

Experience in a New Key

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Hegel's *Phenomenology*: On the Logical Structure of Human Experience

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Abstract: I argue that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an attempt to prove that human experience displays a *sui generis* logical structure. This is because, as rational animals who instinctively create a universe of meaning to navigate our environment, the perceptual content of our conscious experience of objects, the desires that motivate our self-conscious experience of action, and the beliefs and values that make up our sociohistorical experience all testify to the presence of rationality as their condition of possibility. As such, Hegel's *Phenomenology* not only requires of us that we transform the mission of logic into a description of the immanent logic at the basis of human experience, thereby making the task of logic “anthropological.” It also presents us with a novel model of human experience—one that: demonstrates the rationality already instinctively at work in our bodily sensations, perceptions, and desires; gives an account of the origins of human society and history; and also makes human experience irreducible to cognitive processes in the brain, psychological mechanisms, and the biological imperatives of survival and reproduction.

Keywords: Hegel, experience, rationality, consciousness, self-consciousness, perceptual content, desire, recognition, norms, history

1 Introduction: Rationality as the originating factor of human experience

The standard picture painted of Hegel's logic is that it is a formal outline of the logical structure of the universe.¹ On this reading, its three books—the Doctrines of Being, Essence, and the Concept—deduce the basic categories underlying what is. More specifically, they explain how every quality comes to be by substantial and causal principles via an ontogenetic process generated by the metaphysical activity of a God-like thinking subject homologous to that of judgment and syllogism, whereby ontological subjects have predicates and are what they are because of their place in a larger, rationally unfolding whole. As such, the order of the natural and human worlds is, for Hegel, not the product of the will of God, a Spinozist substance, or the laws uncovered by natural science, but instead that of “the Concept”—or, in more conventional philosophical vocabulary, Reason, *nous*, or *logos*—that exists in and organizes them through logical principles.

Contra this picture, I maintain that logic, on Hegel's conception, does not draw up the blueprints of the *physical* universe as a product of “the Concept” writ large *cosmically*. Instead, it draws up the blueprints for the universe of *meaning* generated by the *human* process of conceptualization, a universe of meaning whose logical structure—governed by the concepts we apply, the judgments that stipulate their meaning, and the patterns of inference that justify our judgments—informs the existential structure of typically human experience. This conceptual process, and nothing else, is what Hegel means by “the concept,” which now must be writ small.

¹ For some key examples of this reading in English, see: Taylor, *Hegel*; Beiser, *Hegel*; Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic*; and Stern, “Hegel's Idealism”.

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Such a universe of meaning determines human experience according to Hegel because to say that we are rational animals is to say that rationality is, for us, an *instinct*,² an innate pattern of behaviour that we largely just follow unconsciously in order to navigate our environment.³ Consequently, inasmuch as we *instinctively* use concepts, judgments, and inferences in navigating our environment, something can only have an *impact* upon our experience if it occupies a position within our universe of meaning, just as, by the same token, bats *instinctively* navigate theirs by echolocation and something only can have an *impact* upon their experience if it is positioned within their universe of soundwaves. As a result, rationality regulates our experience in two ways. (1) In terms of our bodily sensations, perceptions, and desires, we only ever experience them as revealing information about the world or pushing us to action because our *bodies* instinctively make claims about what reality is or ought to be. (2) Since claims can only be adjudicated in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, we are social and historical beings: we have an instinctive need to find consensus, driving us to rationally construct *communally shared beliefs and values that evolve over time*. In this manner, the three books of Hegel's logic—once again, the Doctrines of Being, Essence, and the Concept—deduce the basic categories by which we, as rational animals, instinctively make sense of various qualities, provide substantial and causal explanations of them, thus producing accounts of the natural and human worlds and our place in them, and how these accounts are taken as true in what Hegel calls the “pure space” of thinking:⁴ the conceptual activity of making and backing up claims in *discourse* as that which produces the existential structure of our experience of things, ourselves, the beliefs and values that constitute our societies, and even the forward march of history.

In this way, Hegel's “pure space” of thinking anticipates Sellars' logical “space of reasons.”⁵ The position of the latter is that the truth of our claims is not adjudicated by how they somehow correspond to a reality that is somehow *given*, but instead by how we assess their rational force in a practice of giving and asking for reasons, each participant in that practice checking whether any given claim is justified or justifiable. On the pragmatist conception, logic is therefore concerned with expounding the “logical syntax” that structures discourse: the rules of valid concept application, judgment, and inferences that mark how we speak to one another. This framework has, in recent times, become popular as a framework for reading Hegel (as seen in the work of Pinkard and Brandom).⁶

But, I argue, Hegel only anticipates Sellars. He is not a pragmatist.⁷ The stakes of his logic are much higher than getting the right epistemology or philosophy of language. To make, as Hegel does, rationality into an

² See, for instance, *LL*, 3, 22, 32/*GW*, 23.2: 654, 670, 679 and *SL*, 17, 18, 19/*GW*, 21: 15–16, 16, 17. In this paper, I employ the abbreviations *PS*, *SL*, *EL*, *LL*, and *PN* to refer to the following translations of Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit (PS)*, trans. Arnold V. Miller; *The Science of Logic (SL)*, ed and trans. George di Giovanni; *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1, Science of Logic (EL)*, ed. and trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom; *Lectures on Logic: Berlin, 1831 (LL)*, trans. Clark Butler; and *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature (PN)*, ed. and trans. Michael John Petry, 3 vols. *GW* indicates references to the historical-critical edition of Hegel's work in German: *Gesammelte Werke*.

³ This is the meaning of Hegel's repeated claim that we have to be cognizant of the logical principles of thinking *in order to think* just as little as we have to be cognizant of our digestive processes *in order to digest*. Cf. *EL*, 30 §2 Remark/*GW*, 20: 41. In both cases, it is a matter of something that our bodies simply do in and of themselves by their very nature.

⁴ *LL*, 8, translation modified/*GW*, 23.2: 658.

⁵ Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 160 (section 36).

⁶ The pragmatist reading has been more thoroughly developed as an interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* than of his logic. The two major texts here are Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology* and Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*. However, Pinkard has also offered various sketches of Hegel's logic in these terms. Cf. Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography*, 348–51 and “Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Logic*”.

⁷ In this regard, while I do import vocabulary from contemporary analytic pragmatism (“discourse,” “the practice of giving and asking for reasons,” “the logical space of reasons,” “norms,” “normativity,” and others), this is not because I am interpreting Hegel through this framework. Instead, it is because I find this vocabulary helpful for demystifying Hegel's language and making it speak more clearly to us. For while I believe the pragmatist reading of Hegel gets much right and I have learned much from it, I also believe that it ignores the fundamentally anthropological dimension of his logic that I highlight: his thesis that it is only because rationality is an instinct corresponding to a primal human need that we can make sense of why we engage in discourse, are driven to check each other's reasons for their claims, and follow logical norms. Consequently, Hegel provides a unique alternative to pragmatism that shares many of its positions, but with a crucial difference: rationality is not just the logical syntax of discourse, but also, and more primordially, the biological form of human life that explains why discourse existentially matters to us and informs our experience of things and ourselves.

instinct, that is, an innate pattern of behaviour inscribed into our very biological nature to satisfy some basic need or vital necessity (*Bedürfnis*),⁸ is to say that we don't just give or ask for reasons and uphold each other to their validity because that's just what we do in discourse. Instead, it is to proclaim that we have a need to *produce and consume* reasons in discourse, to communally understand the natural and human worlds, in the same way that other living creatures have a need to *seek out and consume food*.⁹ Put differently, the defining trait of being human for Hegel is that we, in our experience, are driven to pursue a species-specific *rational* interest in knowing reality, just as plants and animals pursue species-specific *natural* interests in theirs, interests that in each case are the foundation of a unique experiential life-world. It is precisely the structure of *our* experiential life-world, as made possible by our rational instinct and the categories that make it up, that Hegel's logic describes. This leads to a unique model of human experience. In the same vein that a tree is internally compelled in its experience to grow towards the sun, avoid the shade, and blossom or a dog sniff out what is edible, an unhostile environment, and who are appropriate mates *in order to sustain their lives and preserve the life of their species*, the human being is internally compelled in its experience to create a universe of meaning *in order to live*. It is this ontologically distinctive, human universe of meaning that is formally outlined by his new, idiosyncratic type of logic, a universe that we inhabit from the very beginning of our lives exactly like a plant or dog theirs. As such, logic in Hegel's recasting now describes the process of conceptualization that *makes us human*, that is, *Homo sapiens*: living creatures who are not just interested in survival and reproduction, as other animals are, but who embark, by their very nature, in the search for wisdom or truth as a need or vital necessity that structures every level of the human experience.

This implies that Hegel's conception of logic is not just a philosophy of language. It is, strictly speaking, *anthropological*. In doing logic, we do more, for Hegel, than just learn about how we *ought* to think or about the logical syntax of discourse; we learn about *our very essence*,¹⁰ the rational instinct for meaning that gives our experience the specific shape that it has. As he puts it, logic is that through which "spirit [...] thinks its essence"¹¹ by thinking the "logical nature"¹² that "permeates all [man's] natural behaviour, his ways of sensing, intuiting, desiring, his needs and impulses."¹³ Hegel's point is that, insofar as we are *aware* of something in front of us, of some motivation pushing us to do this or that, or of a belief or value that we feel the urge to uphold socially and historically, the experience of this awareness is made possible by its underlying logical structure: our awareness occurs only because we, in being aware of *x*, orient ourselves in a universe of meaning generated by a nexus of concepts, judgments, and inferences that determine *what* we are aware of and *why* we take this awareness as capturing something true about the world or how it should be—a universe of meaning that defines who we are.

I will make my case for construing human experience as made possible by its logical structure by focusing on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, his literary and philosophical masterpiece. Since the *Phenomenology* is avowedly Hegel's introduction to his logic—his "ladder,"¹⁴ as he puts it—before we can have an adequate idea of what his logic formally outlines, we must grasp what the project of the *Phenomenology* consists in. My thesis is that even when we look at its table of contents, it is unclear how the text can serve to rehabilitate metaphysics after Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as the standard picture proclaims.¹⁵ It is a book about: object-oriented *consciousness*; *self-conscious* action; scientific *reason* in modernity; the historical transformation of social beliefs and values, the communal *spirit* of a people, from ancient Greece up to

⁸ As Hegel points out, "[a]ctivity always proceeds from need [*Bedürfnis*]." *LL*, 5/*GW*, 23.2: 656.

⁹ Such a literal understanding of our need to produce and consume reasons along the lines of the animalistic need of seeking and consuming food takes inspiration from Hegel's own comparison of the instinct of reason with the instinct of eating that we see in animals: "Just as the instinct of the animal seeks and consumes food, but thereby brings forth nothing other than itself, so too the instinct of Reason in its quest finds only Reason itself." *PS*, 157 §258/*GW*, 9: 147.

¹⁰ *SL*, 10/*GW*, 21: 8.

¹¹ *SL*, 10/*GW*, 21: 8.

¹² *SL*, 17/*GW*, 21: 15.

¹³ *SL*, 12/*GW*, 21: 11.

¹⁴ *PS*, 14 §26/*GW*, 9: 23.

¹⁵ Take, as a representative of the typical reading, Stephen Houlgate. He summarizes the argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as the attempt to elevate our natural consciousness to the standpoint of speculative philosophy, which "knows *being* to have the form of *thought* and so to be knowable from *within* thought itself." Houlgate, *Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, 12.

Hegel's Germany; and the history of *religion*. It is, in brief, a treatise about human experience understood broadly.

What, then, is the project of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its connection to his conception of logic? I contend that it is the endeavour to demonstrate, through an inner exploration of the fundamental dimensions of our experience and the history of our attempts to comprehend them, that rationality is the originating factor of human experience.¹⁶ The *Phenomenology* is, as the original title of the book has it, a "science of experience."¹⁷ As such, by giving witness to the inborn rationality without which we cannot account for the very structure of human experience as it reveals itself to us phenomenologically, its project is to transform the mission of logic into a description of the rationality always already operative within human experience as its condition of possibility.

In this paper, I will concentrate on how the first two segments of the *Phenomenology*, the sections on consciousness and self-consciousness, introduce the anthropological task of Hegel's logic. It does so by displaying to us the *sui generis* logical structure of these dimensions of experience, through which the distillation of said structure becomes the proper subject matter of logic. But the purpose of this paper is not merely to come to a better understanding of Hegel. Rather, it is to show that this historical thinker, when we closely follow his thinking, presents us with resources that we can still marshal today. In reconstructing its argument, we will see how, on my reading, Hegel's *Phenomenology* provides us with a novel model of human experience filled with wide-reaching epistemological, practical, and metaphysical theses. In the first place, the *Phenomenology* demonstrates that the structure of our conscious experience of objects entails that there is nothing *given* in that experience. Our sensory and perceptive experience, as well as our experience of a metaphysical order, are always already *products* of our process of conceptualization. In other words, its structure demands that we ascribe to a form of "absolute idealism." In the second place, the *Phenomenology* demonstrates that the structure of our self-conscious action entails that the desires that count the most for us existentially are not merely *natural* desires, but the uniquely *spiritual* desire for the recognition that our claims of right are rationally justified. Put differently, Hegel's *Phenomenology* sketches an account of the experiential origins of human history as ontologically distinct from the purely natural life of survival and reproduction to which all other living creatures are beholden. As we shall see, Hegel maintains, by dint of these arguments, that our experience of objects, our experience of our actions, and our experience of society and history are irreducible to cognitive processes in the brain, psychological mechanisms, biological imperatives, or what have you, but must be grasped on their own terms. In all these ways, I contend that Hegel's model of experience is worth our attention today.

2 The experience of consciousness: rationality and the conceptual articulation of our awareness of objects

Hegel's *Phenomenology* begins with an inner exploration of our conscious experience of objects and the history of various ways we have interpreted the source of our knowledge of them: the realist attitudes of natural consciousness, common-sense empiricism, and modern science. It starts here because we tend to assume that we use our rationality to make claims about the world around us and what makes these claims true is their correspondence to facts against which they are checked. To demonstrate that rationality is the originating factor of this dimension of experience, Hegel has to show how we, the philosophical readers engaging in a phenomenology of spirit,¹⁸ are forced to concede that what explains the very structure of our conscious experience of objects and our knowledge of them as evinced in this experience is idealist, not realist, criteria once we follow the historical course of how we have tried to make sense of this dimension of

¹⁶ Here I agree with Harris: "The Hegelian Logic is, first of all, the theoretical structure of rational selfhood." Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. 2, 776.

¹⁷ Cf. *PS*, 21 §36/*GW*, 9: 29.

¹⁸ Hegel introduces the distinction between the inner exploration of each shape of experience and the "we" that follows this exploration at *PS*, 55–56 §87/*GW*, 9: 60–61.

experience. To accomplish this, he has to display to us how the objects that we normally take to be just there in our everyday existence and our epistemological practices are always already products of our process of conceptualization.

2.1 Sense-certainty: the instinctive rationality of the body

Hegel begins his inner exploration of our conscious experience of objects with a stance he refers to as “natural consciousness.” Presumably, the first manner through which we would have tried to give meaning to this dimension of experience would have arisen from the fact that in said experience objects are *immediately given* in all their concrete richness with a force that is existentially irresistible.¹⁹ This realist attitude, which Hegel calls “sense-certainty,” is committed to the objective norm of truth being this *direct* apprehension (*Auffassung*) of objects: to be conscious of something, to know what it is, does not require conceptualization (*Begreifen*), the conceptual articulation of content, because the intelligibility of things around us is, as it were, *readymade*.²⁰ In an aphorism from the time he was writing the *Phenomenology*,²¹ Hegel employs the example of a farmer’s wife (*Bauersfrau*) to drive home what he has in mind:²² a naïve realism in which we go about our quotidian business with the conviction that things are exactly as we sense them, so that we can capture what something is simply by pointing to “this” or “that” object straightforwardly present in the here and now of experience, whether this pointing is performed physically or with indexicals.

The question is why such a naïve realism would have come to abandon this conviction, however much we in our day-to-day lives work under its presupposition. The issue is, as Hegel’s internal reconstruction of the farmer’s wife’s position shows, the *shifting* nature of the objects that we experience themselves, which are in a ceaseless state of becoming and hence can never be definitively pinned down by merely referring to them. The here and now of experience to which the farmer’s wife points is, by definition, inconstant: what is *now* has already become, at the precise moment it is referred to, a *then*, just as much as a *here* has already become a *there*. In short, no object is as readymade as it seems to be in our immediate conscious experience of it: what is immediately given only shows itself by disappearing such that any intended reference to it will always miss the mark. In this fashion, when pressed to specify more exactly what she means by “this” or “that,” the farmer’s wife must grant that the straightforward presence of objects is not as stable as it initially gives the impression of being, causing her faith in the objects that populate her life-world being just there to be picked out to waver. It is a matter, then, of determining how the farmer’s wife could have had any conviction in their immediate givenness in the first place.

This can only be possible, as Hegel’s phenomenological argument goes, because the farmer’s wife, even if she is unaware she is doing so, has *already said* more than she means to. Although she takes herself to be *extra*-conceptually indicating something just there, in the very act of pointing to it physically or with indexicals she is, in fact, *already situating* it in a pre-existing and self-developing universe of meaning that she creates and which alone can make it definite by holding together all the multifarious moments of an object in its becoming. In Hegelese, the immediacy of sense-certainty is mediated. In other terms, an object can only be picked out as a “this,” “that,” “here,” or “now” replete with concrete richness insofar as it is our *discourse about it* that ties all its appearances and disappearances into one coherent whole. As Hegel puts it, such locutions only function at all to the extent that they are implicitly universals that bring together particular determinations.²³ For instance, *this* cow right here can be *meaningfully* pinned down by the farmer’s wife only because it is taken as the same one that she just saw a second ago over there, bought as a calf a couple years ago, and has seen grow up into an adult with distinctive traits and characteristics—

¹⁹ *PS*, 58 §91/*GW*, 9: 63.

²⁰ *PS*, 58 §90/*GW*, 9: 63.

²¹ *GW*, 5: 489 §11.

²² I take this reference from Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder*, vol. 1, 212. For his discussion, see 212–18 & 221–28. Admittedly, this choice of example is sexist and elitist.

²³ See, for instance, *PS*, 60–61 §§96–98/*GW*, 9: 65.

each particular instance of *this* universal “cow,” in its becoming spread over space and time, coalescing into *one* singular object by the process of conceptualization by which she gives meaning to her otherwise rhapsodic conscious experience of objects.²⁴

With these opening phenomenological moves, Hegel has begun introducing the anthropological task of his logic. We are supposed to witness to how the farmer's wife can only believe that objects are *just there* in her senses inasmuch as that she does not recognize that her *body itself* has produced their oversaturated content through a conceptual process that, because it happens at the level of her sensibility, has occurred without any mental effort on behalf of her *conscious* mind. They therefore look like “immediately given” material even though her conscious experience of them is constituted conceptually: already when she, say, sees one of her livestock, it is her *eye itself* that is placing it within a rudimentary universe of meaning that she, in the here and now of experience, involuntarily navigates. Consequently, her conscious experience has the structure of fully formed objects because that structure is made possible by a logic of its own. But this entails, as Hegel says later in the *Phenomenology* and different versions of his logic, that rationality is an “instinct”²⁵ and its categories “drives,”²⁶ whereby much of its activity is “unconscious.”²⁷ Accordingly, we see the first fashion that Hegel's *Phenomenology* serves as an introduction to his logic: it shows us that the latter will consist in unearthing the rationality *instinctively* already operative even in the most elementary level of experience—the body's sensibility—and which bestows upon that level its logical structure. In particular, its Doctrine of Being, as that which describes the basic categories via which we make sense of various kinds of qualities, will describe how even our experience of “this” and “that” in the here and now is supported by conceptual moves: “immediate sensory consciousness, insofar as its behaviour involves thinking, is chiefly limited to the abstract determinations of quality.”²⁸

In this manner, Hegel's *Phenomenology* also shows us how Hegel's logic anticipates contemporary phenomenology. By bracketing our natural attitude about objects, our spontaneous belief that they are just there in experience readymade, phenomenology seeks to describe those activities that underline what appears, in everyday life, as straightforwardly present because they are the hidden deep structures of experience. For instance, Husserl describes how the putatively fully formed objects of conscious experience arise out of pre-predicative, pre-figuring forms of perception (a strategy later expanded upon by Merleau-Ponty),²⁹ while Heidegger how they are initially disclosed from within our shared being-in-the-world, our irreducibly practical engagement with things and one another through which alone they are first made significant.³⁰ Everyday objects with factually discernable features are, on these models of experience, made possible by these prior, more primary domains of human experience.

Hegel presents an interesting alternative. On his account, it is not that objects are originarily products of a pre-cognitive domain of experience that cognition works into judgments and inferences. His thesis is that we are just oblivious, in our average everyday existence, of how experience always already stands within the logical space of reasons that we instinctively navigate to give objects the meaning that they in fact have for us, even in its most ostensibly simplest forms. The very structure of a “this” or “that,” the most rudimentary perceptual content, is always already conceptually articulated. The idea is that, were our perceptual content not from the outset conceptually articulated, we could not speak of any *experience* at all: experience requires awareness of *what* something is, but without concepts that give something determinate content, no object is *intelligibly* present. An animal may sense or practically react to its environment, but this is not enough to claim that it has an awareful experience of it. As Kant had already argued, non-conceptual experience is “blind,”³¹ but “blind experience” is an oxymoron. *At the level of experience*, therefore, there is nothing for Hegel more primary than the instinctive activities of cognition that are the categories. As

²⁴ PS, 63–64 §§107–108/GW, 9: 68.

²⁵ Cf. PS, 149 §246/GW, 9: 140; LL, 3, 22, 32/GW, 23.2: 654, 670, 679; and SL, 17, 18, 19/GW, 21: 15–16, 16, 17.

²⁶ SL, 17/GW, 21: 16.

²⁷ SL, 15, 16, 19/GW, 21: 13, 15, 18

²⁸ EL, 136 §85 Addition/GW, 23.3: 860.

²⁹ Cf. Husserl, *Experience and Judgment* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

³⁰ See, for instance, §§15–16 of Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

³¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A51/B75.

such, objects are only *immediately given* to our consciousness with the existential irresistibility that they command over us because the human body's rationality constructs, unconsciously *behind our backs*, a complex inferential machinery that produces these experiences by placing what are otherwise mere stimuli into a universe of meaning. This renders the conceptual process that the human body performs part of the deep structure of experience that only logic can unearth, even if a phenomenology of spirit can display to us the necessity of this deep structure as its condition of possibility.

Nevertheless, in Hegel just as in contemporary phenomenology, our conscious rationality ultimately does derive from processes *below* our conscious mind that we must recover. Conscious rationality is but *one* moment in the genesis of experience, indeed one that comes *late upon the scene*. But these processes, although they are still more expansive than our conscious rationality, are nonetheless formally rational. In this sense, Hegel's model of experience is innovative because it denies any obvious dualism between the body and mind in that there is no distinction in kind between how the former processes information and the latter: there is rationality, logic, *all the way down*.

2.2 Perception: the theory-ladenness of our experience of objects

Let's return to Hegel's phenomenological argument. The lesson that we, the philosophical readers, are supposed to have drawn from the inner exploration of sense-certainty is that its objects are *never* mere "thises" or "thats" immediately given in the here and now. They are, *from the very beginning*, objects whose becoming, as spread over space and time, are held together from within a universe of meaning that we instinctively create. But this an insight that the farmer's wife still cannot attain. She is still convinced by the realist attitude that something just there is the basis of our conscious experience of objects. It is thus only fitting for her to try to locate a more stable object that can serve as an objective norm of truth. And she finds one in the notion of a thing with properties. For a thing is not just a "this" or "that" fully present in experience—as an object that appears just as much as it disappears, a thing is complex in that it holds within itself a multitude of "thises" and "thats" as that which belong to it as its own. In other words, it is a universal that holds together a number of particular instances, thereby making itself something singular. Recognizing this, the farmer's wife now realizes that there are no objects directly apprehended (*aufgefasst*) in conscious experience. Instead, they are only there in our *perception* (*Wahrnehmung*) insofar as *we take them as true* (*nehmen...wahr*), that is, as what is truly present in the otherwise inconstant play of appearance. With the move from sense-certainty to perception, the *Phenomenology* introduces a new realist attitude, one that has learned from the failures of the previous to give meaning to our conscious experience and the knowledge of objects we have through it: a more philosophically informed type of common-sense empiricism.³²

The problem, however, is that the farmer's wife is once again unable to find anything self-identical in experience that could undergird perception. She slowly discovers that a thing has two irreducible and, indeed, contrary meanings. On the one hand, it is, as a universal with particular determinations, a *many*: an inclusive medium, what Hegel calls an "also," in which its various properties coexist.³³ On the other hand, properties are "only determinate in so far as they *differentiate* themselves from one another, and *relate* themselves to *others* as to their opposites."³⁴ In contemporary vocabulary, we would say that properties stand opposed (1) to one another in relations of *mere difference* (whereby they can be combined even though they are incommensurable with one another) and (2) to other properties in relations of *material incompatibility* (whereby they mutually foreclose one another and hence cannot be combined). It is by so "negating" one another in a determinate manner that properties acquire their full-fledged meaning as traits *proper to this* rather than *that* thing: by having these properties, which precludes it from having other properties without changing whatever it is, a distinction is drawn between this thing and something else. For instance, this tulip has the properties of being "in front of me" and "alive," which means it cannot have

³² In labelling it so, I am following similar terms as Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. 1, 238.

³³ *PS*, 68 §113/*GW*, 9: 72.

³⁴ *PS*, 69 §114/*GW*, 9: 73.

the properties of being “over there” or “dead.” Were it over there, it would be a different tulip and were it dead, it would be detritus.³⁵ Consequently, a thing is equally a singular *one*, an exclusive unity that stands on its own by its intrinsically contrastive function. Nevertheless, for an object that is just there in perception to be simultaneously *one* and *many* is a contradiction. As a result, the farmer's wife ends up, in order to stave off this contradiction, alternating between which dimension of a thing she takes as true and which she takes as merely subjective.

First, the farmer's wife takes the *oneness* of a thing as true. But she is nonetheless aware that the thing itself has *many* properties. To save the self-identity of the thing, she thus conceives of its properties as stemming not from the thing itself, but instead from how her body's physiology processes its unity in a piecemeal manner, making our perception the medium in which they coexist.³⁶ Yet the price that she pays for keeping the objective unity of a thing separate from the subjective play of its properties in us is that the object becomes unknowable. It gets turned into a Lockean substance—“nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those Qualities we find existing”³⁷—since it is only in virtue of its properties, now taken as subjective, that it is recognizable as the distinctive thing that it is. Acknowledging this, she modifies her realist stance. She takes as true the thing as a medium in which properties coexist. As such, the thing itself is construed as a bundle of *many* self-identical properties directly discovered in experience and onto which perception can latch, whereby any sense we have of them belonging together in *one* thing becomes a side effect of how the conscious mind in perception brings about said unity through subjective, psychological mechanisms.³⁸ Nevertheless, she has difficulty “prevent[ing] these properties from collapsing into the oneness of the thing” because it is the assembly of mere differences and material incompatibilities that define what this thing distinctively is in contrast to other things, hence making these properties moments of its exclusive unity.³⁹

This entails that a shift must occur in how we comprehend our conscious experience of the perception of objects. It demonstrates that there is nothing self-identically present in perception (a unity that perception subjectively breaks apart, or a multitude of properties it subjectively pieces together) and on the basis of which we can explain the structure of that experience.⁴⁰ A thing is experienced *as* this or that thing only because: (1) it has properties that we *know* can coexist; (2) these properties contrast it from other things with properties that we *know* are materially incompatible with its own; and (3) it is precisely this intellectual framework that *makes it known* as a distinctive thing that is separate from other things. In other words, our *perception* of a thing is a moment of our *understanding* of it: what we *take as true* in it is never something just there, but a product of our *process of conceptualization*. As a result, even a perception as mundane as that of table salt (Hegel's favourite example in this chapter) is only intelligible insofar as a theoretical construct produced by discourse provides the structure of our experience of it. When we see it immediately there *as* salt, we in fact *already see* that: it is this or that thing with these properties that can coexist (white, granular, tart, etc.); these properties exclude it from being something else (say, sugar, which while also white and granular is sweet); and these properties thereby belong to it as the thing that it is (salt). Our perception instinctively navigates, as its condition of possibility, a complex universe of meaning. And this implies that empiricist common-sense epistemology, which thinks that theory is somehow built upon some kind of raw given data, is wrong. There is no direct access to things or their properties: our conscious experience of objects is, *from beginning to end*, theory-laden.

This shows a second manner that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an introduction to the anthropological task of his logic as a description of the logical structure that supports human experience. Our perception of the innumerable array of diverse things that just seem to populate our average everyday existence is governed

³⁵ A more detailed analysis along these lines can be found in Brandom, “Holism and Idealism in Hegel's *Phenomenology*”. For a systematic take on determinate negation in Hegel and in particular his logic, see Sparby, *Hegel's Conception of the Determinate Negation*.

³⁶ PS, 72 §119/GW, 9: 75–76.

³⁷ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 296 (Book II, Chapter XXIII, §2) & 305 (Book II, Chapter XIII, §15).

³⁸ PS, 73 §121/GW, 9: 76.

³⁹ PS, 73 §121/GW, 9: 76.

⁴⁰ PS, 75–76 §125/GW, 9: 79.

by our understanding of them—and the more robust our understanding of something is, the more vibrantly will that thing present itself to us. Conceptualization does not *remove* us from the richness of “immediate” experience; it is, for Hegel, at its very origin so that, in any real-life movement from day-to-day perception to a scientific understanding of what we perceive we are only trying to make more explicit or concrete what is already implicitly or abstractly there as when we, for instance, take this salt with these properties as a substance with accidents (sodium chloride) and further as something that was causally produced (by, for instance, a refinery of halite deposits) within a larger causal nexus (of the natural and social worlds). In describing the basic categories through which we instinctively seek substantial or causal principles in things, Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence therefore describes (1) how the intellectual frameworks developed by the understanding, even when we are unaware of them doing so, influence how we experience even the most quotidian things and (2) those conceptual moves by which we instinctively seek to make those frameworks as determinate as possible.

But Hegel’s thesis concerning rationality as the originating factor of our most rudimentary sensations and everyday perception has another implication. It maintains that our conscious experience of objects cannot be explained by recourse to, say, neurological mechanisms through which the brain processes stimuli nor psychological mechanisms such as association in tune with memory. While these do play a role in experience, that role is regulated to that of the *pre-history* of experience: these naturalist narratives may explain how certain data becomes *physiologically* present as something towards which we can react reflexively, just as other animals reliably respond to such data, but it can never explain how we become *conscious* of such data, its *intelligible* presence in experience. This is because, on Hegel’s account, to be conscious is to be aware or know, even if only at an instinctive level, *what* something is. But for it to be so intelligible as whatever it is, we must introduce conceptual distinctions, which themselves come in two types: material incompatibilities and material inferential consequences. By way of illustration, already when we *see* snow falling from our window, we are *directly* conscious that it is not rain, sleet, or hail, even though these are all types of precipitation, and also that it is cold and likely icy outside. Otherwise, such a seeing would not constitute a moment of *awareness* in that we would not know what it is *about*—once again, a non-conceptual experience would be blind, which is paradoxical. Therefore, *whenever* we consciously experience anything at all, we are always already oriented within such a nexus of conceptual distinctions. For we humans, sentience is, according to Hegel, overwritten by sapience: our conscious experience is *made possible* by the conceptual distinctions we bring into play, the universe of meaning that we create. In Hegel’s words: “Because we are thinking beings, thinking is in everything.”⁴¹ As a theory of categories, his Doctrines of Being and Essence are thus concerned with formally outlining the most fundamental concepts that we apply in discourse to become conscious of the world around us, defining a wide array of such concepts. These range in complexity from “quality,” “existence,” and “finitude” through “pure quantity,” “continuous magnitude,” “discrete magnitude,” “number,” and “measure” to “the essential,” “ground,” “law,” “possibility,” “contingency,” “necessity,” “substance,” “cause and effect,” and “reciprocity” (to name some salient examples). And because these fundamental concepts obey a normativity of their own—what constitutes a valid application of them in discourse is set by the logical space of reasons itself—to grasp why our conscious experience is populated by, for example, an awareness of some indistinct sounds behind us, the degree of temperature of the room, or the movement of billiard balls as one provokes another into motion upon impact, we must reconstruct the process of conceptualization through which we come to have the conviction that we are conscious of these objects. In formally outlining this conceptual process, Hegelian logic formally outlines how our experience comes to have the structure it does. But this entails that *no* reduction of experience to merely neurological or psychological operations will ever suffice to account for why we *take* something to be whatever it is.

2.3 The understanding: the idealist source of true beliefs

As we have seen, the problem that plagues the common-sense empiricism of perception is that, faced with a thing and its properties, the perceiver must sort out what is objective and subjective in their conscious

⁴¹ *LL*, 5, translation modified/*GW*, *GW*, 23.2: 656.

experience of an object, but cannot do so on the basis of merely given data. Instead, objects are recognized *as* objects only insofar as our conscious experience of them is always already navigating a nexus of conceptual distinctions, a series of material incompatibilities and material inferential consequences that define the constitution of our experience of something. With this realization, we, the philosophical readers, move from the standpoint of perception to that of the understanding as providing the very structure of our conscious experience of objects.

And the farmer's wife, too, has learned from her own experience. She has learned that things cannot be made fully intelligible just by pointing to them, but require an irreducible moment of theorization. But she will still not back down from her conviction that something *out there* is ultimately what makes our discourse about things true. Although a stable object is not to be located *in the sensible realm of experience*, she now maintains that it can be *in the supersensible realm of which our experience is the appearance*. Appearance is indeed in flux. Nevertheless, this flux is not a series of *random, erratic* happenings. It has recognizable *patterns*. To the extent, therefore, that the metaphysical foundation of objects is taken to be that which governs the ever-changing, sensible world of appearance, she postulates that the "real" world consists in a realm of eternal laws that, while transcending phenomena, nonetheless immanently structure them.⁴² Since a law is only a law to the extent that it effectively reigns over its domain, this new realist attitude establishes a putatively sure-fire method for securing knowledge: we know when our theoretical construction of a law corresponds to a law in the supersensible world because it can be *verified by* the observable world according to the degree to which our model of the latter enables us to make *successful predictions* about it.

Now the farmer's wife leaves her farm and goes about the task of building scientific hypotheses. In going about explaining things and their properties, however, she runs into three problems even when her models make successful predictions. (1) She encounters an innumerable multitude of laws that explain an innumerable multitude of phenomena. This entails that the world of laws itself needs explaining too: we must construct a *system* of laws, a Theory of Everything, that makes them intelligible, the impetus for which in Hegel's time was how Newton was able to subsume the particular laws of motions for earthly and celestial bodies under more general laws.⁴³ Yet the more we reduce laws to more universal ones in order to explain why they exist, the more these universal laws become distant from the realm of appearance they are intended to explain.⁴⁴ As such, they are not easily verifiable through it. (2) Even on the basis of more universal laws that explain particular ones, we come to realize that we have no idea *why* any law obtains. They all display an insurmountable facticity: we can easily conceive it possible that *other* laws could obtain.⁴⁵ (3) Since the content of such constructions derives from experience, it may be the case that they are just accidentally true *generalizations*, instead of getting at something *lawful* behind phenomena.⁴⁶

If our theoretical constructions of laws are not obviously made true by the world of experience—a system of laws may not have a *direct* connection to experience;⁴⁷ we can always wonder *why* a law obtains; and a law can be attacked as a *mere generalization*—the question that arises is how we can have conviction in their truth that we do, in fact, display in our experience. At this point, idealism enters upon the scene as the solution. According to Hegel, we must phenomenologically concede that what accounts for our knowledge of objects is *idealist* rather than *realist* criteria when we recognize that the only reason why the work of explanation is ever deemed successful is because, in dealing with appearances and their alleged foundation in transcendent principles, the understanding is only ever dealing with the *movement of understanding itself*.⁴⁸ In other words, a theoretical construction is taken as true whenever we are *rationally*

⁴² PS, 90–91 §149/GW, 9: 91.

⁴³ PS, 91 §150/GW, 9: 92.

⁴⁴ PS, 91 §150/GW, 9: 92.

⁴⁵ PS, 93 §152/GW, 9: 93–94.

⁴⁶ PS, 94–95 §§154–155/GW, 9: 95.

⁴⁷ This is a problem acknowledged by contemporary Theories of Everything such as superstring theory. The latter argues that, even though the entities that it postulates as the building blocks of the universe may not admit empirical verification, we have still good reasons to posit their existence.

⁴⁸ PS, 101 §163/GW, 9: 100–101.

satisfied that our discourse about something adequately explains the phenomenon under investigation by capturing what it truly is.

Let's take an example. Stars themselves do not make what we say about them true or false. At first, they were likely just experienced as meaningless blotches of light. However, when we began to notice that they moved in recognizable patterns and then formed an understanding of these patterns, we were led to postulate a Ptolemaic universe—and were rationally satisfied that this model was the right one because it was determined to be the best explanation. Regardless, it slowly became evident that this model could not fully explain all heavenly motions. This lack of rational satisfaction led to a new model: that of a Copernican universe. This is why, for Hegel, truth is never a mere matter of verification against *given* facts, but a function of our universe of meaning *itself*, which, without external support of truth, establishes what counts as true beliefs that arrive at facts (the sun orbits around the earth vs. the earth orbits around the sun).⁴⁹ Here we see the third manner that the *Phenomenology* functions as an introduction to the anthropological task of Hegelian logic. In describing how we create a universe of meaning that provides the logical structure of our conscious experience, we describe an idealism that is “absolute.” For the *Phenomenology* has, according to Hegel, now proven that our universe of meaning is *self-contained* and *self-justifying*: self-contained, because to become more consciously aware of what an object is, to track truth about it, we just have to say more and more about it in discourse; self-justifying, because our certainty that the object is whatever we say it is comes from the rational satisfaction derived from what is said, not from correspondence to given facts, for what is taken as a fact is itself a product of our process of conceptualization. As Hegel puts it elsewhere: “All revolutions, whether in the sciences or world history, occur merely because spirit has changed its categories in order to understand and examine what belongs to it, in order to possess and grasp itself in a truer, deeper, more intimate and unified manner.”⁵⁰

3 The experience of self-consciousness: rationality and our metaphysical achievement over (our animal) nature

With this latest phenomenological insight gained, a significant change has occurred in our comprehension of the structure of our conscious experience of objects. We, the philosophical readers, are supposed to have given witness to how, in picking out “this” or “that,” encountering a thing with properties spread throughout space and time, or gaining more complex knowledge of what something is, we are creating a universe of meaning with no external support. This signifies that consciousness is never merely awareness of *an object*: there is always an element of *self-consciousness* at play, an awareness of the *distinctively human* interests whose satisfaction we seek whenever we engage in making an object intelligible. For making things intelligible is an *activity* that we perform and, as Hegel emphasizes, “[a]ctivity always proceeds from *need*,”⁵¹ whereby, without this need that impels our rational activity of conceptualization, we would never go about it. Hence, when we tear open the curtain of appearance to see what lies behind, *we see only ourselves*.⁵²

The conceptual artistry of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is such that whenever a major transition occurs like that from consciousness to self-consciousness, we get a more comprehensive picture of human experience, in particular of how certain dimensions of it are the deep structure supporting others and of the role rationality plays in the constitution of our experience. What we overlooked in the inner exploration of our conscious experience of objects was the fact that the rationality behind our realistic attitude is not just a *neutral* task of conceptualization: were it not for the *distinctively human* interests motivating that activity, we would never be internally compelled to create a universe of meaning in the first place. Consequently, to grasp why we are

⁴⁹ I take this point from Žižek who argues that one of Hegel's great achievements is “embracing the self-referential play of the symbolic with no external support of its truth. For Hegel, there is truth, but it is immanent to the symbolic process—the truth is measured not by an external standard, but by the ‘pragmatic contradiction,’ the inner (in)consistency of the discursive process.” Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 77–78.

⁵⁰ *PN*, vol. 1, 202 §246 Addition/*GW*, 24.3: 1183.

⁵¹ *LL*, 5/*GW*, 23.2: 656.

⁵² *PS*, 103 §165/*GW*, 9: 102.

instinctively driven to create a universe of meaning, we must situate our understanding, which provides the basic structure of our consciousness of objects, in the broader *goals* of human self-conscious action.

Hegel's transition from consciousness to self-consciousness thus appears to mirror not only Kant's declaration of the primacy of the practical in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,⁵³ but also more strikingly Fichte's more elaborate transcendental deduction of the same in his 1794 *Science of Knowledge*—a theme repeated later in the 19th century in Marx's famous Thesis on Feuerbach XI that “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world; the point, however, is to change it”⁵⁴ and in certain pragmatist theories of truth. The common thread between these positions is the claim that theory is reducible to a moment of the more primary goals of praxis. The innovation of Hegel's inner exploration of self-consciousness, quite to the contrary, lies in its reversal of this claim by contending that theorization does not arise from a world of pragmatic concern to which it is *subordinate*, but instead responds to an *irreducible* existential concern: the distinctively human interest in theoretical knowledge, thanks to which we create a universe of meaning *and act in it the way that we do* because we cannot help, as rational creatures, to explain the world around us and our place in it. Consequently, the net result of his phenomenological argument will be that it is only because we are, as it were, theoreticians *from the very start*—or because, as Hegel puts it elsewhere, “a human being as a thinking being is a born metaphysician”⁵⁵—that human praxis has the ontologically unique structure that it does.

3.1 Desire: the ontological distinctiveness of animal vs. human action

Hegel begins his inner exploration of our self-conscious experience of action with the internal reconstruction of the human being as seemingly fully immersed in nature. The reason for this is that one might think that we humans, at the historical beginnings of experience, were beholden to entirely natural desires. In living out our lives, our primary pragmatic concern would have therefore been, just like that of all other organisms, to satisfy the main interests of all life: survival and reproduction.

But why would have humanity ever stopped behaving like animals under the sway of naturally motivated interests and started establishing communities whose own interests surpass these? According to Hegel, the movement from our “immersion” in nature to human society and history has to do with the constitutive *restlessness* of human desire, which makes it impossible for us to be satisfied as long as we only chase after the objects required to survive and reproduce. This, of course, separates us from other animals. As Hegel later argues in his *Philosophy of Nature*, animal life is characterized by a cyclical oscillation between *lack* and *fulfillment*: whenever a certain desire emerges, an animal feels a lack, setting in motion a process through which it seeks out, consumes, or creates, via its instinctual programming, whatever object will fill in said lack—water, food, shelter, a mate, or what have you.⁵⁶ Although any given natural desire will eventually reassert itself, the natural desires of animal life are *not* restless. At the very moment that the intended object is procured, a natural desire is *fully satisfied*, no matter how transient that satisfaction may be. Hegel's point is that the human being is barred from all such *natural* satisfaction. Our desires are, from the very outset, *spiritual* rather than *natural*: we crave something more than a particular object and the satisfaction that our desires result in can never be reduced to the physiological gratification that an object grants.⁵⁷ What, then, do our desires seek and what is the defining feature of their satisfaction?

Hegel's original thesis is that our desire is *irreducibly* spiritual because its effects on human experience already display the work of rationality *over* our given biological systems. Our rationality, as it were, “short-circuits” our immersion in nature. At the most basic level, because we must conceptualize to have a

53 Cf.: “the concept of freedom [...] constitutes the *keystone* of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even of speculative reason.” Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 139.

54 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 574.

55 *EL*, 155 §98 Addition 1/*GW*, 23.3: 871.

56 *PN*, vol. 3, 141 §359/*GW*, 20: 358.

57 *PS*, 109–110 §175/*GW*, 9: 107–108.

conscious experience of objects that we may desire, the fact that we are rational changes the very structure of our desires. For instance, we never merely perceive *this* or *that* object; we always perceive objects as *particular* instances of *universal* classes. As a result, even Aurignacian hunters and gathers would have desired more than just this or that object: since issues such as their theoretical knowledge of its supply would have influenced their actions, if an object (e.g., water) was, say, known as a scarce resource required for their existence, in desiring it they would have felt that it was their right, a right that others should acknowledge.⁵⁸ Similarly, if we take the mythopoetic origins of ancient Greece, what counts for the warriors battling at Troy is not the mere physiological gratification of a natural desire (e.g., for Helen) that has been thwarted, but Menelaus' and Paris' feeling that their desire is their right, one that others should take as inalienable.⁵⁹ In other words, our desires are always already caught up in our *claims* of right to which we feel *justified* because of their place in our universe of meaning.

The upshot of Hegel's analysis of distinctively human desire is two-fold. On the one hand, while we may assume that conceptualization was not *consciously* active at the historical beginnings of human experience, nevertheless that such agents *felt* themselves justified to the objects of their desires demonstrates that conceptualization is instinctively at work *in the body as its desires motivate action*. As such, our desires are not a testament to our rootedness in nature *despite* our rationality: rather than being derived from the instinctual programming of our biological systems, they always already stand in the logical space of reasons. On the other hand, as soon as desire is so structured, we are foreclosed from being satisfied by drinking, eating, having shelter, and copulating like other animals are. These are never sufficient to live a *fulfilling* human life because what existentially matters the most for us is not so much the *objects* we claim as a right or the physiological *gratification* they grant. A claim of right must be vouchsafed by others, since when we are denied something we *think* ourselves entitled to for this or that reason, it is not just that we lose access to some particular object—*our self-conscious identity, which is tied up with this claim, is struck down*. For what we desire the most is the social recognition of our claims of right and the feeling of prestige that comes from others upholding their validity as things we are entitled to. As Hegel puts it, “[s]elf-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”⁶⁰

On this basis, Hegel next submits two interrelated theses concerning the structure of our self-conscious experience of action as inflected by the desire for recognition. First, this desire renders self-consciousness intrinsically antagonistic. A *claim* of right inevitably comes across the *counterclaim* of another self-consciousness. Such a state of affairs is inevitable because, in seeking recognition, we are in effect investing what are otherwise *singular*, naturally conditioned desires with *universal* significance—in short, asserting *ourselves*, whereby claims that stand in conflict with one another are unavoidable. And this is why, in Hegel's narrative, the struggle for recognition does not begin in loving dialogue, but rather in a life-and-death struggle. Our desire for recognition is so existentially irresistible that we can be prepared to die and even murder to get our fundamental *ideas* of who we are and what we have a right to recognized. Hegel's phenomenological argument is that we can only make sense of our readiness to risk death in the name of recognition on the assumption that rationality is, implicitly at least, here too instinctively at work. Since our doings, just as much as our sayings, move in the logical space of reasons, if we take an action, a specific move in that space, to be valid, then we have no reason to *ever* retract that action or move, but on the contrary *every* reason to demand that all others who move within it plan their next action or move accordingly. Rationality, contra the optimism of the Enlightenment, is therefore the origin of strife as well as brutal cruelty—our capacity to inflict violence upon one another instead of ceding to someone's demanded rights—even if it is also the hope for reconciliation.

But this, for Hegel, proves that we humans have decisively swapped merely natural desires for strictly speaking spiritual ones. It entails that rationality implants within us motivations for actions with no biological

⁵⁸ While the example is my own, I take the general idea from George di Giovanni, “Religion, History, and Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*”, 230–31.

⁵⁹ This is a modified version of an example from George di Giovanni, “¿Cómo de necesaria es la Fenomenología para la Lógica de Hegel?”

⁶⁰ *PS*, 110 §175/*GW*, 9: 108.

gain in homeostasis or the preservation of the species.⁶¹ It renders us, as Hegel revealingly expresses the matter, “not attached to life,”⁶² thus making the structure of human action ontologically unique in the animal kingdom. In virtue of this, our self-conscious experience reveals a profound metaphysical truth: that there is an *ontic gap* between the goals of merely animal action and those of typically human action; that we, by recourse to our rationality, can stipulate the conditions for our own existence (the rights that are existentially all important for us) *against* any pre-given natural facts about who we are (biological imperatives). Put differently, whereas the natural desires of an animal instinctively program it to seek out, consume, or create certain objects to survive and reproduce, our own rationality, while itself an instinct, is an instinct of an idiosyncratic type. For the sake of what we *think* ourselves entitled to, we can override our basic animal nature, our very biological system, by supplanting our natural desires with greater spiritual ones—just as, for instance, when a protester will go on a hunger strike to get the worthiness of a cause recognized, even to the point of courting death.

This leads to Hegel's second thesis about the structure of our self-conscious experience of action as inflected by the desire for recognition. A claim of right cannot so possess us unless we take it as *justified*, as something that, because it is rational, I have no reason to step back from—and neither do you. Consequently, when *I* demand that you acknowledge my claim and *you* demand that I acknowledge yours, what we are actually demanding is that *we* come to a rational consensus on what our mutual rights are. Recognition is, according to Hegel, a *cognitive* achievement and the feeling of prestige that we so strongly crave is a uniquely *rational* satisfaction: it derives from others accepting that the reasons we give for our claims of rights are sound. However, consensus is the basis of *any* social existence. Our rationality therefore not only changes the structure of desire; it also makes our desire for the recognition, the most fundamental human desire that provides the basic structure of our self-conscious experience of action, the source of social normativity. For as soon as individual agents come to some agreed upon understanding of their mutual rights, which is the ultimate aim of the struggle for recognition on Hegel's account, a community with shared beliefs and values, a shared universe of meaning, emerges.

Herein lies the originality of Hegel's theory of recognition. It signifies that the authority of practical norms is not grounded in a social contract to which we consented in order to escape the state of nature, a war of all against all in the competition for resources in which the strong prevail. Hegel maintains that we were *never* in a state of nature, but *always already* in a struggle for recognition in which the question of which rights we should bestow upon one another is centre stage, even when violence is at play as in the battle of life and death. It also signifies that their authority cannot be grounded in any biological or psychological fact about what we are—say, in those values or laws that would best promote our biological flourishing or in some psychological capacity for sympathy that marks our given animal nature. What underlies their authority are our rational deliberations about the rights we claim such that the norms that make up our practical ways of life are *self-grounding*.

It is precisely in virtue of this that Hegel can here, already in the second segment of his *Phenomenology*, tell us what it means for us to be beings endowed with “spirit,” Hegel's term of conceptual art for our rational capacity of thought. The idea is that, because we are instinctively rational, our self-conscious experience of action is so structured that (1) we *demand* that others recognize our rights, leading to the emergence of communities, and (2) these rights *irreducibly* arise from within the logical space of reasons. Consequently, “spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I.’”⁶³ Put differently, human self-conscious experience is “absolute” in the sense that it has no external support for the truth of the interests that it pursues (e.g., they are not, say, explainable by naturalist biological or psychological principles). Instead, it rationally elects what existentially matters for it through a process of

⁶¹ As Kojève succinctly says: “the being that is incapable of putting his life in danger to attain ends that are not immediately vital—i.e. the being that cannot risk its life in a Fight for *Recognition*, in a fight for pure *prestige*—is not a truly *human* being.” Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 41.

⁶² PS, 113 §187/GW, 9: 111.

⁶³ PS, 110 §177/GW, 9: 108.

conceptualization that aspires towards a shared understanding of the goals of human action (an “I” that is a “We” and a “We” that is an “I”). The human being, as a being of “spirit,” therefore creates practical ways of life “in and through itself” that are *self-contained* and *self-justifying* insofar as the normative structure of these ways of life is solely determined from within the logical space of reasons. But this in effect makes “spirit” into what the tradition called “substance,” except now writ small semantically rather than large cosmically. Just as Spinoza’s substance is fully self-causing and self-propelling, so now the logical structure, the universe of meaning, that makes possible our self-conscious experience of action is seen as spontaneously self-determining and self-unfolding.

3.2 From the master and slave to unhappy consciousness: the self-writing epic of human history

At this stage in Hegel’s inner exploration of self-consciousness, we enter the realm of human history, moving from the prehistorical life-and-death struggle to the emergence of slavery in ancient Greece, then to stoicism and skepticism, and ending with the so-called unhappy consciousness of medieval Christianity as that which sets the stage for the modern scientific revolution.⁶⁴ Hegel’s narrative of this historical movement from one practical way of life to another, however, does not focus on how one such way of life rose to dominance after the fall of another due to social conflict, geopolitics, or economic issues as, for instance, conventional histories may.⁶⁵ Instead, it seeks to show, by internally reconstructing the self-conscious *experience* of these ways of life on their own terms—the goals of action that they set for themselves and how they justified these goals from within a certain universe of meaning created and sustained by a variety of social practices (the work of the slave, the cosmic speculation of the stoic, the critical scrutiny of the skeptic, and the rites of the Christian)—how this very historical movement itself exhibits the presence of rationality as its originating factor.

Hegel does so by demonstrating that an internal reconstruction of this historical movement exhibits the three-step conceptual movement of immediacy, negation, and negation of negation that is the structure of logical thought.⁶⁶ First, he traces how different historical players, by acting according to their goals and participating in certain social practices, gave their lives a seemingly coherent meaning. Next, he traces how acting in this manner unexpectedly caused the universe of meaning that informed their self-conscious experience to generate doubts about itself and in so doing made that universe fall into existential despair. Finally, he traces how these doubts led to the existential necessity of new goals, created and sustained by new social practices, because the very language through which their semantic world established itself was acknowledged as rationally unsatisfying. In this fashion, this internal reconstruction testifies to the fact that history, rather than being, say, the haphazard coming- and ceasing-to-be of peoples and civilizations, tells a unique kind of story. What we see is that each way of life is only comprehensible insofar as we come to see how its *own experience* of itself offers a solution to the problems experienced in its past, problems that jeopardized the very shared universe of meaning that made the community a community in the first place—problems that may have been forgotten in this new way of life as it lived itself out, but which we, the philosophical readers, can now recognize as a fundamental part of their history. In this manner, to grasp the emergence and decline of practical ways of life, we must grasp the implicit judgments and patterns of inferences that made one such way of life rise to prominence as a *studied* response to its antecedent trials and tribulations and which eventually laid the groundwork for its own undoing as this response brought forth distinct problems of its own—we must grasp, in brief, the logical chain of *thought* that underlines our history as a *self-writing epic* of humanity seeking the best goals that we should, together, strive to realize.

⁶⁴ In Hegel’s philosophical narrative, with the historical move from medieval Christianity to the modern scientific revolution we move from the *Phenomenology*’s inner exploration of self-consciousness to that of reason and consequently from one fundamental dimension of experience to another. This transition, however, stands outside the scope of the current paper.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed account of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* that makes the same point and upon which I draw, see Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 10–12.

⁶⁶ Cf. *SL*, 737–750/*GW*, 12: 238–251 and *EL*, 125–133 §§79–82/*GW*, 20: 118–120.

This puts into relief the primary lesson of Hegel's inner exploration of self-consciousness: if our desire were simply natural and not always already spiritual through and through, we would have forever remained at the level of self-preservation and the propagation of our progeny and never have entered the realm of human history, the experiential origins of which are precisely at stake in these passages. For in this inner exploration, we are supposed to give witness to how human history itself is a metaphysically *sui generis* domain of experience made possible by our rationality. It shows how the becoming of practical ways of life spread over space and time is, if Hegel's analysis holds and as he himself summarizes in the final chapter of his *Phenomenology*, "a conscious, self-mediating process,"⁶⁷ one that can only be understood on the spiritual, i.e. rational terms that it sets for itself. Consequently, we see the fourth manner that the *Phenomenology* serves as an introduction to the anthropological task of Hegelian logic as the distillation of the logical structure of human experience. In describing the basic categories underlying judging and inferring, Hegel's Doctrine of the Concept does more than describe the rational consistency of valid thought or the logical syntax of linguistic discourse: it describes the rationality that has been instinctively operative throughout human history as its condition of possibility. This is because, for Hegel, it is absurd to believe that, if we are rational animals, our rationality would not be at work in the very products of the human spirit through which we humans seek to know ourselves. Just as our own discourse about the world is *rationality self-revising* in light of any new information that it discovers, so too should the evolution of our own beliefs and values concerning ourselves, as well as the social practices by which we uphold them, exhibit the same logical structure of self-correction and growth in light of any new information that we discover about ourselves.

4 Conclusion: The innovations of Hegel's model of experience

The project of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to prove that it is our rationality that makes typically human experience possible. Once that proof has been furnished, we can then turn our attention to unearthing the logical structure that underlies it in all its fundamental dimensions, thereby changing the very mission of logic to a formal outline of the logic immanent to human experience itself.⁶⁸ As Hegel puts it, now "[s]pirit has won the pure element of its existence, the concept,"⁶⁹ his choice term for the human process of conceptualization as such. But in so reconceiving logic, Hegel's *Phenomenology* is not only developing an original anthropological conception of logic. He is also sketching an equally original account of at least three aspects of our experience: (1) our *bodily* experience and how said experience, instead of being merely "subjective" in the pejorative sense, already paints an objective picture of the world around us and how we should act in it; (2) our *sociohistorical* experience and why this feature of experience is a necessary component of human experience as such; and (3) our experience of *freedom* as something irreducible. This is because since we, for Hegel, have an instinct to produce and consume reasons for our beliefs and actions just as other animals have an instinct to seek out and consume food, our rationality informs our experience in three ways.

1. *Bodily experience.* Insofar as we are instinctively rational, our bodily sensations, perceptions, and desires are never mere "brute" givens, as they may be for other animals. We only ever experience them as revealing information about the world or pushing us to action because they are already the product of our *bodies* making well-reasoned claims (e.g., when I see that the streets are wet, I directly believe this is true because my body has instinctively inferred it had rained, just as much as if I desire to act, I must, at some level, feel that I am entitled to perform this action). As such, even perceptual content—the most rudimentary conscious experience—*always already* stands in the logical space of reasons. In this manner, there is no distinction in *kind* between our sensations and perceptions of the world and the more abstractive and reflective claims of science (the so-called "manifest" and "scientific" images): each is a form of *truth-taking* geared at capturing what the world is, each therefore aiming at

⁶⁷ PS, 492 §808/GW, 9: 433.

⁶⁸ For more on how Hegel's logic is a theory of human experience, see Joseph Carew, "Describing the Rationality of Human Experience".

⁶⁹ PS, 490 §805, translation modified/GW, 9: 432.

objectivity, the one only differing from the other in the *degree* of conceptual artfulness they make use of to establish what is true and objective. In a similar vein, there is no distinction in *kind* between mere desire and normative demands. Even at the level of mere feeling, we are *always already* concerned with what we are rationally owed as our most basic rights to the point that this is, in fact, our most fundamental feeling. As such, there is no problem for Hegel to explain why we ever became ethical and social norm-following creatures: the question of normativity is simply written into the very structure of self-consciousness.

2. *Sociohistorical experience*. As just highlighted, to the extent that we are instinctively rational, we are creatures internally compelled to make well-reasoned claims about what is true and how we should act towards one another. But because well-reasoned claims are rationally binding within the logical space of reasons, in instinctively making them we also instinctively demand the recognition of our systems of beliefs and values from others. In this regard, Hegel's model of experience provides an interesting explanation for why our experience has a *communitarian* dimension. We do not form groups because we are gregarious animals for whom the biological success of the species is dependent upon cooperation. For Hegel, to say that spirit is an "I" that is a "We" and a "We" that is an "I" is to say that we, by dint of our rationality, have an internal compulsion to articulate group "mentalities," *communally shared beliefs and values*: the reasons you and I provide for our beliefs and actions, even if they are in conflict with one another, have an inborn tendency to converge in shared outlooks and goals as they get rationally worked out in logical space of reason. This is because the logical space of reasons cannot tolerate the inconsistency generated by contradictory claims, leading to the existential necessity of consensus. However, this implies more than an original explanation for the emergence of human societies and their historical development. It also implies that, intrinsic to the very structure of sociohistorical experience as logical in nature, are grounds for an optimism in dialogue: insofar as we all are engaged in the project of *justifying* our claims of right *by our very nature*, our competing claims should be able to come into conversation with one another so that, logically, we surmount our differences and come to common understanding of what to believe and how to act.
3. *The experience of freedom*. Last but not least, in arguing that our conscious experience of objects, self-conscious experience of our own actions, and sociohistorical experience is made possible by our rationality, Hegel is additionally arguing that the very logical structure of human experience entails its radical *freedom*. For human experience, inasmuch as its originating factor is rationality itself, cannot be reduced to a simple product of nature. To the extent that we are rational animals who instinctively *demand* reasons for our beliefs and actions, we also *respond* to these reasons. Consequently, the *entirety* of human experience—everything from how we sense, perceive, understand the world, and act in it—is the *spontaneous* product of our deliberations, rather than being merely the result of how our brains causally *react* to sensory data, our biological systems to certain ingrained imperatives, our minds to psychologically conditioned behaviors, or what have you. Hegel's point is that, since we can always take up a *critical* attitude *against* these within the logical space of reasons (by, say, rationally deciding that what physiologically *seems* one colour is, in reality, another due to sub-optimal lighting, that an impulse to eat is the wrong move in a hunger strike, or a certain association is unfounded), the domain of human experience is *sui generis*. In an age where reductive and eliminative accounts of human experience prevail, perhaps it is here that Hegel's own model of human experience, as first set out in his *Phenomenology*, offers worthwhile arguments to be employed against them and displays its continued relevance for our times.

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