

Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel:

Comparing Empirical and Logical Concepts

I. Introduction:

The enterprise animating this chapter is generically of the sort epitomized in Croce's title: to specify "what is living and what is dead in Hegel's philosophy." Two qualifications of this characterization are in order, however. First, the indefinite articles in my title are meant to indicate that I understand what one is doing in drawing such a distinction in a way that is at once more pluralistic and less final than that slogan suggests. I am proposing *one* way of distinguishing in Hegel's work large, orienting philosophical insights worth pursuing and developing today—what I see as the core of his achievement—from what show up against that background as optional collateral commitments, contingent choices as to how to work out the big ideas, as well as what as far as I can see are simply mistakes (albeit intelligible and forgivable ones). I do not at all suppose that there are not other ways of carving things up from which we might learn as much.

Further, I address here only one aspect of Hegel's multidimensional thought: exploiting fault-lines that appear when one considers the relations between his views about the contents of ordinary determinate empirical concepts, on the one hand, and his views about the contents of the specifically *logical*, philosophical, or speculative concepts in terms of which he elaborates

his own views (concepts such as particularity, universality, and individuality, Ansichsein, and Fürsichsein) on the other.¹

Before launching into the discussion of this particular perspective on Hegel's thought, however, it is worth our taking note of a methodological worry that arises at the outset concerning the very idea of a *critical* reading of that thought: a reading, that is, that appropriates some of his philosophical concepts and claims, while ignoring or rejecting others. Specific, characteristic features of Hegel's views present a special obstacle to any such undertaking. For Hegel himself insists, explicitly and repeatedly, that his philosophical account presents a *system*. And one essential property of a system in this sense is a strong and distinctive sort of *holism* concerning the philosophical idiom in which it is expressed: no piece of it—no concept and no claim—can have the content that it does except in the context of *all* the rest.² The systematicity Hegel's philosophy aspires to and purports to exhibit, entails that it is, as we may say, *semantically monolithic*. That feature would make it impossible to chip off some bits from the block. Attempting to pick and choose, to select and reject, would inevitably be to falsify. Severed from the unique living conceptual organism to which they belong, the dead appendages could not perform their expressive function. The monolithic systematicity claim³ is the biggest

¹ In other I consider different such dimensions: Hegel's understanding of determinateness, in Chapter Nine, and his assimilation of concepts to selves, in Chapter Eight.

² Here I talk about the systematic metaphysics—basically, the logic. For various bits of the *Realphilosophie* Hegel presented in terms of those categories might, of course, be contested, while remaining firmly within the confines of the system. Thus Hegel himself seems to have approached the project of *applying* his categories to the empirical-historical matter of the development of the concepts and practices of religion, art, and natural science in an experimental spirit. Thus various versions of the lectures on the history of religion deploy his logical apparatus in different ways, once setting things up in terms of a progression from *Ansichsein* through *Fürsichsein* to *An-und-fürsichsein*, another time in terms of a progression from categories of Being, through Essence, to the Concept. (While these categories line up roughly, there are important differences of nuance between them, which come out in the applications.)

³ This holism does not exhaust Hegel's notion of systematicity. Another essential element is *comprehensiveness*: that every alternative account can be exhibited as a partial, inadequate version of the system, a stage in its development (as rationally reconstructed) that must be superseded on the way to, and so whose insights can be seen

obstacle to the critical appraisal of Hegel's concepts and claims, and so their appropriation in our very different circumstances. But it has seemed to many to be of the very essence of Hegel's philosophical contribution, so that the whole scheme stands or falls with that claim. Rolf-Peter Horstmann, for instance, has eloquently appealed to this feature of Hegel's thought to argue that we must swallow it whole or not at all.⁴

The short form of my response to this objection that the systematic character of Hegel's thought precludes the possibility of a *critical* reading of it is that the first claim of his I want to reject—as the very first step in the critical enterprise—is just this claim about its semantically *monolithic* character. What if Hegel is *wrong* to think that *if* one can say at all what he is saying in the *rest* of the *Logic*, *then* one *must* say it in terms that are *systematic* in a sense that entails being semantically monolithic? Of course, a “what if?” proves nothing. *Entitling* oneself to a response of this general shape (that is, relinquishing the commitment to Hegel's thought having to take the shape of a *semantically monolithic* system) requires performing a dissection that distinguishes within Hegel's system an autonomous, viable conceptual core from a discardable

to be incorporated in, that system. Indeed, because of this feature of the scheme he presents, Hegel thinks it is inappropriate for us to call it *his* system—in the way in which he *does* allow talk of “Spinoza's system” or “Kant's system.” In virtue of its expressive developmental *comprehensiveness*, it should only be thought of as “*the* system”. Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer discusses this point at pp. 30-31 in his fascinating and important *Hegels Analytische Philosophie* [Ferdinand Schöningh, München, 1992].

⁴ This claim is the gravamen of his chapter “What is Hegel's Legacy, and What Should We Do With It?” *European Journal of Philosophy* 7:2 (1999) pp. 275-287. Thus, because “Hegel's very ambitious and complicated version of an ontological monism is an essential part of his philosophical legacy,” (279) “Hegel's philosophical legacy consists in a very intricate combination of an impressive multitude of elements which in their entirety form one huge complex. To choose only some of these elements and to claim that just these constitute the philosophically important parts of his legacy means to have a very special notion of what could be done to a philosophical theory without changing its content so much that the theory has in fact been abandoned.” (284) Therefore, Horstmann concludes, “To deal with Hegel's philosophy in a rather selective way means not being very faithful to his will, to say the least” (285). Horstmann's recommended response to this situation is to reject the idea that Hegel left us a viable philosophical legacy: “Now ‘System-Philosophie in Hegel's sense has been out of fashion from his days on, and I take it that nobody nowadays really wants to give the ‘System’-version of a holistic approach in philosophy a second chance. If, however, there are good reasons to suppose that for Hegel the idea of a system was constitutive of a philosophical theory, then one wonders how it is possible to think of Hegel as a philosopher whose legacy is of some value for us.”(276)

husk of optional collateral commitments, and further locates the strong holist aspect of the systematicity of the semantics of its *logical* and *philosophical* concepts and claims in that shell. Doing that would require specifying *what* other master-commitments or insights of Hegel's can be made sense of apart from the systematicity claim, so as to see that they do *not* in fact require or entail it. How one might go about doing this should be clearer at the end of my story than it can be made at this point. But the short version is: good reasons to endorse a strong holism concerning the senses (but not the referents) of ordinary determinate concepts do *not* oblige one to adopt a corresponding thesis concerning the contents expressed by the logical and philosophical metavocabulary we use to discuss and explicate those ground-level concepts.

II. The First Move: A Distinction

The critical perspective on Hegel's thought that I want to explore and expound here begins by comparing and contrasting Hegel's views about the nature of the contents of ordinary determinate concepts with his views about the nature of the contents of what he calls "form determinations of the Concept": logical, philosophical, and speculative concepts. The first category comprises the contents of the concepts expressed by our use of ordinary words, such as 'red', 'rigid', and 'rotten', and of the claims expressed by our use of ordinary declarative sentences containing them. These are the contents that articulate our everyday empirical consciousness, both cognitive and practical, of the world around us, as well as the contents that articulate our everyday empirical *self*-consciousness of ourselves as creatures in that world: those expressed by words such as 'self', and 'object'. The second category comprises the *logical*

philosophical concepts and *speculative* philosophical claims whose development is the subject matter of both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*.

The relation between the two categories is, I think, an *expressive* one. To be a *logical* concept, for Hegel, is to play the distinctive expressive role of making explicit general features of the use and content of ordinary, *nonlogical* ('determinate') concepts.⁵ It is to be a certain kind of *metaconcept*. This is perhaps clearest in the use Hegel makes of his logical vocabulary in the *Realphilosophie*, but he believes quite generally that, as he puts the point in the *Encyclopedia*, "the whole progress of philosophizing in every case, if it be a methodical, that is to say a necessary, progress, merely renders explicit what is implicit in a notion."⁶ The principal point of his logic is to develop conceptual tools that are necessary and sufficient to express explicitly the essential structures that are implicit in our use of ordinary concepts (including those of the empirical sciences) in judgment and action. For Hegel, as for Kant, judging and acting just *is* applying concepts, and it is in virtue of that capacity that we are spiritual, rational, free creatures—that is, creatures able to undertake *commitments*, to take on *responsibilities* whose content is articulated in terms of what would count as *reasons* justifying them. So coming to be able to make explicit what is implicit in our concept use—to *say* and *think* what it is we have all along been *doing* in judging and acting—is achieving a distinctive sort of *self-consciousness* of ourselves as normative, rational, *geistig* beings.

⁵ Having appropriated from Hegel this conception of the characteristic expressive role that demarcates logical vocabulary as such, I motivate and expound it in its own right in the first chapter of *Articulating Reasons* [Harvard University Press, 2000], and develop and apply it in the rest of that work.

⁶ *Encyclopedia Logic* [ref.], §88.

One important ancestor of this fundamental distinction between kinds of concepts is Kant's division of labor between empirical concepts and the pure concepts of the understanding, that is, the categories. Of course, Kant understood the relations between these concepts and metaconcepts somewhat differently: the pure concepts or categories codify in explicit concepts (that is, ones that can themselves figure in judgments) the *forms* that are implicitly exhibited by all empirically contentful concepts as they figure in (explicit) empirical judgments. That is, in Kant's hylomorphic philosophical metalanguage, the *content* of the pure categorial concepts expresses the *form* of the determinate empirical ones.

But for both figures I think it is good methodological advice to seek to understand the account offered of the metaconcepts to begin with in terms of what they tell us about the use and content of the ground-level concepts.

This is not always easy, since both Kant and Hegel spend a *lot* more time talking about the nature and contents of the concepts they want to use to explicate concept use than they do about concept use itself. So there is a natural temptation to follow their example, and worry more about, say, the deduction of the categories in Kant, or the problem of how to make a beginning and then conduct a progressive exposition of the system of logical concepts in Hegel, than about the picture being presented of how ordinary cognition and action should be conceived. But I think it is important to resist that temptation—at least sometimes—and so to enter this particular hermeneutic circle at a different place from that we find in the first *Critique*, or Hegel's *Phenomenology* or *Logic*.

III. Two Claims about Empirical Concepts

I want, then, to start with two connected, original, overarching structural claims that I see Hegel putting forward about ordinary empirical concepts—claims which seem to me to hold particular promise in addressing issues of contemporary philosophical interest. The first concerns his particular way of understanding the sense in which the content made available to thought through the immediate deliverances of sense outruns any particular conceptualization of it. The second is his consequent account of what is required to grasp, express, or convey the contents of determinate empirical concepts.

Each of these phenomena takes the form of a *process*. In the first case, it is the process whereby immediacy is gradually and incompletely incorporated in the thoroughly mediated—that is, inferentially articulated—form of determinate-but-still-determinable concepts. That is the process whereby determinate conceptual norms are at once instituted and applied in judgments and actions.⁷ In the second case, the process in question is a recapitulation as rational reconstruction of the first sort of process, which displays it as expressively progressive, as the gradual emerging into explicitness of a determinate conceptual content that can then be seen retrospectively as having been all along implicit in the tradition of applying and assessing applications of it. Hegel's term for this sort of process is '*Wiederholung*'. As I read him, Hegel thinks that it is only by engaging in processes of the first kind that we can manage to think or mean anything determinate, and it is only by engaging in processes of the second kind that we can *say* what we mean or think, making that content explicit to ourselves or others.

⁷ I discuss this process in another connection in Chapter Eight.

This second sort of enterprise depends on the use of some sort of logical vocabulary. The adequacy of a system of logical concepts is to be evaluated by its expressive capacity to make explicit the essential, content-determining features of both kinds of process or practice. Under the headings of '*Verstand*' and '*Vernunft*', Hegel introduces two meta-metaconcepts for classifying the most important kinds of logical metaconcepts. His own understanding of his distinctive philosophical contribution is epitomized in the slogan that the point of his work is to teach us how to understand our conceptual activity, and therefore ourselves, according to the categories of *Vernunft*, rather than those of *Verstand*. The two claims about the contents of empirical conceptual contents that we turn to next articulate central elements of the contrast between the metalogical standpoint of *Verstand* and that of *Vernunft*.

IV. The Conceptual Inexhaustibility of the Empirical: The Tradition

The tradition Hegel inherited took it that actual, concrete, determinate particularity could not be fully captured by the finite concepts deployed by nondivine minds. Their theoretical versions of the point start with the thought that although much of what I see when I look closely at my hand, or hear when I listen to a complex piece of music, can be expressed in judgments, no set of such judgments, certainly no *finite* set of judgments, can express *all* of it, without remainder. There will always be a residue that is as yet unsaid or unthought (sayable or thinkable though each bit of it may be). There will always be more material to be conceptualized. We cannot *exhaustively* describe any particular as it is sensuously presented.

Empiricists understood concepts as formed by abstraction. The richness and detail that must be ignored in order to produce abstract repeatable representations cannot then be fully reconstituted by finite conjunctions of such general classifications. Leibniz did think that there are fully individuating individual concepts corresponding to particulars—that particulars *are* unrepeatable *infimae species*—but also thought that only God could grasp such concepts. Created minds must do with finite, always extensible but always incomplete, collections of marks that remain essentially general in their signification. For Kant, conceptualizing the manifold of sensuous intuition—rendering its content in the form of judgments—is an infinite, in principle uncompletable task. Hegel says of this view:

In the field of the finite, absolute determinateness remains only a demand, a demand which the Understanding has to meet by continually increasing delimitation—a fact of the greatest importance—but which continues *ad infinitum* and which allows only of perennially approximate satisfaction.⁸

Indeed, for Kant each empirical judgment is the application of a rule for synthesizing other representations that has potentially infinite consequences for the course of future experience. The failure of any of these would require relinquishing or amending the judgment. My claim that the animal I am looking at is a dog may successfully synthesize an indefinite stretch of future presented intuitions, but at every point the possibility still remains that further exposure to the individual may force me to withdraw the judgment and replace it with another, say, that it is in fact a fox. The result is accordingly a thorough-going fallibilism about empirical judgments.

⁸ *Philosophy of Right*, §101 [Allen Wood (ed.), H. B. Nisbet (trans.); Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 128].

This way of thinking about the relation between particular things and the determinate concepts they fall under—about the relation between immediacy and mediation—is characteristic of the standpoint of *Verstand*. On this conception, empirical judgments are *de facto* collectively *incomplete*. But a sufficiently comprehensive set of them—not available to us because it would have to be infinite⁹—might not be. And each empirical judgment is individually prone to the possibility of *error*. But any individual judgment might also be wholly true and correct, even though we can never be *sure* of any particular one that it is. One of the most interesting, original, and radical, but also among the most difficult aspects of the conceptual transformation to the standpoint of *Vernunft* that Hegel urges on us concerns the successor conception he proposes to this traditional combination of epistemological fallibilism and acknowledgement of the *de facto* conceptual inexhaustibility of the empirical.

As a point of entry into the topic, we might consider two extreme views one might have about Hegel's final position on the nature of determinate concepts and the empirical claims they figure in, according to which there is no interesting successor conception to the traditional one available to be investigated. According to the first, or *eliminative* interpretation, it is only from the defective viewpoint of *Verstand* that there *are* any determinate claims or concepts. We are supposed to give up that delusion when we pass to the more adequate perspective of *Vernunft*. According to the second, or *quietist* interpretation, absolutely nothing changes at the object level when we pass at the metalevel from employing categories of *Verstand* to employing categories of *Vernunft* in *understanding* or *expressing* what is going on in ground-level application of determinate concepts in empirical judgment. On the eliminative reading, issues about fallibilism

⁹ And the whole set is not entailed by any finite subset of it: a failure of a certain kind of *compactness*.

and the incompleteness of the empirical enterprise lapse, not because a successor conception is required but because the enterprise itself is revealed as ill-conceived. On the quietist reading, the *phenomena* of empirical inexhaustibility and fallibility persist, although the terms in which they are described evolve in concert with Hegel's other metatheoretical innovations.

I don't think either of these approaches is sustainable. The eliminative view cannot be right, because it is clear that even after we have learned the lessons of the Logic, language remains "the existence of Spirit".¹⁰ We are still supposed to use declarative sentences to express ourselves, as Hegel does when applying the conceptual apparatus of the Logic to nonlogical material in the lectures on aesthetics, religion, and the philosophy of nature. And Hegel remained actively interested in introducing new words for distinctive empirical phenomena—for instance the term 'entoptic', which he coined in 1817, to describe colors newly discovered to appear in transparent media when they are heated (an innovation for which Goethe praised him extravagantly).¹¹ The process of forming, applying, and criticizing determinate empirical concepts and claims in natural science, for instance, is clearly supposed to continue even after we have achieved the sort of self-consciousness about that process that Hegel's logic affords—as evidenced by his dedication to support and promulgate such research in the Hegelian *Yearbook of Scientific Criticism* he edited from 1826 to 1831 (for instance, in its treatment of the researches of the Humboldts).

But the quietist view, according to which no ground-level change at all is supposed to be occasioned by that new philosophical self-understanding cannot be right either. For one aspect of *Verstand* that we must give up in order to achieve the perspective of *Vernunft* is the *semantic*

¹⁰ *Phenomenology*, Miller paragraph 652, p. 395.

¹¹ *Hegel: the Letters* Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (trans.) [Indiana University Press, 1984].

atomism that sees the determinate identity of empirical concepts as wholly unaffected by the judgments applying them that we endorse. According to Hegel's holistic successor conception, we must understand change of beliefs and change of concepts as going hand-in-hand, and think about the progressive evolution of *the* Concept: the holistic constellation of determinate claims-and-concepts comprising both doxastic and inferential commitments. Doing that means giving up the idea that we can change the judgments we make or the claims we endorse while holding onto the very same determinate conceptual contents that were in play beforehand. If Goethe had managed to establish that a common mechanism accounts both for entoptic and eoptoc colors, the result would not just have been new judgments, but a re-determination of the contents of those concepts.¹²

V. The Conceptual Inexhaustibility of the Empirical: Hegel

Hegel's own alternative to the traditional approach is neither eliminativist nor quietist about the incompleteness of the enterprise of empirical knowledge. As I read him, Hegel has a big new idea—a striking and strikingly original successor conception to that of his precursors. For him, I want to claim, the richness and fecundity of the immediate sensuous experience of particulars—the way it is bound to overflow any conceptual classification—is manifested primarily not in its necessary *inexhaustibility* by any finite set of empirical *judgments*, but rather in the necessary *instability* of any set of determinate empirical *concepts*. There is and can in principle be no set of determinate concepts whose *correct* application in empirical judgment will not eventually require us to revise and reject some of them. For that reason, any set of

¹² See “Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism...” *op. cit.*.

determinate empirical judgments is not only *incomplete* and *fallible*, but is guaranteed to be *incorrect*. That is, it not only *must omit* some claims that *are* true and *may* contain some claims that are *not* true, it *must* contain some claims that are *not* true. In short, as I want to put the point, Hegel is not just an *epistemic fallibilist* about the truth of empirical *judgments*, but a *semantic pessimist* about the adequacy of empirical *concepts*. It is not just that we are necessarily *ignorant* of some truths and possibly in *error* about others, the necessary inadequacy and incorrectness of our *concepts* means we are *necessarily* in error.

Hegel thinks that a truly critical philosophy should investigate—as he takes it none of his predecessors, including Kant, had done—the nature and conditions of the possibility of *determinate contents* of thoughts and the worldly states of affairs they present. His thought is that by doing that we might be able to find or craft a concept of content that could, at least in favored cases, intelligibly be understood to be shared by a *thought*, judgment, or commitment that *p*, on the one hand, and the *fact* that *p*, on the other.

Doing that would, in turn, make possible a better picture of the possibility of genuine knowledge of how things really are than he takes it results if we start with one kind of thing, subjects or their representings, confronting another kind of thing, objects represented, across what is inevitably an ontological and epistemological gap. As I argue in Chapter Four, the opening paragraphs of the *Introduction to the Phenomenology* make it clear that Hegel thought Kant's transcendental idealism should be understood as inexorably following out the logic implicit in such a picture, rather than as overcoming or replacing it.

Hegel endorses the Spinozist principle “Omnis determinatio est negatio.” For him, *determinateness* of content—whether of judgments and concepts on the subjective side of certainty, or of facts and properties on the objective side of truth—is always a matter of *exclusive* [ausschliessend] *contrast* with, the ruling out of, other possibilities. These fundamental relations of material incompatibility, what he calls “determinate negation”, in turn give rise to material *inferential* relations among the contents they articulate: what he calls “mediation”. So for instance being a dog entails being a mammal in that everything incompatible with being a mammal is incompatible with being a dog. To be determinate or determinately contentful just is to stand in relations of material incompatibility and material inference to other such determinately contentful items—whether on the side of thoughts or of facts. These relations are intrinsically modally robust: incompatibilities are *impossibilities* of coinstantiation, and the inferences they generate are *counterfactual*-supporting. It is as a consequence of this way of thinking about determinate contentfulness that Hegel secures the result that was so important to Kant, namely that we can never be in the supposed position from which Hume’s question is asked: one in which determinate empirical thoughts or states of affairs are fully in place, but the question of how *lawful* or *necessary* relations among them are to be underwritten is still open.

It is also an approach that rules out the semantic atomism on which Enlightenment epistemology was predicated. For that traditional picture took it that a stock of determinate concepts could be available to the inquirer, out of which judgments could be constructed that then could be sorted—fallibly to be sure—into true ones and false ones. The gradual accumulation of truths and winnowing of falsehoods then permitted the building of the edifice of

scientific knowledge, brick by brick. But according to a conception of, in Sellars' phrase¹³, "concepts as involving laws and inconceivable without them," the identity and individuation of concepts does not swing free of the judgments we endorse concerning lawful connections among them—paradigmatically, for Hegel, their modally robust material incompatibilities with and entailments of other concepts. Cognitive progress cannot then be construed just as the accumulation of true judgments, but must include also the shaping and improvement of the concepts that articulate those judgments. Besides the possibility of having incomplete or incorrect *judgments*, we have to worry about whether we have gotten the *concepts* right. So the old picture of knowledge is undercut by Hegel's approach to content. For him, the soft underbelly of Enlightenment epistemology is its implicit semantics.

This is the line of thought that leads Hegel to the holistic idea that the unit of cognition is not individual judgments or determinate concepts, but what he called "the Concept": the whole evolving constellation of claims-and-concepts, of doxastic, incompatibility, and inferential commitments. That it develops and changes—not just in the judgments it includes, but in the concepts they involve—is a consequence of its being articulated in terms of relations of material incompatibility or determinate negation. Giving up the picture of the contents of determinate concepts as settled independently and in advance of their modal connections to one another leads Hegel to think of them as *dynamic*, as changing (not just being selected) in response to other changes in our commitments. For the engine of conceptual evolution is the possibility that applying determinate empirical concepts in the context of collateral commitments, including the other judgments that are available for use as auxiliary hypotheses in multipremise inferences, can

¹³ [ref. to "Concepts as Involving Laws and Inconceivable Without Them", in *PPPW*]

lead to commitments that are *incompatible*, according to the contents of the concepts involved. And the practical significance of that incompatibility—what it is for a subject to take or treat such commitments *as* incompatible—is an obligation to *do* something, to alter or relinquish some of the commitments that led to the predicament. This is the process Hegel (in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*) calls ‘experience’—‘Erfahrung’, not the episodic ‘Erlebnis’ appealed to by the empiricist tradition.¹⁴

It is also the process of *determination* of the content of empirical concepts, whereby immediacy—how things really are, what is really incompatible with what, and what really follows from what—gets incorporated into those contents, *making* them (more) determinate. Thus if I have a concept acid* that is determinate in having as modally robust conditions of application that if something tastes sour then it is an acid*, and as modally robust consequences of application that if something is an acid* then it will turn Litmus paper red, I can be led by the immediate deliverances of sense (judgments I find myself with responsively, *noninferentially*) to commitments that are incompatible by my own lights if I run across a liquid that tastes sour but turns Litmus paper blue. In the context of the hypothesized commitments, the world is then telling me that I cannot have the concept acid* with the exclusions and entailments I started out with. As Hegel says:

We learn by experience that we meant something other than we meant to mean; and this correction of our meaning compels our knowing to go back to the proposition, and understand it in some other way.¹⁵

¹⁴ This is the sense invoked in the original title of the *Phenomenology*: “The Science of the Experience of Consciousness.”

¹⁵ [PG M63].

If I respond by altering the concept—say by restricting the inference involved to *clear* liquids, or to ones that also pass a further test—a bit of how the world really is gets built into my concept. By undergoing such a process, engaging in such a practice, articulated by relations of material incompatibility and inference, I don't just accumulate true judgments, I get better concepts—ones whose constitutive incompatibilities and inferences better track the way things really are.

The point is that for Hegel, first, determinateness of content is articulated in terms of his understanding of negation, and second, negation involves two essentially interdependent aspects: *relations* of modally robust exclusion or material incompatibility, and *processes* of concept revision in experience, in response to finding oneself with incompatible commitments.¹⁶ The existence of the content-articulating relations of exclusion just consists in the liability of the contents so articulated to revision through the experience of error. This is why “The distinct content, as determinate...is its own restless process of superseding itself, or negativity,”¹⁷ and why “determinateness, with its concrete life...is an activity that results in its own dissolution,”¹⁸ and “determinateness...is...the self-moving soul of the realized content.”¹⁹ Determinate content is “what is alive within itself;”²⁰ it is “Becoming.”²¹ It is what Hegel means by talking about “specific Notions and their organic, self-grounded movement,”²² “the rhythm of the movement of the content,”²³ “the rational element and rhythm of the organic whole,”²⁴ and by saying that “in speculative [begreifenden] thinking...the negative belongs to the content itself, and is the

¹⁶ See the extended discussion of this point in “Holism and Idealism in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*”, op. cit..

¹⁷ [PG M805].

¹⁸ [PG M54].

¹⁹ [PG M53].

²⁰ [PG M47].

²¹ [EL §88].

²² [PG M805].

²³ [PG M57].

²⁴ [PG M56].

positive, both as the immanent movement and determination of the content, and as the whole of this process,”²⁵ and that “the self-moving concrete shape makes itself into a simple determinateness...its concrete existence is just this movement...The form is the innate development of the concrete content itself.”²⁶ It is why “appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but...constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth,”²⁷ and why “The evanescent itself must...be regarded as essential, not as something fixed, cut off from the True, and left lying who knows where outside it, any more than the True is to be regarded as something on the other side, positive and dead.”²⁸

VI. Weak and Strong Versions of Hegelian Conceptual Dynamism

The *dynamic* character of determinate concepts, which underwrites the semantic pessimism that is Hegel’s successor-conception to the Enlightenment epistemic incompleteness and fallibilism version of empirical inexhaustibility can be understood in at least two different ways. For there are weaker and stronger versions of the thought that it is in the inadequacy and instability of every constellation of empirical concepts—the way each such system breaks down and point beyond itself to another—that the conceptual inexhaustibility of the empirical consists. The less committive reading merely extracts the consequences of Hegel’s broadly inferentialist holism, according to which changing the claims or judgments one endorses alters the inferential significance of those endorsements, and hence the concepts that articulate their contents. This is

²⁵ [PG M59].

²⁶ [PG M56].

²⁷ [PG M47].

²⁸ [PG M47].

a Quinean line of thought.²⁹ If meanings or conceptual contents must be individuated at least as finely as roles in material inferences, and if those inferential roles depend on what else one takes to be *true*, since that determines what auxiliary hypotheses are available for extracting consequences, then changes of belief can bring with them changes of meaning.

Further, material inference is non-monotonic: adding more premises can not only make new conclusions available, it can make old ones unavailable. The inference from the premises that this match is dry and well-made to the conclusion that if I strike it, it will probably light may be a materially good one, even though if we add to the premises that it is in a very strong magnetic field, that conclusion would not follow.³⁰ That formal feature of material inferences means that *ignorance* is as corrosive to correct inference as is *error*.³¹ Adding new bits of knowledge is in principle as transformative of inferential roles, and hence conceptual contents, as discovering the falsehood of some of one's beliefs. In the context of such a holism about the inferential articulation of any system of claims-and-concepts, then, the traditional Enlightenment understanding of the inexhaustibility of the empirical—that any empirically accessible set of true judgments is bound to be incomplete, to omit some truths that are not simply consequences of the ones it already contains—has the in-principle instability of any set of empirical concepts as a straightforward consequence.

Each new empirical belief we acquire may require us to alter our inferential commitments, and so our concepts.

²⁹ See Chapter Eight.

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Chapter Two of *Articulating Reasons*.

³¹ I argue for this claim in “Unsuccessful Semantics” *Analysis* Vol. 54 No. 3 (July 1994) pp. 175–8.

I call this conception of “the inner life and self-movement” of determinate empirical concepts a ‘weak’ version because of the ‘may’ in that last formulation. The addition of any new bit of knowledge *may* require a change of concepts. But it need not. It may be entirely compatible with our prior beliefs, and bring in its train no alteration in the counterfactual-supporting inference potentials of other sentences. Producing *all* the true empirical judgments is a Fichtean infinite task. As such, it is not completable by us. But there is a sense in which this is a merely practical difficulty. At least the notion of the totality of true empirical judgments makes sense.

Likewise, on this line of thought, the notion of a complete and correct set of determinate empirical concepts—a scheme that endorsing further judgments by applying those concepts correctly in new experiences would never lead us to correct—is perfectly coherent. We are, to be sure, not likely to achieve such a conceptual scheme, and in the nature of the case could not be in a position to *know* that we had achieved it, even if in fact we had. But this is only semantic *fallibilism*, not yet semantic *pessimism*. It adds to traditional epistemic fallibilism only the minimal lessons required by rejecting the semantic atomism of the Enlightenment.

But Hegel might be putting forward a much more radical view. He might be giving us more than just a semantically sophisticated holistic version of the standard epistemological observation that “nature shows us a countless number of individual forms and phenomena”³² or “nature...runs on into endless detail in all directions.”³³ When he says, for instance, that “In this motley play of the world...there is nowhere a firm footing to be found,”³⁴ he might not mean just that we can’t be *sure* that what seems now to be firm won’t at a later point slip. Some of his

³² [EL §21Z].

³³ [EPN Introduction, before §245].

³⁴ [EL§123].

formulations suggest that he is putting forward the much stronger claim that the very idea of an adequate, stable system of determinate empirical concepts is deeply incoherent. On this line, thinking that that idea *does* make sense is just the root mistake of metametatheoretical attitude of *Verstand*. What we must realize to move to the standpoint of *Vernunft* is that we will *always* and *necessarily* be led to contradict ourselves by applying determinate concepts *correctly*—no matter how the world happens to be—and that it is in just this fact that the true nature of the immediacy, particularity, and actuality revealed to us in experience consists.

the Antinomies are not confined to the four special objects taken from
Cosmology: they appear in all objects of every kind, in all conceptions, notions,
Ideas....The principles of the metaphysical philosophy gave rise to the belief that,
when cognition lapsed into contradictions, it was a mere accidental aberration,
due to some subjective mistake in argument and inference.³⁵

The proper conclusion is rather that “thought in its very nature is dialectical, and, as understanding, it must fall into contradiction,”³⁶ or, more alarmingly, that “For anything to be finite is just to suppress itself and put itself aside...everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient...All things—that is, the finite world as such—are doomed.”³⁷ On such a conception, the inexhaustible richness of empirical particularity essentially manifests itself in the *transformation, alteration, and development* of determinate concepts that is the process of experience.

³⁵ [EL §48].

³⁶ [EL§11].

³⁷ [EL§81].

On this reading, when Hegel says of the concrete that “the true, thus inwardly determinate, has the urge to develop,”³⁸ and that “The Understanding, in its pigeon-holing process, keeps the necessity and the Notion of the content to itself—all that constitutes the concreteness, the actuality, the living movement of the reality which it arranges,”³⁹ he means that *no* concepts with fixed, determinate boundaries can capture how things are in a way that will not turn out to require eventual revision. The case of the defective concept of acid* sketched above is not exceptional. We will *always* “learn by experience that we meant something other than what we meant to mean,” and so be obliged to “correct our meaning”.⁴⁰ We are always, and in principle, not just epistemically, but semantically *in medias res*. Coming to understand this is learning to think with the concept of the “true infinite” of *Vernunft*, in place of the “spurious infinite”, which is the “infinite of the understanding”⁴¹, identified with the “perennial ought” and the “progress to infinity”⁴² of *Verstand*. The difference is a matter of how we *understand* finite determinateness, and the infinity that it implicitly contains.

This view should not, I think, be thought of addressed to empirical concepts individually or one by one. There is no reason I cannot sort objects into those that do or do not qualify as *rigid*, or as *having a mass greater than that of the Sun*. It is only when those classifications are suitably related—by material incompatibility and material consequence—to other classifications in a sufficiently large constellation of them, that their necessary instability, their *essentially* provisional character, shows itself. The claim is rather about whole articulated *systems* of claims-

³⁸ Berlin Introduction (1820) to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (p. 20 [32])

³⁹ [PG M53].

⁴⁰ [PG M63].

⁴¹ [SL p. 139].

⁴² [SL p. 142].

and-concepts, doxastic commitments and inferential commitments relating them. So the thought in question cannot even come into view as an alternative until and unless one has given up the semantic atomism of Hegel's predecessors. The idea is that there could in principle be no *autonomous* practices of applying concepts—a set of practices one could have though one had no other conceptually articulated ones—that will not show itself in need of repair in response to non-inferential (in Hegel's terminology “immediate”) applications of them to particulars. And that is not because those applications are *mistaken*, by the lights of the practices to which they belong. Rather, applications of them that are *correct* by those lights will lead to incompatible commitments.

The idea is that at *every* stage in the development of an autonomous system of empirical concepts there lie ahead doxastic commitments (applications of concepts in judgment) that are *correct* according to the norms then in play and that are *incompatible* with various other correct applications of them. Any sufficiently comprehensive set of determinate concepts will, if applied in practice, result in *experience*, that is, the discovery of *error* requiring the subsequent adjustment not only of previously undertaken judgments, but also of the inferential commitments articulating them, and therefore of the concepts themselves.

The most precise version of such a claim about a distinctive form of the outrunning of the mediated (conceptual) by the immediate (actual) that I can come up with is this.

Empirical Inexhaustibility as Strong Conceptual Instability (EISCI):

For any sufficiently comprehensive, potentially autonomous, inferentially articulated system of determinate claims-and-concepts *S*,

there is a particular p in the world to which the concepts apply and

there are concepts C, C' in S such that mediation and immediacy collide in that either:

- ai) in the context of S (i.e. of the collateral commitments it comprises, both doxastic and inferential), the applicability of C to some particular is *materially incompatible* with the applicability of C' to it,

and

aii) C and C' both *immediately* (according to the non-inferential reporting practices of S) *apply* to p ;

or

- bi) in the context of S (i.e. of the collateral commitments it comprises, both doxastic and inferential), the applicability of C to some particular *materially entails* the applicability of C' to it, and

bii) C *does* and C' *does not immediately* (according to the non-inferential reporting practices of S) *apply* to p .

It is, of course, contingent whether we would ever, in pursuing the practices of that system of claims-and-concepts, run across the fatal particular, and whether if so we would in fact confront it with the relevant concepts. But what is *not* contingent, on the line being considered, is that the particulars and concepts that would show the inadequacy of the conceptual scheme are out there, awaiting discovery. What makes the concepts that play roles in the conceptual scheme *determinate* is that they incorporate features of how the world really is—what follows from what and what is incompatible with what. They come to do that by a process of *experience*, that is, of *error*, of the sort exemplified by the story about the defective concept acid*, and characterized by the EISCI principle just formulated. The empirical world is conceptually inexhaustible in the

sense that there is always more experience of that sort to be had, more of the world to be incorporated into our determinate concepts by the experience of error. “For the notion does not, as understanding supposes, stand still in its own immobility. It is rather an infinite form, of boundless activity.”⁴³

In the botanization I have been suggesting, this distinctive Hegelian view is denominated “strong semantic pessimism.” It is a form of *pessimism* rather than merely *modesty* or *fallibilism* because it concerns *error*, rather than *ignorance* or *uncertainty*—*incorrectness*, not just *incompleteness*. It is *semantic* rather than *epistemic*, in that it concerns *concepts* and their *contents*, rather than *judgments* and their *truth*. It is *strong* rather than *weak* because the defect it alleges is *necessary* and *in principle*, not just *contingent* and *in practice*. One might prefer to call the view “strong conceptual dynamism,” since it is not pessimistic in the sense of denying us access to something that we either need or could have. But I’ll stick to the other terminology for this manifestation of Hegel’s Romantic expressivism.

I think this strong semantic pessimism is at the very core of the reconceptualization of conceptualization that Hegel invokes under the heading of ‘*Vernunft*’—and which it is, on my view, the task of the Logic, the study of the “form determinations of the Concept”, to make explicit. One of the essential, defining features of *Verstand*, the traditional standpoint that Hegel means to lead us beyond, is its commitment to the possibility in principle of a set of empirical concepts that is ideally adequate in that no course of experience would ever oblige us to modify those concepts, as inquiry went about fallibly and revisably sorting judgments resulting from the

⁴³ [EL§166].

application of those concepts into true ones and false ones. (Whether we could ever be sure we had hit upon such a set of concepts doesn't matter for this thought). Even on the weaker reading, Hegel is urging—on the basis of a holist (because inferentialist-incompatibilist), recognizably Quinean, rethinking of the relation between judgments and concepts, between epistemic assessments of truth and the semantic contents of concepts—that cognitive progress must be thought of not just as making more true and fewer false judgments, but also as grooming and improving our concepts, that epistemic progress must also be conceptual progress. On the stronger reading he is making a far more radical and interesting claim: that a proper appreciation of empirical inexhaustibility—of the way in which immediate (non-inferential) presentations of sensuously available particulars necessarily outrun attempts to capture them in thought—must take the form not just of the incompleteness of the project of expressing them fully in judgments, but further of the collective instability of any set of concepts we might employ in an attempt to do so. I have here said next to nothing about the crucial question of why one might endorse a view of this sort, and how it might be justified.⁴⁴ My concern in the present context has been just to get it on the table. But those sufficiently familiar with the tradition will recognize that I have been venturing into the hairiest, scariest regions of Hegelian metaphysics: the bits that have led many, for instance, the less thoughtful Marxists (a category that does not always exclude Marx himself) to attribute to Hegel the view that the world itself is contradictory, inconsistent, that it always and necessarily exhibits incompatible objective properties, and led even somewhat more cautious readers to see him as claiming that the world is protean, mutable, fleeting, so bound to evade our conceptual grasp. I hope it is clear that from the point of view of

⁴⁴ Pursuing this point would require going more deeply into how things stand between the objective relation of incompatibility side of the concept of negativity and the subjective movement of experience side of it, and their relations to the movement of understanding of relations of incompatibility that Hegel calls “traversing the moments.” Some of the raw materials for such an enterprise are presented in “Holism and Idealism...”, op. cit..

the semantic reading in terms of empirical inexhaustibility that I have been proposing, such interpretations result from a failure to free oneself from, or see alternatives too, the sort of understanding of the nature of *determinateness* Hegel takes to be characteristic of Enlightenment *Verstand*.

VII. Truth, Determinateness, and Skepticism

One might think that *strong semantic pessimism* in this sense would straightforwardly entail *epistemological skepticism*. Perhaps surprisingly, it does not. The point is an important one, because Hegel is clear throughout his writings that he not only does not consider himself a skeptic, but that he considers avoiding skepticism a principal criterion of adequacy of philosophical thought. Appreciation of the way thought advances by uncovering contradictions is not to be a “way of despair”.⁴⁵ But why not? It seems no help on this point to say that determinate negations lead to positive results, if every one of those positive results in turn leads to further determinate negations: materially incompatible commitments. Even what has been called the “fallibilist metainduction”—that since all our prior theories have turned out to be false, we ought to expect all our future ones to do the same—has been thought a counsel of despair. And Hegel’s semantic pessimism is far stronger and more principled (it is an *a priori* claim about ultimate intelligibility).

Indeed, holism raises the skeptical stakes substantially, even for the weaker form of semantic pessimism. For if getting the right concepts depends on getting the inferences right,

⁴⁵ [PG M77].

and getting the inferences right depends on having all and only true judgments as auxiliary hypotheses, then the correctness of our inferences is held hostage not only to the *correctness* of our judgments (brought into question already by epistemic fallibilism), but to their *completeness* (brought into question by already by traditional ways of understanding the conceptual inexhaustibility of the empirical), given the non-monotonicity of multipremise material inferences. And concepts that are incorrect in the sense that their contents incorporate incorrect inferences—concepts like the defective acid*—are not literally true of anything, and so not fit for framing *any* true ground-level judgments. Thus, someone who does not accept a great deal of Aristotle’s world-view cannot accept that there *are* any things that have all and only the properties he attributed to, say, *brains*, as inseparable parts of organisms, and so ought to deny that, strictly speaking, he would have been saying something *true* when he said that he had two hands (not because he doesn’t have two of something, but because nobody could, strictly speaking, have *any* of what he meant by ‘χειρ’—just as there aren’t any witches, even though there were people who were called ‘witch’). The strong semantic pessimist goes on to claim that *all* sufficiently comprehensive conceptual schemes contain concepts like this, and since the rest are inferentially related to them, the rot can hardly be contained.⁴⁶ Why isn’t this not only a skeptical result—but worse, the endorsement of a particularly virulent sort of *semantic* skepticism? *Epistemological* skepticism may then appear as only one of the milder and more benign consequences of such a view. For not only our possession of *knowledge* but the intelligibility of the notion of *true* judgment seems to be ruled out, along with even the intelligibility of the very idea that our thoughts have *determinate* contents.

⁴⁶ I think Hegel does endorse something like this line of thought, but only as half the story. In one sense, all of our determinate judgments *are* false, and all of our actions are failures. But in another sense, all those judgments are true and all those actions successful. To understand Hegel’s concept of determinateness requires understanding the relations between the two perspectives. But that’s another story.

In fact, Hegel's affirmation of the necessary instability of empirical concepts is compatible with his making sense both of the *determinateness* of concepts and of empirical *truth* and *knowledge*. But securing that compatibility requires radically reconstruing the concepts of determinateness, and truth. One crucial element of that reconstrual is that *determinateness* must no longer be thought of as a property an individual empirical concept can have all on its own (as, for instance, determinateness is on its Fregean construal as the possession of sharp boundaries of appropriate application or extension), apart from its synchronic inferential relations to other such concepts and apart from its diachronic developmental relations to its predecessors and successors in a progressive tradition bound together by experiential transformations of a holistic system of claims-and-concepts. And the locus and unit of *truth* (and so of knowledge) can no longer be identified as the *judgment*.

So how should we think about truth? The previous discussion has put us in a position to add a dimension to the famous passage from the Preface of the *Phenomenology* (some bits of which have already been quoted), which was discussed already in Chapter Six:

This truth therefore includes the negative also, what would be called the false, if it could be regarded as something from which one might abstract. The evanescent itself must, on the contrary, be regarded as essential, not in the determination of something fixed,⁴⁷ cut off from the True, and left lying who knows where outside it, any more than the True is to be regarded as something on the other side, positive and dead. Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself

⁴⁷ “nicht in der Bestimmung eines Festen...”

arise and pass away, but is 'in itself', and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth. **The True is thus a vast Bacchanalian revel with not a soul sober;** yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose. Judged in the court of this movement, the single shapes of Spirit do not persist any more than determinate thoughts do, but they are as much positive and necessary moments, as they are negative and evanescent. In the whole of the movement, seen as a state of repose, what distinguishes itself therein, and gives itself particular existence, is preserved as something that recollects itself, whose existence is self-knowledge, and whose self-knowledge is just as immediately existence.⁴⁸

This passage directly addresses, not the development of determinate empirical concepts, but of the “shapes of Spirit”, which are structured by metatheoretic idioms for making sense of what is going on at the ground level of applying ordinary concepts in judgment and action. But I want to suggest, as the penultimate sentence perhaps confirms, that what is said here about *philosophical* concepts and the practices they are embedded in applies also at the ground level. (I will have something more explicit to say about this parallel below.)

Truth is thought of here not as a special, desirable *property* of judgments, but as a distinctive sort of *process* of transforming concepts (and so, judgments). It is the conception that goes along with the shift from thinking of experience as a kind of self-correcting process

⁴⁸ [PG M47]. I have adjusted the translation somewhat, in part out of admiration for Baillie’s memorable rendering of the key passage: “Das Wahre ist so der bacchantische Taumel, an dem kein Glied nicht trunken ist; und weil jedes, indem es sich absondert, ebenso unmittelbar [sich] auflöst, ist er ebenso die durchsichtige und einfache Ruhe.”

(Erfahrung) rather than as a kind of self-intimating episode (Erlebnis). To understand truth this way, we must understand the “movement of the life of truth”, which is its actuality, and not look for something that is determinate in the sense of being fixed or static. Rather, truth is to be found in the way in which successor concepts concretely *improve* upon their predecessors. In this sort of expressively progressive process, the evanescent [das Verschwindende, what disappears], what shows itself to be cognitively incorrect, not only judgments found to be false, but concepts found to be inadequate, is an essential element. That each individual commitment, doxastic or inferential, eventually shows itself to be an appearance that must ultimately be rejected is the experience of error, finding oneself with commitments that are incompatible by one’s own lights, that is the motor of the truth-process. Truth is not a matter of getting things right (once and for all), but of getting things righter (at every stage). Hegel’s strong semantic pessimism, his conceptual dynamism, means that truth for him is a kind of progress, something you make, rather than something you have—a feature first of what you are doing, and only derivatively of what you have done. And the comparatives involved in the assessments of conceptual progress do not take absolutes in Unger’s sense—to use his homey examples, they are not like “flatter than”, which can be paraphrased as “more nearly perfectly flat”, but like “bumpier than”, which cannot be paraphrased as “more nearly perfectly bumpy”.⁴⁹

The “Bacchanalian revel” is an image for the lively interactions of concepts and claims (which are applications of those concepts), as each new commitment alters its relations to each other. Their drunkenness signifies the weaving trajectories that result from those interactions,

⁴⁹ The fact that ‘flat’ and ‘bumpy’ are complementary contradictory predicates—with *flat* (to a certain degree) entailing *not bumpy* (to a corresponding degree) and *vice versa*—shows how delicate the issue of the absoluteness of comparatives is. See Peter Unger *Ignorance* [ref.]

the impossibility of any member's executing a prior plan for consecutive movements, the restless, unintentional elbowings of one another that contribute to the resulting, unpredictable evolution of the whole company. The integrity of the ongoing affair is maintained, however, for as soon as one participant has fallen exhausted and immobile beneath the table, beyond further participation—a concept showing itself inadequate and unsustainable, the commitments it incorporates accordingly dissolving—its place is taken by another, fresher reveler bringing renewed (though still temporary) vigor to the fete. Joining, sustaining, and leaving the animated conversation is the “arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but... constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life” of the party. The Concept, like an organism, is not to be identified with its constituents at some time-slice of its career, but with the process by which those elements fall away and are replaced.

Anything intelligible as a *truth*-process, as a *cognitive* process, or process of *knowing* (not now to be identified with *Verstand*'s conception of the settled achievement of truth or knowledge) must show itself to be responsive to how things objectively are. The process of experience is so responsive, since knowers engaged in it respond to the acknowledgment of error—finding themselves with incompatible commitments—by readjusting and repairing the discordant concepts that led to the contradiction of inferentially derived commitments carrying the authority of mediation by non-inferentially acquired commitments carrying the authority of immediacy, in such a way as to eliminate or avoid the incompatibility. Individual commitments count as being “judged in the court of this movement” of experience, as capturing or not

capturing how things objectively are. “Common understanding, too, is a becoming, and as this becoming, it is reasonableness.”⁵⁰

Further, to qualify as cognitive, as a practice of knowing, as truth-revealing or truth-expressing, such a *process* must also show itself to be a *progress*. The responsiveness to the immediate being of things must not be random, desultory, or circular, but *cumulatively* revelatory. However meandering the progress might be, some improving grip on how things are must be visible as gradually emerging. How this dimension of normative assessment of experience is to be understood is a long story, and I am obliged to be ruthlessly short with it here. For Hegel the *expressive progressiveness* of the process of experience is something that in principle is only visible *retrospectively*. The process must be *recollected* (by a ‘Wiederholung’), that is rationally reconstructed *as* the progressive revelation—the making explicit—of conceptual contents that then appear as having been all along implicitly in play. A paradigmatic case is where some concept-constitutive inference—say, “If I strike this dry, well-made match, it will probably light,” which might be partially constitutive of well-made as applied in this context—was modally robust under a relatively restricted range of circumstances, and then is updated by having one of the (what then becomes retrospectively visible as) implicit restrictions made explicit in the form of a collateral premise in a successor inference (and hence concept): “If I strike this dry, well-made match in the absence of a strong magnetic field, it will probably light.” Since this inference remains good under a wider range of counterfactual situations (i.e. when conjoined with a wider range of collateral premises, true or false), it better expresses what

⁵⁰ [PG M55].

objectively follows from what, and the concepts that it in part articulates are more correct than their predecessors.⁵¹

From such a retrospective, recollective, rationally reconstructive point of view, a process of experience that shows up as expressively progressive is at the same time one in which the contents of the concepts developing in it are *determined*, i.e. become *more determinate*. Once again, this comparative is not to be understood as admitting an absolute reading, so not as paraphrasable as “more nearly perfectly (fully, unimprovably, unrevisably) determinate.” For that absolute notion of determinateness is an illusion characteristic of the defective metacategories of *Verstand*. More and more of how the world objectively is (what really follows from what, what properties or claims are really incompatible), constraining the process of experience through the deliverances of sensuous immediacy (i.e. non-inferentially acquired judgments), is incorporated at each stage into the mediated (that is, articulated by inferential and incompatibility relations) contents of empirical concepts. The philosophical standpoint of *Vernunft* seeks to do all of the philosophical work for which *Verstand* called on a notion of a once-and-for-all achievable *property* of *determinateness* of empirical conceptual content—at least all of that philosophical work that is valuable and worth doing—by appealing instead to the concept of a *process* of empirical *determining* of conceptual content that is comparatively assessable—in a move formally parallel to that we have already seen enacted for the concept of

⁵¹ As we saw in Part Two, Hegel’s most helpful discussion of this sort of retrospective constitution of an expressively progressive trajectory through a tradition is in the closing paragraphs of the *Introduction* to the *Phenomenology*, where he talks about the emergence in experience of a “second, new, true object” from a first object that then shows up as having been a mere appearance of the second. It is in terms of this process that we are to understand how a distinction between noumena and phenomena can arise *within* a sequence of phenomena, and how the concept of referents or representeds, what we are talking or thinking *about*, can arise from a sequence of senses or (what then show up as) representings, what we are saying or thinking (as it turns out, about them). Laying out a reading of those dark but pregnant passages along these lines is a task that must await another occasion, however.

truth. On this view, determinateness—like truth and knowledge of how things objectively are—is a concept with real and important application; the kind of normative assessment it codifies is not dissolved in a corrosive anything-goes skeptical soup. (Hegel’s image is “the night in which all cows are black.”) But it has become a diachronic, functional concept, applicable only in virtue of the role a concept plays in an expressively progressive tradition: the way it develops, in concert with its fellows, through experience. This is a temporal, or better, *historical* semantic functionalism (and therefore, a kind of holism), in addition to the *inferential* semantic functionalism (and therefore holism), we have already considered.⁵²

VIII. Erinnerung: Vernunft’s Epistemology of Semantics

That, in very broad terms, is how I think Hegel avoids having his strong semantic pessimism collapse into skepticism. Before leaving the discussion of Hegel’s view of the proper way to understand the nature and functioning of ordinary empirical concepts (including those of the natural sciences), I want to extract one more important consequence from his approach. As indicated in Section III above, Hegel thinks that his *Vernunft* account of the *metaphysics* of semantics has important consequences for the *epistemology* of semantics—that is, for how we think about what it is to *grasp*, *convey*, or *communicate* conceptual contents. The two orthogonal dimensions of Hegel’s semantic holism—the inferential and the historical—together put severe constraints on how we can think about those issues.

⁵² A fuller discussion of this issue can be found in Chapter Eight.

For conceptual contents as Hegel conceives them cannot be specified or conveyed by *definitions* of the sort Kant deploys throughout his work: verbal formulations distinguishing the concept from all others by a set of necessary and sufficient marks.⁵³ As a rough example for a substantive concept, he offers a definition of virtue: a readiness in lawful actions that are done freely, combined with moral strength in pursuit of these with struggle against obstacles.⁵⁴

The trouble with these from the point of view of the Hegelian semantics is that they purport to fix the content of one concept by appealing to other concepts—those articulating the constituent marks—that must be supposed to have achieved full and final determinateness, fixing *their* boundaries once and for all. And that picture, characteristic of the metaconception of concepts of *Verstand*, is just what the metaconception of *Vernunft* assures us we cannot have.

Nor could one insist that at least the *relation* between, say, virtue and the mark of struggle against obstacles might be constant, even as the contents of those concepts evolved through a course of experience. For such counterfactual-supporting inferential relations must themselves be constantly assessed as candidates for possible revision in response to recalcitrant experience, along with all the rest. (Would any and every possible ground for relinquishing the mark of struggle against obstacles really just be warranting a change of subject from that of virtue?) This is, once again, a Quinean point: once they have served their purpose of introducing a concept, definitions take their place alongside other judgments in which it is applied, with at best a presumption against revision that remains defeasible and refutable. Nor is it any help for this difficulty to retreat from Kantian-Leibnizian *definitions* to what Kant calls ‘descriptions’: more subjective, purpose-relative specifications of a concept that hope to convey the content to another

⁵³ This definition of definition is offered in each of the versions of his *Logic* that we have. See for instance the Dohna-Wundlacken *Logic*, p. 489 in Kant’s *Lectures on Logic* J. Michael Young (ed., trans.), [Cambridge U. Press 1992].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 464-465.

by offering marks that are neither necessary nor sufficient, but only suggestively associated.⁵⁵

The troubles with the marks themselves, and with their association with the concept being explained, remain. For the root of the difficulty is the conception of what is conveyed:

something that *has* complete, precise, distinguishing marks.⁵⁶

So if these sorts of tellings won't do, how *are* conceptual contents to be understood, specified, and conveyed? Does the metaconceptual perspective of *Vernunft* condemn us to some sort of mere *showing* of what cannot be *said*? Not at all. *Vernunft*'s distinctive form of content-delimiting saying is an *Erinnerung*: a rationally reconstructed genealogy, which exhibits the current functional role played by the concept in a larger cognitive constellation articulated by relations of material incompatibility and material inference as the outcome of an expressively progressive process of development. Typically, this is a matter of tracing a carefully selected trajectory through the actual history of the concept, by selecting index episodes of experientially-driven revision and refinement of the concept, each of which reveals—from the viewpoint of the so-far-finally achieved conception, some important aspect of conceptual content being conveyed. Where the actual history is too confused, incoherent, or fitful, where too many steps are retraced, lessons lost, or blind alleys over-thoroughly explored, however, a cleaner, clearer path may be indicated, whereby the actual content *could* have developed, though in fact things didn't happen that way. Hegel's own accounts of the contents of substantive concepts, in the *Realphilosophie*, take the shape of one of these two species of rationally reconstructed recollection.

⁵⁵ E.g. at p. 491, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Cf. p. 489, *ibid.*

As examples, one might think of the narrative whose eventually revealed hero is the concept of animal organism in the *Encyclopedia* Philosophy of Nature (or the related discussion of the organic in the *Observing Reason* section of the *Phenomenology*), the presentation of memory in the *Encyclopedia* Philosophy of Mind, the treatment of the sublime in the first volume of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, or of the epic in the second volume, or of the religion of beauty in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, or the genealogical explanation of the concepts of property and contract in the *Philosophy of Right*.

For Hegel, I have claimed, the determinate content of ordinary, ground-level, empirical concepts, including those of the natural sciences, consist in the relations of material incompatibility and material consequence they stand in to other such concepts, and to a set of judgments that are endorsed applications of them, on the one hand, and the functional role they play in a progressive, expressive-developmental sequence or tradition of such constellations of claims-and-concepts, both earlier and later, on the other. If that account of the nature of determinate conceptual content is correct, then the *only* way to grasp, specify, or communicate such contents is by placing them in such a synchronic and diachronic context. Insofar as the whole is only sketched, the conceptual content of the functional component in question will be only approximately delimited.

IX. Logical Concepts Compared to Empirical Ones, Metaphysically and Epistemologically: a Difference and a Similarity

I have gone on at some length about how I see Hegel thinking about ground-level empirical concepts both because this is the semantic issue about which I think he has the most to teach us today and because these views are much less familiar and less discussed, and the attribution of them is accordingly bound to be more controversial, than is the case for his treatments of logical concepts. But the larger point was to motivate a particular program for a critical reading of Hegel by comparing and contrasting his views about ordinary empirical concepts with his views about his own philosophical and logical ones. As I indicated above, I take it that Hegel's distinctively philosophical, logical, or speculative (a translation common in English versions of Hegel for his "begreifende") concepts—including the "form determinations of the Concept" with which the *Science of Logic* is principally concerned—have a characteristic expressive role that is quite different from that of ordinary, nonphilosophical concepts. Their job is not to make explicit how the *world* is (to subserve a function of consciousness) but rather to make explicit the *process* of making explicit how the world is (to enable and embody a kind of *self-consciousness*). If I am right in attributing to Hegel the constellation of views about the metaphysics and epistemology of the semantics of determinate concepts I sketched in the body of this paper—strong semantic pessimism as the expression of a construal of empirical inexhaustibility as necessary conceptual instability, and recollection as the only adequate form of specification of the contents of determinate concepts, respectively—then perhaps one reason these views have not been much remarked on by Hegel's readers is that what he actually talks about in his official systematic works, the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology of Mind*, is exclusively his distinctive *philosophical* concepts. Furthermore, Hegel's views about the contents of concepts at one level cannot straightforwardly be carried over to the concepts proper to the other level.

Specifically, I think that Hegel thinks that logical concepts are different from ground-level concepts in one important respect, and like them in another. They are *unlike* determinate empirical concepts in that Hegel thinks that there *can*, indeed *must* be a final, fully expressively adequate set of logical concepts, whose application in practice will never oblige their users to revise or relinquish them. He is a strong semantic *optimist* about logical concepts. Indeed, he thinks that in his *Logic*, he has presented such a system of logical concepts. What his logical concepts are adequate *for* is just making explicit the process by which determinate content is conferred on or incorporated in the ground-level empirical and practical concepts that articulate our consciousness of how things are: the process of determining conceptual content through experience. Being able to deploy those logical, so metaconceptual, expressive resources Hegel has developed out of the raw materials he inherited from the philosophical tradition is achieving a certain kind of semantic self-consciousness. It exercising a capacity, engendered by the use of his logical vocabulary, to *say* and *think* explicitly what one has all along implicitly been *doing* in saying and thinking anything at all—namely, determining content, incorporating immediacy in the form of mediation, by engaging in a process of concept-revision through experience. This is the sort of self-consciousness Hegel calls “Absolute Knowing.”

As I indicated above, I think there is no reason whatsoever to think that Hegel ever believed that the achievement of the sort of self-consciousness about that process of experience made possible by his logical and systematic philosophical vocabulary—that is, attaining Absolute Knowledge—meant that empirical inquiry, discovery, and theorizing would come to an end. On the contrary. Although being able to bring out into the self-conscious light of day what

one had previously been obliged to do in the dark may transform empirical inquiry in various ways, it does not bring to an end the enterprise of grooming and transforming our claims-and-concepts in the light of the deliverances of sensuous immediacy.

Erfahrung—the revelation of what one had taken to be true as *mere* appearance—is the passing away that does not itself pass away. Any impression to the contrary is the result of confusing the two levels of concepts. For the *logical* enterprise of crafting expressive resources sufficient to make explicit the crucial features of the empirical enterprise *can*, *must*, and Hegel thinks, essentially *has* come to an end with a fully and finally adequate system of concepts: with what for that reason should not be called ‘*his*’ logic or philosophical system, but simply ‘*the*’ logic or system.

So Hegel thinks that empirical and logical concepts are as different as they could be with respect to the possibility of achieving a final, unrevisable, fully adequate system of them. That is *not* in principle possible for empirical concepts, but *is* possible both in principle and in practice, for logical or philosophical concepts. But there is another respect in which Hegel’s practice shows us he believes logical concepts *are* like empirical ones. It concerns not the metaphysics of their content, but its epistemology. For Hegel clearly takes it that the *only* way it is possible, in principle, to understand, specify, or convey logical or philosophical concepts is by rational reconstruction of an expressively progressive tradition of which they are the product. Both of the works in which he presents his systematic thought—the only two books he published during his lifetime—have this form. They are semantic genealogies of speculative logical concepts.

Thus in the *Phenomenology* he selects from the actual history of the development of philosophical concepts a sequence of transformations each of which can be seen, retrospectively, as conceptually epoch-making, and as cumulatively determining and revealing to us the systematic idiom—the constellation of philosophical claims-and-concepts—whose use *is* the final form of semantic self-consciousness he calls “Absolute Knowing.” In the *Logic*, what is essentially the same system⁵⁷ is presented as the culmination of a course of development that begins with the very simplest form-determinations of concepts—metaconcepts codifying a semantic self-consciousness so rudimentary that without it no concept-use at all is intelligible at the ground level—and progresses in a trajectory that does not at all pretend to track or be drawn from the empirical-historical tradition of thought by which the systematic concepts actually developed.

The *Erinnerung* presented in the *Logic* is substantially more retrospectively reconstructed, and hence more rational in the sense of more reason-revealing, than is that of the *Phenomenology*. But for both, Hegel clearly believes that the *only* way to come to occupy the cognitive position he finally arrives at is by going through the conceptual process and progress to which the long expositions of those works are guides. It is no use jumping ahead to peek at the ending and see how the books come out.

It should be remarked also, by way of qualification of the claim to discern a similarity in the treatment of logical and empirical concepts, that even along the dimension of the epistemology of their semantics, the similarity cannot be taken to be an identity. For the process

⁵⁷ So I claim; of course this is controversial.

recollected in the case of the logical concepts is *not* (in either of its versions) one of *determination by incorporation of immediacy*, as it is in the case of empirical concepts. In the logical case the transformative Erfahrung that is rehearsed in the two books is rather motivated wholly by considerations that show up retrospectively as having always already been implicit in the contents of the (meta)concepts already in play.

X. Conclusion: Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel

I want to conclude by sketching my program for a critical reading of these Hegelian theses. I take it that reading a text for its conceptual content is exploring the inferential roles of its claims: determining what one would be committing oneself to by undertaking such claims, and what might entitle one to such commitments, what would be evidence for and against them, and what they would be evidence for or against. The inferences in question are typically (sometimes, massively) multipremise inferences. That means that for each claim one has identified as central or fundamental, there is a choice possible as to the source from which one draws the auxiliary hypotheses, with which it is to be conjoined in determining its inferential role. A close or *de dicto* reading (what in jurisprudence is called a “black letter” interpretation), restricts the available collateral premises to other claims made in the text (or corpus) in question. A critical or *de re* reading, however, finds its auxiliary hypotheses, not in claims attributed to the author being read, but rather in those endorsed by the one doing the reading—not from what else the author *takes* to be true, but from what *is* true, according to the reader. The result is an assessment of what *really* follows from and would be evidence for the claims in question, whatever the author may have thought. I don’t think that one or the other of these ways of

approaching a text, for instance, a philosophical one, is “better” than the other. Each offers a legitimate perspectives on the conceptual content, that is, the inferential role, of the claims made in a text, and each provides a distinctive sort of illumination of the text it addresses. So long as it is clear which set of rules one is binding oneself by, neither enterprise should be thought objectionable in principle. Such, at any rate, is the hermeneutic methodology my inferentialist semantics underwrites.⁵⁸

The program I am sketching aims at a critical reading. I have now put myself in a position to say rather economically what I propose to keep and what I propose to emend in Hegel’s philosophy. The results of my (very selectively focused) exercise in comparing and contrasting Hegel’s views about empirical and logical concepts can be formulated in two claims:

1. Hegel thinks logical concepts are *different* from empirical concepts in that because of the difference between their characteristic expressive tasks, while there can for reasons of deep principle be no final, stable, expressively complete set of *empirical* concepts, there *is* a final, stable, expressively complete set of *logical* concepts.
2. Hegel thinks that logical concepts are *like* empirical concepts in that in spite of the difference between their characteristic expressive tasks, the only way in principle to understand, specify, or convey the contents of both sorts of concepts is by a rational reconstruction of a history of their *development*.

The underlying claims about the nature of empirical concepts seem to me to be among the most interesting and promising of Hegel’s conceptual innovations in semantics. And I also endorse what I understand to be his approach to the quite different expressive role distinctive of logical or

⁵⁸ I discuss this connection between hermeneutics and inferentialist semantics in greater detail in Chapter Three of *Tales of the Mighty Dead*.

philosophical concepts—the one epitomized in the slogan (my words, not his): “Logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness.” But I think Hegel is wrong in *both* of these claims about the differences and similarities between empirical and logical concepts.

I think he is wrong to think that we can ever finish the task of producing expressive tools to make explicit what is implicit in the process of determining empirical conceptual content. He is certainly wrong to think that he has already given us a complete set of inference-codifying concepts. The discussion of the forms of the syllogism in terms of his logical concepts of particularity, universality, and individuality in the *Science of Logic* is a *tour de force* of theoretical craftsmanship and beauty. But we now know, as he could not, that it does not and could not capture even the simplest forms of inference involving iterated quantifiers, which are essential for forming the most basic mathematical concepts. But I also think he is wrong even to think that we *could*, in principle, even if not in practice, finish the expressive task to which logical vocabulary is addressed. The simplest inference-codifying locutions are conditionals, which let one *say* explicitly *that* some inference or inferential pattern is a good one. But we assess the goodness of inferences along many semantically relevant dimensions, and different conditionals are needed to capture each. Thus asserting the two-valued (so-called “material”) conditional is explicitly saying that it is good in the sense that it will not lead from a true premise to a false conclusion. Asserting an intuitionistic conditional is explicitly saying that it is good in the sense that there is a recipe for turning a proof of the premises into a proof of the conclusion. And so on, for the conditionals of strict implication, relevant implication, entailment, quantum logic, and so on. I don’t know how to make sense of the idea of a *complete* set of semantically relevant dimensions of appraisal of inferences, and hence of conditionals codifying them. Here I

am inclined rather to a sort of metalevel *logical* inexhaustibility claim: there will always be further aspects of the process of (further) determining the contents of empirical concepts by incorporating immediacy in mediated form.⁵⁹

As to the second claim, even if the only way to grasp, specify, or convey empirical concepts is by *Erinnerung*, by an exercise in semantic genealogy, it at least does not *follow* that that is so also for logical concepts. And it seems to me that it is not so. The semantic expressive role distinctive of logical vocabulary gives us another way of understanding and conveying them. For we can start with a *pragmatic* metalanguage, in which we describe the practices that confer and determine conceptual content, and specify in those terms what it is that a particular logical locution makes explicit, introducing it as expressing *those* features. This is, not by coincidence, the path I pursue in *Making It Explicit*. I think it *is* possible in principle to say how we should think about discursive practice according to the conceptual scheme in place at the end of the *Phenomenology* and the *Science of Logic*, *without* having to rehearse the expository paths by which Hegel develops that scheme for us.

Of course, a *lot* of work would have to be done to make out these last claims of mine. After all, the very best way to show it is possible to make non-genealogical sense of Hegel's enterprise is just to do it. It will no doubt be a relief to know that I don't propose to launch into that project here. But it should at this point be pretty clear how I propose to carve off some bits of the Hegelian enterprise as worthy of being pursued in contemporary terms, while discarding

⁵⁹ Notice that to say this is not to say that there is anything about that process that in principle cannot be made explicit, but rather that for any particular set of logical expressive resources, there will always be something still left unsaid: a claim of the form $\forall \exists \sim$, not $\exists \forall \sim$.

others as inessential—what I consider living and what dead in Hegel’s understanding of conceptual content.