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© 2015 “Towards Reconciling Two Heroes: Habermas and Hegel”, Robert B. Brandom

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# Towards Reconciling Two Heroes: Habermas and Hegel

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## Abstract

I describe my engagement with Habermas's ideas, and sketch way of reading of Hegel that I take to be consonant with the deepest lessons I have learned from Habermas. I read Hegel as having a social, linguistic theory of normativity, and an exclusively retrospective conception of progress and the sense in which history exhibits teleological normativity.

*Keywords:* Habermas, Hegel, normativity, discourse ethics, history.

## Part One

I first heard Jürgen Habermas's name more than 30 years ago, in the Spring of 1979, when I had just arrived at the University of Pittsburgh as a new Assistant Professor. Those who know my Doktorvater Richard Rorty will not be surprised to hear that, although his own masterpiece *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* had just appeared, rather than talking about that, at the time he was much more interested in passing on his enthusiasm for Habermas's book *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Following his recommendation, I read that work—with mounting excitement. It did wonderful, original things with lines of thought I had always been interested in, but had never seen how to integrate with my central interest in the nature of language and its role in our lives. It was able to do so in part by offering a reading of huge swathes of the philosophical tradition since Kant. The ambition and sheer power of the work exhilarated and inspired me then—as they still do today. More than anything else, I think it was the invigorating prospect of a new way of thinking about how philosophy of language could legitimately be thought of as “first philosophy” that caught my imagination.

The familiar starting-point is the conviction that the most important event in human history—simply the biggest thing that ever happened to us (or, alternatively, that we ever did)—is the rolling and still on-going transition from traditional to modern societies, practices, and modes of thought. (If someone wants to hold out instead for the antecedent advent of civilization—large-scale cities, organized agriculture, the accompanying specialization and division of labor,

along with the elicitation of labor surplus to the requirements of subsistence—I won't insist that we choose between these contenders.) The early modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant all contributed to the development of the theoretical, ideological fighting-faith of modernity. But no-one before Hegel explicitly took that titanic transformation and the unity of its various aspects as his central, organizing philosophical topic.<sup>1</sup>

The principal aim of the Enlightenment was not only to begin to articulate the new sort of understanding characteristic of modernity, but also to say why the whole business is, or at least would be, on the whole a Good Thing, a progressive step in our development. In this regard, the Anglophone analytic philosophical tradition has been, to its credit, a loyal heir of the Enlightenment: a cheerleader for modernity, at least in its intellectual guise as empirical (paradigmatically natural) science, and (though perhaps to a lesser extent) its political guise as liberal political democracy. So was Hegel. But he took a different branch of the paths that diverge here. For he takes seriously not only the Enlightenment, but also its Romantic critics. (In a telling letter written while he was still a student at the Tübingen Stift, he expresses his enthusiastic endorsement of Kant's *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, which he and Hölderlin and Schelling had just read, but ends his account with a caution: "Still, Phantasie, Herz, and Sinnlichkeit must not be sent empty away.") Of course he does not, as the Romantics did, yearn for a return to premodern ways of life (in spite of his admiration of Greek *Sittlichkeit*). Modernity for him always represented the only way forward. And he was a ferocious critic of the anti-intellectualist side of Romanticism. He was, if you like, a romantic rationalist, but a rationalist nonetheless. His synthetic rationalism had to find a place for art, as well as science, for desire, feeling, and power, as well as reason, for the value of individuality as well as that of universality. But it could not allow thought to be displaced in favor of "a warm mist of incense and a distant jangling of bells," as he saw the Romantics as prone to do. In the end, for him, "on he who looks rationally on the world, the world looks rationally back."

Four related commitments distinguish the road Hegel pioneered from that which leads from Kant's Enlightenment to that of Russell, Carnap, and Quine. First, he was determined to understand the *unity* that emerges from the interrelations between the various aspects of incipient modernity: not only the intellectual (including scientific), but also the economic, political, bureaucratic-institutional, civic, and literary-and-artistic dimensions. Second, he was convinced that *philosophy* had something special to say about the unity the process of modernity exhibits across those various aspects. Third, he was concerned to understand also the shadows cast by the newly dawning light of the modern—some of which had been seen already, however indistinctly, by the Romantics. The shiny new apple came complete with worms, and the worms were not merely contingent interlopers, but an integral part of the ecology of the apple. Fourth, he embraced the challenge of describing the essential play of light and dark in the chiaroscuro of modernity, of diagnosing the ineluctable pathologies that accompanied its new-found health, in such a way as to lead to a therapy. This is the challenge of limning the shape of a second progressive transformation, of the same order of magnitude as that from traditional to modern society and thought. It is the challenge of making visible the outlines of a third, post-

<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see Pippin 1997.

modern age, forged in the fires of lessons learned from what was gained and what was lost in the transition to the second. (Rejecting the reactionary irrationalist strands of Romantic nay-saying to Enlightenment, while accepting many of their accompanying more positive critiques, Hegel sees the task as requiring a vision of the post-modern that is also post-romantic—a criterion of adequacy that the later Heidegger and Derrida, for instance, might well be taken not to satisfy.) None of these projects and commitments finds a place in the philosophical problematic characteristic of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. ('Modernity' is not one of its words.)

Already in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas showed, it seemed to me, the way to a reconciliation of these traditions. Two of the ideas he develops there provide the key. The first is the thought that the distinctively modern form of power consists in systematically distorted structures of communication and reflection—the discursive practices within which we both articulate our self-understandings and legitimate and appraise our practices and institutions. The second is the thought that, perversely intimate, invisible, and (so) insidious as these deformations of the practices of giving and asking for reasons are, they nonetheless open up the possibility of new forms of opposition to power that is so encoded. For they make room for *critical* discourses with an *emancipatory* potential. These are idioms or vocabularies that make explicit the implicit commitments, permissions, and prohibitions (including, but not limited to inferential ones) that give normative, purportedly rational, force to various structures of power. As explicit claims, those commitments, permissions, and prohibitions emerge from the shadowy background into the rational light of day, where they can be challenged and need to be defended—where reasons for them can be asked for, offered, and assessed. Emancipatory critical discourses hold out the prospect of giving concrete content, and so real force to the biblical injunction: "Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Hegel invents the notion of (though not the term for) 'ideology' that initiates this tradition. Especially in the *Phenomenology*, he explores the interplay between the power-laden asymmetric cognitive relations that articulate various modern social practices (residual structures of mastery, aspiring to independence, which is to say authority, without correlative dependence, which is to say responsibility), on the one hand, and the expressive inadequacies of the fundamental concepts in terms of which the self-conscious individual selves who stand in such cognitive relations and deploy those concepts understand themselves and those practices and institutions, on the other. The other great unmaskers of the nineteenth century, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud principal among them, built on his ideas to expose the extent to which modernity, whose self-conception essentially turned on putting reason where power had been, just as essentially expressed itself by making reason a mere form power can take: the modern mask it wears.

One natural response to such critical discourses is to find in them grounds for suspicion of the very concept of 'reason' the Enlightenment had put at the center of the ideology it crafted for the project of modernity. Perhaps the Platonic distinction between persuasion and verbal coercion—the very idea of a normative "force of the better reason" to be distinguished in principle from lower, merely rhetorical forms of inducing conviction—is itself an illusion. Perhaps what we are pleased to call 'reason' is *just* the distinctively modern form of power relations: politer, but no less coercive, and both less honest (in denying that

power is being exercised at all) and more all-encompassing (because penetrating and permeating the discursive core of what the self-conscious modern selves who are subjected to that power are) than premodern forms. A great deal of Foucault's work can be read as developing such a line of thought.<sup>2</sup> Thought of this way, diagnosing ideological functions of various modern discourses, practices, and institutions shows up as a distinctive form of the Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism.

Besides this romantic use of the idea of 'ideology', though, there is also a post-romantic, rationalist use of it. Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance, offered an account of the modern ideological consequences that result from identifying reason exclusively with its *instrumental* species. The problem is taken to lie not in reason as such, but in a stunted and contracted conception of it. That thought in turn opened up a space within which one might hope to carry forward the Enlightenment vision of reason as a countervailing force to mere power, hence not as simply one more form among others that such power can assume, provided a sufficiently rich and comprehensive conception of 'reason' can be crafted. That is the virgin territory Habermas has committed his labors to improve, and in which he has erected his theoretical edifice.

A central pillar of that edifice is his transposition of the issue raised by the unmaskers of ideology into a thoroughly *linguistic* key. (The twentieth century has justly been called the century of language in philosophy—no less in the continental than in the analytic tradition.) The appraisal and legitimation of social practices and institutions has become in the modern era a wholly discursive affair. That entails that unmasking an ideology is a metadiscursive matter of diagnosing systematic distortions in discursive structures: deformations of communicative action. These will have, to be sure, broadly pragmatic as well as narrowly semantic manifestations. But it is principally to the *language* we speak, the *concepts* we use, and the social-practical context in which we do so that we must look to understand distinctively modern forms of unfreedom, as well as for the tools to combat them.

One of Habermas's most basic contributions, it seems to me, is his idea that this insight presents a point of contact between these large, weighty cultural issues and the sort of detailed, painstaking work in the philosophy of language that has been pursued with single-minded precision by the analytic tradition. Here ground-level concerns, of the sort that have relatively clear-cut criteria of success and failure, can be pursued by technical means with the realistic expectation that they can do important work (in the strict sense physics gives that term: force applied through distance) in addressing heavy-duty philosophical and more broadly cultural concerns. If understanding the relations between reason and ideology is one of the principal philosophical tasks of our age, then there is indeed a case to be made for a suitably broadened (especially along the pragmatic dimension) philosophy of language as "first philosophy." And it is a case that is very different from and more comprehensive than the much narrower defense Michael Dummett offers for that claim.<sup>3</sup> While Dummett's brief is

<sup>2</sup> I think there is reason to believe that by the end of his life, Foucault had come around to acknowledging that, for all its defects, the modern form of power masquerading as reason was still a signal advance on premodern forms.

<sup>3</sup> Originally, in Dummett 1973.

addressed exclusively to philosophical researchers, Habermas's makes a claim on contemporary intellectuals more generally.

This approach provides a much-needed bridge between traditions that are motivated by different perceptions of the principal philosophic issues that center on understanding us as rational animals.<sup>4</sup> The analytic tradition has been substantially focused on—some would say obsessed with—the issue of naturalism: the relations between reasons and causes, between rational norms and causal compulsion. The tradition that Hegel initiated has been worried instead (*inter alia*, to be sure) about the issue of ideology: whether and how there is a distinction to be drawn between genuinely *rational* norms and those that express various power relations in the guise of rational ones, the distinction between reason and interests, between rational persuasion and strategic manipulation. The one tradition is concerned to understand *logos* by means of its relation to *physis*, while the other is concerned to understand *logos* by means of its relation to *mythos*.<sup>5</sup> (Putting things this way underscores, I hope, that there is no underlying conceptual necessity to choose between the sort of illumination to be gained from considering the one contrast and that to be gained by considering the other.)

Kant had the idea (and Hegel follows him down this path) that a post-theological conception of distinctively *moral* reasons could be built out of the idea that (to put the point in my terms rather than his) certain principles of conduct make *explicit*, in the form of rules, normative commitments that are *implicit* in our engaging in discursive practices at all—simply in our talking and thinking, judging and acting intentionally. The bindingness of any commitments discovered to have that status would be unconditional for us *as* ones who judge and act. (Of course, in another sense these are hypothetical, merely contingent commitments, since we could renounce our discursiveness and revert to merely animal sentience. As Sellars says: “One could always, of course, simply *not speak*—but only at the cost of having nothing to say.” Sapience-suicide is not, for deep reasons ultimately of *semantics*, an option one can ever have a *reason* to adopt.) One of the central ideas that binds the various German Idealists together is that the implicit structural *pragmatic* commitments that form the necessary background against which any *semantically* significant ground-level commitments (whether cognitive or practical) can be undertaken form in principle the basis for a philosophical ethics and a corresponding politics. It has been one of Habermas's tasks in our own time to transpose that thought into a *linguistic* key, and to develop it in the light of the results of philosophy's more than century-long fascination with language. This is his *discourse ethics*, and his idea for founding political theory on an account of the nature of communicative action.

Already in the seventies, then, I saw Habermas as putting on the table three big, interlocking ideas that significantly raised the philosophical stakes and the potential payoff, and set substantial new criteria of adequacy for the philosophy of language as it had been pursued in Anglophone analytic circles. These are:

- The idea that modernity both brings out into the light of explicit day the issue of the need to *legitimate* claims to authority, and pioneers a distinctively modern form of power—which is exercised precisely through sys-

<sup>4</sup> The topic addressed by Brandom 2009.

<sup>5</sup> This way of drawing the distinction was suggested to me by Gilles Bouche.

tematically distorted structures of communication and legitimation. Those distortions are revealed by *genealogies*, which explain our attitudes in terms of *causes* that do not provide *reasons* for them.

- The idea that while realizing that fact undercuts some of the Enlightenment's claims for the possibility of achieving freedom through reason, it need not, *pace* the conclusions that Romanticism drew, be understood as showing that idea to be wrong root and branch. For when relations of power and domination adopt that new, more occult guise, they become liable to new forms of resistance, via the development of *emancipatory critical* discourses. And
- The idea of discourse ethics, and of a kind of political theory that is derived from thought about us as essentially discursive beings.

Now the topic I want to address in the rest of this paper is this. Once Habermas had given me the eyes to see these ideas, I came to see them above all in Hegel. Only the third of them seemed present already in Kant, and there without the crucial connection to *linguistic* practice that Hegel had introduced and exploited. Yet Habermas himself keeps a wary, careful distance from the Hegel of 1806 and after, and is far more comfortable associating himself with Kant when the "Kant oder Hegel?" question arises. This is an issue we have talked and written some about, and it has come to seem to me that our differences here turn more on differences in how we read Hegel than they do in what philosophical ideas we think are worth pursuing and which not. So I want to say something about those issues of interpretation.

But before turning to that topic, I cannot resist an excursus on the first of the three ideas I just adverted to. I doubt that I can adequately convey how exciting and enlightening it was for me to read what Habermas made of what Lacan made of Freud, in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. The key interpretive point Habermas attributes to Lacan is that Freud's 'unconscious' refers to aspects of the language one speaks of which one is unaware—as I would put: commitments implicit in what one says that one is not currently able to make explicit in the form of claims one endorses. Lacan's Freud focuses on commitments that arise out of one's childhood experiences, but which take the form not of claims one would endorse if confronted on the issue, but rather of dispositions to talk one way rather than another. Neurosis does not just *manifest* itself in, but actually *consists* in the recalcitrance of such dispositions to rational confrontation by commitments one is disposed explicitly to avow and acknowledge. (Though Habermas is too polite to say this, Lacan's own neuroses, in this technical sense, make it a hermeneutic challenge to extract this insight from his extravagant prose—but that just underlines Habermas's interpretive achievement here.) Analytic philosophers had distinguished what Dennett (1983) had called "two norms attributions of belief answer to," namely, those one is disposed to avow explicitly, and those one manifests implicitly, in what one does, rather than in what one says. *That* is not a specifically Freudian insight. In order to be able to talk at all, one must distinguish between these two different kinds of consideration involved in attributing commitments.<sup>6</sup> Freud's peculiar hydraulic psychokinetics, and still more the Family Romance psychodynamics it is at some points

<sup>6</sup> As I argue explicitly in Chapter Eight of Brandom 1998 and Chapter Five of Brandom 2000.

allied to, show up as speculative theories of some individual-specific patterns of disparities between the deliverances of these two sorts of evidence. The suggestion I took from Habermas's characterization of what Lacan made of Freud is that a suitable topic for the philosophy of language (in its broader guise) to address is the class of individual-specific, relatively long-term patterns of disparity between commitments one explicitly acknowledges and those that are only implicit in what one does (including what else one acknowledges) that might be addressed as explanatory targets by psychological theories (for instance of stages of development and botanizations of kinds of disruption and their consequences). I had never seen psychoanalytic vocabularies in this light before. The possibility of telling such a story seemed to me at the time as a paradigm of how research in a relatively narrow area (analytic philosophy of language) could be made to serve more general cultural and intellectual interests.

## Part Two

The route that Habermas establishes from a theory of communicative action in general to political theory turns on the assertion within that base theory of a necessary and essential connection between discursive *meaningfulness* and the making of *validity claims* that must under various circumstances be redeemed, vindicated, or justified in order to achieve their effect. The distinctive kind of *authority* speech acts claim comes with a correlative justificatory *responsibility*. The idea is that the notion of 'meaning' that is a principal topic of *semantics* cannot be understood apart from practices of justifying, of asking for and offering justifications or reasons, which are a principal topic of *pragmatics*. Though I am not sure how comfortable Habermas would be with this way of putting things, we might think of semantic contents or meanings as theoretically posited in order to explain, or at least codify, various otherwise disparate aspects of the practices of redeeming and challenging the validity claims undertaken by using expressions that have or express those contents or meanings to perform various kinds of speech act. Such an approach would have the advantage of emphasizing the central role that Habermas's idea of organizing an account of the *use* of language ("communicative action") around the notion of 'validity claim' plays within his overall system.

Habermas has shown how much can be done with these two ideas: Thinking of discursive practice in terms of a distinctive kind of *normative* practical significance characteristic of speech acts as such, and thinking of semantics methodologically as a kind of explanatory auxiliary in the service of an account of the proprieties of the *use* of linguistic expressions, which is pragmatics. (I have called this latter sort of commitment "methodological pragmatism.") These points arise naturally within the theory of discourse. But Habermas has shown that they have resonances and consequences that reach far beyond that limited sphere.

Although he does not emphasize the point, I think it is important to realize that the first point is a lesson we owe ultimately to Kant. Kant's deepest and most original idea is that what distinguishes judging and intentional doing from the activities of non-sapient creatures is not that they involve some special sort of mental processes, but that they are things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. Judging and acting involve *commitments*. They are *endorsements*, exercises of *authority*. 'Responsibility', 'commitment', 'endorsement',

‘authority’—these are all *normative* notions. Judgments and actions make knowers and agents liable to characteristic kinds of *normative* assessment. Kant’s most basic idea is that minded creatures are to be distinguished from un-minded ones not by a matter-of-fact ontological distinction (the presence of mind-stuff), but by a normative *deontological* one. This is his *normative characterization* of the mental.

Our *freedom* for Kant consists in our *authority* to make ourselves *responsible* for judgments and actions (thinkings and doings). This is a normative characterization of freedom. The philosophical tradition, especially its empiricist limb, had understood the issues clustering around the notion of ‘human freedom’ in alethic modal terms. Determinism asserted the *necessity* of intentional performances, given non-intentionally specified antecedent conditions. The freedom of an intentional action was thought of in terms of the *possibility* of the agent’s having done otherwise. The question was how to construe the subjection of human conduct to *laws* of the sort that govern the natural world. For Kant, though, these categories apply to the *objective* side of the intentional nexus: the domain of represented objects. Practical freedom is an aspect of the spontaneity of discursive activity on the *subjective* side: the domain of representing subjects. The modality that characterizes and articulates this dimension is not alethic but deontic.

The kind of responsibility that we as knowers and agents have the authority to undertake is a distinctively *rational* responsibility, and in that sense judging and acting are *rational* capacities. Rationality in this sense does not consist in knowers and agents generally, or even often, having good reasons for what they believe and do. It consists rather just in being in the space of reasons, in the sense that knowers and agents count as such insofar as they exercise their normative authority to bind themselves by norms, undertake discursive commitments and responsibilities, and so make themselves liable to distinctive kinds of normative *assessment*. In particular, they are liable to assessment as to the goodness of their *reasons* for exercising their authority as they do, for taking on *those* specific commitments and responsibilities. Whatever the actual causal antecedents of their judgments and intentional doings, Kantian knowers and agents are *obliged* (committed) to have *reasons* for their judgments and actions.

All that is to say that Kant already endorses the two principle theoretical commitments that stand at the foundation of Habermas’s systematic philosophical edifice: a normative characterization of discursive activity in terms of validity claims, and the pragmatist methodological strategy of understanding semantic content in terms of what we are doing when we use language (apply concepts). Identifying the common influence of Kant makes it clear that it is not just a happy coincidence that these fundamental Habermasian claims are also at the center of the account of discursive practice and semantic content developed in *Making It Explicit*. I think there are good reasons—reasons that I take it Habermas and I largely agree about, even though he does not draw this conclusion—to prefer the Hegelian to the Kantian way of working out these ideas.

First, Hegel takes it that normative statuses such as authority and responsibility (what show up in the *Phenomenology* as ‘independence’ and ‘dependence’) are *socially* instituted statuses. The attitudes and practices that institute them are *recognitive* attitudes and practices: taking or treating each other in practice *as* authoritative and responsible. Further, authority and responsibility are co-ordinate statuses. Authority and responsibility come together. (There is no independence

that does not incorporate a moment of dependence—essentially, and not just accidentally.) For the context in which such statuses are non-defectively instituted is one of *reciprocal* or *mutual* [gegenseitig] recognition. Each attempted exercise of authority is at the same time implicitly a petitioning for recognition of it as valid, legitimate, or warranted, as one the author is entitled to. And that is to say that attempting to exercise authority is always also making oneself responsible to those one recognizes as authorized (entitled, perhaps obliged) to validate it by recognizing it in turn. Correspondingly, an attempt to *make* oneself responsible, even in judgment and intentional action, is authorizing others to *hold* one responsible. Hegel's fundamental idea that self-conscious individual subjects and their communities ("social substance") are alike synthesized by reciprocal recognition. This is Hegel's way of making sense of the connection between meaningful speech acts and validity claims, between discursive authority and discursive responsibility that is at the center of Habermas's account of communicative action and discursive practice. Seen the other way around, Habermas's theory of communicative action is his account of the practices Hegel talks about under the heading of "reciprocal recognition."

Hegelian Geist is the normative realm of all our normatively articulated performances, practices, and institutions, and everything that makes them possible and that they make possible. (This is the sense in which Nature is intelligible as the body of Geist.) It is socially instituted by reciprocal recognition. In particular cases, asymmetric cognitive relations are intelligible: I can recognize someone as having the distinctive bundle of authorities and responsibilities characteristic of an ambassador without having myself to be recognized by her in the same respect. But these are in principle derivative cases, parasitic on the universal normative medium of *discursive* practices. "Sprache is the Dasein of Geist" Hegel (1807: § 652) says in the *Phenomenology*. That is, the medium that gives *conceptual* shape to our norms, making judgment and agency possible in the first place. And that conceptual shape is a *rational* shape, since it is relations of *rational* authority and responsibility that articulate it. They are *rational* normative relations because of how they depend on *inferential*, *justificatory* relations between the *conceptual contents* the attitudes and statuses are intelligible as possessing and expressing, just in virtue of standing in those inferential relations to one another and to various nonlinguistic situations and performances. That normative discursive realm in which we live, and move, and have our being is itself instituted by cognitive relations that *are* constitutively mutual, reciprocal, and symmetric. Denizens of this realm, the speakers and agents who are the only candidates for exhibiting more specialized, derivative, institutional normative statuses, are, once again, rational in the normative sense of exercising rational authority and taking on rational responsibility—being permanently liable to distinctive kinds of assessment and appraisal—rather than in the descriptive sense that addresses how good they are doing what they are responsible for doing or vindicating the sorts of authority they claim.

When it is described in these terms, I hope it is clear that Habermas is the foremost contemporary theorist of Hegelian Geist, the one who has taught us the most about its fine structure, the theorist who has best found an idiom for making explicit the commitments that are implicit in our being discursive normative creatures. So, what is not to like about Hegel's version of these ideas? There are a lot of possible answers to that question, and I can only address one possible worry here.

One issue arises from what I take to be a misreading of Hegel that is evident in some recent German interpretations that understand Hegelian Geist as kind of divine mind, a social subject that is self-conscious in something like a Cartesian sense. It is a development of the right-wing Hegelian picture of the Absolute as a kind of super-individual thinker (an interpretation propounded already by Hegel's student Gabler). This reading was very influential for the British Idealist admirers of Hegel, and remains part of the popular conception of Hegel's thought among non-philosophers. Some of Henrich's students (Kramer, Düsing) seem to have drawn the conclusion from his brilliant reading of Fichte that Hegel must take as a central theme the self-reflective structure of individual self-consciousness. But one of Hegel's decisive insights is expressed in his non-mentalistic, indeed non-psychological, normative conception of self-consciousness as a social achievement that takes place largely outside the skull of the particular organism who becomes a self-conscious individual by entering into recognitive relations with others whose practical attitudes are equally essential to the institution of that status. (Already in the 1920's the neo-Kantian Hartmann (1974: 364) had emphasized that "The founding intuition of German Idealism is: 'The Absolute is reason. It is not consciousness'.")<sup>7</sup> This Hegel is Habermasian; the Hegel who is a "philosopher of consciousness" in the sense of Fichte's or Schelling's "absolute subjectivity" is not.

A standard complaint is that Hegel offers us a teleological picture, according to which the end of our conceptual development is fixed in advance, independently of our decisions and activity. History is seen as a process that unfolds according to an iron necessity, marching to its fore-ordained conclusion and completion. Hegel does, of course, say some things that invite such a reading—though it still owes more to what some Marxists made of Hegel than to his own texts. I think such a view depends on two mistakes. First, one ought to distinguish Hegel's views about speculative, philosophical, and logical concepts, on the one hand, from his view about ordinary ground-level empirical and practical concepts, on the other. As I understand them, the point of the former is to provide the expressive tools needed to make explicit what is implicit in the process of development of the latter. Hegel *does* think that there can be a fully adequate, final set of logical, metasemantic, metaphysical concepts—the organ of a distinctive kind of philosophical self-consciousness that permits us to *say* and think what it is we are *doing* when we say or think anything about ourselves and our world. But he does *not* think that bringing those concept-determining activities and structures out into the daylight of explicitness—achieving the alarmingly titled state of "Absolute Knowing" that both the *Phenomenology* and the *Science of Logic* aim to produce—settles what ground-level concepts we ought to have, or the conceptual commitments, theoretical and practical, that we ought to adopt. Inquiry and deliberation must go on as before, with the sole difference that now we know what it is we are doing when we inquire and deliberate. Explicitly, that is conceptually, understanding the way we and our concepts mutually develop and determine ourselves through our concept-using activities and practices is a unique and valuable sort of self-consciousness, the culmination of a distinctive evolutionary process. But it does not at all relieve us of the responsibility to deal

<sup>7</sup> My remarks in this paragraph are informed by a fascinating (and much more sophisticated) unpublished discussion by Franz Knappik, to which I am indebted.

with unforeseen and unforeseeable contingencies as we find out more about our world and deliberate about what we ought to do and who we ought to be.

Indeed, as I read him, Hegel denies the intelligibility of the idea of a set of *determinate* concepts (that is, the ground-level concepts we apply in empirical and practical judgment) that is ultimately adequate in the sense that by correctly applying those concepts one will never be led to commitments that are incompatible according to the contents of those concepts. This claim about the in-principle *instability* of determinate concepts, the way in which they *must* collectively incorporate the forces that demand their alteration and further development, is the radically new form Hegel gives to the idea of the conceptual inexhaustibility of sensuous immediacy. Not only is there no fore-ordained “end of history” as far as ordinary concept-application in our cognitive and practical deliberations is concerned, the very idea that such a thing makes sense is for Hegel a relic of thinking according to metacategories of *Verstand* rather than of *Vernunft*.<sup>8</sup> All that he thinks the system of logical concepts he has uncovered and expounded does for us is let us continue to do out in the open, in the full light of self-conscious explicitness that lets us *say* what we are doing, what we have been doing all along *without* being able to say what was implicit in those doings.

The other mistake that I see in attributing to Hegel this sort of fatalistic teleological view concerns the misunderstanding of the notion of ‘necessity’ that it seems to me to depend on. For this view understands Hegelian necessity as *prospective*, and the modality involved as *alethic*. And I think his notion is rather essentially *retrospective*, and the modality involved is *deontic* or normative. Here, too, I think the view I take Hegel to be developing is one that should be entirely congenial to Habermas. On the first point, “the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk.” What it is for us to “look rationally on the world,” the condition of “its looking rationally back,” is that one of the commitments that turns out to be implicit in our discursive activities generally, a commitment that is constitutive of “reason’s march through history,” is the commitment to “give contingency the form of necessity.” The way we do that is to look back over the process by which our concepts (whether determinate-empirical or logical-philosophical) have developed, and retrospectively select an expressively progressive trajectory that culminates in our current position. This sort of rational reconstruction of a tradition exhibits each of the developments on which it focuses as the making explicit of commitments that can then retrospectively be seen as having been all along implicit in prior practice. This is discerning at each point a rule that would have rationalized the concept-applications that were actually made along the trajectory that has been carved out of what actually happened.

I have urged that a good model for the process Hegel is concerned to theorize about is the process by which the contents of the concepts of common law are developed and determined in Anglo-American jurisprudence. By contrast to statute-law, the *only* source of content for these legal concepts is the decisions of judges, who apply them in the particular cases that contingently arise. Common law is judge-made law. The form of a rationale for a particular decision is the extraction of a principle from prior precedent and practice. The current judge makes explicit a rule that he claims is implicit in the prior decisions he selects as authoritative. Genealogical explanations of those decisions are always in principle available. That is, one can find causal explanations that do not cite norms,

<sup>8</sup> I have pursued this line of thought in greater detail in Brandom 2005.

rules, or principles, appealing instead to “what the judge ate for breakfast” in the jurisprudential shorthand for factors such as collateral political concerns, contingencies of class background or training in one school rather than another, and so on. But if the later judge can find a principle implicit in prior decisions that is brought out into the light of day in further refinement by the decision, that decision can nonetheless be seen as governed by that authoritative norm. ‘Necessary’ [notwendig] for Hegel, as for Kant, means “according to a rule or norm.” Placing a prior decision as an episode in a rationally reconstructed tradition of precedents that is expressively progressive in having the form of the gradual unfolding into explicitness of a principle that can be seen to emerge over the course of development of that tradition is at once turning a past into a history and giving contingency the form of necessity.

There is no thought that any particular development is necessary in the alethic sense of being inevitable or unavoidable, or even predictable. It is rather that once it has occurred, we can retrospectively exhibit it as *proper*, as a development that *ought* to have occurred, because it is the *correct* application and determination of a conceptual norm that we can now see, from our present vantage-point, as having been all along part of what we were implicitly committed to by prior decisions. This normative sort of necessity is not only compatible with freedom, it is constitutive of it. That is what distinguishes the normative notion of ‘freedom’ Kant introduces from the elusive alethic notion Hume worried about. Commitment to the sort of retrospective rational reconstruction that finds norms governing contingent applications of concepts (the process of reason) turns out to be implicit in engaging in discursive practices at all because it is only in the context of discerning such expressively progressive traditions that concepts are intelligible as having determinate contents at all. Coming to realize this, and so explicitly to *acknowledge* the commitment to being an agent of reason’s march through history, is achieving the distinctive sort of self-consciousness Hegel calls “Absolute knowing.”

Of course, no retrospective story one tells can succeed in rationalizing *all* of the actual contingent applications of determinate concepts that it inherits. (That is what in the final form of reciprocal recognition, we must *confess*, and trust that subsequent judges/concept-apppliers can *forgive* us for, by finding the line we drew between what could and what could not be rationalized as itself the valid expression of a prior norm.) And no such story is final, because the norms it discerns must inevitably, when *correctly* applied, lead to incompatible commitments, which can only be reconciled by attributing *different* contents to the concepts. Doing that is telling a *different* retrospective story, drawing a different line between past applications of the concept that were correct and precedential, and those that were incorrect and expressively not progressive. So the content of ground-level concepts develops and is determined not only according to each retrospective recollection [Erinnerung]<sup>9</sup> of it, but also between successive stories.

It is expressively progressive recollective narratives of this sort that form the background necessary to diagnose systematic distortions in discursive practices. Such distortions are not found by comparison with some abstract, utopian ideal, but with respect to a principle discovered as immanent in a tradition. What I have been outlining is Hegel’s way of characterizing the process by which we distinguish *reason-constitutive* norms from adventitious, contingent, or merely

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hegel 1807: § 808.

strategic ones, and hence distinguish *logos* from *mythos*, genuine reason from ideological commitments masquerading in the guise of reasons.

Consider the lessons we might draw from looking retrospectively at the history of the extension of the voting franchise in modern times. A progressive trajectory can be discerned, in which various supposedly essential qualifications are gradually shed: noble birth, property-ownership, being the male head of a household, not being a member of a despised minority.... We might construe this tradition as the gradual emergence into explicitness of the principle that those who are *subject* (responsible) to laws should exercise some authority in determining their content. But if *that* is the norm implicit in this development, then it seems our current practices are still only distorted expressions of it. Are we sure that excluding teenagers, resident aliens, or ex-felons aren't restrictions that belong in a box with excluding women, blacks, or those who do not own property? Reconstructing the tradition around an expressively progressive trajectory and trying to formulate a principle that makes explicit the norm that is implicit in it gives us a *critical* grip on where we are now. It opens up the possibility of seeing ourselves as still making versions of old mistakes. This Hegelian structure of "reason's march through history" underwrites Rorty's sage (if incendiary) advice that it is better for us to be politically motivated by fear than by hope—fear of making new versions of old mistakes, rather than utopian hopes not rooted in a reading of the tradition.

All this is to say that retelling bits of our history "Whiggishly"—as a progressive story about the gradual revealing, through concrete experience, of the contents of norms that we can then be seen to have been implicitly committed to all along—by no means has exclusively conservative consequences. On the contrary, it is the engine of criticism, and so of emancipation from the distortions of our conceptions of the contents of the commitments we come to acknowledge ourselves as undertaking. Notice, too, that in this example an important progressive part of what we come to see is that concepts such as 'citizenship' and 'voting franchise' are bundles of kinds of responsibility and authority that are socially instituted, and that, like 'property' have no *natural* unity or integrity that we are obliged to respect. It is open to us to repackage those kinds of authority and responsibility in accord with the best lessons we can draw from the history and tradition we are able to discern. This is an instance of the fundamental Hegelian lesson about the ultimately social character of normative statuses, which are understood as instituted by recognitive practices and articulated by recognitive relations. This insight marks a fundamental advance over Kant's understanding of the normativity he rightly saw as constitutive of our sapience. And it is an insight as fundamental to Habermas's thought as it is to Hegel's.

In this paper I have begun to point to some of the themes that, as it seems to me, unite in a common cause two of my greatest intellectual heroes and philosophical inspirations: Habermas and Hegel. I read Hegel as taking over Kant's normative theory of conceptual activity and giving it a social, and ultimately a linguistic turn. The particular way he understands discursive normative statuses as social statuses, namely in terms of practices of reciprocal recognition, provides an account of the deep conceptual connection between the claim to discursive authority constitutive of speech acts and a corresponding justificatory responsibility. When that view is combined with a pragmatist order of semantic explanation—one that appeals to features of discursive practice to explain conceptual, cognitive, and discursive contentfulness—the result is an endorsement

precisely of the fundamental link between meaningfulness and validity claims that stands at the center of Habermas's systematic edifice. As I read Hegel, he offers a powerful model for the way the contents of ground-level concepts develop and are progressively determined by incorporating contingencies that are retrospectively rationalized. Viewed prospectively, conceptual contents are made; viewed retrospectively, they are found. Both temporal perspectives are essential to understanding both the sense in which conceptual norms are determinate, and the sense in which they are rational. The way this sophisticated account integrates an acknowledgement of the sense in which discursive practices are at base and in principle *rational* practices and the sense in which they are nonetheless unavoidably *distorted* in expressing also non-rational interests and contingencies (the residue in every retrospective discerning of a tradition that is *not* rationally reconstructable as expressively progressive) seems to me to be both valuable in its own right and altogether in the spirit of Habermas's approach to communicative action. So much of my own work takes place against the background of a conversation between these two towering figures that I am very glad to have had this opportunity to begin to conduct some of it more publicly.

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