitudes of a particular kind: forgiveness, confession, and trust. The sort of Hegelian semantic self-consciousness that consists in understanding our discursive activity according to the categories of *Vernunft* accordingly obliges us to be certain kinds of selves, and to institute certain kinds of communities. In particular, the sort of theoretical understanding he teaches (the explicit acknowledgment of what he shows to be implicit in our discursive practice) obliges us in practice to forgive and trust one another: to be *that* kind of self and institute *that* kind of community. Practicing the recollective recognitive hermeneutics of magnanimity is not just one option among others. A proper understanding of ourselves as discursive creatures obliges us to institute a community in which reciprocal recognition takes the form of forgiving recollection: a community bound by and built on trust.

Recollective rationality is also the key both to understanding the history of *Geist*—all our norm-governed practices and performances, and the statuses, selves, and institutions they produce and are produced by—and to envisaging its next development. For Hegel the turning point of history so far has been the gradual, still incomplete transition from *traditional* to *modern* forms of life. This was a shift from a metaphysics of normativity structured by the status-dependence of normative attitudes to one structured by the attitude-dependence of normative statuses. The mistake characteristic of the first is *fetishism*: mistaking what are in fact the products of our activities for objective features of the world. Modernity is the advent of a distinctive kind of normative self-consciousness of our own role in instituting norms. The pathology characteristic of modernity is *alienation* from the norms that make us what we are: failure to understand them practically as rationally constraining. When recognition takes the form of retrospective rational reconstructive recollection, the insights of traditional practical and modern theoretical normative self-consciousness will be reconciled and their failures overcome. We will move decisively beyond the normative structure of subordination and obedience to genuine self-conscious freedom: *Geist* with the structure of trust.