



## Nature and Spirit in Hegel's Anthropology Some Idealist Themes in Hegel's Pragmatism

Iain Macdonald

Volume 63, numéro 1, février 2007

Idéalisme allemand

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016677ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016677ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Macdonald, I. (2007). Nature and Spirit in Hegel's Anthropology: Some Idealist Themes in Hegel's Pragmatism. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 63(1), 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/016677ar>

Résumé de l'article

Certaines lectures récentes de Hegel ont mis l'accent sur la dimension sociale de la philosophie de Hegel afin de parer les exagérations et les méprises courantes concernant son idéalisme. Robert Brandom, par exemple, a relevé des « thèmes pragmatistes dans l'idéalisme de Hegel ». Mais une question d'ordre général se pose : cette stratégie déflationniste rend-elle réellement justice à la pensée de Hegel ? Qu'advient-il des conditions logiques requises pour la connaissance et l'action, auxquelles Hegel attache beaucoup d'importance, et comment ces conditions cadrent-elles avec les dimensions naturelles et sociales de l'expérience ? En tablant sur des passages de l'*Encyclopédie* et d'autres textes, le présent article argumente en faveur d'un transcendantalisme modeste chez Hegel, afin d'éviter la rectification exagérée qui consiste à réduire le concept du concept chez Hegel à un réseau de pratiques sociales.

# NATURE AND SPIRIT IN HEGEL'S ANTHROPOLOGY

## SOME IDEALIST THEMES IN HEGEL'S PRAGMATISM

Iain Macdonald

Département de philosophie  
Université de Montréal

*RÉSUMÉ* : Certaines lectures récentes de Hegel ont mis l'accent sur la dimension sociale de la philosophie de Hegel afin de parer les exagérations et les méprises courantes concernant son idéalisme. Robert Brandom, par exemple, a relevé des « thèmes pragmatistes dans l'idéalisme de Hegel ». Mais une question d'ordre général se pose : cette stratégie déflationniste rend-elle réellement justice à la pensée de Hegel ? Qu'advient-il des conditions logiques requises pour la connaissance et l'action, auxquelles Hegel attache beaucoup d'importance, et comment ces conditions cadrent-elles avec les dimensions naturelles et sociales de l'expérience ? En tablant sur des passages de l'Encyclopédie et d'autres textes, le présent article argumente en faveur d'un transcendantalisme modeste chez Hegel, afin d'éviter la rectification exagérée qui consiste à réduire le concept du concept chez Hegel à un réseau de pratiques sociales.

*ABSTRACT* : Some recent readings of Hegel have stressed the social dimension of Hegel's philosophy in order to ward off common exaggerations and misconceptions about his idealism. Robert Brandom, for example, has pointed to "pragmatist themes in Hegel's idealism." But a general question arises as to whether this deflationary strategy really does justice to Hegel's thought : what becomes of the logical preconditions for knowledge and agency, on which Hegel places much emphasis, and how exactly do these preconditions mesh with the natural and social dimensions of experience ? On the basis of passages in the Encyclopedia and other texts, this paper argues for a modest transcendentalism in Hegel, in order to avoid the over-correction that consists in reducing Hegel's concept of the concept to a network of social practices.

---

The question running through this study is not uncontroversial : is Hegel a transcendental philosopher ? Or more specifically, the question is : what *kind* of transcendental philosopher is he ? Of course, Hegel's critique of traditional (*i.e.*, Kantian) transcendental philosophy is well known and for most people it goes without saying that he sees the Kantian approach as a valiant but ultimately failed effort. But the question becomes more pressing in the contemporary critical context, in which it has become common to stress what Terry Pinkard rightly calls "the sociality of reason" or the basic idea that "all claims to knowledge are best understood as historically situated

forms of social practice.”<sup>1</sup> Now, although this is clearly Hegel’s view, the idea merits further clarification, especially in relation to Hegel’s frequent critiques of the contingency and one-sidedness (*Einseitigkeit*) of historical subjectivity. Or to put it the other way around, for Hegel the sociality of reason has to be understood according to its *necessity*, which means in relation to spirit understood as the “absolute foundation”<sup>2</sup> or the “absolute *prius*.”<sup>3</sup> In effect, this is the central tension in Hegel’s thought : how to think, *at the same time*, spirit as an absolute condition of possibility *and* the absolute necessity of inevitably contingent manifestations of spirit.

But it is difficult to strike the right balance between necessity and contingency while remaining true to the language of transcendental philosophy, which regards the contingent and the empirical as necessary but as essentially separate from the pure original unity of apperception. This is the simple answer to why Hegel distances himself from this language : it is too abstractly oppositional. But there may be good reason to revisit the problem, especially in view of some recent literature on Hegel that goes too far in the other direction (*i.e.*, in the anti-transcendental direction), by seeking to reduce or dismiss the tension between spirit *qua* absolute and spirit in nature and history. The result is a revisionism that is gaining in popularity. In this vein, Robert Brandom has sought to push the sociality of reason to an extreme by reducing Hegel’s philosophy to a discourse on the social practices by which meaning is constituted. This position, which is one of conceptual pragmatism, is first of all based on making a distinction between objective inferential relations (entailment and incompatibility) and subjective inferential processes (historical, social belief formation and error correction). This distinction has its merits, but the more problematic consequence of conceptual pragmatism is that it undialectically evacuates the transcendental question (or what the transcendental question, equally undialectically, is trying to grasp) too quickly and thereby invalidates its appropriation of Hegel’s philosophy.

Brandom asks the following question : “Can we really understand relations of incompatibility without any prior grip on what is incompatible ?”<sup>4</sup> His answer to this question is “no,” of course, based on the claim that material inferential relations can *only* be grasped in and through their corresponding practices.<sup>5</sup> In other words, relations of inferential incompatibility necessarily presuppose the real-time processes and practices in which they are borne out.<sup>6</sup> This ultimately leads Brandom to the claim

- 
1. Terry PINKARD, *Hegel’s Phenomenology. The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 20.
  2. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press International, 1969, p. 577 ; ID., *Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1971ff., vol. 12, p. 11. In general, references to the German text will be to the Meiner critical edition, except for references to the *Zusätze* to paragraphs from the *Encyclopaedia*, which will be to the *Werke* published by Suhrkamp.
  3. ID., *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, § 381, p. 8 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 381.
  4. Robert B. BRANDOM, “Holism and Idealism in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*,” in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 187.
  5. “The content [is to be explained] by the act, rather than the other way around.” See ID., *Articulating Reasons. An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 4.
  6. ID., “Holism and Idealism in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*,” p. 194.

that “for Hegel all transcendental constitution is social institution.”<sup>7</sup> What Brandom seems to mean is that knowledge and agency are shaped by social practices, such as negotiation and administration ; moreover, such practices are the *only* way in which we can determine conceptual content ; therefore, such social practices *exhaust* the determination of conceptual content. On this view, there is no absolute first — there is only the *a posteriori* priority of the social. In other words, on Brandom's view, which he attributes to Hegel, knowledge and agency are purely social achievements ; they do not rest on any non-social or *a priori* condition of possibility.

The problem with such an approach, as temptingly deflationary as it may seem, is that it tends to dismiss or attack the absolute priority Hegel clearly accords to logical relations and the internal structure of the Concept (*i.e.*, the concept of the concept), emphasizing only the lived reality of spirit, the aspect that Hegel calls externalization, *Entäusserung*, or “spirit emptied out into time.”<sup>8</sup> At the very least, before we opt for a pragmatist reading, we should clarify the kind of priority that Hegel accords to the Concept in view of his commitment to the lived reality of spirit in conflict with itself, engaged in the social processes of belief formation and error correction. For this tension is essential to Hegel's thought ; to the extent that readers of Hegel ignore or dismiss it, they are pursuing lines of thought incompatible with Hegel's.

In the present context, the well-trodden path of looking at the constitution of living spirit through the social struggle for recognition will be avoided, mainly because the struggle for recognition *presupposes* a subjectivity that is already receptive to alterity and competing knowledge claims. For this reason, the struggle for recognition cannot be understood in isolation, without knowing how spirit pre-forms the subject's demand for recognition in the social context. But what is the nature of this presupposed subjectivity ? Are social practices primary ? Or is spirit in some other sense primary ? Or to put it another way, what does Hegel mean when he says, in the *Encyclopaedia*, that “actual spirit [...] has external nature for its proximate presupposition and the logical idea for its first presupposition” (*der wirkliche Geist [...] hat die äußere Natur zu seiner nächsten, wie die logische Idee zu seiner ersten Voraussetzung*) ? Hegel's anthropology provides us with answers to these questions. To anticipate somewhat : in natural spirit — in sensibility (*Empfindung*) and the feeling soul (*die fühlende Seele*) — we discover the logical preconditions for knowledge and agency, as well as the natural preconditions for social practices such as concrete error-correction. Moreover, because these preconditions are seen as *necessary* and *universal* presuppositions, it is also through Hegel's anthropology that we can shed some light on Hegel's ‘strange’ transcendentalism.

---

7. ID., “Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism,” in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 216.

8. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 492 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 9, p. 433.

9. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 381, *Zusatz*, p. 8 ; ID., *Werke*, 20 vol., Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 10, p. 18.

However, before moving on to a discussion of these issues, it may help to recall aspects of Hegel's critique of Kant's transcendentalism, just as a way of clearing up some potential sources of confusion. The fact of the matter is that Hegel consistently avoids using most of the language of transcendental philosophy ; and indeed, he *never* characterizes his own thought as transcendental. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious of which is that the term is bound up with the inconsistencies of Kant's philosophical system. One of the pillars of Hegel's critique of Kant is thus that his thought "does not correspond in its development to its beginning,"<sup>10</sup> by which Hegel means that Kant's argument for synthetic *a priori* judgements betrays the true insight that underpins his theoretical philosophy in the first place : that there must be an original *a priori* synthesis containing within itself both identity and difference. The betrayal of this insight, on the other hand, consists in the fact that Kant falls into a discourse that abstractly opposes what is synthesized to the synthesizing forms themselves : intuitions and concepts may be mutually necessary for there to be knowledge, but they are nevertheless fundamentally distinct. Hegel will take issue with this first of all by accusing Kant of making the concepts of the understanding a mere "psychological reflex" ; or, in other words : the Kantian concept is "*empty and devoid of content* despite the fact that it is synthesis *a priori*."<sup>11</sup> His argument on this point is quite straightforward : if *a priori* synthesis is an absolute precondition of knowledge, then it can only be because synthesis always already contains "determinateness and difference within itself," as opposed to meeting with difference only in the manifold.<sup>12</sup> Hegel criticizes Kant on a number of other issues, of course, but this is the one that is most central to his reception of the first *Critique* and his relation to the transcendental : Kant's *a priori* synthesis is far too formal. Not only that : it is also far too subjective, in that it denies that there could be any speculative unity of identity and difference (*i.e.*, true synthesis) in the empirical counterpart to the Kantian transcendental ego. Hegel, on the other hand, will undertake to show that there is a speculative unity of identity and difference not only in *subjective* being, but also in *objective* being (at least *in potentia*), as well as in both taken together.

Now, what is important here is the real substance of Hegel's critique, which does *not* take aim at the transcendental as such, but rather at the one-sided, overly formal *a priori* that for Kant characterizes the original unity of apperception. Therefore, if Hegel refuses to use the word "transcendental" to characterize his own thought, it is not because he rejects the notion of original *a priori* synthesis. It is rather that the principle of original synthesis is misunderstood by Kant ; Hegel merely intends to rectify the misunderstanding. He wants to show that the speculative unity of identity

---

10. ID., *Science of Logic*, p. 589, trans. modified ; ID., *GW*, vol. 12, p. 22.

11. ID., *Science of Logic*, p. 589 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 12, p. 22-23.

12. It could be argued that the twelve categories are, for Kant, the sign of difference within the unity of original synthesis. But this is a sham difference, according to Hegel, to the extent that the categories are equally formal and empty of content, not to mention the fact that Kant does not trouble himself with demonstrating the necessity and internal logic of the categories, merely reading them off the forms of judgement in the metaphysical deduction. Cf. ID., *The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences, with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1991, § 42-44, p. 83-87 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 79-81 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 8, p. 116-121.

and difference necessarily implied by Kantian synthesis is not to be atomically conceived in isolation from its empirical content. It would therefore be fair to say that he rejects only the Kantian idea of a purely subjective synthesis, rather than the more general idea of transcendental (*i.e.*, universally and necessarily presupposed) synthesis, though for Kant these are one and the same thing. Given all of this, it is understandable why Hegel avoids the term transcendental while still praising the original synthesis of apperception as “one of the most profound principles for speculative development.”<sup>13</sup> This remark suggests that we have to understand Hegel's thought as remaining true to Kant's original insight, namely that a unity of identity and difference is an absolute, *a priori* condition of experience and knowledge, “independent of its non-spiritual [*i.e.*, natural], and also of its spiritual [*i.e.*, historical], shapes.”<sup>14</sup>

At first blush, this seems to be a baldly metaphysical claim, to the effect that the unity of identity and difference — namely, the Concept — is prior to its manifestations. Such claims are, of course, difficult for full-blooded pragmatists to reconcile with their insistence on the primacy of social practices. But the metaphysical appearance of Hegel's claim merits further examination, for he is in fact arguing for the sublation of any abstract opposition between transcendentalism and pragmatism. What is missing, though, is an understanding of the *nature* of the Concept, *i.e.*, its natural character.

It is an essential part of Hegel's philosophy that the Concept “in its own absolute character [...] constitutes a *stage of nature* as well as of *spirit*.”<sup>15</sup> This first of all means that the absolute logical basis of experience and knowledge is, in spite of its absoluteness, also *lived*. Hegel is here putting forward the idea of a *lived* transcendental — *this* is the paradox and the core of what needs to be understood in Hegel if we are not to err too far in the direction of purely social practices (the ‘lived’ taken in isolation), on the one-hand, or philosophical formalism (the ‘transcendental’ taken in isolation), on the other. The starting point, then, is life, or more specifically the life of spirit in nature ; for understanding how spirit is *lived in nature* will turn out to be necessary to understanding both how social practices are possible in the first place, and how ‘external’ nature already expresses the development of an original synthesis. As it happens, these are the fundamental aims of Hegel's anthropology, which bridges the gap between the development of nature as such and the development of spirit as such, between the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of spirit.

It is important to recall that spirit is not an ‘entity’ of some kind. It is “something absolutely restless, pure activity, the negation or ideality of every fixed category of the understanding ; not abstractly simple but, in its simplicity, at the same time a distinguishing of itself from itself.”<sup>16</sup> First of all, as *pure* activity, spirit asserts its independence from existing historical, social practices ; but at the same time, as the basic act of distinguishing itself from itself, it necessarily involves a relative determinacy,

---

13. ID., *Science of Logic*, p. 589 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 12, p. 22.

14. ID., *Science of Logic*, p. 586 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 12, p. 20.

15. ID., *Science of Logic*, p. 586 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 12, p. 20.

16. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 378, *Zusatz*, p. 3, trans. modified ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 12.

the concrete reality of distinction, which always happens in the specificity of a given time and a given place, and in the context of a network of given beliefs. Or to put the same idea in more concrete terms, spirit is the process whereby living subjects set themselves against objects (the subject as distinct from the object), while at the same time giving objects their due (the object as known by the subject). This process thereby requires a consciousness capable of bifurcation (*Entzweyung*) or redoubling (*Verdopplung*), whereby difference can be experienced and overcome (e.g., contradictions between received wisdom and phenomenal knowledge, or the relation of ends to means). Properly understood, therefore, spirit is : (i) a difference *immanent* to spirit (because the difference between subject and object is *construed* by the subject), and (ii) the power to *overcome* this difference in the unity of spirit itself (because the subject can ‘make sense’ of the difference construed between subject and object).

This may seem abstract, but the central claim is straightforward enough. Knowledge, for it to count as knowledge, must be able to justify itself otherwise it would simply collapse. But then, at a minimum, knowledge requires a bifurcation of consciousness, that is, a critical-comparative activity by which consciousness can consider what it concretely takes to be the truth (the ‘in-itself’) in relation to possible defects in these so-called truths (the realization that the truth is always ‘for’ consciousness or construed by the subject, *i.e.*, ‘for-itself’). This activity is necessarily a *practice*, insofar as it requires the social and historical treatment of social and historical content for it to actualize itself. But it is also *independent* of this content when considered as the necessary structure of redoubled subjectivity, capable of experiencing and analyzing competing truth claims. This necessary structure or capacity is what Hegel calls being-for-self (*Fürsichsein*).

Of course, being-for-self is not enough on its own, because as a critical-comparative activity, spirit must not only be able to juxtapose its two moments (in-itself and for-itself) ; it must also be able to *progress* beyond specific tensions between these moments and thereby ‘produce’ itself. Concretely : knowledge must admit of possible progress in the form of error-correction, for otherwise it would simply lapse into dogmatism. This is what Hegel generically calls self-education and self-instruction (*der Geist als sich bildend und erziehend betrachtet*).<sup>17</sup> We could also call this aspect the self-production of spirit. Taken together, being-for-self and self-production are the unity of identity and difference at work in the subject, the first moment of Hegel’s lived, transcendental condition of possibility of knowledge : ‘knowledge practices’ of whatever kind take and *must* take this form.

However, the central problem has not yet been solved, for we do not have an answer to how this is really possible or what the point is in insisting on it. Logically, knowledge and agency may require self-doubling and self-correction, *i.e.*, being-for-self and self-production. But the conceptual pragmatist can still reply that this is a mere abstraction from what really occurs. In the lived reality of belief formation and error correction, it is the practices and beliefs themselves that have primacy, since it

---

17. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 387, p. 26 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 387. See also ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 396, *Zusatz*, p. 55 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 76.

is in and through them that knowledge is really produced and errors are corrected. Logical relations alone do not constitute knowledge. Hegel's reply to this is twofold. First, it makes no sense to give priority to social practices if we cannot account for their possibility, which means first of all their basis in natural existence. But, second, since the natural existence that makes such practices possible is essentially nothing other than the physical shape of self-producing being-for-self, the logical idea has an absolute (*i.e.*, non-relative) priority. In other words, we see the same redoubled structure at work in natural existence as in spiritual existence. Thus, if the Concept "in its own absolute character [...] constitutes a *stage of nature* as well as of *spirit*," it is because it is the lived reality of a universal and necessary structure. For Hegel, it is in this way that knowledge and social practices presuppose natural spirit — in the form of a sentient, feeling body — which, in turn, is "inwardly bound"<sup>18</sup> to spirit. Without such a body, informed by spirit, there could be no knowledge and no social practices.

The key concept here is that of habit (*Gewohnheit*), which is based in sensibility (*Empfindung*) and the feeling soul (*die fühlende Seele*). But first a word about Hegel's concept of soul : soul is equivalent here to natural spirit, the implicit unity of nature that nature itself cannot know or realize. On its own, as it were, nature is pure, undifferentiated externality and blind necessity, alien to ideality. But ideality is nevertheless held within nature as its potential, as what nature can become through spirit. For example, the genus-species relation is only implicit in nature until spirit can draw it out and see it for what it is. In this light, the soul is just the "universal immateriality of nature, its simple ideal life."<sup>19</sup> Or as Hegel also puts it, soul is the "sleep of spirit"<sup>20</sup> or spirit *in potentia*. Thus it is somewhat one-sided to say that nature is *simply* or *purely* undifferentiated externality and, in fact, Hegel gives several examples of how matter sublates its own externality : gravity in this sense sublates the independence of the planets, just as the genus sublates the independence of the individual.<sup>21</sup> But making this sublation *explicit* of course requires spirit proper, the absolute power of negation. The production of spirit is therefore the "goal" (*Ziel*) of nature, according to Hegel, not in some mystical sense, but because spirit is a possibility contained within nature itself — a possibility that, once realized, allows nature to come full circle and know *itself*. However, nature must first "destroy itself and break through its husk of immediate, sensuous existence, to consume itself like the phoenix in order to come forth from this externality rejuvenated as spirit."<sup>22</sup>

It accomplishes this rebirth first in sensibility, which for Hegel is a primitive form of ideality. In sensibility, a very simple and limited phenomenon, there is really

18. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 378, *Zusatz*, p. 3 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 12.

19. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 389, p. 29 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 388.

20. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 389, p. 29 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 388.

21. See, for example, ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 389, *Zusatz*, p. 32 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 47. Miller has "refutes" for Hegel's "aufhebt."

22. ID., *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, § 376, *Zusatz*, p. 444 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 9, p. 538.



only a “dull stirring”<sup>23</sup> — but it is concentrated in a sentient soul who, as sentient, *knows this stirring to be its own*. Hegel already describes this as a negation and the expression of a constitutive universal because the sentient soul knows the sensation *both* as something independent from it (different) *and* as its own (identical). The given sensation is, as he says, “immersed in the soul’s universality and is thereby negated in its immediacy and so characterized as of ideal nature. Consequently, in this other, the sentient soul returns to itself, and in the immediate, merely given object which it senses, is at home with itself.”<sup>24</sup> For example, the animal ‘knows’ how to distinguish edible from non-edible matter, it ‘reacts’ to its environment and defends ‘itself’ against threats. In short, it relates itself to what it is not, and implicitly understands this ‘not’. But this is nothing more than simple being-for-self, as previously defined.

Interestingly, Hegel also calls this simple being-for-self “judgement” (*Urteil*), even though we are not at the level of language, in order to underscore the way in which the sentient soul already expresses a necessary logical relation, a middle term connecting mere existence to full-fledged being-for-self.<sup>25</sup> Here then is the original synthetic *a priori* judgement, liberated from its formal and purely subjective shackles. More specifically, ideality, or soul, is described in these passages of the *Encyclopaedia* as the self-differentiating (*sich teilende*) soul asserting itself as a proto-self in the primordial judgement (*Urteil*) of sensation. In this primordial judgement (really an *Ur-teil*), mere existence looks upon itself as the *unity of diverse* sensations, and is for that reason the natural prototype of the ‘I’ that accompanies all its representations. Or in Hegelian terminology, mere existence is sublated in sensibility and thereby transforms itself into incipient being-for-self.

This picture is completed by Hegel at a later stage. In the section of his anthropology dealing with habit, sentient being-for-self develops further into a soul capable of interaction with others and involved in a broader context of feelings and desires. In its least developed forms, the feeling soul can show itself to be in thrall to its own fancies (madness) or to the whims of another being (magnetism, or mesmerism). But in habit proper, the feeling soul becomes the master of its contingent sensations and desires. Corporeality in general is thereby subordinated to an abstract universal. For example, in becoming ‘used to’ (habituated to) the cold, the mere sensation of cold is suppressed in favour of an interested self-overcoming. At a more developed stage, feeling can be completely overshadowed by subjective aims, that is, by an abstract universal that realizes itself through or in spite of the mass of sensations and feelings that constantly course through the body. But more importantly, at this juncture, habit constitutes a turning point for natural spirit and the feeling soul : it marks the point at which the soul becomes “actual” (*wirklich*) and thus announces the advent of real consciousness, “the soul awaking [from its sleep in nature] to the higher stage of the

23. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 400, p. 73 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 396.

24. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 399, *Zusatz*, p. 71-72, trans. modified ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 96.

25. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 399, *Zusatz*, p. 72 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 97.

ego, or abstract universality.”<sup>26</sup> Thus although habit is focused on self-mastery through repetition, it is also the natural precursor to recollection and memory (*Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*).<sup>27</sup>

In habit — that is, in making the functions of the body the functions of spirit — the soul transforms “its identity with its body into an identity posited or mediated by spirit”<sup>28</sup> and mere contingent corporeity becomes inwardness. To put it simply, it becomes possible to interiorize (*erinnern*) contingencies, circumstances, and feelings to put them in the service of free ideality. I can shake hands, nod, turn up my nose, use my vocal cords to speak, *etc.* All of these examples *signify* through the subordination of physical to spiritual processes.<sup>29</sup> In short, the body becomes a sign of something inward and unifying (a concept, an aim), in spite of persistent contingencies and conflicts in the feeling soul.<sup>30</sup> But in making the body signify arbitrarily through habit (the habit, or convention, of nodding, of subordinating the hand to the pen, and so on), spirit is already expressing itself or, in short, producing itself. It has mastered the activity of opposing itself to itself, of learning how to realize its aims, and how to make contingent materiality serve ideality. But it has also learned how to overcome opposition (*e.g.*, internal opposition : its own body ; or external opposition : magnetic phenomena) in order to achieve spiritual aims. Natural spirit has discovered (though it does not understand the consequences) that it can enact a universal principle, that it can produce at the level of habit the implicit truth of original synthesis, namely, an ideal subjectivity that remains self-identical in the repetitions that make up habit, as well as in the manifold gestures and feelings that make up its natural existence and which are moulded to its inwardness. As a complement to the incipient being-for-self of sensibility, therefore, we find here the self producing itself through self-overcoming and training. In other words, we have discovered the natural origin of intellectual self-production and self-education.

When Hegel says, therefore, that nature is the proximate presupposition of spirit, he means that nature (or more specifically, the “natural soul”) is the “real possibility”<sup>31</sup> of the full-fledged being-for-self of the subject. The ‘I’ requires a *nature of like kind* (*i.e.*, unified unity and diversity) to become what it is, namely, free, self-related universality. And when he adds that spirit is nevertheless the absolute *prius*, he means that nature ‘by itself’ cannot really count as anything, cannot even be seen as unified, as phenomenal, as something rather than nothing ; without spirit, understood as a possibility contained within nature, nature ‘by itself’ is only externality and blind necessity — nothing more. But given a natural consciousness who is able to posit a law of universal gravitation or for whom the animal is not a mere individual but part of a network of species and genera, this externality is overcome and nature loses its

---

26. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 412, p. 151 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 421.

27. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 410, p. 143 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 418.

28. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 410, *Zusatz*, p. 146 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 190.

29. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 411, *Zusatz*, p. 148-151 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 192-197.

30. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 411, p. 147 ; ID., *GW*, vol. 20, p. 419.

31. ID., *Philosophy of Mind*, § 412, *Zusatz*, p. 152 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 10, p. 198.

strangeness to itself. Nature capitulates to spirit because spirit alone is capable of saying what nature *is*.<sup>32</sup> It is in this sense that spirit has absolute priority over nature : it is the full unfolding of the unity implicit in nature's external diversity — a unity made explicit only in the inwardness of recollection, which in turn is made possible only through natural processes that provide the real possibility for full-fledged spiritual life.

To return now to Hegel's transcendentalism, a term which has been employed here contentiously : certainly, in the context of a philosophy that demonstrates how being-for-self and self-production are not the sole preserve of a subjective *a priori* form devoid of content, but rather manifest themselves in the very materiality that is traditionally opposed to it, it may be difficult to see why Hegel would want to maintain transcendental terminology. But on the other hand, Hegel's anthropology shows us that on his view, the *a priori* goes *all the way down*, right into the first dawning of differentiation and the awakening of nature to itself in the sentient soul. This *a priori* is just as much objective and material as it is subjective and ideal ; only in this way can we fully account for the functioning of reason itself. But then, it seems quite misguided to dismiss the talk of universal and necessary conditions of possibility, replacing them instead with social practices like negotiation and administration. Such practices are, on Hegel's view, clearly necessary, but they do not tell the whole story. For they depend upon a natural body capable of mastering contingency in habit or, in other words, capable of subordinating its own desires to ideas or rational norms. But if it can do so, it is because this body is *already rational*, even in its most primitive organization of sensation. If Hegel is right in claiming this, then the most primitive social practice imaginable — habit formation — is already the generic expression of the dialectical unity of identity and difference. At the very least, then, some doubt has been cast on the tenability of readings of Hegel that give exclusive priority to social practices. Such practices presuppose a nature that can organize itself into an individual self, or that is always already a dialectical unity of identity and difference. Thus if it is true that "all transcendental constitution is social institution,"<sup>33</sup> then it is no less true for Hegel that all social institution is transcendental constitution (*i.e.*, dependent upon a universal and necessary synthesis). For, like every other abstract opposition treated in Hegel's works, the tensions between transcendental and social modes of explanation cannot be reduced to one or the other of the terms in the opposition. They form a dialectical pair. They make sense only in their lived, mediated unity, as evidenced by natural forms of self-producing being-for-self.

---

32. Cf. ID., *Philosophy of Nature*, § 376, *Zusatz*, p. 444 ; ID., *Werke*, vol. 9, p. 538-539.

33. BRANDOM, "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism," p. 216.