

Reclaiming Rationality Experientially: The New Metaphysics of Human Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology*

Joseph Carew
McGill University

ABSTRACT: Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is typically read as a work that either rehabilitates the metaphysical tradition or argues for a new form of idealism centred on social normativity. In the following, I show that neither approach suffices. Not only does the metaphysical reading ignore how the *Phenomenology* demonstrates that human rationality can never adequately capture ultimate reality because ultimate reality itself has a moment of brute facticity that resists explanation, which prevents us from taking it as a logically self-contained, self-justifying metaphysical zone traditionally known as 'substance,' but it also ignores how the *Phenomenology* equally demonstrates that human rationality creates a historically self-unfolding universe of meaning that is, because it displays a rational systematicity and consistency unlike anything else in the world, the closest thing we have to substance, but which, given its freedom, is more correctly called 'subject.' Consequently, while the non-metaphysical reading rightly recognizes that the *Phenomenology* develops a radically innovative account of intersubjectivity, it neglects how the social theory that it develops comes fully equipped with various metaphysical commitments concerning nature, spirit, and the relationship between them without which this theory would be unintelligible.

KEYWORDS: Hegel, Metaphysics, Idealism, Normativity, Experience, Reason, Rationality.

1. Introduction: *The End of Classical Metaphysics*

With the publication of his correspondence with Mendelsohn in 1785, Jacobi incited a controversy that would prove decisive for the development of early nineteenth-century philosophy. The aim of Jacobi's literary exchange was to demonstrate not simply that Spinoza's system was admirable for its coherence and thoroughness, but also that Spinoza singlehandedly had the courage to do what no other thinker could in Western metaphysics: push reason to its ultimate limit, no matter the implications.¹ In so doing, Spinoza gave witness to how our rationality, when explaining

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¹ JACOBI, F. H. *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*. Ed. and trans. by G. di Giovanni. Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, p. 187.



the world around us, is forced to conclude that all the particular things we encounter—the discrete objects of perception, the lawful phenomena science describes, and even ourselves as existential beings—do not display any self-subsistence. Rather, these things logically depend upon other things in an infinite complex of causes: each cause must produce one given effect, which in turn must become the cause of one other given effect in a movement both backward- and forward-looking. Taking this reasoning to its next step, we see that this infinite complex of causes itself constitutes a self-contained, self-justifying (*causa sui*) substance of which particular things are mere modes. This does not just entail that these modes have no self-standing outside of substance. More drastically, it also shows that the latter, as an always already logically complete chain of causes, contains the former from all eternity. Given the claims of reason, individuality and temporality must therefore be declared illusionary. There is nothing but the total synchronic presence of *deus sive natura*. For Jacobi, Spinoza’s unmitigated rationalism thus signified that Spinoza was the metaphysician *par excellence*; and in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Pantheism Controversy,’ Spinozism would indeed come to be seen as the culmination of what we may call ‘classical metaphysics’ because of this devotion to the claims of reason. To speak of one was therefore to speak of the other.

For Jacobi and those writing after him, the issue with such a system is the drastic consequences it presents for us as knowers and agents. Theoretically, Spinoza requires us to see human rationality—to express the situation in a traditional image—as a fall from true substance. Paradoxically, the claims of reason require us to limit our rationality: in contrast to the eternity and perfection of ultimate reality, we know that, for all its efforts, our cognition, insofar as it is discursive in nature, can never adequately represent to itself substance’s infinite complex of causes in its unfathomable expanse. To try to shorten this ontic gap, it may supplement itself with intuition, which allows it to see the infinity of substance in the finitude of a given mode,² but no such supplement can overcome its inborn deficiency to grasp all that is. Despite Spinoza’s contention that this gap does not foreclose the possibility of genuine knowledge or even wisdom, the fact still

² This is beautifully expressed by the metaphor that “logical proofs are the eyes of the mind,” which entails that geometric philosophy should open up within us a new faculty of “intellectual intuition” that allows us to “see,” “observe,” and “sense” the eternity and perfection of substance. SPINOZA, B. **Ethics and Selected Letters**. S. Feldman (Ed.); S. Shirley (Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1982, 5p23s. References to *Ethics* employ the following system: Roman numeral = part, p = proposition, s = scholium.

remains that within his metaphysical framework human rationality is experienced as a pale comparison to a rational cosmic order that is greater than us and of which we are a simple part. Once we accept this position, we practically face the danger that our lives are robbed of any meaning. The story of true substance, a story that eludes our complete comprehension, does more than include our story as a mere chapter. It dictates its unfolding. To think of our will as free is, to follow Spinoza's favourite example, to be like a stone that, in midst of its flight after being thrown, falsely believes that it has thrown itself.³ Because of its inability to immediately see things as they are, our rationality all too often prevents us from discerning our complete and utter dependence on the infinite complex of causes that produces us, thereby giving us misguided hopes of autonomy. The risk of such a position is, to use the term that Jacobi introduces into philosophical discourse, a rampant nihilism.

In the historical philosophical positions that followed, there would be a myriad of attempts to escape the theoretico-practical deadlock of the logical conclusion of classical metaphysics taken to be drawn by Spinoza's *Ethics*. To borrow a phrase,⁴ "the fate of reason" itself was now on trial: if reason necessarily lead to Spinozism and Spinozism to nihilism—what was left for philosophy and, more importantly, for us? Perhaps the most innovative and radical endeavour to move beyond this perceived impasse is the one undertaken by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For rather than directly arguing for a series of theses that would, as it were, reclaim our rationality from its nihilist clutches, Hegel embarks upon an inner exploration of spirit's (that is, our human) experience in its most fundamental dimensions with the aim of making spirit itself recognize what its rationality means for it. However, *pace* mainstream interpretations for which the leading intention of the *Phenomenology* is to prove that we *prima facie* lowly creatures in fact possess 'absolute knowledge' of substance, now reconceived as a rational cosmic subject for which our rationality coincides with its coming to self-awareness, I argue that Hegel's project is much more groundbreaking. To pose myself against the extremes of a theological and panlogist reading, there is no question of the *Phenomenology* putting us face to face with God's own self-consciousness⁵

³ SPINOZA, *Ethics*, Letter 58. Compare with 1p24, 26, 27, and 33.

⁴ BEISER, F. *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.

⁵ For instance, LAUER, Q. *Hegel's Concept of God*. New York: SUNY Press, 1982, p. 293.

or showing that the categories of human thinking are *tout court* “the most general and fundamental forms of being.”⁶ Although such would effectively bestow a new dignity upon human rationality, they only do so at the risk of what one may call philosophical pride: making what once appeared as a fall display a close proximity to the centre of all things, they invest our standpoint with universal importance. My contention is that Hegel’s solution is at once more modest and more audacious. Admitting that human rationality is a fall from substance, he asserts that this fall is not a fall ‘downwards,’ but ‘upwards:’⁷ an ascent into the independent, metaphysically higher realm of spirit, rather than a descent from ultimate reality. Consequently, substance is not that to which all is, in essence, reducible because human rationality creates its own universe in which, and in which alone, it is at home.

All of this is to say that the *Phenomenology* thus stands for the end of classical metaphysics instead of its rehabilitation, a point that has been, except for several noteworthy exceptions, missed throughout its reception.⁸ It endeavours to accomplish this deathblow, I argue, in four major steps. First, the experience of appearance demonstrates how the realist epistemology at the heart of classical metaphysics is flawed. Discursive cognition is not that which keeps us from a full vision of ultimate reality. It is, quite to the contrary, all we need for truth. Second, the experience of desire testifies that our rationality renders substance a realm of ‘pre-history’: a metaphysical zone that cannot be subjectively recovered because spirit has rendered it of secondary importance to its own life. The next steps deepen these themes. Third, we are unable to find, in the experience of modern science, our expectation of finding a self-contained, self-justifying order fulfilled at the level of the natural world. But this turns out to be due to objective opaqueness instead of subjective fault. Fourth, we recognize that we only look for such an order because we misrecognize where reason is truly instantiated: the rationality implicitly active in the historical development of communal experience. In this manner, we see how Hegel reclaims rationality from its theoretico-practical

⁶ HOULGATE, S. *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006, p. 436. Cf. *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 12.

⁷ I owe this point to a private conversation with George di Giovanni.

⁸ The most discussed expressions of a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in recent literature are PIPPIN, R. *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 and PINKARD, T. *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Although I largely agree with them, each fail to see the ways in which Hegel himself argues for a series of metaphysical commitments in his defence of both idealism and social normativity.

deadlock by showing us how the inner exploration of experience requires of us a new metaphysics of human spirit that stands in stark contradistinction to the framework of classical metaphysics. Furthermore, if this entails that the metaphysical reading of the *Phenomenology* is misguided, then it also equally entails that important qualifications must be added to the non-metaphysical reading of it as an idealism centred around social normativity because this reading fails to see various ways in which Hegel here advances distinctive metaphysical commitments concerning nature, spirit, and the relation between them.

2. *Contra 'Mere' Appearance*

That human rationality would be a fall from true substance appears intuitive. As beings that primarily interact with things through sense organs and the discursive categories of the intellect, there is no way for us to gain a God's-eye view of the world. For classical metaphysics, reason helps us sidestep our otherwise piecemeal encounter with the world by enabling us to capture its underlying necessary and universal structure. Nevertheless, despite the fact that reason thereby bestows upon us a certain access to its fundamental forms, our rationality still cannot begin to fully comprehend the world in the totality of its specific content. There is always an insurmountable ontic gap between the world and how it appears to us that reason by itself cannot close. Even if we know, for instance, that every event has a cause, we cannot describe the entire series of causes that brought forth any given event. After a certain point, we simply succumb to epistemic uncertainty, which renders most of human knowledge unsteady in its foundation inasmuch this whole series is needed to give a complete account of any given event. Our cognition and by implication the world as it appears to us thus display an inevitable sense of contingency that the world itself does not.

Classical metaphysics operates under the realist assumption that there is a world out there whose rational order our theoretical models must duplicate if they are to find the authentication they require. A model captures truth only if there is, in other words, an adequation between idea and reality. But this forces us from the outset to see our rationality as impotent when compared with the latter. For given the drastic split between the finitude of our cognition and the infinite complexity of the world espoused by classical metaphysics, there is no way that things could appear to us as they really are. The originality of Hegel's phenomenological analysis of theoretical

consciousness is to internally explore the very experience of appearance as realists have variously construed it (sense certainty, perception, different classical metaphysical epistemologies) in order to determine the specific relationship that it bears to the world from within. The point is to see whether these models of the experience of appearance succeed at consistently explaining what actually happens in the theoretical consciousness of an object. What if the major error of classical metaphysics was to prejudge the reach of human rationality because it never had investigated this experience on its own terms?

In a first move, Hegel shows us how classical metaphysics is an advance over the experience of theoretical consciousness as assumed by a realistically oriented, ‘natural’ consciousness inasmuch as it recognizes that we must appeal to more than the content directly presented to us in sensible or perceptual intuition if cognition is to be possible. If all I take into consideration are the qualia offered to me by sense certainty, I merely encounter the punctual upsurge of this or that specific sensation with no way of linking them together. I may have a vivid richness, but am denied the ability to meaningfully speak about it.⁹ As for perception, it gives me a series of discrete objects that are fully formed for the intents and purposes of everyday life. However, were I restrict myself to its distinct kind of evidence, I would be unable to determine why these things laid out in front of me have the specific properties that they do.¹⁰ Classical metaphysics realizes that to bring what I encounter into a coherent picture of the world at large, I must go beyond what I see, hear, smell, touch, and taste and how these qualities coalesce to constitute *gestalts* of lived unity spread over space and time (what Hegel refers to as forms of “simple togetherness”¹¹). Once we take on its standpoint, we can then, as it were, take the things of experience to refer to a hidden ground, an invisible depth, from which things emerge into the phenomenal shape that they assume through a process we have to reconstruct if we are to comprehend the world in any sophisticated way.

⁹ As Hegel says, whenever we try to speak of this sensuous richness, we find that our words have “become stale.” HEGEL, G.W.F. **Phenomenology of Spirit**. Trans. by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 60. This is because qualia “vanish” as soon as they “are.” HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 64.

¹⁰ Based on the evidence of perception alone, the objects that populate our life-world are not as consistent as they appear. We cannot even determine whether the properties we see are mere effects of *our* perception or whether they constitute the object itself. HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 72 and 73. Is there a series of self-identical objects that our organs of sense enable us to see in a limited way or are there merely bundles of properties lacking an inner rule?

¹¹ HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 68.

Consequently, classical metaphysics tries to give us resources by which we can penetrate, by moving beyond appearance, “*into the true background of things.*”¹² This has the side effect that the appearance of the world to us now proves to be a mere appearance, a realm of non-self-standing differences that carries no substantial weight, in short, a surface show: we can only truly grasp something if we see its foundation in a transcendent reality such that only if this foundation can be articulated will what is otherwise ephemeral or opaque, when viewed sensibly, achieve intelligibility.

Hegel’s strategy to argue against classical metaphysics does not consist, like Kant’s, in denying that we have access to how things are in their truth beyond appearances, thus limiting our knowledge to the latter, even if it does consist in the similar move of investigating appearance on its own terms to see how it is possible and what kind of conclusions we are to draw from it. The issue with classical metaphysics is that, just like the models of sense certainty and perception before it, it fails to consistently explain what actually happens in the theoretical consciousness of an object. The immediate problem it faces arises from the very gesture of postulating a transcendent reality that at once exists outside of and provides the basis for the realm of appearance as its hidden ground. The further we must go past phenomenal reality to articulate the foundation of what appears to us, the harder it is for us to claim that we have cognitive access to it at all. It gets transformed into a “*pure beyond*” that we can give no specific content to.¹³ Although we must proclaim that there is an ontic gap experientially separating us from the nature of things—there is no question of being in direct contact with things as they are due to the peculiar character of our cognition—such a gap risks rendering all knowledge claims baseless or, worse, reducing them to hallucinatory *Schwärmerei*.

However, we evidently do claim to have knowledge. It is a matter of determining the proper model that could explain this ‘faith’ that is so basic to our theoretical consciousness of objects. The model proposed by classical metaphysics is, as we have just seen, insufficient on these grounds. For if classical metaphysics is to work, it must be able to give content to its principles; otherwise there is no manner of ascertaining whether any adequation has been reached between idea and

¹² HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 86.

¹³ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 88-9.

reality given the ontic gap separating them. Yet classical metaphysics still has a trick up its sleeve. It now, in the phenomenological narrative we are following, recognizes that this “inner being,” as Hegel puts it, must not simply exist in some supersensible zone totally beyond us. Insofar as it represents “*appearance qua appearance*,”¹⁴ which is to say in its truth, it cannot be entirely different than appearance itself. Explanation may require a difference between *explanans* and *explanandum* to be informative, but if the two are simply kept apart we can in no way speak of having established any meaningful relationship between the two terms. In Hegel’s language, force and its expression cannot be diverse things. With this move, we no longer need to posit a transcendent reality outside of appearance and have now stepped into the *Weltanschauung* of modern science in that we declare that knowledge consists in knowing the natural laws that internally govern and are therefore visible in the observable world, believing that this model is the only sure-fire way that the foundation that we propose of what appears can actually prove to be a foundation rather than a contentless fantasy construction.

We now move from a model of the experience of theoretical consciousness in which we look for the profound “holy of holies”¹⁵ constitutively hidden to appearance to one in which we look for laws that show themselves in the phenomena over which they have reign from within appearance. However, despite this apparent progress, the endeavour of looking for inner rules governing phenomena soon faces an impasse of its own. If laws are to render given phenomena internally consistent, there must be an innumerable multitude of laws to go along with the innumerable multitude of phenomena. Were this not so, we would fall back into the problem of a pure beyond with no content once again. But this means that for every type of phenomena we have to posit a new type of law, leaving us with a chaotic realm of laws where we once had a chaotic realm of experience. We must, therefore, build these into a system of laws if a coherent picture of the world at large is to be given. This presents us with a two-fold dilemma. On the one hand, the more we reduce the indefinite specificity of natural laws to more general ones, the more these general laws will fail to render intelligible specific cases of lawfulness. A system of laws loses, in other words, the immanent relation to appearance that made law advantageous in the first place.

¹⁴ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 89.

¹⁵ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 88-9.

On the other hand, even on the basis of general laws as the foundation of specific ones, we come to realize that we have no idea why any law obtains. We can easily conceive that it is possible that other laws could hold: “in all of these forms, necessity has shown itself to be only an empty word.”¹⁶

Moreover, this dilemma belies an even more fundamental one. The very supposition that with laws we are explaining experience rather than generalizing from it now becomes problematic. If we must postulate a law that reigns over every given kind of phenomena we come across, it is unclear that we really are moving beyond phenomena into the metaphysical principle that renders them possible. For instance, when we ‘explain’ lightning, we apprehend this as the instance of a universal, infer from it a certain law, namely that of electricity; yet our ‘explanation’ does not present us with any new content beyond what is already given to us in appearance.¹⁷ If the understanding is to keep the supersensible realm distinct from the phenomena—and, to repeat, explanation requires a difference between *explanans* and *explanandum* to be informative—it leaves us in the position of having to say that the inner being of things is the exact opposite of what we see before us (the “inverted world”).¹⁸ This leads to absurdities such as north is really south and crime punishment, namely to claims to the effect that any object or event is just not what it seems.

The conclusion that Hegel draws from the model that classical metaphysics provides to construe the experience of theoretical consciousness is that it fails due to its realist assumption that a model can only be authenticated if there is an adequation between idea and reality. In light of its model, knowledge of an object ought to be impossible. Given the ontic gap that separates us from the world, one of two things can happen. If we take the world as radically transcendent, then it risks being so distant from us that it is without content; or if we take it as being visible from within appearance, we cannot guarantee that we do nothing but generalize from appearance instead of explaining it. Hegel’s tactic is, as it were, to radicalize the latter option. What we now realize is that the reason why the work of scientific explanation was so rationally satisfying at all was because, in dealing with appearances and their foundation in the fundamental forms of the world

¹⁶ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 93.

¹⁷ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 94.

¹⁸ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 96.

at large, it was, in fact, only dealing with the movement of understanding itself.¹⁹ Laws are more than generalizations because the theoretical constructs that we provide let phenomena show themselves as internally referring to one another through complex interrelationships in a way that permits rational self-correction. They act as the norms through which the otherwise transient or given nature of things takes on meaning in a self-unfolding universe of meaning. Let's take an example. The stars are mere meaningless blotches of light. They are just there amongst countless other physiological stimuli that bombard us during nighttime. It is not until we ask why they move that we are led to postulate a Ptolemaic universe in which they begin to appear to us in a lawful manner. And due to the inability of this model to account for all the lawful motions of the heavenly bodies we are forced into a Copernican worldview as a rational correction of the previous theoretical construct, which enables these bodies to appear to us in an even more lawful manner. That phenomena do not transpire according to the norms that we have stipulated—that they do not conform to the concepts we form of them—is an impetus to revise the norm to see how the new one fares in rendering the order we are investigating comprehensible. In this way, the inconsistency of our conceptual apparatus allows us to track truth over time by purely internal resources, which in turn explains the 'faith' we have in our knowledge claims despite the ontic gap that separates us from the world, a gap that should, on a realist model of theoretical consciousness, instead lead to epistemic uncertainty about them. There is no need for some external support of truth, some adequation. But rather than declaring that we thus only know mere appearances, the illusory surface show of a greater reality, Hegel proclaims that appearances can be revelatory of the way things are. They open up a space of discovery²⁰ wherein we learn, bit by bit, more about the world. Paradoxically, realism does not make a realist. In this way, the inner exploration of the classical metaphysical model of the experience of theoretical consciousness illustrates that there is nothing constitutively hidden to us in our cognitive projects.

Yet one last problem remains to be resolved. While the transition to idealism overcomes the concern that the laws described by modern science are mere generalizations, we have not yet overcome the deeper worry that we fail with them to get at the self-identical substance thought to

¹⁹ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 95.

²⁰ DI GIOVANNI, George. Introduction. In: HEGEL, G. W. F. *The Science of Logic*. Ed. and trans. by G. di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. xxxviii.

underlie all phenomena. Concepts may provide a normative space in which the ephemerality and opacity of appearances get reworked into an intelligible presence that manifests, through a rational process of discovery, the way things are in the world. Nevertheless, the concern is that we are forced to conclude that we still cannot capture the inner being of things in its deepest sense. Hegel's next move is nothing short of daring. Recognizing that substance as an always already complete rational cosmic order renders knowledge problematic insofar as this order is out of our grasp in its totality, he stipulates that if the things of experience are to display the intelligibility that they indeed do, then substance itself cannot be in a state of eternal perfection. It is what it is only through becoming what it is, by carrying an "inner difference" within itself that unfolds through time in a self-referential process Hegel refers to as "infinity."²¹ Here we see the first way in which the *Phenomenology* advances a metaphysical commitment. Hegel's innovation is to not do so by dogmatically stating a thesis, but through a complex inner exploration of the experience of theoretical consciousness itself and what it entails. Only on the basis of such a becoming could a successful discursive account of what is possible—and surely we do have ones at our disposal—because it implies that, to be objective, phenomena do not require an eternal, perfect framework to be coherent: inasmuch as there is no 'more true' reality behind things in their becoming—there is only one thing followed by another in a movement that presupposes nothing but itself as a metaphysical movement—we have no need to pass beyond appearance to get an experientially hidden system of content in order to guarantee any given knowledge claim (an impossible task); we must simply reconstruct a thing's becoming to capture its own inner rule, which we have just shown is possible through a process of rational discovery.

For Hegel, the very experience of intelligibility in theoretical consciousness therefore requires of us that we rethink the ontic gap separating us from the world. We cannot deny that there is such a gap. What we experience does not directly reveal the world in its inner being. However, the gap cannot be the one envisaged by classical metaphysics, according to which there is a fully determined reality on the one hand and an indeterminate realm of experience on the other. To do justice to the intelligibility that we *de facto* possess in our knowledge, we must proclaim that substance itself simply is not self-identical, but always in becoming; and that, because all cognition

²¹ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 99.

has to do is reconstruct the self-referential movement of becoming, and this alone suffices for truth, cognition is in principle infinite.²² While there may indeed be given historical limits to how far we can push this reconstruction—we may lack the instruments or have not yet made the models to make our findings into a coherent picture—there is nothing constitutively out of the reach of human rationality.

3. *The Metaphysical Achievement of Desire*

The net result of Hegel's analysis of the models of experience assumed by realists is that substance cannot be the direct source of theory verification. The latter does not, by means of some adequation between idea and reality, authenticate a given model: we can only be satisfied with a model insofar as, in the task of providing explanations, we are only ever dealing with the conditions we stipulate for the attainment of truth—we are giving reasons, we are constructing intelligibility, with no external support. Hence, when we tear open the curtain of appearance to see the truth beneath, we see only ourselves.²³ This signifies that consciousness is never just consciousness of an object. There is always an element of self-consciousness' that exceeds the mere consciousness of an object by operating as a necessary deep structure of any act of cognition. This entails that the entirety of the preceding discussion was missing an analysis of the very presupposition that makes it possible, which forces us to expand our analysis by focusing on that shape from which we, without knowing, made abstraction.

The unique conceptual artistry of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is such that whenever such a major transition occurs we get a more comprehensive picture of the fundamental experiential dimensions of spirit and what its rationality means for it. What we overlooked in the case of our inner exploration of theoretical consciousness was the fact that rationality is not just a neutral task of

²² HEGEL. **Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion**. Peter. C. Hodgson (Ed.); R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Trans.). Berkley: University of California Press, 1984-1987, vol. 1, p. 248.

²³ HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 103. In this regard, I agree with Robert Pippin's interpretation of this section as a defence of idealism and disagree with more neutral renderings of it, which see here nothing more than the move from theory to praxis. Cf. PIPPIN. **Hegel's Idealism**, p. 131-142 and HARRIS, H. S. **Hegel's Ladder**. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977, vol. 1, p. 308. For an overview of the problem, which sides with the latter, see STERN, R. **Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit**. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 66-70. While Hegel assuredly moves from theory to praxis, the analysis of theory commits him to a strong form of idealism.

constructing models to understand the world. More primordially, it is caught up with our own self-consciousness of who we are and what we do. To grasp theory, we must therefore grasp the goals and aims it has in our life, why it has significance for us at all as the kinds of beings we are. This intimates that in order for something to have meaning for me—to appear on my radar, as it were, as something to cognize—I must, in the first place, possess a specific interest for it in order for it to grab my attention. To use a wordplay, it must mean something for me: we cannot simply postulate a theoretical standpoint as the basis of objectivity because such a position towards the world is itself an abstraction from something more primary, namely the mode of praxis in which spirit as self-consciousness concretely lives out its life, the theoretical standpoint now being seen as just one way in which it does so. Before we can fully grasp how consciousness knows, we must grasp how self-consciousness acts. In this regard, Hegel’s transition from theory to praxis appears to structurally mirror not only Kant’s declaration of the primacy of the practical, but also Fichte’s dialectical proof of the same in his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. The uniqueness of Hegel’s own contribution, however, is to go beyond a pragmatism according to which the rational freedom of action is the first principle from which we are to interpret all other aspects of experience. As we shall see, his analysis seeks to show that it is only because we must conceptualize the world that there is such freedom at all.

When we start internally exploring the experience of practical self-consciousness in the most basic way available to us of construing it, we see that it is not a form of theoretical knowledge, but rather the indubitable certainty that “I am I.”²⁴ Everything else (the objects it experiences, the abilities that it has) is a mere moment of the freedom implicit in this certainty, that is, in the awareness that I, and I alone, am the ruler of my existence. This does not mean that self-consciousness is only conscious of itself as a series of free acts—the resources of sense-certainty, perception, and understanding remain available to it²⁵—but rather that self-consciousness, taken as a practical engagement of self-realization, is the motivation behind the making of things intelligible to us, the latter now being seen as a function of said engagement. The problem, however, is that self-consciousness so conceived has no immediate content of its own. It paradoxically only comes

²⁴ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105.

²⁵ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105.

to explicitly see itself as an I by reducing to itself the world that it has made present by sensation, perception, and understanding, thereby seeing this world as a means through which it can achieve awareness of its freedom.²⁶ It thus turns to the things of the world so that, by destroying their independence in making them a moment of its action, it may turn back to itself through its Otherness and in so doing demonstrate to itself that it is the ‘truth’ of experience: that what experientially counts is itself, and itself alone, since nothing else can uphold its own being against the power of its practical engagement.²⁷ The most primal expression of self-consciousness is therefore desire:²⁸ by desiring this or that, I make it secondary to the concerns of my own life, use it as a vehicle for my self-realization, which guarantees the freedom implicit in the indubitable certainty that ‘I am I.’ But this places a tension at the heart of self-consciousness. If it can only be aware of itself by destroying the independence of objects it comes across, once it does so the indubitable certainty it has gained quickly will fade from view as soon as that destruction is complete, driving us to new desires in an endless repetition.

The account that Hegel here gives of the restlessness of desire overlaps with his later account of the inner contradiction of the ontological form of animal life in the *Philosophy of Nature*. Using this account as a foil will allow us to see how this initial model construing the experience of practical self-consciousness is unable to consistently explain what actually happens in that experience. Like in the former case, in the latter there is a form of practical engagement that gives the animal an intelligible world in which it is the centre, an intelligible world it only has in virtue of the self-concern that goes along with such engagement.²⁹ And in a way structurally analogous with spirit, the (albeit limited) self-consciousness of the animal is not simply immediate, but primordially constructs itself through the destruction of the independence of objects, rendering them a mere part of the self-unfolding of its natural life, by which the animal gains certainty that it is the ruler of its own existence by being the ruler over the world it finds itself in.³⁰ While Hegel does not state in the *Phenomenology* how spirit, according to this model, accomplishes such

²⁶ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 109.

²⁷ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105.

²⁸ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 105.

²⁹ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*. Trans. by M. J. Petry. London: Humanities Press, 1970, vol. 3, §359, p. 141ff.

³⁰ HEGEL. *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 3, §359, p. 141ff.

destruction, he describes a multitude of ways in which animals do in the *Philosophy of Nature*, ranging from eating to building nests.³¹ Due to instinctual programming, whenever a certain need is not met, an animal feels a certain lack that puts the awareness of its (once again limited) self-consciousness in danger, setting in motion a process whereby it seeks out whatever object in its environment will fill out said lack so that its certainty of itself will be regained.³² However, this satisfaction—the attainment of homeostasis—is also impermanent, for the animal only comes to re-experience this lack again at a later point. In the dialectic of animal life, this impasse is only overcome when we realize that the singular biological organism is never a mere singular but always already a member of a species such that the satisfaction that comes with the assertion of its stable subjectivity over the whole of nature is secondary to the role it plays in the greater life of the whole of its own kind.³³ An animal only exists for another animal, its offspring, in which it finds its own life fulfilled, in a process that, too, is governed by its instinctual programming.³⁴ Hegel even goes so far as to say that here we already encounter something like the universality of spirit.

The question that imposes itself is how spiritual desire differs from animal desire. If we adopt Hegel's dialectical analysis of the latter, what appears unique—our theoretical rationality, the presupposition of which we are now internally investigating at a deeper dimension of experience—comes to be seen as a mere tool we possess as beings bound by the biological process of the self-preservation of the species. It helps us navigate through our environment like birds have wings or spiders the ability to spin webs, aiding our survival. Hegel's innovation consists in the claim that our desire cannot be understood as a function of natural life because its effects on spirit display the work of theoretical rationality over biology. Theoretical rationality, as it were, 'short-circuits' our immersion in nature. At the most basic level, because we must conceptualize to have an experience of objects at all, and hence to have a world of things that we desire, we always see particular experiences as instances of classes of possible experiences.³⁵ We therefore want more

³¹ HEGEL. *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 3, §362, p. 148.

³² HEGEL. *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 3, §359, p. 141.

³³ HEGEL. *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 3, §368, p. 172.

³⁴ The dialectic of animal life therefore displays the same three-fold movement that Hegel summarizes in HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

³⁵ Here I draw upon, DI GIOVANNI, G. Religion, History, and Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In: Westphal, K. R. (Ed.). *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 230-231. For di Giovanni, the human capacity for reflection makes whatever any naturally given object be

than just this or that object because an object can now only be experienced in terms of its supply within a spatial and temporal context that goes beyond the now. But as soon as this move is made, we are prevented from being satisfied like animals by eating, drinking, and copulating: since the experience of any bodily lack must pass through a network of such conceptualizations, it becomes irrevocably entangled with them, thus forever losing its status as a mere response to a mere lack in our biological system in that issues such as our knowledge of the limited supply of any given resource now become necessary to how we relate to the world around us. To say that self-consciousness is desire is thus to say that we, in virtue of our rationality, have impulses that go beyond those of the largely reflexive impulses structuring need, the ground of animal comportment, as if our conceptual apparatus is capable of re-channelling and thereby re-writing our instinctual programming, making it want things with no direct biological gain in self-preservation. Animals, for instance, largely just eat when they are hungry, without considering that their food source may run out, while we are concerned with the source of our food even when we are not hungry. While we, like animals, can never be satisfied by this or that object, this is, for us, not just because of the fleeting nature of desire in general, but rather because rationality creates in us desires that otherwise do not exist in nature. We must, therefore, go beyond our initial model of practical self-consciousness.

How exactly does, for Hegel, rationality create new desires? More precisely—and, indeed, more strongly—rationality does more than just create new ones. It changes the very structure of desire in us. First and foremost, it causes them to be more than mere ‘inclinations’ given to us sensibly. As a product of theoretical rationality intersecting with the body, as experienced in our practical self-consciousness desires are rationally motivated. Whenever we want this or that particular thing, this want is, by definition, experienced as a justification of this want. By dint of the conceptualization of the class of this or that, we believe ourselves entitled to it as, say, something rare or part of a scarce resource that is required for our existence, and this entitlement, rather than instinctual programming, guides our action. As such, our desire is not a simple testament to our rootedness in nature despite our rationality; it demonstrates how even our most rudimentary impulses are always already more than natural insofar as we never feel mere urges because all of

experienced as one of many possible objects, which in fact makes nature itself be experienced as *scarce*.

our desires are, by definition, a claim to their intended object. Yet a claim assumes, in principle at least, a counterclaim such that the former is necessarily a claim against that of another self-consciousness.³⁶ In this context, Hegel helps us understand why the constant claims we make on certain objects—ranging from physical property to the borders of a country—are so important for us existentially. What matters the most for us is not so much the objects whose ownership we claim as a right, but rather the prestige that comes with the social recognition according to which the grounds for our actions, whether they be tacitly or explicitly articulated, are authoritative for others. We desire, in other words, the satisfaction that comes from the recognition by others that what we do is rational and therefore universally binding for all rational creatures. This is why, for Hegel, we have to move from a model of the experience of practical self-consciousness in which desire is interpreted as the mere restlessness of the destruction of objects, one after the other, in a failed attempt to realize one's freedom, to one in which we see that desire can only be fulfilled when a specific object—another subject, another self-consciousness—recognizes our desire for this or that because it is only through that recognition that the freedom implicit in the certainty that 'I am I' can be realized. Consequently, rationality, and its concomitant need to conceptualize, changes the very structure of desire because it makes desire, in short, the basis of social normativity,³⁷ because it adds a new element to our lives that is in excess of what we are as mere beings of nature.

But if we push this model of the experience of practical self-consciousness (which has now proven to be, in truth, a theoretically infused, practical self-consciousness) further, we see that it entails that recognition itself can only come from others who too take their own claims in earnest, others who thus present themselves as more than mere means insofar as they have desires themselves. This renders spirit *qua* self-consciousness intrinsically antagonistic to the extent that each self-consciousness is ingrained with the conviction that it is more than a natural thing imbued with life that may be used. Its desires, too, are to be taken as universally binding. This is why the search for recognition does not begin in love, but rather in a life and death struggle: the experience

³⁶ DI GIOVANNI. *Religion, History, Spirit*, p. 230-231.

³⁷ Alexandre Kojève suggests something similar: "it is human to desire what others desire, because they desire." KOJÈVE, A. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Trans. by J. H. Nichols. New York: Basic Books, 1969, p. 6. What his account fails to underline, however, is that desire can only thus operate if it displays an in-built normativity whereby I can desire what someone else desires in the same way that I can believe what someone else believes: desire, just as much as belief, can be 'persuasive,' capable of shaping how I should orient myself in the world. Praxis always reveals a moment of theory.

of self-consciousness is such that, thanks to the inborn normative thrust of desire at its underlying structure, it is always willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of this recognition because the satisfaction of this recognition is existentially all important for it, the only way in which it can achieve genuine awareness of itself as a self-consciousness. Rationality therefore makes us “not attached to [natural] life.”³⁸ This proves that another fundamental reversal has occurred in the human organism when compared with other natural beings: we have decisively swapped biological satisfaction for a strictly speaking spiritual one, one which has no direct basis in nature because our craving for recognition from others is so strong that we are willing to die for our fundamental ideas of who we are and what belongs to us instead of following the biological imperatives of eating, drinking, and copulating.³⁹

Hegel’s daring thesis is that, rather than proving that we are still in the clutches of natural life, the very experience of desire, as a product of rationality, demonstrates our freedom from it. It is precisely in virtue of the uniqueness of spiritual desire that he can here already anticipate full-fledged spirit in outline.⁴⁰ For if spirit has shown itself to intrinsically contain the power to render our biology of secondary importance to its own rational pursuits for recognition, we already have enough resources to sketch the ontological distinctiveness of spirit as a creature that dwells in a metaphysical zone all of its own. This puts into relief the basic lesson to be drawn from the inner exploration of the experience of theoretically infused, practical self-consciousness: if our desire were simply natural and not always already spiritual through and through, we would forever remain at the level of the propagation of one’s progeny and never have entered the realm of history, the origins of which are precisely at stake in these passages.⁴¹ History is never a mere natural tale of survival, but an ongoing (and often bloody) quest for recognition in which the claims of various individual agents engender a self-unfolding pragmatic universe of meaning in which these claims are decided upon spiritually, i.e. rationally. More profoundly still, since this universe stands in sharp contrast to the world at large, it testifies to something radically new that has emerged in

³⁸ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 113.

³⁹ As Kojève puts it, “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*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110ff.

⁴¹ This is why it would be misleading to assert that desires arise from *organic* life. Cf. PINKARD. *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 48.

substance thanks to the normative demands with which our rationality re-writes our instinctual programming. As such, from within this universe everything that comes logically before is experienced as a realm of what may be called ‘pre-history’: a separate metaphysical zone that cannot be subjectively recovered from within the new form of life that hereby emerges because the founding gesture of spirit—its ability to conceptualize—forces spirit to leave it behind and bring forth something irreducible to it. That there is an ontic gap between the life of substance and the experience of spirit therefore makes known a truth that was lost upon classical metaphysics: that spirit, thanks to the gift of rationality bestowed upon it, creates the conditions for its own existence (what counts as important for it, what organizes its very life-world) against any pre-given metaphysical conditions (biological imperatives that dictate what, when, and how it should try to eat, drink, and copulate). In this regard, what Hegel’s inner exploration of our theoretically infused, practical self-consciousness reveals is that our rationality is not a simple fall downwards from ‘true’ substance. By engendering a pragmatic universe of meaning all of its own, rationality is primordially a metaphysical achievement over the latter. If our rationality is proof of some kind of a fall from ‘true’ substance, it is therefore proof of a fall upwards into a new world with rules that have no precedent in nature.

4. Reason’s Discovery of the Irrationality of Nature

In Hegel’s phenomenological narrative, we have thus entered the realm of history as something ontologically distinct from the world at large and which must be grasped on its own terms: a pragmatic universe of meaning in which what counts is the rational claims by which we stake out this or that for ourselves and we give meaning to who we are. After elaborating upon the basis of praxis in conceptualization, Hegel is thus able to re-enact, through the lens of desire, the motivations that led us from ancient Greece through medieval Europe up to modern science by ascertaining how different players, thanks to the vicissitudes and transformations of their desires, would have conceded or modified their claims to this or that and found new ways to give meaning to their existence (living as a master or slave, a stoic, a sceptic, or searching for union with God). With the emergence of the modern scientific revolution, however, we hit a new impasse. For this revolution decisively demonstrates that we do more than live out our lives caught within our

spiritually created life-world and thereby shows that the model we have been using to interpret the experience of self-consciousness, although it reveals fundamental truths about it, cannot consistently explain all of what actually happens in it. This implies that we must push spirit even further than desire because the entirety of the preceding discussion was, as before, missing an analysis of a presupposition without which it would be impossible, namely the cognitive possibility of assuming a completely and utterly detached or neutral standpoint towards the world. Because self-consciousness, as a practical activity, is infused from the very beginning by theory, spirit is never just concerned with how to live out its life—it is never just part of a pragmatic, action-centred universe of meaning—but must always already be engaged in some degree of impartial, disinterested enquiry if the theoretical basis of praxis is to function at all. This, in turn, requires of us that we give a more comprehensive picture of this fundamental experiential dimension of spirit and what its rationality means for it by adding a new dimension to our ‘list’: the speculative use of reason.

In retrospect, we can see how the seeds of this move had already been planted with the transition from theory to praxis. Insofar as the rationally self-moving kinesis of the desires constitutive of the latter only exists due to the conceptualizing activity intrinsic to what it is to be human, it is not surprising that our rationality does more than transform animalistic desires into spiritual ones. The abstraction and reflection that makes our desires display the unique structure that they do is merely a moment of a greater effect that rationality has upon our experience. The very fact that we must conceptualize means two things. First, that we take the world not just as something to reduce to the orbit of our self-concern. We also take it as something to speculate about: we all ask ‘the big’ questions, even without being aware of it, for their own sake, questions that demand a satisfaction outside of any specific practical engagement that organizes our life-world. Second, that we crave more than the recognition from others that the norms justifying our actions are the right ones. Contra the phenomenological findings of our inner exploration of self-consciousness, this is not the first and foremost feature of us as human beings. It fails to make fully intelligible exactly why we are normative in our praxis. Hegel's striking insight is that to the extent that our praxis requires a moment of conceptualization to posit itself as an irreducible realm, conceptualization must be a deep structure of experience more primordial than that of praxis. Inasmuch, therefore, as conceptualization is the condition of the possibility of praxis, we must all

be, as it were, scientists (in the broad sense that includes not just the natural sciences but also the human sciences) ‘before’ we are practical. Reason is, as he revealingly puts it, for us creatures of spirit an “instinct.”⁴² To mix Aristotelian and Sartrean metaphors, one could say that we are condemned to wonder and, were it not for this condemnation, that is, this inescapable need to infuse the very fabric of our experience with abstraction, reflection, and theorization, spirit itself as a realm of the freedom of action would be inconceivable.

Hegel begins his inner exploration of this new dimension of experience with the assertion that, in light of reason’s foundational role in spirit, there is an ingrained conviction that there exists a metaphysical identity between being and thinking.⁴³ After all, it is only if being itself is rational through and through that we could hope, in providing theoretical constructs of it in the use of our rationality, to come to know it. In this regard, reason is representative of a certain inborn optimism in the power of our rationality to attain knowledge. Modern science is such a definitive stage in the history of spirit because it takes what is otherwise a mere confidence that we can attain knowledge and converts it into a methodologically rigorous procedure for guaranteeing it, thus permitting us, in principle, to satisfy our instinct of reason in that this procedure is free from all the inner limitations at overcoming subjectivity and capturing objectivity present in previous historical models of construing reason.⁴⁴ For reason in this guise, the world is now experienced as open to our rationality in a way never before imaginable; and despite the fact that we may have needed to pass through a long trajectory spanning centuries and centuries for our confidence to become a certainty once and for all, there is no question of this trajectory taking away from the great achievement of modern science. Indeed, this newfound procedure finally lets reason put itself to the test to see whether, by its own resources, it can own up to the claim that it had made from time immemorial of being able to attain knowledge.

⁴² HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 149.

⁴³ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 139.

⁴⁴ In the phenomenological narrative that Hegel constructs, we see traces of this confidence already in the slave, who, by working on an object that they can make no claim to, must possess knowledge if they are to fashion it according to the master’s desire. TAYLOR, C. *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 157. This is why we can move from the slave directly to stoicism, wherein thinking believes itself capable of capturing the general laws of the universe. This confidence is ‘mere’ confidence rather than a ‘certainty’ to the extent that it cannot withstand the sceptics. It requires the lessons learned by the ascetic unhappy consciousness to see that there is nothing, in principle, separating it from a transcendent reality.

The very structure of reason is therefore such that we are not only convinced that the world is inherently rational, but also that we ought to be able to explain it in a rationally satisfying way. Taking modern science as the zenith of such an endeavour at a rationally satisfying explanation of the world thanks to the certainty given to it by its method, Hegel now internally explores it to determine, when push comes to shove, whether it can live up to its promise. But this equally means that when we, in the mode of science, observe the world—which is not a mere empiricist ‘seeing,’ but entails proposing theoretical constructs and verifying their explanatory merit—we are, in effect, looking for our rationality’s presence in the world and therefore that by which we can recognize ourselves within it inasmuch as, in the case of an adequate explanation, the rational story we would be writing would be indistinguishable from the rational story substance is writing about itself. Or, in Hegel’s own words, “the *existence* of the world becomes for self-consciousness its own *truth* and *presence*; it is certain of experiencing itself therein.”⁴⁵ However, the rub is that reason “is all reality, not merely *for itself* but also *in itself*, only through *becoming* this reality,”⁴⁶ that it cannot simply be certain that it will find its theoretical constructs verified by the world when these constructs do in fact capture the metaphysical structure of the world, but must prove that these constructs are capable of being verified by the world at all.

The question is, to put it differently, whether our theoretical constructs are ever successfully embodied in the world reason observes or whether these constructs always elevate above it, being unable to make fully intelligible the lawfulness it encounters. As reason looks through the wealth of knowledge it has before it, it quickly, however, runs into a dilemma. Although there is nothing epistemologically obstructing it from grasping what is in its inner being, as it goes through the “endless particularization of the chaos of animals and plants, of rocks, or the metals, earths, etc.,” it is never rationally satisfied with its explanations of what displays intrinsic or contingent being vis-à-vis the concepts it forms.⁴⁷ This may seem to be a variation upon the classical metaphysical theme that, for all its efforts, our cognition, because discursive in nature, can never adequately represent to itself what truly is in its unfathomable expanse—that while we are capable of genuine

⁴⁵ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 140.

⁴⁶ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 140. This quote refers, in fact, to practical self-consciousness. But the topic sentence of the paragraph is clear that Hegel is using it as a way to grasp the idea that “[r]eason is the certainty that it is all reality.”

⁴⁷ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 148.

knowledge or even wisdom, we can never hope to have a complete grasp of a rational cosmic order that is greater than us. But Hegel's radical suggestion is that such a model does not consistently explain what actually happens in the experience of reason. The inner exploration of the latter shows us that reason is not overwhelmed by a reality whose metaphysical structure is just too complex to decode. Despite being certain that it can unpack its truth to a rationally satisfying degree, everywhere it looks there is, instead, a surd that resists explanation. Contrary to our certainty in our method, no matter what field of phenomena we example, we therefore not only cannot find a rationally satisfying basis for all the details that force themselves upon us in the task of providing explanations. More drastically, we also do not see the point of even trying to because there is a point at which things just are the way they are. Exhibiting at each level a stubborn immediacy that can never be conceptually mediated, the world contains an element of brute facticity that prevents us from making things fully intelligible. That is, it lacks rational systematicity and consistency.

Indeed, the inner exploration of the experience of theoretical consciousness had already implicitly come to this realization. We there recognized that we could only do justice to our experience of intelligibility in committing ourselves to a metaphysics of becoming. But if the world is in becoming, and that becoming is to be serious, then there cannot be behind becoming a logically self-contained, self-justifying substance that is complete from all eternity. In that case, becoming would be a mere illusion generated by the finitude of our cognition, its inability to see the infinite complex of things all at once. To prevent such a construal of the brute facticity present in the world, our commitment to a metaphysics of becoming must also commit us to the additional thesis that the world, in becoming what it is, must accrue determinations for which there is never any adequate explanation besides the fact that the world, in its becoming, just happened to take on those determinations rather than others. We can, of course, temporally trace the emergence of these factually given determinations and therefore to some degree understand them, but the point is that the picture of the 'why' of this emergence that we paint will never be fully rationally satisfying. This leads to what Hegel calls in his *Philosophy of Nature* the "impotence of nature:"⁴⁸ instead of nature being a metaphysically complete rational cosmic order that is reflected in the phenomena that the philosophical sciences examines, there is, on the contrary, a material openness in its life

⁴⁸ HEGEL. *Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 1, §250A, p. 215.

(an insurmountable factor of “self-externality,” “irregularity,” and “contingency”⁴⁹) that is an affront to the rational closure we seek and are certain that we can capture. Insofar as the inner exploration of reason is, in a large sense, an investigation into the deep structure implied by theoretical consciousness, it merely makes explicit this already implicit commitment in the metaphysics of becoming first broached earlier.

This puts us face to face with the extreme difference between Hegel and classical metaphysics. While classical metaphysics proclaims that human rationality has insurmountable limitations in attaining knowledge due to the cognitive excess of substance, for Hegel there is nothing out of its reach. Nonetheless, while there is nothing in principle refractory to the medium of conceptualization (what Hegel calls “the concept”), substance itself is shown to lack a fully articulated rhyme or reason for why it is the way it is. In endeavoring to make the world intelligible, rationality therefore instills expectations of meaning where no fully satisfying meaning is to be found. Like children, we ask ‘Why?’ even when there is no possible response. In a dialectical reversal, the existence of an ontic gap between substance and human rationality is now shown to reveal the finitude of the world, the manner in which its content is not ‘too much’ for thinking, but in fact ‘too little,’ like a Sphinx without a riddle. Rather than claiming that ultimate reality is a realm of richness that forever escapes rationality, Hegel’s innovative thesis is that, when viewed through the lens of rationality, we see that it is, metaphysically, a realm of relative irrationality that is a scandal to the intense demands that our rationality place upon it for complete intelligibility. Faced with these demands, what was once referred to as ‘substance’ thereby proves to be nothing more than ‘mere’ nature, a metaphysical zone of becoming that fails to be self-contained and self-justifying in any logical sense, but largely is what it is because it just happens to be that way. As a “blind power,”⁵⁰ its forms therefore carry within them an air of brute facticity (e.g., why is the law of gravitation the constant that it is and not another?) such that human rationality can never find its own presence therein—or as Hegel says in an oral addition: “the forms of nature, therefore, cannot be brought into an absolute system.”⁵¹ However, the inner experience of reason therefore not only

⁴⁹ See, for instance, HEGEL. **Philosophy of Nature**, vol. 1, §247, p. 205 and §250, p. 215.

⁵⁰ Hegel, G. W. F. **Hegel and the Human Spirit. A translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6) with commentary**. Trans. L. Rauch. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983, p. 104.

⁵¹ HEGEL. **Philosophy of Nature**, vol. 3, §370Z, p. 180-181.

shows that human rationality must in some sense be more rational than the metaphysical structure of the world in that its intense demands for complete intelligibility imply logical norms that are not, strictly speaking, always found metaphysically instantiated in substance. It also strips classical metaphysics of its fundamental epistemological framework inasmuch as it shows that when we conceptualize the world around us, we must judge the world against the standards set by human rationality rather than the other way around, in consequence of which we see that it is actually the world that does not live up to us and not the other way around.⁵²

5. From Substance to Subject—A New Metaphysics of Human Spirit

Recognizing that what we may now simply call ‘nature’ cannot bring reason satisfaction, in Hegel’s phenomenological narrative reason now searches for a reality in which it does find itself successfully embodied. To know that there is an insurmountable disconnect between the theoretical constructs it provides and the world that these constructs seek to explain entails that something exists that offers us a perfect adequation between idea and reality in contrast with which nature is judged as too irrational for there ever to be one at its level. The next move consists in the following intuition: if the whole of the extra-subjective realm proves opaque, we should examine the hypothesis that such opacity only arises because it pales in comparison to the intelligibility offered by reason in its mode of self-consciously deliberating upon norms for action. If reason cannot find itself at home in the world, it should, in other words, be able to in what it rationally does. Consequently, given that the standpoint of a pure observer is an irreducible deep structure of spirit—as rational beings, we are all condemned to wonder—the fact that reason observing nature is unable to see a reflection of its rationality belies a more profound discovery: that if our speculative yearning is to obtain any satisfaction, it must shift its focus from the domain of classical metaphysics to spirit’s own activity, for it is here, and only here, that it can hope to find an entirely self-contained, self-justifying order, albeit one no longer writ large cosmically. Reason now

⁵² Roani Padui recently made a similar point: “The disjunction between the concept and reality is not simply a limitation of our discursive understanding, a defect of our human finite intellect, but is rather the expression of something essential about nature—namely, its own resistance to full incorporation into the categories of universality and necessity.” *The Necessity of Contingency and the Powerlessness of Nature: Hegel’s Two Senses of Contingency. Idealistic Studies*, n. 40 (3), p. 253, 2010.

assumes the point of view of an external observer scrutinizing the principles by which individuals have chosen to live out their lives, looking upon modern society—that society in which reason has come to awareness of itself for the first time according to Hegel—at a sociological distance, if you will, in order to explore the self-consciously deliberated upon norms that structure human action.

Action is a good candidate for a perfect embodiment of rationality. By definition something done with purpose, the principle underlying it can never be ‘senseless’ in the manner that much of the becoming of nature necessarily is: an action is constitutively saturated with a freely decided meaning, that is, done with a reason in mind. Nevertheless, our task fails anew, whether it be when we internally explore actions marked by the law of pleasure or the Kantian moral law, to take the two extremes of Hegel’s analysis. The ostensible rationality behind each ends up producing an irrationality that this rationality cannot contain, which undermines the pretence to any adequation between idea (the self-consciously deliberated upon norm for action) and reality (the action itself). In the first case, the law of pleasure, when chosen, fails to make an individual’s life rule governed in a satisfactory manner. Maximizing their self-feeling by converting nature into a means for indulgence,⁵³ the laws of nature eventually impose themselves in a way that is contrary to the path of indulgence, thereby negating ‘hedonism’ as a rationally self-sufficient way of life in that it has no control over this imposition, thus exposing it to contingencies. As for the Kantian moral law, the individual believes, by taking themselves as a purely rational subject, to have direct access to well-established universal rules that hold with no exception. By following them, their actions ought to exhibit a perfect, transparent rationality. Before they can follow these rules, they must, however, prove that these rules rationally obtain. But if they are to ‘test’ these rules by seeing if they live up to criteria such as non-contradiction, the only criteria at their disposal as a purely rational subject, this process only shows that the form of the rule is universalizable without addressing the content. Proving that something could be a moral law because it is logically consistent to conceive it as such does not fully explain why it is, for the individual, rationally binding as one. And if we cannot find a rational basis for any law in our capacity for self-conscious deliberation, then we must say that reason in this mode always presupposes the truth of the laws to which it adheres, which makes it seem contingent though it is experienced as necessary. Like Antigone, the most we can say

⁵³ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 218.

concerning their origin is: “They are not of yesterday or today, but everlasting, / Though where they came from, none of us can tell.”⁵⁴

But the dead end to which we came in the moral law intimates another rational source for the normative claims upon us, namely a communal way of life as that which tells all those who fall under its reach what is right and wrong in terms of what helps promote that way of life. That an individual cannot justify each and every norm for action that they recognize to be universally valid, even when they render themselves into a (putatively) purely rational subject, demonstrates the possibility of a greater, ‘transindividual’ rationality that is always already at work in society at large, yet which cannot be seen from the perspective of abstract, historically detached reason. The major transition that Hegel here enacts consists in a two-step argument. First, no individual can be adequately understood as rationally self-determined. They are only ever fully comprehensible in terms of the multitude of customs, traditions, and laws that precede them as part of a specific communal way of life into which they are acculturated before they ever become an individual and which thus informs their own lives by instilling in them various norms for action. Second, we could only hold others up to these norms because we assume, implicitly at least, that there is a good reason behind them. Were we not convinced that they were how we should act, we would more readily question them than we do. Consequently, Hegel’s claim is that this shared, largely anonymous social context into which individuals are thrown is more than the random outcome of contingent occurrences that just happen to determine a specific culture’s worldview. On the one hand, this context proves to be the studied product of the experiences of a culture, experiences that thus contain within them a distinctive logic of their own with respect to which we can explain why this or that custom, tradition or law, rather than another, came to be as a norm for action. While a specific communal way of life may never be fully justifiable from the perspective of abstract, historically detached reason, this does not prevent it from always already having found its own rationally motivated historical justification inasmuch as it arises as a lived, but rational response to what a people has undergone—their ordeals, their trials, their tragedies. On the other hand, because this context goes beyond me or you as individuals, yet is a studied product, it also has a rationality of its own that, while being greater than our own rational lives as individuals, nevertheless can be

⁵⁴ HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 261.

retrospectively reconstructed. Through such a reconstruction, we would see that much of what holds normative weight for us is a function of a community's judgement about what should constitute it as a community in light of its collective history.

This proclaims that a radical reversal must occur if rationality is to find a reality where it is fully embodied. We cannot remain at the level of a neutral investigator looking at things or actions externally according to the standards of pure, historically detached reason, but must assume the internal standpoint of a communal way of life as this life historically plays itself out on its own terms. If this life—taken broadly as a complex of customs, traditions, and laws that informs our sense of who we are—displays, throughout its history, a fully reconstructible rational process, then we would have effectively discovered a self-contained, self-justifying order, except now at a historical rather than cosmic level. This is why Hegel's word for a communal way of life, 'spirit,' falls under a subheading of 'reason.'⁵⁵ By showing us, experientially, a reality where we can be rationally satisfied, it investigates the hidden presupposition of the latter in its observing and self-consciously deliberating mode and, by implication, experience as such. In this manner, while spirit has been our theme all along, we only now come to see what it exactly means.

But even if a communal way of life is a product of rationality, it has yet to prove itself to be a reality that is rationally satisfying. The *Phenomenology* must thus now internally explore this new dimension of experience to see whether it can provide such satisfaction. To introduce this deep structure of spirit, Hegel plays on what would have been a familiar philosophical trope to him from the Romantics: seeing the birthplace of Western civilization in ancient Greece. The latter can serve as a starting point for his argument simply because its city-state reflects one of the simplest conceivable forms of a rationally self-sufficient communal way of life: we here *prima facie* encounter an ethical order in which everyone has a normatively stipulated place such that, when one sticks to one's given role in society and its respective roles, this way of life should become both self-contained and self-justifying. Indeed, in this way the Greek way of life ought to display a rational systematicity and consistency the likes of which is not present in nature.

For Hegel, the founding gesture of the unity of Greek society is a division of labor between

⁵⁵ For sake of brevity, I abstract from religion, which is also a subheading of 'reason.' I believe that Hegel makes the necessary (although not sufficient) conditions for a move towards 'absolute knowing,' the consummation of 'reason,' at the end of this chapter such that, for my purposes, I need not cover it.

the sexes, each being a representative of a specific domain of law. While males are given the task of attending to matters of the state, females are required to attend to familial affairs, ranging from the raising of children to the burial of the dead. The duties related to each domain are experienced as universally valid, offering no exception to those who must heed to their call insofar as both play an insurmountable part in the well-being of Greek society, the former by assuring the flourishing of a communal way of life over the singular desires of individuals or groups and the latter by preparing individuals, particularly males, for participation in this life. However, when we move from the ‘pure outline’ of the norms that internally make up the latter (its self-understanding) and turn to how it historically plays itself out on its own terms (the social reality that arises on the basis of this self-understanding),⁵⁶ a problem arises when, as depicted in Sophocles’ play *Antigone*, these duties find themselves poised against each other. Enemies of the *polis* do not deserve burial rites—but what happens if, like after Creon’s decree, someone demands the right to bury their brother, even if he is declared an enemy of the *polis*, as did Antigone? In following the divine law, Antigone’s action carries normative weight. Regardless, at the same moment it stands in contradiction to the human law. For Creon, the situation is reversed. Who is justified? The quandary is not only that both of their respective actions are sanctioned by the norms that make up the basic values of their society, but also (and this is the more troublesome point) that each can only experience the other’s standpoint as a singularized desire with no rational justification from within the normatively stipulated role they fulfill in society insofar as there is no way to negotiate between these simultaneously well-founded duties. The rationality at the foundation of the structure of ancient Greek society therefore creates an irrational moment that it cannot contain, rendering it rationally non-self-sufficient.

Although a product of rationality, the spirit of ancient Greece does not display the self-contained, self-justifying order that the subjects falling under it in a first moment experience it as having. But this, it must be said, presents an even worse predicament than the possible inability of a communal way of life to satisfy us rationally. It also challenges the idea that spirit is a metaphysical achievement over nature. If spirit cannot determine whether, according to the norms

⁵⁶ We see this move itself in how Hegel structures his phenomenological analysis, which goes from an abstract description of ‘the ethical order’ to its concrete unfolding in ‘ethical action.’ HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 267 and p. 279.

it provides, an action is done out of a universalizing intention or a singular desire—singularity being the domain of natural desires—this achievement of rationality—its creation of a self-standing universe of meaning—is put into question. There would be nothing irreducibly new added to nature, for the latter would have found a way to pursue its own ends despite the promise of rationality to have bestowed upon us a power over it. Hegel’s daring thesis is that the entirety of Western history and, by generalization, world history as such is a series of endeavors to find a manner to ultimately ground spirit as a rationally self-sufficient communal way of life, to secure its status as a being ontologically distinct from nature. The rise of one such way of life to dominance after the fall of another therefore has to do with more than geographical, sociopolitical, or economic issues, even if these do play a role;⁵⁷ it has more to do with how this emergent communal way of life offers a solution to the problems experienced in its antecedent history, problems that jeopardize the very life of spirit *qua* an ‘I’ that is a ‘We’ and a ‘We’ that is an ‘I.’⁵⁸

Nevertheless, even if we can reconstruct the largely implicit, ‘transindividual’ inferences that may have led spirit to adopt this or that new social configuration, as Hegel proceeds to do, what we see throughout its history is that the challenge it faces continually re-emerges in a different guise. Despite the reflective resources that it gains through its experiences, the criteria by which it tries to create more rationally self-sufficient ways of life perpetually create irrational moments of the type just described that it cannot contain. In medieval culture, the strict code by which one lives is unable to tell one if one is acting out of noble or ignoble motivations. During the French revolution, the very attempt to establish a government based on universal reason gets experienced as a dissenting singular fraction that goes against it. Terror ensues. This comes to its head in Kantian ethics, now reconceptualized as a radical way in which a community tries to rid itself of the irrationality of its own practice. If the decisive issue in spirit’s history has been how to guarantee that a universalizing intention is free from singular desires, Kant offers a seemingly surefire manner of resolving the antagonism: by occupying the formal position of an abstract I, we can easily stipulate the conditions under which an action’s universal validity can be assured, namely the potential of a maxim for universalizability. But this ‘test,’ although making an advance over prior

⁵⁷ Pinkard makes a similar point. See PINKARD. *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 10-12.

⁵⁸ This description of spirit occurs at HEGEL. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

attempts, similarly backfires. It is incapable of specifying how a moral agent, who must always act through a particular action, that is, from within a situation, is able to determine that their action is indeed in synch with the universal demands of rationality.

One last phenomenological player steps in. Taking our singular standpoint as having a direct access to the universal, the beautiful soul proclaims we can know when whatever we do in the here and now is rationally justified. As we move away from morality into conscience, the immediate certainty that the specific duty one feels at this instant as binding for oneself is taken to be what ought to be binding for all. It is not divine or human law, nor the form of our maxims, that make an action universally valid, but what our intuition, when faced with the concreteness of a lived context and inspired by moral genius, tells us.⁵⁹ Now the individual, as this singular individual, is perceived as the source of normative values such that what once appeared as a rational obstacle for a truly spiritual action is converted into a positive condition, as the individual gains reflective awareness of their spiritual importance as an individual for the first time. However, in light of this unique source of moral authentication, these personal testimonies will invariably be at odds with one another. The only genuine possibility for the beautiful soul is to enter into a battle of recognition.

Hegel's strategy is to underline how, for the beautiful soul, the logical inconsistency that always destroyed spirit from within is more than some kind of unforeseen glitch in its rationality in the latter's attempt to create a rationally self-sufficient communal way of life. It is in fact one with the latter. The turning point occurs when the beautiful soul realizes the one-sidedness of their universal judgment, how their subjective position has been unknowingly tainted by their singularity, and confesses to the other beautiful soul their wrongs. What is crucial is that the act of confession comes with the recognition that the other is equally constrained by the same moral limitations. To confess, the beautiful soul must therefore also be prepared to forgive because they now see, explicitly, that the difficulty of reconciling singularity and universality is part and parcel of spirit's very activity. The latter is nothing but the attempt, through rationality, to transform otherwise naturally conditioned, singular desires into universalizing intentions. This is why the battle for recognition amongst the beautiful souls, and its ending in mutual forgiveness, is

⁵⁹ HEGEL. *Phenomenology*, p. 397.

revelatory of the struggle of spirit itself. It points to what spirit has been doing, implicitly, all along its history. Insofar as its rationality is nothing but the act of universalizing nature, of investing it with meaning, it always runs the risk trespassing the criteria of its own legitimate actions, of swapping universality for singularity. There will always be, in other words, difficulties posed by the norms for action that make up a communal way of life, difficulties that reveal how these norms cannot be rationally self-sufficient on their own terms because they lead to situations in which these norms breakdown. Nonetheless, the failure of spirit's historical projects does not point to its impotence, perhaps one similar to the kind we see in nature, but instead to its ability to self-correct, to grow, to evolve, in a fully rational manner. Its rationality may perpetually create a moment of devastating irrationality in our social practices—but it also, time and time again, comes to contain it. Or, as Hegel puts it, spirit heals all wounds.⁶⁰

What is at stake in Hegel's inner exploration of the historical vicissitudes present in and creative of the experience of spirit's ever-changing communal way of life is thus the phenomenological demonstration that the latter is a "*conscious, self-mediating* process."⁶¹ It is the endeavour to show that both the inner transformations of any given community's customs, traditions, and laws and their total transubstantiation into a new way of life are penetrated through and through by a rational movement that can be retrospectively reconstructed. Now we encounter the move we have been waiting for all along, namely the move from substance to subject,⁶² swapping a classical metaphysics where an underlying reality is the object of metaphysical praise to a new metaphysics that celebrates the unique power of spirit as seen experientially from within. As a historically self-unfolding universe of meaning, the latter possesses the self-containedness and self-justification we for millennia mistakenly sought for in substance and its avatars: here, and here alone, do we encounter a rationally satisfying system inasmuch as this social system itself is a product of human rationality working itself out. To grasp why a specific custom, tradition, law, or communal way of life exists, we simply have to grasp how it, as a determinate manner of universalizing, emerged as a lived, but rational response to the difficulties posed by past customs, traditions, laws, or communal ways of life, which in turn arose organically from the failure of

⁶⁰ HEGEL. *Phenomenology*, p. 407.

⁶¹ HEGEL. *Phenomenology*, p. 492.

⁶² HEGEL. *Phenomenology*, p. 10.

previous ones in a chain that logically (though perhaps not actually) could go on, forwards and backwards, forever. This self-mediating process in which our communities participate is therefore a dynamic, never-ending rational achievement by us. Absolute knowing is nothing but the raising up of this otherwise implicit self-mediation to the level of scientific cognition,⁶³ which sets the stage for the *Science of Logic* as an investigation into the forms of thinking without which this rationality could not historically work itself out.⁶⁴

5. Conclusion: The Anti-Spinozism of Hegel's Phenomenology

To return to the historical problematic that we began with, we can now see the radical manner in which Hegel reclaims human rationality from the theoretico-practical deadlock of classical metaphysics as it was conceived, thanks to Jacobi's influential reading of Spinoza, in his time. Through an inner exploration of the fundamental dimensions of human experience, what the *Phenomenology* brings powerfully to the fore is the claim that our rationality can in no means be seen as a fall downwards from 'true' substance in two interrelated ways. First, while the tradition of classical metaphysics argues that we lowly creatures cannot grasp the unfathomable expanse of ultimate reality because the infinite complexity of its rational structure always overwhelms the efforts of our cognition, it experientially shows the opposite, namely that ultimate reality contains so much brute facticity in its becoming that it itself is lacking in rational systematicity and consistency and therefore resists explanation. In this regard, it is not that our rationality is somehow less than a rational cosmic order that is greater than us. Second, against the tradition of classical metaphysics for which the story of our lives is a mere chapter of the larger rational cosmic story that not only eludes our complete comprehension, but also dictates the unfolding of this story, the *Phenomenology* experientially shows us that the history in which we participate as a people is a completely and utterly self-meditating process. But this entails that spirit is, as Hegel says elsewhere, a "product of itself," the "process of proceeding forth from, of freeing itself from nature:"⁶⁵ it indicates the beginning of a new universe, a universe that is, insofar as it contains its

⁶³ HARRIS. *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. 2, p. 784.

⁶⁴ HEGEL. *Science of Logic*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Hegels Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes/Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective*. Ed. and trans.

own ground or reason within itself, for all intents and purposes *causa sui*, except now in a historical rather than cosmic register and which thus stands in sharp contrast to the self-externality, irregularity, and contingency everywhere in nature. If the theoretico-practical ontic gap between ‘true’ substance and spirit is, therefore, evidence of a fall from substance—of some kind of constitutive experiential split between us and the world—then it must be viewed, from the standpoint of spirit, as a fall upwards into an irreducibly new and self-standing realm. As such, the *Phenomenology* sketches the foundation for a new metaphysics through a careful inner exploration of experience, which is why it can be the introduction to the *Logic* as the elaboration of that metaphysics: a metaphysics of human spirit in its historical existence as that creature which, through its rationality, leaves substance behind, thereby rendering it ‘mere’ nature in terms of its own form of life. The forms of this rationality, having been hereby reclaimed experientially, are now to be elaborated on their own terms.

These concluding, summary remarks provide me with a conceptual basis to highlight what I take to be the insurmountable limitations of the standard metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings of the *Phenomenology*. Both do not realize the radical ‘anti-Spinozism’ it argues for. The metaphysical reading falls short, in this regard, on two fronts. In the first place, it does not recognize that the identity between being and thinking that the *Phenomenology* seeks to establish is only ever found at the level of spirit’s historical existence and never at the level of ultimate reality. In its becoming, spirit is a self-meditating process. Any irrationality that arises in its social practices is an incitation for self-correction, growth, evolution such that what may be, from within the historical worldview of one community, irrational, is, from within the one that immediately follows it, not only rationally resolved, but also explains the role certain historically emergent customs, traditions, and laws play for it such that the inner transformation and transubstantiation of worldviews exhibits an extreme degree rational systematicity and consistency. Consequently, historical existence is shown to be a fully reconstructible rational process in a way quite unlike anything in nature because there is here no longer any such thing as brute facticity: the norms for action that make spirit what it is are never just given, but are always already rational products. To grasp the move to absolute knowing as the rehabilitation of classical metaphysics in which we come to see how our rationality

M. Petry. Dordrecht: Riedel, 1978, vol. 1, p. 6n/7n.

is one with the rationality of the cosmos so that we can, by studying the logic of our rationality, come to discover the blueprints of the material universe is to misinterpret the specific relationship that the *Phenomenology* experientially sketches between human rationality and ultimate reality. In the second place, the *Phenomenology* is so concerned with the concrete details of spirit's historical existence that it is unconvincing to say that it, in the end, reduces these details to a mere moment—albeit important—of the self-development of a rational cosmic Absolute. The move to absolute knowing, which coincides with our philosophical coming to awareness of spirit as absolute spirit, is 'absolute' because it is the scientific cognition that historical existence is just as logically self-contained and self-justifying as substance was taken to be in classical metaphysics, although in a non-cosmic register, which justifies the use of the adjective in a now modified sense. Human spirit, by following its own rationally self-given norms, lives in a realm all of its own.

As for the non-metaphysical reading, while it has distinct advantages in underscoring both the idealistic moments of the *Phenomenology* and in particular the unique theory of history as a rational self-correction, growth, and evolution of norms for action, it fails to see how its inner exploration of experience comes with a series of metaphysical commitments. With regards to the experience of theoretical consciousness and speculative reason, it does not recognize how Hegel argues, transcendently as it were, that in order to explain the very possibility of these experiential dimensions, we have to not only postulate that nature is a realm of material becoming, but also that this becoming is a realm of relative irrationality. This entails drastic metaphysical implications that the non-metaphysical reading overlooks, but which I believe have to be on the center stage of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and philosophy as a whole, namely that nature can never be taken as a rationalist substance, but is instead a mere chain of largely self-external, irregular, and contingent events for which no rhyme or reason often exists. In terms of the experience of practical self-consciousness and spirit, the non-metaphysical reading shines, it must be said, the most. It recognizes that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between explanations in the context of theory vs. praxis or natural causes vs. norms as domains irreducible to one another. Nevertheless, in focusing on themes such as recognition and the sociality of reason, the ways in which the multitude of customs, traditions, and laws that make up any given communal way of life are the historical achievements of human action, it is unable to do complete justice to the speculative tones omnipresent in Hegel's conception of spirit. Hegel's point is not just that spirit is ontologically

distinct from nature. More radically, if we look at the metaphysical zone that spirit opens up in contrast to the metaphysical zone of nature, we are forced to conclude that historical existence is, in its becoming, the closest thing that we have to what classical metaphysics called ‘substance.’⁶⁶ But this puts us in a particular situation: since nature itself lacks rational systematicity and consistency, then the fact that spirit proves to be a type of substance, one that we can more adequately call a ‘subject,’ means that we must be, in some sense, the products of ourselves; that we must have, somehow, freed ourselves from nature, this being the condition of the possibility of the inauguration of wholly new, self-standing universe irreducible to the latter’s material becoming. However, this not only means that human spirit is always to be understood as a moment of absolute spirit, a ‘transindividual’ rationality that is historically playing itself out in and through us and our communities. It also means that any understanding of Hegel’s social theory must also concern itself with his metaphysical vision of nature, spirit, and the relationship between them. To adequately understand recognition or the sociality of reason, for Hegel, we have to see the presence of absolute spirit as a self-caused fall from nature, upwards and not downwards, into a realm all of its own. In that the non-metaphysical reading of the *Phenomenology* downplays Hegel’s speculative interests, it mistakenly overlooks how Hegel’s reclaiming of human rationality, which is decisively intersubjective, already articulates and therefore depends on such a vision.

Joseph Carew
Department of Philosophy
McGill University
Leacock Building,
855 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, Quebec, H3A 2T7, Canada

jstephencarew@gmail.com

⁶⁶ H.S. Harris says something very similar: “*the nearest substance is the communities we build.*” Lecture Notes on Hegel’s *Encyclopedia Logic* [1830], prepared by H.S. Harris for a course during the academic year 1993–1994 at Glendon College, York University, Toronto. **Manuscripts of H.S. Harris**, p. 5.

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