

## Hegel's Speculative Sentence: An Onto-grammatical Reading of "Lordship and Bondage"

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I am honored to participate in the present *Festschrift* for Jere Surber and hope that my contribution may repay, in some small way, the great debt that I feel toward him. In many ways, it was his curatorial role in the Hegel Society of America's biennial 2002 meeting, on the theme of "Language in Hegel", that launched my academic career. Indeed, the inclusion of my early work on Hegel's notion of scientific objectivity and language, in the HSA meeting and later in his edited publication on the subject for the SUNY Hegel series<sup>1</sup>, not only gave me the confidence to pursue my linguistic reading of the German idealist but helped me make the shortlist for the post that I have now held for 20 years, at the University of Ottawa.

It is somewhat ironic that my earlier work on language in Hegel concentrated on his notion of speculative language in its later, systematic, *Encyclopedic* extension, and that I have only fairly recently "returned" to the speculative sentence or proposition (*Satz*) as it first appears in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the subject of Jere's groundbreaking essay in *Hegel-Studien*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when I began working on language in Hegel, I judged the *Phenomenology* passage to be simply an early, rather inchoate attempt to express what would be later developed and refined in the mature system. More specifically, I considered the judgment (*Urteil*) form of the speculative proposition, as Hegel discusses it in the *Phenomenology's* Preface, to be accomplished and thus more worthy of study in his more mature work, in the *Logic* and the *Encyclopedia*. There, we find the destiny of judgment realized in the perfected (*vollkommene*) form of the syllogism (*Schluss*), as articulated in the system itself. Happily, my

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Reid, "Objective Language and Scientific Truth in Hegel", in Surber, Jere (ed) *Hegel and Language*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Jere Surber, "Hegel's Speculative Sentence", *Hegel-Studien* 10 (1975) pp. 210-30.

latest work, which involves the examination of language forms in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, has caused me to revisit Hegel's early, pivotal text on the speculative sentence and Jere's important commentary on it.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the features that Jere discusses in his "Speculative Sentence" article are fundamental to my own grasp of language in Hegel, generally: the ontological nature of judgment (*Urteil*), the psycho-grammatical nature of the propositional *Subjekt*, the distinction between names (*Namen*) or signs (*Zeichen*) and words, how the meaning of the predicate rebounds on the subject, and, perhaps above all, the metaphysical dimension that scientific (systematic) language necessarily opens onto. I would like to briefly retrace my own discovery of these elements as they arise in Hegel's mature *Encyclopedic* writings and then revisit the "speculative sentence" passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, as the passage pertains to my recent *Phenomenological* project. Proceeding in this way will allow me to introduce some new elements, which, building on the foundations explored in Jere's 1975 article, further explore the onto-grammatical nature of Hegel's speculative sentence and how its copulative space of ambiguous meaning has political purchase. To illustrate this, I will apply the onto-logic of the speculative sentence to the famous "Lordship and Bondage" text, a dialectic with clear political overtones. There, we will see how understanding the *Subjekt* as both a grammatical entity and as the expression of thinking consciousness implies the meaningful agency on the part of the predicated Other.

In the early article that I referred to above, "Objective Language and Scientific Truth in Hegel", I explore the question of objective truth inherent within the Hegelian system, as it is presented in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. I show how truth, in the systematic

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Reid, *Hegel's Grammatical Ontology: Vanishing Words and Hermeneutical Openness in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021)

context, is not a matter of correspondence between language and a divorced, substantial reality, whether material or ideal. Rather, for Hegel, true scientific (systematic) objectivity takes place in the actual discourse of Science (*Wissenschaft*) itself. Such an idea of scientific discourse or logos relies first and foremost on a theory of language that we find presented in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* book of the *Encyclopedia*, which I discuss in my article. There, I demonstrate how the idea of objective language in Hegelian Science revolves around the distinction between the linguistic sign (*Zeichen*), i.e. the raw signifiers that Hegel also sometimes calls “names (*Namen*)”, and, on the other hand, what he generally refers to as “words (*Worten*)”. Thus, when, in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (section 464), Hegel writes, “The existence, as name, needs an Other, [i.e.] meaning from the representing intelligence, in order to be the significant thing [*die Sache*], true objectivity”, the “significant thing” that he is referring to is what he means by “word”. This claim is supported in the previous section, where we find: that “names as such [are] meaningless words”.

Although Hegel’s use of the terms is not always rigorous, signs (names or signifiers) are, for Hegel, predominantly natural, that is to say, *immediate* and largely arbitrary entities, arrived at through common *usage*, in the French sense of the term: being worn away into a current shape through the friction of use. Words are more substantial. They are, in fact, empty signs that have been invested with thought, “intelligence” or meaning. Put briefly, thought invests linguistic signs (found immediately there) with meaning in order to produce words. Of course, words alone do not Science make. Rather, as meaningful entities, they take place in greater grammatical structures of significance: in sentences (propositions, judgments) and finally, in the ultimate Hegelian grammatical structure: the syllogism, which is the perfected (*vollkommene*) form of what he calls the Concept. Anyone doubting the syllogistic outcome of the grammatical

proposition, should re-read the last sentence of the “Judgment” chapter of the *Greater Logic*: “By virtue of this fulfillment of the copula, the judgment form [a.k.a. proposition] has become the syllogism.” Understanding what exactly Hegel means by the “fulfillment of the copula”, in the *Phenomenological* setting, is the subject of my most recent work on the speculative sentence.

I will return to the question of the copula below. For now, I would like to briefly revisit the notion of “fulfillment or filling (*Erfüllung*)”, mentioned in the sentence above. The idea of “filling” obviously implies content, and this is a key aspect of Hegel’s notion of objectively true discourse, i.e. of the logos that he calls Science. If we take Science itself as the most perfected (*vollkommene*) form of the syllogism or Concept, then we must expect this form to be thoroughly fulfilled with content. Further, if we respect the grammatical foundation of judgment (*Urteil*) as the fundamental structure that comes to inform the systematic syllogism, then it becomes necessary to see how the syllogistic embodiment of Science derives its content from forms of judgment. Since the *Encyclopedia* itself espouses the syllogistic form of a universal moment (the *Logic*), a moment of particularity (*Nature*) and a culminating singular moment (Spirit), it should be apparent that the content with which this syllogistic structure is fulfilled is essentially discursive, i.e. made up of discourses that take place in the grammatical form of judgment and are meaningful within the system of Science itself. The content of Science consists of real words, invested with meaning (thought), through judgment, and therefore *not* merely consisting in arbitrary linguistic signs. What are the discourses that form the content of Science?

The discourses of Science are the actual texts upon which philosophical thought reflects and which form its syllogistic content. The philosophy of history, for example, does not reflect abstractly on human time and events but rather on the actual historiographical texts that tell their story; the philosophy of nature does not reflect generally on the things of nature themselves but

rather on the actual texts of natural science; the philosophy of religion considers sacred artistic expressions and doctrinal texts etc. Of course, the question arises: what makes these constitutive texts themselves objectively true? Why Goethe and not Newton? The answer to this is fundamental. In Hegel, greater narrative structures confer meaning on the discourses that form the content of those structures. Ultimately, it is because, for example, linguistic expressions of law fit into the narrative of objective spirit, a.k.a. the narrative of Hegelian freedom, which, in turn, fits into the narrative of Spirit as a whole, that law constitutes an objective content of Science. Goethe's chiaroscuro notion of color is more conceptually meaningful, within the Hegelian narrative of natural science, than is Newton's fragmentary, analytic one.

The relation between content and scientific form is reciprocal and organic, i.e. integrated and integral. While the systematic narrative confers meaning on the discrete contents, the discursive objectivity of those contents confers truth and objectivity on the grand narrative structure. Drawing a literary parallel, Mr. Darcy's incidental comments on Elizabeth at the ball in Bath only become significant content in light of *Pride and Prejudice's* carried out narrative arch, which, reciprocally, would not be the same without the initial contretemps that Darcy's comments occasion. For those who might worry that my literary example shows Hegel's theory of truth to be overly "coherence" rather than "correspondence", I would add that the empirical content of Science is nonetheless supplied by the discourses of the positive sciences (e.g. of nature) upon which Hegelian philosophy reflects.

In a subsequent article, I explore Hegel's ontological grasp of judgment"<sup>4</sup>, an idea that is again fundamental to Hegelian *Wissenschaft*, and which is another important aspect in Jere's article on the Speculative Sentence. While the ontological dimension of *Urteil* certainly informs

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<sup>4</sup> Reid, Jeffrey, "Hegel's Ontological Grasp of Judgement and the Original Dividing of Identity into Difference", *Dialogue*, 45.1 (Winter 2006) p. 29-43.

the onto-grammatical reading of the *Phenomenology* and the idea of hermeneutical openness that I will discuss below, the core idea is also present in other Hegelian contexts.

Of course, “judgment” is a grammatical term that refers to a linguistic proposition (*Satz*), and, as such, presents a relation between the grammatical subject and the predicate through the copula “is”. The fulfillment of the judgment form by which the syllogism comes about, as expressed in the above-quoted passage from the “Judgment” chapter of his *Greater Logic*, takes place in the copula. This latter involves the “determinate connection” between the subject and the predicate, as Hegel writes there. In fact, the determinate nature of the copula, of the “is” between subject and predicate, bespeaks its accomplished existence, whereby it will become the mediating moment of particularity within the Hegelian syllogism.

To illustrate this crucial point for the reader, allow me to refer to the purely *formal* (i.e. non-ontologically determined) logic of the best-known categorical syllogism. There, the determination according to which the *particular* species of “all men” falls under the *general* (universal) quality of “being mortal” allows the syllogism to arrive at its conclusion, that Socrates, as a *singular* man, is mortal. However, in Hegel’s systematic Science, the syllogistic structure is fully ontological, articulating the movement of his famous Concept, according to which thought, in its indeterminate generality, determines itself in and through the particular moment of otherness, in order to be reconciled in the singular, holistic grasp of itself as having carried this determinate movement into actual being. The content of Science should thus be seen as arising from the different ways in which thought addresses its particular Other and recognizes itself therein. The fulfillment of this movement, whereby abstract self-identity is only realized through the organic grasp of mediating difference, is fundamentally carried out in the copula of the judgment form.

The “ontological grasp of judgment” means taking the copula “is” as performative of actual *being*, an idea arrived at by conceiving *Subjekt* in both the grammatical and psychical acceptance of the term, as I mentioned above, a move that Jere explores in his “Speculative Sentence” article. In my earlier work, I arrive at this discovery by another route, by showing how, in making this move, Hegel is inspired by Fichte’s fundamental proposition for all Science, the famous “*Ich bin Ich* (I = I)”, however as read through the interpretive lens of Hegel’s old friend, Hölderlin, in his short but foundational text “*Urteil und Sein* (Judgment and Being)”. Fichte’s proposition or sentence (*Satz*), taken as the expression of the absolute I, does indeed express the self-positing (*sich setzen*) agency of subjective thought per se in the linguistic terms of a judgment, where “I” is *Subjekt* in both senses of the word. What Hölderlin contributes, in his short but pivotal text, which is a critical commentary on Fichte’s founding proposition, is the crucial idea that the copula, the “ = ” between the subject “I” and the predicate “I”, is not merely a statement of identity but always also an affirmation of difference. Otherwise, why have the copula at all? If the copula were simply an expression of pure identity, we could simply say “I”. Further, Hölderlin shows how it is through the interplay between identity and difference in the copula that existing, determinate Being arises. To *be*, is necessarily to be *both* what is, and what is not, as Heraclitus had already remarked. That is precisely what “determinate” means and why it arises in the copula.

Contemporary philosophers in what is referred to as “the analytic tradition” will doubtlessly find the idea that the grammatical copula has ontological weight either puzzling or downright wrong-headed. Even among those present-day readers who are honestly interested in Hegel and German Idealism, the ontological nature of judgment may still be unfamiliar and appear unlikely. Perhaps this is because of an enduring tendency to read Hegel as a neo-Kantian

philosopher and thus to accept as conclusive Kant's criticism of the ontological argument for the existence of God, in the first *Critique*, where he explicitly cautions against taking the copula as anything other than an empty sign of identity. And yes, Hegel's *Scientific* take on the copula is indeed informed by its metaphysical use in the ontological argument, where the statement "God is Being", to use the example from the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, which Jere discusses, does promote the "is" as the expression of the Absolute's *existing* reality. My research into the extra-*Phenomenological* aspects of the speculative proposition shows that it is more than just an idiosyncratic element discussed over several pages of that work's Preface, but informs Hegel's entire systematic project.

Looking at the ontological nature of judgment in a more anthropological, and perhaps more familiar way, it may be helpful to see Fichte's first principle ( $I = I$ ) as simply stating the factual reality of human subjective thought. Indeed, the fundamental intuition of the self-positing agency of thought, covertly at play in Kant's notion of ideal causation in the province of moral reason (pace neo-Kantians), is shared by Hegel. Indeed, when students ask me about the nature of his idealism, I tend to express its fundamental principle in these terms: belief in the agency of thought. In other words, far from asserting that "everything is ideal", Hegel's absolute idealism rests on this core tenet. Thought has agency; in fact, thought *is* agency. Without this, the whole system is meaningless. But what does such agency imply and how is it "speculative"?

First of all, we must accept that there *is* something called thought and that it is associated with selfhood. Second, we must accept that thought is not just a private calculative, passive feature of data processing but that it comes out of our heads, into the world, which it configures, determines or, using Hegel's term, *negates*, in a way that transforms its objects into something more thought-ful and more meaningful than what was initially and immediately found there.



The agency of thought might be thought of as a kind of phenomenological intentionality, for readers more familiar with that vein of contemporary philosophy.

Crucially, I maintain that, for Hegel, the agency of thought is performative in and through language *as meaning*. It is through the medium of language that thought determines its worlds and worlds become meaningful. How? Because when thought takes possession of linguistic signs to form words, its ideal agency becomes real and actual in the world. If asked for proof of the agency of thought, Hegel might simply have answered, “Spirit”, which we may translate as “the existing, self-knowing, humanly produced, historically developed, cultural reality of the world that we live in”. As the instantiation of thought, spirit must therefore be open to linguistic interpretation.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* recounts this development (of spirit), up to a reality that Hegel calls Science, which is subsequently presented, in its accomplished form, in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. Whereas my earlier efforts dealt mainly with how the objectivity of language is meant to inform Science, my current work has dealt with forms of language that are involved in the development of spirit, as defined in the paragraph above. These forms or figures (*Gestalten*) present themselves throughout Hegel’s *Phenomenological* work. If language can be said, generally, to mediate our thinking relations to the world (through the agency of thought), and given that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* describes such relations in terms of consciousness, in terms of the relation between the thinking subject and its objects, then language must be involved in each of the forms of consciousness that are presented in the *Phenomenological* epic. It should thus be possible to discover and show how each form of consciousness involves and reveals itself as a form of language.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel presents his notion of grammatical ontology in the “speculative sentence” passage, particularly in the sections (M59 – 66/W3, 56-62)<sup>5</sup>, the sections that Jere discusses in his article. Given the direct complicity at play between judgment and consciousness established there, the whole book can be read as a protracted commentary on these few but fundamental pages, a reading that I attempt in my *Hegel’s Grammatical Ontology* book. In order to grasp how such a reading is possible, we must understand how the speculative approach to the proposition (or judgment) brings about a dialogical reality within the copula itself. More precisely, we must see that the subjective determination undergone by the predicate (as substance) actually confers selfhood upon it, in such a way that now the predicate can be seen as subject and where what was formerly subject should now be seen as the predicate. This reciprocal, “speculative” predicative action is described by Hegel as involving a “*Gegenstoss* (counter-thrust)”, wherein the “Subject has passed over into the Predicate (M60/W3, 57).”

The thing is this: given the ontological nature of the subject-predicate relation, the speculative proposition constitutes its own grammatical ontology, observable in the way the copula is now conceived, as the “harmony” of both identity and difference, or a “floating center (M61/W3, 59)” of meaning. In the speculatively grasped copula, as Hegel puts it in fittingly ambiguous terms, “we learn that we meant something other than what we meant to mean (M62)”. In clearer terms, whereas the dogmatic, reflective proposition expresses the unilateral, opinion of the subject/self, which it imposes upon the predicate/object, the speculative proposition allows the predicate to speak for itself. The result is an ambiguity of meaning that takes place *in the copula itself*, in the ambiguous relationship between subject and predicate.

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<sup>5</sup> I will refer to A. V. Miller’s translation, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), although sometimes modified. I will sometimes relate cited passages to the edition of *Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 3 [W3] edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), in order to situate the reader with respect to the German text. The page numbers of the *Werke* edition refer to the beginnings of the paragraphs in Miller’s translation.

This relationship is one where identity is fully enlivened by difference, and whose multiplication of meaning involves an essential openness to interpretation, which I refer to as hermeneutical openness.

Further, the ontological nature of the copula, the performative reality of the “is”, carries over onto its *level* of speculative ambiguity and openness. Grasping the copula ontologically consequently allows us to conceive of its fulfillment in communal/societal realities, which display varying features of openness and “harmony” that result from the essential differentiation that arises within predicative self-identity. The progression recounted in the *Phenomenological* epic leads to the Absolute Knowing chapter, where *Encyclopedic* Science is deduced as a communal form of hermeneutical openness.

Such a conclusion implies that the *Phenomenology* should be read as a series of attempts at communities of hermeneutical openness, a series that only makes sense in light of its achieved culmination in Science. Following Hegel’s argument, we can here anticipate the communal embodiment of such an ambiguously open, discursive reality, where the Scientific verb is fully at play, in the syllogistic form that I presented above as the onto-grammatical outcome of the judgment form in the syllogism. Of course, the logic of Hegelian narrative means that such an ending, in the fully speculative community, sheds light on and makes meaningful all the other figures that have led to its realization. The speculative community of hermeneutical openness evoked in the final Absolute Knowing chapter is nothing other than the state university (of Berlin), an admittedly surprising conclusion that I arrive at in my book, and which I cannot go further into here.

The title of my new book on Hegel’s grammatical ontology includes the phrase, “*Vanishing Words*”. The phrase expresses a crucial feature presented in the “speculative

sentence” section of the Preface, and which Jere presents in his references to the “loss” of the subject (Surber, “Hegel’s Speculative Sentence”, pp. 221-2). Essentially, “vanishing (*verschwinden*)” is what words do. First, they are spoken, written, expressed, and, as such, really *are* something. They exist in the world. However, they begin vanishing as soon as they are articulated or pronounced, an aspect that is easily grasped in the evanescence of the spoken word, whose sound evaporates into thin air. Although its perdurance may be more lasting, even the written word is temporal and finite. The pages yellow and decay; the parchment crumbles into dust. The manuscript is lost; the book is out-of-print. In today’s culture of the digitally configured word, the finite temporality of written language should be even more pressingly evident.

More fundamentally, words are always past. They are read or spoken. Words are in time and, as such, are only *for* a time. Significantly, in Hegel, the vanishing of words confers on them an essential aspect of “having been”. I write, “essential” because the truth or essence of things in general, and of words in particular, is revealed, in the *Perfekt* tense, in their “having been”, and thus through their vanishing or “loss”, as Jere puts it in his article. “*Wesen ist gewen*”, to repeat Hegel’s mantra. Essence is what has been. Although the term “essence” may appear spooky and metaphysical, in the context of language and words, we can say that it simply denotes “meaning”. Thus, for Hegel, the meaning of things is revealed in their vanishing. Words are meaningful things (*Sachen*). The meaning of words is revealed in their vanishing, and captured in greater structures of meaning.

Above, I mentioned how Hegel defines “words” over against linguistic “signs”. I said that words were signs invested with thought. The essential vanishing feature of words means that this investment is finite and temporary. Thought always outstrips the word in which it takes

place, simply because words are always embodied in finite signs. The vanishing of the word, its quality of having been said, heard, written, read... releases thought in the form of meaning. Briefly, the vanishing of words is a necessary condition for meaning. Meaning spills out of words that have been and is never definitive. Therefore, an essential condition for hermeneutical interpretation is the vanishing of words, leaving behind the empty signs that they invested (predicated) in the first place.

Over against such vanishing, linguistic signs represent predominantly natural, finite entities that thought finds immediately there. And according to Hegel's take on natural entities, they may "die" but their death is, in itself, without significance or meaning. Thus, signs may evolve over time. Hobbes may have written "wee" for "we" or "softnesse" for "softness" but as linguistic signifiers, these idiosyncrasies have no effect on the meaning. Meaning is a feature of words, which always outstrips them, spills out of them in their vanishing and is never definitively set. In spite of their *natural* finitude or perhaps because of it, signs have a stubborn persistence. They change slowly and contingently over time, like mountains or glaciers. Linguistic signs, as Hegel writes in his report on state education to the counsellor Niethammer, are, in this regard, like so many "stones or coals" (W4, 415)".

What do vanishing words have to do with the speculative proposition? As I explained, the speculative way of looking at language, in Hegel, involves a reciprocity whereby the predicate is allowed subjective agency, and the subject allows itself to become the object of the Other's predication. Since predication is that act through which signs are invested with meaning to become words, we can say that reciprocal predication brings about the constitution of words, which, as I also stated, are essentially vanishing. Further, as vanishing, words are outstripped by their meaning. Consequently, the reciprocal interplay of speculative predication brings about an

ontologically determined space of ambiguous meaning, in the “floating center” that Hegel situates in the copula of judgment. The hermeneutical openness in the speculative copula depends on the vanishing of words, where meaning constantly outstrips their existence as past, as having been. And the vanishing of words implies the essential ambiguity of meaning, where the predicated Other is given voice, allowing hermeneutical openness to actually take place.

The dogmatism that Hegel associates with representational language does not admit such reciprocity. The predicate remains the object upon which qualities are visited as accidents. The vanity of unilateral predication, whereby the subject jealously keeps predicative agency for itself, may indeed produce words but these are just empty reflections of its own subjective vacuity and, as such, are never really more than the arbitrary signs of its dogmatic assignment. The fact that dogmatism attempts to set “in stone” its meanings, according to its own exclusive predicative agency, to selfishly maintain them without admitting or even hearing the voice of otherness, reflects the ultimate status of its discourse as consisting of dead signs, dead letters. Dogmatism is indeed *dogmatic*.

Such critical observations are not confined to the epistemological province. The ontological nature of the predicative rapport, as reflected in the performative reality of the copula, means that the discourse of dogmatism brings about worlds whose only substance is the background noise of ceaseless, opinionated chatter and demagogy. The *Phenomenology* shows how such language-worlds, by the unilateral, non-speculative nature of their identities, while generally harmless, are always in danger of collapsing into proto-fascistic communities that are exclusive of difference. Systematic Science, through the actuality of its hermeneutically differentiated copula, is meant to guard against such outcomes, both epistemologically and politically.

In order to introduce or at least anticipate the political dimension of the speculative sentence, I will show how it can be discovered in a relatively well-known section of the *Phenomenology*: the master-slave<sup>6</sup> dialectic, as it appears in Chapter four, on Self-consciousness. While I obviously do not have the space, here, to show how the onto-grammatical reading of the speculative sentence develops through the first three chapters of Hegel's book, this development is indeed the case. To wit, chapter three, Force and Understanding, opens up language to interpretive otherness, to the fact that stating things "as they are" always involves recognition of what they are not, an ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) that is not arbitrarily accorded but rather, anchored in the predicative structure of language itself. Such ambiguity, involving an interpretive recognition of other listeners and speakers, is discovered in the form of judgment and the copula that arises in the "inverted world" section of Force and Understanding. It is this ambiguously speculative insight that is developed, deduced or made "true" in chapter 4, on Self-consciousness. There, the objective Other has been so predicated with the essence (meaning) of selfhood (thought) that it (the predicate) actually becomes another subject, and to be a subject is to speak one's mind.

Of course, as witnessed in the intrigues of the best novels, great stories often depend on misunderstandings, some of which are hopefully resolved, but only after a struggle, antagonism and conflict, otherwise known as the plot. The same is true of the *Phenomenology*. Misunderstandings are not immediately resolved, like a pistol shot. Otherwise, the book would have been a mere pamphlet and there would be little to say about it. Self-consciousness presents the first engagement in the long struggle for mutual understanding between rivals that are both

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<sup>6</sup> Miller's translation of the struggle as that of "Lordship and Bondage" obscures the ancient, classical, pre-Christian aspect of "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft".

identical and different. As is the case with the best novels, or at least with those that encourage us to read to the end, the plot is only resolved in a much later chapter.

The *Phenomenology* can be interpreted as a story about language itself, as it forms and performs different worlds and human ways of being in them. Thus, if we adopt a historical narrative and apply onto-grammatical forms of language to it, then the master-slave dialectic should be seen as a struggle for liberation that takes place in linguistic terms. Specifically, I want to put forward a reading in which the struggle for independence means leaving a subservient state of “being predicated as” to a form of self-predication or self-determination through judgment. In these terms, we may read the slave as initially a mere *empty* word or “sign” (*Zeichen*), entirely open to the master’s determinacy. However, following the onto-logic of the speculative sentence, such heteronomous determinacy will subvert itself in that it invests or predicates the slave with meaning and selfhood, making her something much more than a passive sign. In fact, her liberation involves becoming a meaningful word, a subject who liberates herself through her own linguistic performativity: she will herself determine signs, through predication, as meaningful words. Briefly, as a judging, predicating subject, the slave liberates herself from the status of empty, determinable sign and raises herself to the status of word.

The master-slave dialectic is at the beginning of the struggle for mutual recognition, and its inscription into history, into time. There are many interpretations of this dialectical episode, as witnessed in Miller’s translation of the section as “Lordship and Bondage”, which thus seems to place the movement in the feudalism of the Middle Ages. Some contemporary American interpretations are distinctly non-historical. In my view, we can at least say that the dialectic is temporal, for the simple reason that *struggle* per se is something that *unfolds*, and consequently,



must take place in time. Furthermore, when the temporal aspect is later *recounted*, in language, then it is de facto historiographical and thus historical.

Before further exploring the linguistic dimension of the master-slave dialectic itself, it is necessary to refer briefly to the preceding paragraphs (M166 to M177/W3, 137-44) in the Self-consciousness chapter. This text may simply appear as a sort of introduction or undercard to the main event, the title match between master and slave, but these preceding paragraphs are essential to understanding the main bout. That is because they engage a third term into the combat between the dialectical antagonists, an element that we can refer to as “natural life”. This natural element, which is introduced through a discussion of human sexual desire, plays a key role in the unfolding of the dialectic and in our grasp of language within it. More precisely, Hegel’s evocation of sexual desire allows us to also see how the human body, taken as “natural life”, can be presented onto-grammatically as a determinable, empty sign. Liberation will thus entail a form of self-liberation where the predicated body is invested with meaning, thus becoming a living word. This outcome must involve a process of self-differentiation through another self. Specifically, as an embodied living process, consciousness must reflect on itself as both self-identical and yet different, in and through another like itself: a living, conscious organism.

Consciousness must find a way to satisfy itself *as consciousness*, i.e. to find itself and fulfill itself in the other consciousness. In other words, consciousness seeks to be conscious of itself in another self or to attain *self-consciousness*. However, here, at this opening stage, the other consciousness is configured strictly as a natural thing, as a “life” and therefore, we surmise, as a living body. This desire to be immediately at home in the other (*bei sich bei anders*) is what defines human sexual desire, for Hegel. The problem is that when “self-consciousness is

[merely] desire (M174/W3, 143)”, its satisfactions are ultimately unsatisfying, since, in sexual satisfaction, what is, in fact, experienced is the fact that “the object has its own independence (ibid.)”. The result is the essentially *persistent* feature of desire (*Begierde*) generally: desire’s senseless, endless repetitiveness, its bad (natural) infinity. Consequently, consciousness’s attempt to know itself in the other *as a natural life-form*, through sexual desire, fails. Desiring consciousness, “produces the object again, and the desire as well (M175)”. Such blind, cyclical repetition and immediacy are features of Hegel’s idea of nature, in general, whose highest form of generality is the impoverished linguistic notion of genus or species.

The ephemeral fulfillment afforded by the satisfaction of sexual desire, of knowing myself in the carnal knowledge of the other, is what Hegel means by “Self-certainty”, in the heading to M166 (“The Truth of Self-Certainty”). The “truth” of the certainty of being at home in the other only unfolds through the twists and turns of the *Phenomenological* plot, where the fleeting, immediate, futile and natural certainty of being sexually satisfied will be at least partially fulfilled in the moral (Protestant) community, evoked at the end of Chapter 6, in the last chapter on Morality. The first twist of plot is the master-slave dialectic, where the certainties of life and sexual satisfaction are thrown into question, a question that is not immediately resolved.

In sexual desire, I attempt to liberate myself from my body by transcending it in the possession of the other’s body and the resultant satisfaction. This fails; satisfaction is always fleeting and desire recurs endlessly. The other’s body and mine remain singular natural things. I must overcome the natural heteronomy of my body in another way, a way in which it does not disappear in the transient moment of satisfaction, but rather, where it is maintained and preserved as full of selfhood. What the desiring consciousness seeks, in the “life” of its sexual partner, is really the “soulful” body, one where my body and that of the other are no longer empty,

determinable, immediate, natural signs but meaningful words. The master-slave dialectic demonstrates how such an outcome can be brought about, not through the immediate “possession” or predication of the other, in sexual satisfaction, but rather through work and the habituation of one’s own body. This is actually what the master-slave dialectic brings about, in the form of the slave’s bodily experience of discipline and fear. Such habituation should be apprehended onto-grammatically.

My argument rests upon finding in Hegel the idea that the body is a “sign” and therefore open to linguistic interpretation. First, recall that pure linguistic signs (or *Namen*), as such, are naturally formed, immediate, arbitrary entities waiting to be predicated and made meaningful by subjective thought. In order to read the human body as a linguistic sign, it is helpful to refer to the *Encyclopedia’s Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, where, in section (s.) 431, Hegel presents the idea that intersubjective, self-conscious freedom can only be realized after the body’s immediacy has been “negated” by and invested with thought, bringing about a mediated entity that is beyond the purchase of desire. As Hegel puts it there, I must “suppress this immediacy in myself and thus give existence to my freedom.” The action, which preserves the body but now as an agent of freedom and no longer as purely natural is presented in linguistic terms:

But this immediacy is, at the same time, the bodiliness of the self-consciousness, in which it has, as in its sign and its instrument, its own self-feeling and its being for others as well as the relation that mediates it with others.

The same idea is found in M175 (W3, 143), near the end of the passage on sexual desire: Self-consciousness involves carrying out “this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is [viz. the negative or free].” Easier said than done! Negating the semiotic immediacy of my own body and investing it with freedom (selfhood) is

thwarted when my body is immediately taken as an empty sign, ready for determinative predication by another.

The investment of the pure linguistic sign with the “soul” of subjective thought takes place through the act of judgment, through predication, an act whose speculative ambiguity, as articulated in the interplay between identity and difference in the copula, is the arena where the master-slave struggle takes place. Their struggle should thus be understood as competing acts of predication, involving an oppositional encounter where “winning” means overcoming one’s status as pure body/sign and taking on the predicative agency of the soulful body or word. Here is how the struggle unfolds (M185/W3, 147 to M196/W3, 154), not from the elevated (Scientific/systematic) point of view, “for us”, but rather from down in the trenches, from the position of the consciousnesses themselves, engaged in the struggle.

First, each consciousness is plunged into its own subjectivity. It has only itself as an object. It is certain of itself, but this self-certainty is not yet true. In other words, it has not mediated itself through another consciousness. The other is simply an individual, a life form. “They are for one another like ordinary objects, independent shapes, individuals submerged in the being of life (M186/W3, 147).” This relation is, of course, reciprocal, and recounts again what we saw in the earlier paragraphs on sexual desire. Each consciousness is, for the other, an “ordinary object”, a body as potential object of desire, and thus, an empty, predicable sign whose meaning is reduced to “object of desire” for the Other.

However, consciousness, to be consciousness, must distinguish itself from that which confronts it, here, the immediacy of life in the form of the other consciousness. As essential negativity or pure restless selfhood, each seeks to negate what stands as objective to it. This is the meaning of the “trial by death (M188/W3, 149)” that Hegel evokes, the fact that each

antagonist seeks the annulment (death) of the other, as an object, while at the same time presenting himself to the other as an object of annulment. In other words, each “stakes its own life” in seeking the “death” of the other, or, in our terms, each offers himself up as a predicable sign.

What is truly at stake, here, is the relation that consciousness has to its own body. When I present myself to another consciousness, as an object, then I do so as a body/sign. Similarly, when I take the other as a natural, immediate object, I take him as a body/sign. In each case, what is not taken into account is the selfhood or meaning of the other or, in other terms, the other’s freedom.

If, in the context of the master-slave struggle, we understand the body ontologically, as a sign, then what I truly want in the dialectical confrontation with the Other, is to get beyond my status of empty determinable sign (body) and be taken as a meaningful word. The problem is that, in the confrontation, I see the other as a mere body, as an empty sign, and therefore as a predicate that is simply a positing of myself, i.e. as something to be negated or determined according to *my* meaning. Such a position is deficient because it reduces the judgment (Urteil) to a proposition of empty self-identity, leaving no room for real difference. And difference is the essence of reciprocal recognition: I must recognize the other as being like me (free) *in* their difference. We might therefore take the tortured expression of Hegel’s speculative sentence or proposition as an articulation of the “trial by death” in the master-slave dialectic:

Thinking therefore loses its fixed objective terrain (*seinen festen gegenständlich Boden*) when, in the predicate, it [i.e. thinking] is thrown back on to the subject and when, in the predicate, it does not return into itself but into the subject of the content. (M62/W3, 59).

In the master-slave dialectic's "life and death struggle", each antagonist seeks to maintain their fixed terrain, whereby the other is determined as a simple sign that is ripe for predication; each seeks to annul the other as sign and fill it with the subjective content of its own self-identity. However, in doing so, each must present itself reciprocally as a determinable sign and thus "stake its life". The grammatical/psychical *Subjekt* of the judgment must also present itself as predicable, and the reciprocal nature of the confrontation means that the predicate must be allowed its speculative "counter-thrust". Consequently, in positing itself through the predication of the other sign/body, each individual self presents itself as open to reciprocal predication. Such risk is the essence of dialogue, which reposes on the recognition of hermeneutical difference, within the recognized, shared framework of a struggle for meaning.

In M188 (W3, 149) Hegel assures us that this "life and death struggle" must not actually result in the real death of either of the opponents. In that case, the survivor would be as dead as the object/body that is killed. Rather, the "death" is figurative because if one of the opponents actually died, there could be no subsequent reciprocal recognition. Onto-grammatically, we can say that the "death" of either (reciprocally determined) subject or predicate removes any possibility of either one attaining anything beyond the status of empty sign, anything like a meaningful word. On one hand, we would be left with subjects of pure self-reflective "meaning (*Meinen*)", without any possibility of its linguistic expression. Such pure subjectivity, in Hegel, is identical to pure negativity or, we might say, to meaningless meaning. As such, subjectivity tends to consume itself in vain, mute self-feeling<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, we would have only the dead sign, devoid of any meaning and open to unilateral, dogmatic predication. Consequently, the actual removal (i.e. death) of either antagonist would imply that there can be no speculative

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<sup>7</sup> See the chapter on Novalis in my book *The Anti-romantic*. According to Hegel's diagnosis of the Romantic poet/philosopher, his death from "consumption" is the result of his self-consuming yearning. *Sehnsucht* becomes *Schwindsucht*.

sentence, no difference within identity, no actual meaning, no “freedom for argument (M62/W3, 59)”, and thus, no philosophy, no Science. Such a fruitless outcome will haunt the more worldly, historical configurations that Hegel evokes in the later Reason and Spirit chapters. It anticipates Hegel’s diagnosis of his own contemporary situation, defined in terms of a culture of *Verstand* (understanding): on one hand, subjective feeling; on the other, finite, meaningless signs, with each aspect underscored by the inert, paralysing negativity of scepticism. Of course, as we may already anticipate, such a world of skepticism, feeling and empty signs (qua data) is one in which we might readily recognize ourselves. After all, the meaning of the dialectical encounter’s “fight to the death” is *für uns*.

If indeed, as Hegel writes, consciousness learns that life is just as essential to it as selfhood (M188), this realization is nonetheless “for us” *Phenomenologists* and it is “we” who see how linguistic signs are just as necessary to logos as our bodies are to the constitution of dialogos. However, in both cases, our body/signs must be ensouled with meaning, and in order to be meaningful, we must acknowledge the predicative agency of the other body/sign that stands before us. I will return to this, below. For now, let us return to the combat.

Regarding our two antagonists, there is an initial victor and a vanquished. The vanquished is the consciousness who surrenders, who blinks first in the standoff where each contender risks their life. One consciousness, the story goes, chooses “simply to live”, or, put otherwise, to maintain his body’s submersion in the things of life. He is thus essentially dependent on the life that sustains him. Above all, he is tied to his body. As a thing among things, he is essentially “for another (M189/W3, 150)”, a determinable sign among signs.

The other combatant is the independent consciousness, whose essential nature is to be “for-itself (M189)”. He is not *dependent*, simply because, in the stand-off with the other, he has

not blinked. He has continued to risk his life, which means refusing one's bodiliness and becoming a pure negativity, pure selfhood, pure determinacy, pure meaning. The first consciousness is the "slave (or bondsman)", the second is the "master (or lord, *ibid.*)".

It is important to see that the slave is *subjected* to the master not directly but rather because the master has shown himself to be independent of thinghood in general, whereas the slave, in his attachment to thinghood, has shown himself to be... a thing. In other words still, because the slave is dependent on the world of things, he shows himself to be nothing other than a body, a thing among things, an empty sign among signs. Pure data, we might say, consumed by the master who is pure negativity or determinacy.

In fact, the seeds of revolutionary reversal are already sown. As consciousness, the master cannot help but measure himself through otherness, and in this case, the otherness is the very world he has forgone, the world of thinghood, as inhabited by the slave's immediate relation with "life", in the form of worldly things/signs as pure objects of desire and consumption. In Hegel-speak, the master "mediates himself" through the slave and his world, and thus derives his essence (we say, "meaning") from them (M190/W3, 150). He derives his essential quiddity or "whatness" from being mediated through another consciousness who is submerged in "thinghood in general (*ibid.*)".

So, ultimately, the master shows himself to be submerged in the very world he sought to escape, the world of immediate things/signs, as objects of life and desire. The master is simply a consumer of the things (data) that the slave produces, and as a pure consumer of things, the master is dependent upon them and therefore, in Hegel's sense, a slave. "[T]he object in which the master has achieved his mastery has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness but a dependent one (M192/W3, 152)". What the master consumes



is the thing as dependent. He thus shows himself to be, in truth, dependent. He shows himself to be essentially a body among bodies, a sign among signs, data in a world of data, the very position that initially characterized the slave.

Recall that the master shows himself to be more willing to sacrifice his “life” than the other. This means withdrawing from his bodiliness, acknowledging the nothingness of his body as an empty linguistic sign. He does so because he wants to become what is left *behind* the sign: pure universality, pure selfhood, pure negativity, pure freedom and “death”, and above all, pure meaning. Of course, in so doing, he is no longer dependent on his status of being a sign among signs and so, he no longer offers himself to the Other as a sign. His nothingness implies that he not only refuses all heteronomous determinacy but he, himself, becomes pure determining agency. Grammatically, he becomes the pure subject of predication. He is the master of meaning. The other, the slave, as remaining pure sign in a world of signs, can only be predicated. He is an object/body/sign ripe for predication.

We might say that the master’s dominance has come to rely entirely on name-calling or negative branding. Put still another way, the master has reduced the slave to the status of data and that is precisely the “virtual” world in which the master finds himself living. His possession is thus reduced to the pure consumption of individual, empty “names” or data. After showing how the insubstantiality of the master’s position is dialectically nugatory, unstable and doomed to fail, Hegel then turns to the slave, to show how the reversal is experienced from their point of view (M194 - 96/W3, 152 - 54).

There are two essential ingredients to the slave’s liberation: fear of death and the discipline of service, and both can be read onto-grammatically. The former aspect, the fear of death, represents the inner experience of pure subjective negativity. Consequently, this fear is not

just some vague apprehension but rather the experience of “pure negativity”, “the absolute Lord”, “dread” that seizes consciousness and “shakes it to its foundation (M194/W3, 152)”. It is a “pure universal moment”, and as such is “the essential nature of self-consciousness”, “pure being for-itself”. It is thus, for Hegel, pure thought or free determinacy. In onto-grammatical terms, the fear of death can therefore be understood as pure essence and therefore as pure meaning.

Just as we can comprehend the slave’s fear as having been inspired or instilled in her by the master, we can read it as the experience of the very meaning that has been predicated into her sign/body by the subjective determinacy of the master. Speculatively, the fear of death allows us to understand how the meaning invested in the slave/predicate now rebounds ambiguously on the master as the performative counter-thrust of difference. By instilling fear in the slave/body/sign, the master has created a monster.

The second essential ingredient for existential freedom is discipline qua work. Through work, the slave does not just experience her essential freedom as inner and universal (i.e. as the fear of death); rather, work is the exteriorization of that freedom into objectivity. In the object that she works upon, the slave recognizes the reality of her own freedom. Work also allows the slave to overcome the natural immediacy in which she was submerged. “Through his service, he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence... and gets rid of it by working on it (M194).”

Hence, the worker/slave is able to recognize himself in the worked-upon object, in the same way that the artist can, in Hegelian terms, be said to recognize herself (i.e. her creative freedom) in the finished work of art. Whereas the object of desire and consumption (the empty sign/data) could only provide a “feeling of self” and a “satisfaction” that is only “fleeting”, work “holds desire in check” and produces a form of freedom that is “something permanent

(M195/W3, 153)”, wherein, most importantly, the slave can recognize the substantial nature of their own freedom. It is crucial to realize that the fundamental “object” that the slave works upon, in order to accomplish *any* work at all, is their own body/sign. This happens through habituation (qua discipline), a process whereby the slave comes to predicate her own body, investing it, through practice, with the soul of selfhood, in order to make it a meaningful, active word. Such a positive reading of “habituation”, as a form of actual liberation, is presented in *Encyclopedia* s. 410. Whereas habit is often “referred to disparagingly”, in fact,

habit is indispensable for the *existence* of all intellectual life in the individual, enabling the subject to be a concrete immediacy, an ‘ideality’ of soul – enabling the matter of consciousness, religious, moral, etc., to be his as *this* self, *this* soul, and no other, and be neither a mere latent possibility, nor a transient emotion or idea, nor an abstract inwardness, cut off from action and reality, but part and parcel of his being.

Consequently, fear of death and discipline can be comprehended as carrying out a self-liberation, where the slave is no longer an empty body/sign, heteronomously predicable, but rather as a self-determined, meaningful word.

In the context of the master-slave dialectic, the slave’s liberation has taken place through the habituating work that the master has imposed upon him, first, the slave’s self-predication of his own body/sign through the habitual, even “proletariat”, self-disciplinary aspect of the work itself, which is necessarily repetitive since it must feed the never-ending appetite/desire of the master for singular things of consumption. Onto-grammatically, we can comprehend such work itself as an act of predication, carried out on the body and on other worldly signs, making them into words in which the worker may recognize herself (as free), as an ensouled body or meaningful word that speaks out.

Reading the slave's liberation in terms of the speculative sentence allows us to see how the slave's self-predication represents a performative challenge to the master's name-calling. Indeed, we understand how, today, the first step in any liberational struggle involves the critical refusal to allow the group that one identifies with to be *named* by the dominating culture, and conversely, to name oneself through an act of self-predication. Of course, the dominant culture often resists such challenges by referring to a unilateral determination of "history" or "tradition". Similarly, the dominant culture often objects to the critical questioning or predicating of other established signs and symbols (statues, flags, celebrated historical figures...) on the part of the "slave". Significantly, the dominant culture's greatest wrath is in reaction to the "slave" who dares to then turn its predicative powers against its former "masters" ("cis-gendered", "colonizing", "racializing"...). Hegel's master-slave dialectic, understood onto-grammatically, helps us appreciate the politically performative stakes involved in such name-calling. Further still, the new-found predicative agency of the slave's body implies that it may now be taken as an actual agent of subversive change, "acting up" in significantly subversive ways (e.g. taking the knee, demonstrating, boycotting...) that show its new status as a word and not merely a sign.

For us, we can say that through her act of self-predication, the slave has shown herself to be no longer an exclusively *subjected* sign or predicate but a *Subjekt*, the one who signifies, the grammatical/psychical subject of judgment. In so doing, the slave has enacted the ambiguous reality of the copula, the speculative truth that it does not just express the unilateral self-identity of the master but that it must also represent a force of resistance, the linguistically performative counter-thrust of difference, an enactment of ambiguity (*Doppelsinnige*, M180/W3, 146) that acknowledges interpretive openness. The "slave" is no longer as-signed as such, anchored and fixed in her nominal reality. No longer a mere sign, ripe for heteronomous predication, the slave

has become a vanishing word, whose meaning is revealed by the fact that she no longer is what she is but rather, is what she has been, the history of her struggle.

Of course, the happy ending that involves a community of shared meaning and reciprocal recognition that Hegel presents as the “I that is we and the we that is I (M177, W3, 144)”, in a sentence that, significantly, alternates the grammatical subject and predicate (“we” and “I”) in a way that illustrates their speculative reciprocity, is not yet realized. There are other opportunities for grammatical misadventure. Indeed, we left the master submerged in an impoverished world of data/signs, a world of his own making, and hardly one open to the dialogue of reciprocal recognition that Hegel promised “for us”. Put differently, the master is a sign among signs, not yet a vanishing word.

My brief tour of the master-slave dialectic has hopefully shown how the speculative sentence section of the *Phenomenology*, brought to light and examined by Jere in his 1975 article, have real purchase throughout the entire book. Further, the real performativity of the speculative sentence, i.e. the fact that, within the economy of Hegelian Science, judgment (*Urteil*) must be understood both grammatically and ontologically, allows us to appreciate the copula as an ambiguous, dialogical space for hermeneutical openness. Consequently, reading of the *Phenomenology* in terms of the speculative sentence is politically meaningful.