The Hobbesian Ethics of Hegel's Sense-certainty

Jeffrey Reid
University of Ottawa

Abstract:

In this paper, I explore the largely ignored ethical dimension in the first section of Hegel`s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Sense-certainty, which tends to be understood exclusively as an epistemological critique of sense-data empiricism. I approach the ethical aspect of the chapter through Hegel`s analysis of language, there, as unable to refer to individual things. I then show that the position Hegel analyses is akin to the one presented by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*, as well as in his *De Corpore*, and which serves to ground his naturalistic ethics. The linguistic juxtaposition consequently allows me to relate the ethics of sense-certainty to Hobbes, not only to his "shallow" empiricism, as Hegel puts it, but to the ethical vision Hobbes presents in his state of nature.

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empiricism[1], but to the ethical vision he presents in his state of nature.

Examining language as a means of comprehending ethical reality is possible because, at

the most fundamental level, language mediates our relations with others, with the world and with

ourselves. The languages that we use form the ethical spaces that we live in. I want to show that

sense-data empiricism partakes in the same materialistic nominalism that Hegel discovers and

critiques in Sense-certainty, and which Hobbes uses to ground his ethical conception of the

human individual in its natural state. These anachronistic references will help us grasp how the

logic of sense-data empiricism implies a specific ethical grasp of reality: a world that is reduced

to an infinite number of objects appearing as concretely individual and novel, and thus as

perfectly suited to the fleeting satisfaction of unique, individual desires. Hegel's critique also

demonstrates how objects of consumption turn out to be nothing but empty signifiers, thus

leaving the consuming self perpetually unsatisfied and hungry. If successful, my analysis might

also be used to illustrate how dominant epistemologies of sense-data empiricism are perfectly consistent with the consumer ethos of our own historical moment, but I will leave such sociological considerations for another time.

Contemporary readers of Hegel from the Anglo-American tradition tend to see the Sense-certainty section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as discussing a problem of knowledge referred to as the problem of universals (and/or indexicals)[2]. Commentators take for granted, since they are themselves in the realist-empiricist tradition, that Hegel is simply evaluating sense-data empiricism as a likely candidate for true knowledge of the objectivity or the reality that is simply out there, waiting to be known by such a method of knowing, perhaps with a few adjustments. The material reality that thus presents itself through the senses is taken as really and truly there, waiting to be discovered by a knowing subject that looks a lot like them[3]. The question becomes "can *we* know reality accurately through *our* senses?" without acknowledging that the "we" of Sense-certainty implies its own particularly primitive form of selfhood, one that is thankfully not immediately evident in most Hegel scholars!

In this light, the Sense-certainty section can be seen, even by those approaching Hegel studies from a strictly Anglo-American (Analytical) tradition, as an interesting, even fruitful analysis of the limits of sense-data empiricism as a theory of knowledge[4]. Locke and or Hume may be named as the philosophical references Hegel has in mind[5]. Robert Solomon, in his more expansive account, includes interesting anachronistic references to other proponents of sense-data theories of knowledge, notably Bertrand Russell, but he also finds room to include such realists as G.E. Moore, J.L. Austin, Sartre, Roy Wood Sellars, George Santayana, Arthur Lovejoy and A.J. Ayer[6]. Besides referring to Locke, Tom Rockmore mentions Bacon[7].

In fact, if we are faithful to Hegel's injunction, in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, against taking the method of knowing as separate from the object of knowledge, then we see that the point of the Sense-certainty section is rather that neither the objectivity *nor the subjectivity* that sense-data empiricism implies is as solid and substantial as what it claims to be; contrary to claims of knowing a rich diversity of worldly things, in sense-certainty both the subject and its objects are impoverished to the point of emptiness. This is because, according to the phenomenological process that Hegel describes in the Introduction to his work, each level of consciousness presents a situation where the knowing subject and its object are mutually determinant. Such reciprocal determination is also what allows each level of consciousness to be grasped both theoretically and ethically, or practically, to use the language of Hegel's day, since determination, as the activity of thought, may just as easily take the form of knowing as that of willing. In fact, within the economy of the *Phenomenology*, we can say that willing or desiring something is just another way of knowing it. Indeed, in Hegel, it is the foundational role of determinant thought that bridges the theoretical and practical realms, divorced in Kant and Fichte[8].

Exclusive interest in the Sense-certainty section for its contributions to theory of knowledge and its critique of sense-data empiricism as a possible candidate for "our" knowing has led many commentators to overlook or to strongly downplay the short but remarkable passage in the section, where Hegel actually addresses the ethical dimensions of a purely empirical relationship between knowing subject and known object, where the immediacy of such a willing relationship determines it as one of animal inclination and hunger or desire[9].

At the end of section 109 in the Miller translation (M109)[10], Hegel briefly but explicitly applies sense-certainty consciousness to the practical sphere, the sphere where subjective thought

is determined as will, in the raw, unreflected form of animal hunger. This sudden shift to the ethical realm is possible because the determination of objectivity that is provided by sense-certainty implies the knowing (i.e. the consciousness) of natural, immediate objects as being thoroughly singular. In fact, this is what generally characterizes, in Hegel, what is natural: the singular, unreflected nature of things (*Dinge*) and our relation to them. In other words, raw desire or hunger presupposes the same natural singularity of its objects that comes to light in the theoretical approach of sense-data empiricism[11]. The natural, unmediated status of singular sense objects means they are always in imminent danger of also being determined as objects of desire. On the subjective side of the knowing equation, as we shall see, the desiring relation to singular sensuous things will come up just as empty as the theoretical attempt to know them. In both theoretical knowledge and in animal desire, the determining relation to such things always collapses into empty universality and dissatisfaction. Here, consciousness is led to spoil "its own limited satisfaction" while still seeking fulfillment (M80).

The truth is that the singular, natural, immediate objects of sense-certainty have no more substance than does the empty subjectivity that determines them thus. "The 'I' does not have the significance of a manifold imagining or thinking; nor does the thing signify something that has a host of qualities (M91)." Indeed, this is precisely the form of empty subjectivity that simple, "shallow" empiricism demands, where the self, devoid of all determining forms, categories or imaginings is passively worked upon (or worked over) by sense data. Reciprocally, sense impressions are nothing substantial in themselves but simply exist as sensations falling into me, an empty vessel keen for content. When Hegel refers to animals, in M109, he means a type of subjectivity that places itself before the world without any of the substantial attributes of

selfhood that are to be subsequently developed through the *Phenomenology*'s recounted encounters with richer objects and worlds.

Sense-based empiricists determine the world as made up of singular, natural and therefore finite things, just as animals are said to do. If such natural things may simply be "eaten up"[12], it is because "our approach to the object [is] immediate or receptive (M90)." In a way, animals are wiser than sense-data empiricists because the former at least recognize the true nullity of consumable reality, the fact that it is simply there to be consumed. Such consumption, Hegel maintains, shows real knowledge of the essential finitude (nothingness) of singular things, a knowledge shared in the Eleusinian Mysteries that Hegel refers to here[13], where the initiate, "brings about the nothingness of such things himself in his dealings with them, and… sees them reduce themselves to nothingness (M109)."

Hegel's references to the Eleusinian Mysteries and the "wisdom of animals", in M109, are often either ignored or taken as idiosyncratic asides and not grasped for what they are: reflections on the ethical nature of the form of consciousness that arises in sense-certainty, where insubstantial things are presented for consumption by the equally empty, abstract and constantly famished (or "receptive" M90) self[14]. One exception is H.S. Harris who, in his commanding study of the *Phenomenology*, does see Hegel`s remark on animal hunger as reflecting an essential practical aspect of sense-certainty itself, where "sense-certainty is not oriented towards knowledge as such, but towards survival.[15]" Harris's comment reinforces the Hobbesian aspect that I will address below but seems at odds with Harris's overall view that Sense-certainty reflects the consciousness of comfortable, familiar "Everyday Life"[16]. For now, suffice to say that the reason we (and Harris and Hegel) can move back and forth between the theoretical ("knowledge as such") and the practical ("survival") subjective determinations is that the same

objectivity of singular, natural things is at stake. Empirical knowing and animal desire are just two ways sense-certainty, as the form of "natural consciousness" (M109), approaches or determines natural objectivity, which presents itself as completely devoid of posited, shared selfhood.

For those who might maintain that this is not yet the place, in the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel addresses desire (presumably referring to its more complete and probably sexual manifestations in the Self-consciousness and Reason chapters) one needs only point out that animal consumption of objectivity is brought up here in a way that does, in Hegel's words, "anticipate how the case stands in the practical sphere" (M109)[17]. Of course, to have a truly practical (ethical) sphere, we need other self-conscious people and that phenomenological level has not yet been attained in Sense-certainty. Self-consciousness is nonetheless the sphere where thought, determined as *human* sexual desire, will first attempt to know its object (another self-consciousness) by *consuming* it, "certain of the nothingness of this other" (M174), before learning the tough lesson of its object's independent selfhood, an independence that has been progressively (but not totally) gained through the preceding movements of consciousness: Perception and Force and Understanding. This is precisely why Hegel can now "anticipate" how the ethics of sense-certainty are involved in the actual relations between two consciousnesses. In immediate sexual desire, consciousness will refer initially to the primitive form of sense-certainty, where the object is merely sensuous, singular and natural, i.e. an object of consumption. Thankfully, the human "object" resists such determination, thereby bringing about the famous struggle for recognition. However, Hegel's "anticipation" does imply that richer, more holistic forms of consciousness are nonetheless haunted by the primitive form of objectification that we experience in Sense-certainty, a fact that may even help us see how our

own existence as consumers does not contradict but rather dwells within richer forms of selfhood, like citizenship.

I would now like to briefly look at Hegel's argument in Sense-certainty in order to highlight the linguistic aspect that I mentioned above. I will then apply this aspect to the practical/ethical considerations that I have been discussing, where the sense object is determined as an object of animal hunger. In order to see how the Hegelian linguistic element plays out in the ethical realm, I will discuss its relation to the theory of language that Hobbes presents in the initial "Of Sense" section of his *Leviathan*. The point is this: the ethics of Sense-certainty are akin to those of Hobbes's state of nature because both involve sense-data empiricism and the materialistic nominalist notion of language that Hegel is criticizing, and which he shows to be impoverished and self-contradictory. Sense-certainty shares with Hobbes's state of nature what might be called the same ethical language-world.

Sense-certainty describes a primitive or naïve form of empiricism, one that claims, however, to be the richest and truest form of knowing. Through our senses, we seem to experience a substantial diversity of things that are given to us directly, in each instance of our lives, in space and time. These sensuous things strike us as absolutely certain, in an authentic fashion. Our thoughts do not seem to interfere with them. Things are, and they strike us as such immediately, in all their apparent variety. Hegel's philosophical reflection will lead us to think again and to discover that things are not as they first seem. What appears as rich and variegated is actually impoverished and bland. What appears immediately as most certain reveals itself to be the least true, and the self that seems most independent with regard to the sensuous things it "eats up" is really the one held fastest in the sway of natural determination.

In order to analyze the knowledge claims of sense-certainty we must begin by asking ourselves where its supposed truth lies. We begin by looking at the object (M94). Is the object essential? Does the object in-itself hold the truth? In other words, does the thing that strikes my senses carry its truth with it, striking me with its truth as it strikes my senses? No. What strikes my senses is not really the singular object that I mean but rather a pure "thisness". In other words, the true singularity of the sense object can only be apprehended when I refer to it as "this object". Any and every sense object must present itself to me as indicated by a "this", a general demonstrative pronoun that contradicts the supposed individuality of the object itself. The question is not, consequently, "what is the truth of the sense object?" but rather, what is the "this" that allows me to mean individual objects? Analyzing the indexical "this", Hegel breaks it down into its twin components of time and space, specifically through the terms "now" and "here", in order to discover if there is anything essential or true in them that lies beyond the empty generality of "this".

Hegel's examination, which, significantly, involves writing down "now this noon" in order to see if the corresponding sense impressions have objective truth, shows there is nothing essential in either the now nor in the here which would be fundamental to the thisness of sense-certainty. Summarizing the argument, one might say that in physically pointing out the thing before me, as "this thing here and now", both "now" and "here" fail to refer to the singular thing that is meant. Rather, they break down into an infinity of "nows" and "heres", dissolving finally into universal, empty forms of "hereness" or "nowness". The examination of here and now confirms the emptiness of the "this", on the side of the object. I.e. "this" singular thing of my senses fails as an object of true knowledge. I can never know and express the utter singularity of the object of my senses. In linguistic terms, "it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express

in words, a sensuous being that we mean. (M97)" And what cannot be said is "nothing other than the untrue and the unreasonable…(M110)". For our purposes, following Hegel's analysis, we can say that individual linguistic signs that are meant to refer to singular things of the senses (e.g. house, tree, man) always require the general demonstrative pronoun "this", which itself turns out to be a thoroughly general linguistic sign, along with its corollaries "here" and "now", signifying everything and nothing.

Perhaps, argues Hegel, we should then look for the truth of sense-certainty in the knowing self since we could not find it in the object of the senses. Perhaps the truth (essence or in-itself) of this form of knowledge (i.e. this form of consciousness) takes place in me, in the knowing subject, rather than in the object. It is because this tree is the one that I *mean*, that it is certain and true. "Sense-certainty is driven back into the I" (M100), as Hegel puts it. Perhaps the truth of the known sense object is in the fact that it is the thing I mean, because it is mine to mean (allowing Hegel to famously play on the verb *meinen* – to mean – and the possessive pronoun *mein*). I indicate it *(ich meine es)*. Now is the day, because I have it before me. Here is the tree because I mean it. The problem is that, in sense-certainty, my "I" is immediately determined by the here (or the now) that it means. According to pure sense-data empiricism, the I that is certain of the house is not the I that is certain of the tree. My sensuous experience thus breaks down into a multitude of singular Is that dissolve into subjective experience in general. I may mean a single experience that is mine, but what I say is not what I mean. When I say "I see the tree", the "I" is a universal I. In Hegel's words, "When I say 'this Here', 'this Now', or 'a single item', I am saying all Thises, Heres, Nows, all single items. Similarly, when I say 'I', this singular 'I', I say in general all "Is'; everyone is what I say, everyone is 'I', this singular 'I' (M102)." Relating this statement to the linguistic context that we visited above, with regard to

the truth of the sense *object*, we can say that, on Hegel's reading, "I" joins "this", "here" and "now" as an empty (i.e. devoid of real content) signifier or sign, one that merely reflects the empty generality of subjective experience. "I is merely general (*allgemeines* = universal), like now, here, or this… (M102).[18]"

Hegel's reasoning here may be hard to grasp, particularly for commentators who believe the "I", here, refers to them, subjects of solid empirical knowing. It is important to recall that the "I" that is under consideration at this stage is the self as immediately experiencing singular objects of the senses, and nothing more. "Neither the 'I' nor the thing has the significance of a complex process of mediation. M91" We are not talking about self-reflective self-consciousness, nor even about the self of Perception (the next section in the *Phenomenology*); we are discussing an unreflected immediate form of selfness that simply receives individual things through the senses as present and certain. In this sense, the I that sees and means this tree is nothing other than an I "full of this tree", we might say and ultimately, "full of thisness". The my-ness or consciousness is entirely given over to what it means, this tree. Consequently, when the singularity of the tree that is meant breaks down into an empty universal (this, here, now), this also reveals the truth about the self that means "this tree". Given the reciprocal (phenomenological) relation between the knowing self and the object of knowledge, where the knowing subject is always consciousness *of* something and the object of knowledge is always the object *of* a knowing subject, it should be no surprise that the emptiness of the object of sense-certainty reflects upon and into the knower of that object. This is why Hegel can refer to a *figure* of consciousness, one that implies a definite knowing relation between subject and object. Here, in the knowing subject, the empty universality of the sensed object produces a subjective

emptiness and a form of hunger that spills over into the practical (i.e. ethical) realm as animal desire (M109), allowing Hegel to "anticipate how things stand" there.

The avidity of the empty subject, its hunger for foreign content to be negated and determined, is a fixture of Hegelian subjectivity in general, that essential characteristic that allowed Kojève (and later, Sartre) to describe the self as a nihilating nothingness[19]. Animal hunger or desire, which posits its object as singular, natural and strictly Other, cannot get satisfaction, because, as we find later in the *Phenomenology*, "Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction in another self-consciousness (M175)" not in a singular, natural object of consumption. In its purely destructive relationship to the singular object of consumption, consciousness remains unrequited, caught up in an endless cycle where it "produces the object again, and the desire as well (M175)." In the section under discussion in Sense-certainty, natural consciousness's compulsive cycle of consumption/hunger is expressed by the fact that it is "always forgetting… and starting the movement again(M109)."

When we apply the linguistic dimension found in Hegel's argument, where the truth of sensuous experience is expressed in the thoroughly general (empty) linguistic signs "here", "now", "this", "I", to the ethics of desire and consumption evoked in M109, we arrive at a surprising insight. In purely animal desire (desire that confers absolutely no independent selfhood onto its objects), the singular objects that are meant for consumption are really empty linguistic signs of hereness, nowness and thisness, and that the self doing the consuming is the equally empty signifier "I".

Among all the secondary references to those empiricists that Hegel might have had in view when writing his Sense-certainty section, I have not yet found the one that I think most telling: Thomas Hobbes[20]. This is surprising. Not only is his empiricism immediately sensuous,

it is accompanied by a natural moral dimension akin to the figure of natural consciousness that

Hegel targets in the section, as characterized by animal hunger.

To summarily support the idea of a Hegelian reference to Hobbes, one might bring up

several factual coincidences. The *Phenomenology*'s beginning with Sense-certainty seems to

echo the *Leviathan'*s empiricist jumping off point, "Of Sense", where the senses are presented as

the basis of all knowledge and all human experience. "There is no conception in a man's mind

which hath not at first… been begotten upon the organs of sense," writes Hobbes[21]. As well,

Hegel's use of the expression "natural consciousness" in Sense-certainty (M109), meaning an

individual consciousness limiting its knowing to singular (natural) things, can be seen as

reprising the fundamental natural elements in Hobbes's thought: the right of nature that

determines life in his natural state[22]. Further, we find the reference to animal hunger and

consumption in the Sense-certainty section reiterated in Hegel's chapter on Hobbes, in the

Lectures on the History of Philosophy: "Hobbes looks at this [natural] condition in its true light

and we find in him no idle talk about a state of natural goodness; the natural condition is really

far more like that of the animals – a condition in which there is an unsubdued individual will.[23]"

Finally, in what may only be an amusing, yet semantically telling coincidence, in order to

illustrate the impossibility of referring to singulars, Hegel, almost two centuries later, uses the

same example Hobbes uses to demonstrate the exact opposite: "this tree"[24]!

Reference to "this tree" brings us back to the linguistic-ethical dimension that I have been

discussing, where the Hobbesian connection to the Sense-certainty section is particularly strong.

Hobbes's idea that language (and thought) consists entirely of real, individual linguistic signs

that are only true when they adequately name individual things reflects the materialistic

correspondence notion of language that Hegel is undermining in the Sense-certainty section,

where he shows how individual linguistic signs cannot refer to singulars but always dissolve into empty generalities or universals[25]. The naturalistic ethics of survival that Hobbes calls the right of nature, and which he deduces, at least in part, from the anthropological theory of language presented in the "Of Sense" chapter of *Leviathan*, seems implied in the "practical sphere" that Hegel describes in his reference to "animal wisdom" in M109, where "all of nature celebrates" the nullity of finite things.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes calls linguistic signs "proper Names", which are "singular to one only thing". The examples he gives are "Peter, John, this man, this Tree" [26]. Particular entities, i.e. generic groups of things may be represented by "common Names", for example "tree" without the demonstrative "this" that is reserved for singulars. Although universals are meant to express a collectivity of similar things, i.e. "all which together", they actually still refer to singular things within the collection. "Universals recall any one of those many" because the singular is all that the empirical human imagination may hold. Universals have no real existence other than as actual names or signs simply because universals are never perceived. Thus, there is "nothing in the world Universal but Names"[27]. Their signifiers have no *universal* referent. They simply refer to singular members of a generic group. "For the things named are every one of them Individual and Singular" and what denotes the true singularity of Names (or linguistic signs) is the addition of the demonstrative "this"[28].

Hobbes clearly believes that demonstrative expressions like "this tree" are the adequate representations of the singular object of the senses[29]. Thus, according to his rather uncompromising view of language, a discourse comprised of proper names is true because it is made up of material signs that denote and correspond to real, individual material things. Of course, we can use universals and particulars in language; it is just that when we do, we use them

as signs (materially real linguistic tokens) that may or may not refer to collections of individual things in reality. The materiality of linguistic signs means, however, that we may use them in a performative fashion, either "for pleasure or ornament, innocently" or "to grieve one another", as "nature hath armed living creatures, some with teeth, some with horns… [30]" We may also use signs the same way we use an abacus, to calculate things. Of course, for Hobbes, what we calculate is ultimately how we can get what we desire.

Sense-certainty, like Hobbes's materialistic empiricism, posits a world of singular signs or proper names, each referring to or naming an individual thing that has struck and been absorbed, at least at some point, by the senses. Hegel's analytical critique consists of showing that the demonstrative pronoun "this" which Hobbes rightly sees as necessary in order to mean such individual things, is itself an empty, general term, thereby contradicting the idea of language as consisting of proper names that correspond to sensually experienced singular things.

The language-world that Hobbes presents, following the "Of Sense" section of the *Leviathan* is consistent with the materialistic moral vision of his state of nature, a state of natural, animal consciousness where the individual's relation to objectivity is to things desired, by natural right, for consumption. The correlation between the linguistic dimension and the ethical sphere can be readily deduced from Hobbes's Euclid-inspired method itself, as employed in the *Leviathan* (but also in the systematic articulation between *De Corpore* and *De Cive*): begin by knowing the simplest element and proceed through inference. Thus, we begin with knowledge of the individual human being and his distinctive mind. Here, we discover that, beyond his five animal senses, the faculties "which seem proper to man only… proceed all from the invention of words and speech"[31]. Having defined his axiomatic, individual human element, Hobbes brings it together with other similar (and equal) individuals, in a hypothetical natural state, and deduces

the ethical world that arises. His famous state of nature is not a sinister dystopia into which humans are introduced. Rather, it is the ethical reality drawn from the specificity of the human individual, a specificity that is fundamentally linguistic.

Hobbes's linguistic reality is consequently perfectly suited to the "antisocial" world he deduces from it, in his state of nature[32]. This is the same world of animal hunger, consumption and survival that Hegel provides a glimpse of in the Sense-certainty section. In both cases, the impoverished reality of the world brought forth, i.e. its lack of recognition, of social structures etc., can be grasped linguistically in that the paucity and abstraction of its vocabulary simply do not allow for the constitution of more substantial ethical forms. Hegel's analysis shows us that the brutish, dispersed nature of purely sensuous reality is witnessed in the fact that the apparent diversity and richness of its vocabulary, of its proper names, can be reduced to four empty indexicals (or two adverbs and two pronouns): here, now, this and I. In fact, I would like to further claim that the reality of sense-certainty, its world, is actually configured by these four linguistic signs. In more Hegelian terms, we might say that "here, now, this and I" are the truth of sense-certainty[33]. In their commentaries on the Sense-certainty section, both H.S. Harris and Robert Solomon evoke literary references that are meant to depict the ethical substance or reality of sense-certainty consciousness. A glance at their *Auseinandersetzung* regarding the choice of references will help further the discussion about the linguistic dimension of this reality.

Harris, in his analysis, chooses to illustrate the world of sense-certainty with a little-known aphorism from the Jena period. In this *Wastebook* fragment, Hegel presents the everyday existence of a good peasant woman, a *Bauersfrau*, who lives contentedly surrounded by the things of her world, her children and her farm animals[34]. For Harris, this world of comfortable familiarity describes the immediate, unreflected consciousness of sense-certainty. Significantly,

in the fragment, the peasant woman gives names to the familiar things of her world and this naming of singular things allows Harris to point out the affinity between Hegel's thoughts on language in the Jena aphorism and what he is saying several years later in the Sense-certainty section[35]. In naming the objects of her world, the peasant woman seeks to affirm their status as existing singulars, to reinforce their reality as unique and enduring. For her, the objects that she names are absolutely individual, a lasting part of her world. Her daughter is not "daughter" but Ursula. Her son is not "son" but Martin. Her cow is not "cow" but Lisa. In spite of the peasant woman's intentions, however, the aphorism shows that such *Namen* are nonetheless empty linguistic signs (signifiers), which, unlike fully determined (through judgment and syllogism) words, remain arbitrary. Similarly, when we throw around undetermined terms like "infinite, knowing, movement", to use Hegel's examples from the Jena aphorism, we are again using arbitrary empty signs. The similar fates experienced by the singular names in the aphorism and the demonstrative signifiers (e.g. this tree, this man etc.) in the Sense-certainty section allow Harris to maintain that the *gemütlich* world of the peasant woman is the adequate expression of sense-certainty consciousness.

Indeed, it might appear that in both cases, singular linguistic markers collapse into empty universals. Just as "Martin" may indicate any Martin and "Lisa" any Lisa, "this tree" and "this man" do collapse into generality. However, I do not think Harris is right here in his choice of models. The most convincing model for the form of consciousness presented in Sense-certainty, in its survival mode[36], is not the peasant woman comfortably immersed in her everyday world. Such a "knowing" relationship, one of familiarity (*Erkennen*), is hard to square with the theoretical presuppositions that exist between the knowing subject and its known object that we find in the most naïve form empiricism[37], where objects are nothing more than raw sense

impressions. This is not the case with the *Bauersfrau*, who clearly attempts (as we all do!) to live in a world of *Sachen* (things that matter), in a world of familiar things (her children, her cow) that are given proper names in a way that demarks them as peopling her world. Most importantly, her act of naming things and people is meant to both affirm them as her property and to affirm them as possessing individual properties that make them lasting and meaningful.

It is true that in naming the objects of her world, the peasant woman does seek to affirm their status as existing singulars, to reinforce their reality as unique and enduring. For her, the objects she names are a lasting part of her world. This is not, however, the form of consciousness that Hegel describes in terms of animal wisdom, where sense objects are merely there to be consumed. In fact, although I cannot go into it here, the world of property and properties that Harris draws upon in the aphorism is more appropriate to the next form of consciousness addressed in the *Phenomenology*: Perception.

It should also be obvious that the naming that the peasant woman bestows on her people and possessions is not what Hobbes means by proper Names, when he uses the term to indicate linguistic signs. Indeed, the *Bauersfrau*'s naming of things is more akin to Hobbes's passing nod to the Biblical origins of language, where Adam is instructed by God to name the things of the world and thus make them his, things over which he has dominion. For us, later descendants of the "Tower of Babel"[38], it is simply "need" that determines word use. The very fact that Hobbes sees no meaningful difference between proper names like, "Peter, John" and expressions like, "this man, this tree", shows we are far removed from the peasant woman's world. Whereas the individual things of her world can certainly not escape the fate of all finite singulars and go to ground (*zu Grund gehen*), it is hard to see how their truth could best be expressed by the simple "here", "now", "this", "I" of Sense-certainty.

In terms of a more recent phenomenology, we might say that Harris sees the language-world of Sense-certainty as one of *Zuhandensein* (of familiar, intentionally invested objects/tools), whereas Hegel is actually describing a world of *Vorhandensein*, of *Dinge* (object things), not *Sachen* (things that matter). Only such things (*Dinge*) may be "eaten up" by the wise animals celebrating the Eleusinian Mysteries, because such things are inherently nothing. Once again, if the world were made up only of *Sachen*, even we would die of hunger[39]. The language-world portrayed in M109 is much closer to the Hobbesian state of nature, or to the sensuous, amoral world that Solomon discovers through the character Meursault, from Camus's *L'étranger*.

Although Harris pointedly disagrees with Solomon's choice, the reference to Meursault[40] is more faithful to the ethical dimension of the figure of consciousness that Hegel is dealing with than is Harris's reference to the peasant woman, immersed in her comfortable, familiar world[41]. Indeed, as Solomon writes, the character Meursault, "looks on as if he were watching a dull movie. It is all simply given to him, as the facts of his experience. He does not try to understand; he does not think that there is anything to understand," for there is nothing beyond the "truth" of his immediate sensations[42]. Building on the Camus reference, I would add mention of Meursault's unapologetically animal sensualism. A true Eleusinian initiate, he drinks in and unreflectingly consumes sights, smells, sounds, tastes, food, cigarettes, the night air and even Marie, her dark hair, sun-warmed skin, perfume, in a way that shows they are everything and nothing[43]. The purely material cause of his murderous act is nothing other than the momentary movement of sunlight on a knife blade. One might also remark upon the impoverished verbal expressions of Camus's protagonist, for whom the mantra-like idiom of universal indifference, "Cela m'est égal" ("It doesn't matter" or in more contemporary idiom: "Whatever"), reiterates

the terminal vacuity of "now, here, this, I" that punctuate the ethical language-world of Sense-certainty.

It is tempting to see Meursault as a singular anomaly, either as a romantic individual staking out a rebellious position against the banal, hypocritical flow of the world or, less charitably, as a murderous sociopath. It is also possible, however, to see in his indifferent sensuality, in his placid avidity for the material empiria of the world, the literary embodiment of the always somewhat jaded, contemporary, individual consumer. Perhaps it is this aspect that allows us to relate to the character, in spite of his pathologically anti-social behaviour.

In this article, I have tried to uncover the ethical dimension inherent in sense-data empiricism, through Hegel's critique of natural consciousness in the Sense-certainty section (M109) of the *Phenomenology*. In order to examine this dimension, I have compared the linguistic theory criticized by Hegel, in that section, with the one put forward by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. This anachronistic juxtaposition has allowed me to show how the ethical world posited by sense-data empiricism may be seen as resembling Hobbes's portrayal of a state of nature. While both Hobbes and Hegel invite us, in very different ways, to leave their natural states behind, our investigation has hopefully shown that in order to move on to richer ethical worlds, we must abandon exclusive reliance on sense-data empiricism and the impoverished linguistic reality it implies.

NOTES:

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[1]G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* III, translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) p. 317. Hegel uses the words

"seicht, empirisch", referring to Hobbes. G.W. F. Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden* [*Werke*], E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel eds., vol. 20, p.227. In the *Encyclopedia Logic* (§60 Remark, *Werke* 8, p. 145), Hegel equates naïve (*unbefangene*) empiricism with "materialism or naturalism". In this paper, when "Sense-certainty" is capitalized, it refers to the eponymous section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Otherwise, sense-certainty refers more generally to sense-data empiricism.

[2] Indexical is a contemporary term that Terry Pinkard defines as words "whose reference varies depending on the context of their utterance." See Pinkard's discussion of the question, *Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 25-6. The work of John McDowell and Keneth Westphal are good examples of recent epistemological interest in Hegel.

[3] A good example of this approach can be found in Willem A. deVries, "Sense-certainty and the 'this-such'", in Dean Moyar and Michael Quante, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 63-75. Thus, "our central question is: How are *we* to understand *our* most immediate and basic cognitive confrontation with the world? (p.69)" Emphasis added.

[4] Pinkard, p. 21.

[5] Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978) p.61. C. V. Dudeck, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind: Analysis and Commentary* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1981) p. 65.

[6] Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A study of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York, Oxford: Oxford U P, 1983) p. 322

[7] Tom Rockmore, *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Berkeley, UCLA Press, 1997) p. 39.

[8] Andrew Buchwalter sees Aristotle and Hobbes as also breaking down this barrier. We might also add Plato, Aquinas… Perhaps the culprit is Kant, whose radical separation between theoretical and the practical represents the exception in the history of philosophy. "Hegel, Hobbes, Kant and the Scienticization of Practical Philosophy" in Ardis Collins, *Hegel on the Modern World*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) pp. 177-8.

[9] Such animal desire or hunger would be captured by the German term (*Begierde*). None of the following commentators discuss the ethical (practical) element of Sense-certainty: Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Joseph Flay, *Hegel's Quest for Certainty* (Albany: SUNY, 1984); Howard Kainz, *Hegel's Phenomenology, Part I: Analysis and Commentary* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1976); Robert Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Dean Moyar and Michael Quante, *Hegel's Phenomenology*; Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978); Interestingly, M. Westphal discusses the epistemological aspects of Ludwig Feuerbach challenge to Hegel's critique of Sense-certainty, without mentioning how this challenge is perfectly coherent with Feuerbach's own sensualism; it is the ethics of sensualism that Hegel is also criticizing in the section. M. Westphal pp. 72-80. Broadening our search, we might also include Dietmar Köhler and Otto Pöggeler in the lack of reference to the ethics of Sense-certainty: *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998); Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974 [1946]).

[10] *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller with Analysis of the Text and Forward by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 64-5.

[11] The translators of the *Encyclopaedia* Logic (EL) attribute what Hegel calls "naïve empiricism"
(§60 Remark) to Locke. I maintain that Locke's empiricism is more the concern of the next
stage of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*: Perception. There, he deals with the Lockean
question of properties, where the contradiction between their objective and subjective status
leads to Humean scepticism. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A.
Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hacket, 1991) p. 319 n.77.

[12] *Aufzehren*. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (PhG), edited by Hans-Friedrich Wessels and
Heinrich Clairmont (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988) p. 77.

[13] "From Empiricism the call went out: Stop chasing about among empty abstractions, look at
what is there for the taking, grasp the here and now, human and natural, as it is here before us,
and enjoy it!" EL § 38 add. This quote emphasizes the "here and now" aspect Hegel deals with
in Sense-certainty, discussed below, while also highlighting the ethical dimension I am
concerned with, as reflected in the consumerist enjoyment of empiria, where what presents itself
immediately to the senses is "there for the taking," whether the taken stuff be human or natural.
Regarding a purely empirical approach to physics, Hegel comments, "only animals are true blue
physicists by this standard, since they do not think." EL §98 add. 1.

[14] Thus, Solomon comments on the animal reference, in passing, in a footnote, describing it as
"rather amusing" (Solomon, 326). Quentin Lauer explains the passage as "a heavy-handed way
of disposing of the kind of skepticism in which empiricism culminates." *A Reading of Hegel's
Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976) p. 50-1. John Russon does not
mention the animal reference. However, his existentialist reading of Sense-certainty recognizes
the role desire plays throughout the section. *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology* (Bloomington:
Indiana University Press, 2004).

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[15] H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder I: The Pilgrimage of Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) p.226. On the same page, Harris also recognizes the speculative important of the Mysteries, whose immediate wisdom is rediscovered, mediated, at the end of the *Phenomenology*, as Absolute Knowing. Donald Phillip Verene also takes the reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries seriously, recognizing how such cultic wisdom is speculatively recollected. *Hegel's Recollection: a study of images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: SUNY, 1985) pp. 33-38.

[16] This is how Harris titles his chapter on Sense-certainty and explains his guiding reference to the *Bauersfrau* (literally, peasant's wife) which I will examine below.

[17] Actually, the German does not contain "how the case stands", a phrase that serves to over-delineate the practical aspects of Self-consciousness and the theoretical considerations of Sense-certainty. As we know, the progression of the *Phenomenology* is a "circle of circles" rather than a line. "Bei dieser Berufung auf die allgemeine Erfahrung kann es erlaubt sein, die Rücksicht auf das Praktische zu antizipieren." PhG pp. 76-77. Note also that it is the empty universality of the subjective experience that allows us to pass seamlessly from empirical receptivity to practical hunger.

[18] Ambiguity between the "Allgemeine" as meaning general or universal probably confuses English language commentators when they refer to "now, this, I, here" as only indexicals. The term does not capture the syllogistic reference that Hegel has in mind, where singulars dissolve directly into generalities, eschewing the meaningful moment of particularity. In this context, the Sense-certainty experience, reflected both subjectively and objectively, leads to a feeling of empty universality, which can even be felt in a religious or mystical way, as the ineffable All. See Harris and Verene's interpretations of the Mysteries above, in note 15. These crucial considerations are often lost in discussions of indexicals. A summary of the argument can also be

found in the EL Remark to §60: "When I say "the singular," "this singular," "here," "now," all of these expressions are universalities... Similarly when I say "I," I mean me as the this one excluding all others; but what I say ("I") is precisely everyone..."

[19] A "néant néantissant" . Introduction à la lecture de Hegel (Paris : Tel Gallimard, 1968 [1947]) p.53.

[20] Adriaan Peperzak remarks upon the surprisingly "not extensive" literature on "Hegel's relationship to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes". Peperzak proposes two issues to be explored: "the treatment of conflict as a 'natural' and inevitable phenomenon of human life and (2) the role played by violence in the foundation of states…" Peperzak also refers to Leo Strauss's idea (in his *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and its Genesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952 [translation of *Hobbes politische Philosophie*, 1936]) that the dialectic of master and slave is inspired by Hobbes, an idea rightly questioned by Ludwig Siep in his 1974 article "Der Kampf um Anerkennung: Zu Hegels Auseinandersetzung mit Hobbes in den Jenaer Schriften," Hegel-Studien 9, pp. 155-207. Adriaan Peperzak, "Hegel and Hobbes Revised", in Ardis Collins, *Hegel on the Modern World* (Albany: SUNY, 1995) pp. 199-217. In the same volume, Andrew Buchwalter's article "Hegel, Hobbes Kant, and the Scienticization of Practical Philosophy" deals with the question announced in its title (pp. 177–198).

[21] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) p. 6.

[22] Stressing the isolated singularity of the natural individual, Hegel refers to a "state of nature" that reiterates the solitary (nasty, brutish and short) life that Hobbes ascribes to the natural individual. Hegel: "[T]he natural man is a singular individual as such, for nature lies everywhere in the bonds of isolation. So, insofar as man wills this state of nature, he wills singularity." EL §24 addition 3. Cf. Hobbes p. 76. We might also note that where, in Hegel, the individual I

collapses into the empty universality of I-ness, in Hobbes, the rapacious self also dissolves, albeit into the relative equality between individuals. Hobbes p. 74. We might also see the universal transfer of right from the citizens to the Leviathan as the Hobbesian dissolution of individuality into an abstract form of generality.

[23]On Hegel's reading, man, in Hobbes's state of nature, "conducts himself in conformity with his desires and inclinations." Significantly, confirming the foundational, yet transitional role of Sense-certainty in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, sees Hobbes as presenting a fundamental natural condition which nonetheless "is not what it should be, and must hence be cast off." E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (translators), *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3 (London: Routeledge and Kegan Paul, 1955) pp. 317-18.

[24]The fact that both Hobbes and Hegel refer to "this tree" ironically reinforces Hegel's point about the impossibility of language referring to singulars, and that writing them down expresses the thoroughly general character of their knowing. ("Because language is the work of thought, nothing can be said in language that is not universal." EL §20 Remark.) Shared reference to "this tree" probably also indicates the abundance of trees in 17th - 19th Century England and Germany!

[25] In Hobbes's thoroughly materialistic cosmos, "Names" (signs) must be as material as the entities they refer to. Hegel also believes pure linguistic signs (*Namen*) have real existence, although as such their level of objectivity is as impoverished and external as that of unreflected singular, natural entities that sense-certainty seeks to refer to. "Names as such [are] external, senseless entities... ." *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Philosophy of Spirit § 459 (*Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 10, p 274. See Jeffrey Reid, *Real Words: Language and System in*

Hegel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) pp. 7-9. Cf. John McCumber on names and words: *The Company of Words: Hegel, Language and Systematic Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993) pp. 220-38).

[26] Hobbes p.17.

[27] Ibid. In *De Corpore*, Chapter 2.9, Hobbes writes: "But a *common name* is called a *universal*, because it is the name of a number of things taken individually, and not because it is the name of all of them taken together collectively". De Corpore, translated by George MacDonald Ross, http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore/decorp1.html#c2

[28] Ibid. Hobbes makes the same argument, in *De Corpore*, Chapter 2.11. In that chapter, Hobbes goes into considerably more detail regarding his theory of names, which he describes as arbitrarily and naturally formed ("names originate in arbitrary human choices", Chapter 2.4) and always related "to something named (Ibid. 2.6)". The ontological status of the thing named is not diminished by its becoming a mental thing rather than one existing in reality, since both are ultimately material.

[29] Hobbes: thoughts are representations or appearances of a body outside us, which "is commonly called an object" and which "works on the eyes, ears, and other parts of man's body." Hobbes p.6.

[30] Hobbes p. 17.

[31] Hobbes, pp. 14-15.

[32] Leon Harold Craig, *The Platonian Leviathan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) p.171. Craig's informative discussion of language in Hobbes (pp. 169-197) highlights the "inadequacies with Hobbes's account 'Of Speech' as an explanation of what ordinary language

is and how it works (p.177)". I would argue that the state of nature is not one where "ordinary language" applies, in its contemporary societal configurations, any more than is the case in Hegel's Sense-certainty. For a more holistic view of language in Hobbes, taking into account political writings beyond the *Leviathan*, see Philip Petit, *Made with Words, Hobbes on Language, Mind and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[33] Similarly, one can say that cyberspace is ultimately configured by two linguistic signs: 0 and 1. The poverty of its vocabulary is instantiated in its status as "virtual" reality.

[34] G.W. F. Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden*, E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel eds., vol. 2, p.542

[35] Harris, Hegel's Ladder I, p. 212.

[36] The word "survival" is drawn from Harris's commentary. See note 15.

[37] Although Harris here refers to the empiricism of Jacobi, which is hardly naïve.

[38] Hobbes p.16.

[39] Harris's insistence on Hegel's use of *Sachen* (things that matter) in the Sense-certainty section allows him to mistake the objectivity of sense data empiricism for that of the peasant woman's everyday world. In the passage dealing with the practical/ethical dimension of empirical reality (M109), Hegel only uses "Sachen" in the first part of the paragraph, where he is still discussing the nature of the object or the "matter at hand" for theoretical knowledge, i.e. the supposed reality of the thing empirical knowledge claims or seeks to deal with and know. When he turns to the objectivity of sense-certain desire, he refers exclusively to singular *Dinge*. *Phenomenologie des Geistes*, H.-F. Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont eds. (Hamburg: Meiner) p.77. The idea is that sensuous objects of knowledge may present themselves as *Sachen* when we are reflecting on them as objects of knowledge, as matters of knowledge, but ultimately they are singular *Dinge*.

[40] Solomon refers to Meursault as a "singularly spectacular literary example of sense-certainty". Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) p.327

[41] Harris, p. 229. "Solomon is quite wrong in thinking that Meursault is a paradigm for sense – certainty. Sense-certainty knows *Sachen*; but it is the very essence of Meursault's estranged state that for him nothing is a *Sache*… Meursault lives in a world of *Dingen* (Sic)." As explained above in note 34, however, Hegel actually uses *Dinge* when he discusses the ethical/animal aspect of sense-certainty and thus Harris, *à son insu*, supports Solomon's reference to Meursault.

[42] Solomon shows how the actual récit of the novel, by the character Meursault, in fact subverts this claim, just as the language of "now", "here", "I", "this", actually subverts the claims of the sensual empiricist regarding his unique sensations.

[43] It may be possible to seek out expressions of animal sensuality in the lives of other empirical realists, in Epicurus, in Lucretius or perhaps in Bertrand Russell!