Hegel's Phenomenology and the Question of Semantic Pragmatism

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Abstract

This paper criticizes the assumptions behind Robert Brandom's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, contending that Hegel's concern with the rational structure of experience, his valorization of reflection over ordinary experience and his idea of the necessity of progress in knowledge cannot be accommodated within the framework of semantic pragmatism. The central contentions are that Brandom's pragmatism never comes to terms with Hegel's idea of truth as a result, leading to a historicist distortion, and also that Brandom's failure to deal with Hegel's distinction between natural consciousness and the phenomenological observer collapses Hegel's phenomenology into a philosophy restricted to the level of natural consciousness.

Robert Brandom has offered a new interpretation of Hegel's account of experience that places Hegel within the framework of a particular kind of pragmatism.[1] He tries to show that Hegel's philosophy, as expounded in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (though with some reference also to the *Logic*), works out a theory of meaning similar in fundamental ways to aspects of the semantic pragmatisms of Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, and indeed Brandom himself. This is a radical new account of Hegel, and it is, I want to argue here, problematic in that it relies on an understanding of Hegel's theory of the relation between concepts which is achieved only through an illicit excision of a key dimension of what Hegel proposes in the *Phenomenology*. The

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dimension at issue here is that in which Hegel sets out to show that knowledge is a rationally driven historical and progressive process, as demonstrated both through the objective self-realization of *Geist* and by the dialectic of experience which we as phenomenological observers can articulate (this latter sense will be most relevant in the criticism of Brandom's position). A notable effect of Brandom's excision of this dimension from Hegel's phenomenological philosophy is to lend Hegel's position to a historicist-relativist account of meaning. In order to show how this is problematic I will set out what Hegel narrates as the ever progressive and objective development of meaning through philosophical experience (phenomenology).

A further casualty of the excision of the dialectical-historical dimension of phenomenology is what Hegel would consider as the content of experience. Brandom appears to hold that Hegel's analysis of experience includes analysis of the meanings or concepts used in everyday experience. However, Hegel's account of experience—of the progressive, superceding forms of knowledge—pertains rather to the fundamental concepts that determine the forms of how human beings relate to and construe their world.

What needs to be focused on, then, is Hegel's phenomenological perspective on the course of knowledge: his reconstruction of the dynamic which pushes knowledge towards completion. The key texts for the expression of these ideas are the Preface and Introduction to the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel sets out the general structure of knowledge as conceived from an observational perspective. Importantly, it is only this perspective which understands its true significance and shape, contrasting thereby with ordinary experience which is the "natural consciousness." Natural consciousness is not illusory but the structure of the knowledge within which it operates is not transparent to it and for that reason not yet grounded. The

observational or phenomenological perspective will be seen to diverge from the context of use meanings at issue in Brandom's pragmatism.

Brandom understands Hegel's account of meaning in the *Phenomenology* as essentially coherentist. Thus for Brandom Hegel is attempting to argue that meaning can be understood as the product of inferential relations, as opposed to the correspondence between our concepts and physical states of affairs (which Hegel so obviously rejects). But what needs to be considered—a thesis, that correctly understood in Hegel, denies Brandom's position—is the notion, for Hegel, that truth is a result. This is the absolute standpoint which Brandom, as we shall see, does not and cannot accommodate.

In this paper I will outline Brandom's interpretation of the pragmatist implications of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then show where I think the problems of that interpretation lie. It will become evident that in my criticisms of Brandom there is something pivotal in how we are to understand the role of history in Hegel's account of the development of meaning. A final section of the paper therefore turns to a consideration of that issue.

Brandom on the *Phenomenology*

In interview Brandom has explained his general view of Hegel as follows: "I also read Hegel as offering an *inferentialist* view of semantic content—and consequently, as the first philosopher to struggle with the nature and consequences of semantic *holism*."[2] And in Brandom's view Hegel develops a recognizably pragmatist theory of meaning as his response to the "consequences of semantic *holism*." Hegel, according to Brandom, stresses the normativity of our conceptual activity, a distinctive pragmatist dimension of semantic holism. Brandom claims that the notion of normativity in the

application of concepts is first recognized by Kant. He writes: "Hegel inherits from Kant a fundamental philosophical commitment (I'm prepared to say 'insight'): a commitment to the *normative* character of concepts. One of Kant's most basic and important ideas is that what distinguishes judgments and actions from the responses of merely natural creatures is that they are things we are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. They are undertakings of *commitments* that are subject to a certain kind of normative assessment, as correct or incorrect."[3] What Brandom is alluding to here is the principle of the autonomy of reason, the notion that our rationality alone entitles us to decide what concepts we think should be used in a given situation (a position which obviously contrasts with the tradition which thinks of concepts as applied "non-normatively" by natural response).

Brandom goes on to demonstrate that there are different versions of the idea of normativity in the application of concepts in experience. Frege, for instance, held that logic is normative in that it is a discipline of how we ought to think. However Frege's version of normativity cannot be endorsed by pragmatism, Brandom thinks. As he explains: "Frege followed Kant in emphasizing that logic (and semantics) is a *normative* discipline: talk about concepts is talk about how we *should* talk and think, not just about how we actually do. This insight is also very important for me. But Frege seems to have had a platonistic, ontological construal of these conceptual norms, whereas I follow a pragmatist line and see them as implicit in our practice. This is probably the greatest difference between the two approaches."[4] (The "implicit in our practices" position is true too of Hegel, albeit with specific regard to his view of political and moral norms, that is to say normativity with regard to social practices which are amenable to disapproval or approbation.) Thus normativity is not a matter

of validating our concepts against some unalterable—let us call them metaphysical—features of reality.

Following Wittgenstein Brandom argues (what I will label) a synchronic thesis, namely, that meaning is determined by *use*: "The practice of using language must be intelligible as not only the *application* of concepts by using linguistic expressions, but equally and at the same time as the *institution* of the conceptual norms that determine what would count as correct and incorrect uses of linguistic expressions. The actual *use* of the language settles—and is all that *could* settle—the *meanings* of the expressions used."[5] Although the notion of use cannot be divorced from history—concepts come to us with some meaning already attaching to them—Brandom does not argue that we must know the complex determinations that make up the history of a concept in order to use that concept effectively. Hence we might think of what Brandom is proposing here as a synchronic thesis in the sense that except in the case of certain specific contexts, meaning does not require historical consciousness.

The notion of use entails sociality, something found neither in Kant nor Frege but it constitutes, according to Brandom, a central element of Hegel's thought on semantics. Brandom offers a fascinating account of what he thinks of as the social normativity of meanings in Hegel by radically re-reading the notion of the reciprocity of recognition, developed in the dialectic of master and servant. His thesis is: to be recognized is, in effect, to be a linguistic user of whom and by whom certain semantic norms are expected. And Hegel is a pragmatist precisely in his view of the social normative commitments of our conceptual activities. This position is described by Brandom as a monistic pragmatist view which is to be distinguished from a two-phased approach which he ascribes to Kant and a whole tradition of analytic

philosophy which followed from Kant. He explains: "Carnap and the other logical positivists affirmed their neo-Kantian roots by taking over Kant's two-phase structure: *first* one stipulates *meanings*, then experience dictates which deployments for them yield true *theories*. The first activity is prior to and independent of experience, the second is constrained by and dependent on it."[6] The monistic position, by contrast, sees our semantic activities as a single layer, one which "involves settling at once both what we mean and what we believe."[7] This selfsame thesis is allegedly found also in Hegel. Hegel, Brandom argues, is committed to the single layer of "making determinate judgments" and simultaneously "settling at once both what we mean and what we believe." Hence Brandom claims that for "Hegel, empirical judgment and action is not (as for Kant and Carnap) just the *selection* of concepts to apply."[8]

What Brandom's picture of Hegel gives us is this: the *Phenomenology* is an account of the practice of employing concepts. This practice is explained by the actual meaning of concepts, meanings which arise socially. Concepts are normative: employing them is therefore always the effort to get it right. The pragmatist criterion of "getting it right" is decided by actual use, and this activity is single-layered. For Brandom these claims all arise as consequences of Hegel's basic commitment to semantic inferentialism. For Hegel, it seems, the activity of employing concepts is always a process of semantic inferentialism: not the non-normative activity of responding to a non-conceptual givenness.

Given that Brandom will re-read Hegel's phenomenology through the framework of semantic inferentialism we ought to be clear about the latter's major claims. A review of Brandom's work explains it as follows: "Our responses to the environment and each other are invested with the character of assertions when they are sanctioned as *proper* or *improper* moves by the community. The *conceptual*

contents of assertions are constituted by the conceptual network of proprieties and improprieties imposed upon their vehicles. With semantic hindsight we may say that semantic contents are determined by their *inferential* liaisons… *Truth* is then disclosed as the property that is preserved by permissible inferences."[9] In essence, then, Brandom's semantic inferentialism is committed to: (a) the idea that the norm of correctness is social; (b) the inferentialist claim that the semantic content of concepts is marked by their relation to other concepts, a relation which (c) is settled by their use.

Critique of Brandom's Interpretation

Of course what Brandom attributes to Hegel is not entirely unfamiliar: anyone who reads Hegel will see *prima facie* evidence of coherentism and inferentialism. But if there is something resembling coherentism and inferentialism it is not in the anachronistic senses used by Brandom. When we examine Hegel's notion of the dialectic of experience—experience as the process of knowledge described by the phenomenological observer—the notions of coherentism and inferentialism serve only to delimit what Hegel is trying to explain. Hegel's notion of meaning is most appropriately considered as *resultant*, that is, as the result of self-consciously progressive intellectual exertions. This result is achieved after a self-conscious process of examining our understanding of what is involved in our epistemic practices. This result, importantly, is apparent only to the philosopher who observes the structure of these practices from without. Whereas for Brandom's pragmatism meaning is available to us from the use contexts of concepts and is therefore *in place*, for Hegel meaning can only be gained at the level of phenomenological scrutiny of what is entailed in any given truth assertion (about knowledge). That is not to say that

what individuals engage in in ordinary experience is meaningless, but rather that its real significance—its shape and trajectory—are intelligible only to the detached observer. Hence meaning, for Hegel—philosophical propositions which can be defended—is determined only after a process of examination, that is, when it has been subjected to a process of justification. And the very project of the *Phenomenology* is to undertake this process. This difference between the pragmatist assumption of meaning in place and Hegel's position requires some further explanation.

In the *Preface* and *Introduction* to the *Phenomenology* Hegel describes the process of the move away from partial knowledge and towards conclusive or absolute knowing. The term Hegel gives to this process, through which knowledge can be observed as advancing towards the Absolute, is *experience*. Experience is, in Hegel's text, the collective name given to self-conscious, deliberately undertaken exercises of critical evaluation and the *progress* made through that evaluation. Hegel himself describes experience as the "*dialectical* movement which consciousness exercises on itself," demonstrating that experience has a discernible rational structure.[10] This means, in effect, that the process of moving from partial to conclusive or absolute knowing is neither haphazard nor random. Each phase of experience is produced by a rational compulsion. The compulsion of rationality does not allow settlement at any point which falls short of knowledge in which all of the implications of the truth claims made in that knowledge have not become fully transparent. In essence, then, experience is the process which is driven by the rational requirement that we overcome incompleteness, i.e. lack of full transparency. What is envisaged by Hegel is a "fully developed, perfected cognition" (*gebildete und vollständige Erkenntnis*).[11] This trajectory—experience in this specific sense—is articulated by the

phenomenological observer who can recognize a structure not known by the agents of ordinary knowledge, that is, of knowledge in ordinary practice.

The perspective of the phenomenological observer allows us to see that this "fully developed, perfected cognition" is achievable through the program of a revelation of the untruth of phenomenal knowledge, its untruth being apparent in its inability to justify itself. As Joseph C. Flay points out, the search for truth, for the Absolute which can support the structure of our ordinary experience against skepticism, means "the *Phenomenology* must show that the absolute standpoint claimed by absolute idealism lies *within* the natural attitude itself,"[12] as otherwise knowledge of the Absolute would be of a realm or entity which was beyond the world of ordinary experience. Rather, the attempt to explain the phenomenal in terms of the absolute standpoint is to give it a justification it lacks from within its own terms. The aim of the phenomenology of knowledge, then, is completeness or, indeed, absolute knowing. Only a grasp of all of the relations implicit in that completeness can overcome the unreal or natural consciousness.

This notion of completeness is important here in the context of a rejection of the pragmatist reading of Hegel. The inferentialism posited by Brandom assumes a set of relations in place, relations which produce effective meaning and which need no phenomenological scrutiny and reconstruction. However, for Hegel this set remains incomplete for so long as it has commitments which have not yet been made fully transparent. Indeed it is really this notion of transparency which makes sense of Hegel's conviction regarding the rationality of experience. Ordinary empirical experience, under Hegelian schema, is not yet rational: it awaits an elucidation that the phenomenological philosopher brings to it. The vital element required to see it as rational is to see it as the product of concepts which can be made transparent. On

those grounds I think that Robert Solomon is quite right to claim that in "Hegel's view… there is no valid distinction between justification and truth."[13] Knowledge is what can be justified and this means making transparent the concepts which lie behind assumptions about knowledge.

What makes it possible to think of knowledge as entailing commitments for Hegel is explained by his account of consciousness. We can get a sense of what Hegel means by "consciousness" from the phrase he uses in the *Encyclopaedia* that consciousness is "the attitude of thought towards objectivity" (*die Stellung des Gedankens zur Objektivität*). What Hegel means here is that consciousness actually determines objectivity. This determination is specific in its scope in that consciousness provides the criterion of objectivity: that is, what we take as objectivity—what we judge things to be—is determined by our criterion of objectivity. (For this reason it is possible for Hegel to speak of different consciousnesses which determine in different ways what the world is, either for a person or for a culture with which a person identifies.) This criterion is, in effect, the commitment to a view of objectivity. But experience sees the evaluation of the way in which the criterion determines what we take to be knowledge. In a non-dialectical mode we take that criterion to be final, as the "truth." However, reflection on the limitations that this non-dialectical terminus produces leads to further progress in knowledge. In this way consciousness comes to be revised: it "transcends" itself. Consciousness does not simply settle at a fixed point: a "limited satisfaction." Rationality compels it forward: "consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction."[14] We can see a process in which individuals or cultures, indeed, may come to realize that this standard or criterion inhibits the full realization of knowledge, and in that case, in light of the way that this criterion has

inhibited knowledge they adjust assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Hegel describes this experience as a "labour of the negative."[15] This is what Hegel intends by determinate negation: a specific response to the failure of knowledge whose specific nature is necessitated by the reason for the failure. This response is not presupposed. As Robert Stern explains: "Hegel claims that because each inadequate stage of consciousness 'suffers this violence at its own hands,' he can persuade consciousness to accept his position in a non-dogmatic and non-question-begging way, by showing that consciousness moves towards it of its own accord, as it seeks to make good on its own internal problems. We therefore do not need to assume anything about the world at the outset, or to use such assumptions to criticize consciousness."[16]

It is in regard to this process of corrective adjustment that we can think about the *dynamic* and *progressive* qualities of knowledge. Knowledge is *dynamic* in that it is achieved only after revisions which are compelled by the experience of an unsatisfactory judgment, where, as Charles Taylor puts it, "effective knowing" breaks down precisely as a consequence of a commitment to a particular view of knowing.[17] And the final achievement of the phenomenology of knowledge—the comprehension of what we have *progressed* towards—is essentially *resultant* also in that the epistemic content of absolute knowing is the accumulated achievement of provisional or partial knowledge. Hence the famous remark: "The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is…"[18]

A further objection to the pragmatist interpretation arises here: the notion of completeness is a possibility in principle for Hegel, one which is articulated by the

observer of experience. But completeness can be only hypothetical for the pragmatist since completeness would involve working out the effect of the semantic relations across all the concepts we can use. At the very least this is an indemonstrable entailment, one which leads to problems that cannot be similarly ascribed to Hegel. This problem is neatly identified by Kenneth R. Westphal: "It is hard, if not impossible, to prevent coherentism from sliding into relativism or at least antirealism if the relevant kind of 'coherence' involves only inferential relations among propositions."[19] What Brandom's interpretation simply never acknowledges is Hegel's obvious efforts to justify our natural beliefs not by embedding them in a coherent web of inferential relations but by demonstrating the grounds—i.e. certain concepts—which underlie our experience.

It seems to me that the progressive notion—the dynamic and resultant issues already mentioned—is by no means entailed in the pragmatist position, or at least the pragmatism attributed by Brandom to Hegel. If for the sort of pragmatism Brandom wants to defend meaning is already in place the only activity available—which resembles what Hegel presents as the examination of commitments in experience—is that of conceptual clarification. The pragmatist may wish to identify, rather like Hegel, the commitments which make knowledge look that way it does. But such clarification is by no means always necessary for successful meaning practice within the position offered by Brandom, whereas it is necessary to the phenomenological project which Hegel undertakes.[20] Otherwise we remain at the level of natural consciousness.

By contrast to Brandom's picture of Hegel's theory of meaning as a process of use and interpretation what is stressed in Hegel's texts is that "experience"—the context in which meaning is generated—can be seen as a deliberative, self-conscious

activity whose only alternative is "unthinking inertia" (*gedankenlose Trägheit*).[21] For Hegel "[t]rue thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the Notion (*Begriff*)."[22] Hegel's talk about "the employment of concepts" is thus always a matter of this "labour." This activity is the self-conscious scrutiny of these concepts. There are many passages within the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* which spell out this activity. Let us consider but a few: "Since consciousness thus finds that its knowledge does not correspond to its object, the object does not stand the test; in other words, the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is."[23] So experience begins with an assertion of some item of "phenomenal knowledge." Should this assertion turn out to be problematic—its does not work, say—we are obliged to reflect on the criterion of effective knowing comes to be revised. As Hegel writes: "...an examination consists in applying an accepted standard, and in determining whether something is right or wrong on the basis of the resulting agreement or disagreement of the thing examined."[24] The language of testing directly conflicts with Brandom's claim (as we have seen above) that Hegel's phenomenology is committed to the single layer of "making determinate judgments" and simultaneously "settling at once both what we mean and what we believe."[25] This "monistic" interpretation simply excludes the process in which phenomenology reconstructs the development of knowledge.

For Hegel even the skeptical scrutiny of our phenomenal knowledge, which does not seek to move beyond doubt, represents a higher activity than phenomenal (i.e. untested) knowing: "The skepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness, on the other hand, renders the Spirit (*Geist*) for the first time competent to test what truth is. For it brings about a state of despair about all the

so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions..."[26] Surely the pragmatist would not want to concede this since pragmatism itself locates semantic activity in our ordinary use situations. It is thereby committed to excluding the philosophical privilege of anything like a skeptical critique of our "natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions." (It is not difficult to imagine how Wittgenstein, for instance, would have objected to Hegel's unwavering claim for the pre-eminence of the phenomenological perspective on knowledge.) But from the perspective of a phenomenology of knowledge Hegel is claiming that we can, indeed must, understand skepticism as a progressive contribution.

In contrast to Brandom's version of Hegel what Hegel actually says is that the revision of our conceptual employment is not a matter of getting straight our ordinary propositional knowledge. Granted conceptual employment always operates under a criterion of what it envisages as capable of generating a coherent proposition. But only a progressive account of the commitments which lie behind the concepts we employ, culminating in a completed series, can achieve truth. The semantic pragmatist reading of the *Phenomenology* falls short then because it simply cannot account for the progressive and resultant dimensions of Hegel's explanation of, let us call it, philosophical meaning. For the pragmatist meaning is in place: for Hegel it is only so after the self-consciously cumulative knowledge of philosophical labor.

The distinction between pragmatism and Hegel's notion of progressive determination is perhaps most vividly seen in the contrasting senses which can be made of the notion of "determinate negation." Brandom thinks of determinate negation as signifying the kind of change of concept application that arises from awareness of, as he puts it, "material incompatibility relations among concepts."[27] In this way one concept replaces another concept of a similar species. Brandom's

example, rather revealingly, is that of color concepts: "An example would be the way calling a patch of paint 'red' precludes calling it 'green.'"[28] In this respect, it is clear that Brandom has a different view of the content of philosophy—and hence what is to be analyzed by philosophy—to Hegel whose interest is not in the empirical determinations of particular objects. For Brandom determinate negation involves the meaning of one term—of empirical concepts—excluding the meaning of another in a particular context. This, however, is an example from ordinary experience which has misleading implications since, in fact, Hegel's actual sense of determinate negation is far more ambitious. For him determinate negation leads to a transformation of our understanding, not just to an ever more precise predication of an ordinary object. To use Hegel's language, determinate negation is a moment in the sublation-*Aufhebung* of the concept, that is, of the model of effective knowing which informed the employment of the concept. Thus determinate negation does not entail a sideways move to another concept: it forces knowledge into a distinctive new form. When a concept is altered, then, the object under consideration is also transformed since its conception is altered. The phenomenological observer can view this as the increasing sophistication in our way of knowing. As Hegel says elsewhere: "The dialectic, on the contrary, is the immanent transcending, in which the one-sidedness and restrictedness of the determinations of the understanding displays itself as what it is, i.e., as their negation."[29]

The Question of History

Some further analysis needs to be given to the label "synchronic" as there is an arguable case that the theory of meaning that Brandom brings to Hegel cannot be appropriately described as a "synchronic" thesis. In his book, *Making it Explicit*

Brandom proposes that part of the possibility of communication is that, in essence, the meanings we employ are part of a wider language that is irreducible to an individual perspective. Thus whilst use may determine the meanings of words or concepts in a situation, these meanings operate within a context of wider communication that extends beyond each of us and into the future. Through the very assertion of objectivity I commit my claims to critical assessment and thus to the possibility that my meanings might be transformed in ways I do not expect. This is because a basic feature of communication is interpretation. In this sense, then, the notion of synchronicity seems (against my claim) to be too narrow to encapsulate Brandom's idea of the open-endedness of communication and of meaning through communication in general. Brandom describes the interpretative dimension of communication as containing elements—the interlocutor's expectations and responses, in effect—that cannot be prescribed in advance. Hence interpretation is required to sustain the meaningfulness of communicative actions: "The reason communication requires interpretation... is twofold. First, speaker and audience typically have different sets of collateral commitments—if they do not, communication would be superfluous. Second, the inferential significance of a claim (what its consequences are and what would count as evidence for it) depends on what *auxiliary hypotheses* are available to serve as collateral premises. So differences in background beliefs mean that a remark may have one inferential significance for the speaker and another for each member of the speaker's audience."[30] We might want to say *either* that Brandom's own position accommodates (or seeks to accommodate) synchronic and diachronic dimensions of our concept employment (diachronic in that it sees communication—and meaning—as potentially operative across history) *or*, rather, that the terms synchronic and diachronic are not appropriate to the position he

is setting out. However, the problem is that *in his reading of Hegel* Brandom does not comment on those features of Hegel's account of concept employment which emphasize the culminative—resultant—property of knowledge as it is achieved through a process of the accumulation of concepts the structure of which we observers can understand. By contrast Brandom's analysis is effectively restricted to the domain of current experience. (The question of what exactly Brandom's own work—as opposed to those philosophical theses he enunciates in the context of his reading of Hegel—has to say on these matters cannot, and need not, be further considered here.) To get a deeper sense of what is at issue we need to examine Brandom's account of the historical dimension of meaning in Hegel.

Brandom considers the historical dimension of meaning within the "recognitive" structures of what he calls "reciprocal authority."[31] This is an element of the interpretation of the dialectic of master and servant that we looked at above. In this context he interprets the idea of *Geist* as "the whole system of social practices of the most inclusive possible community."[32] This claim forms the basis of Brandom's effort to explain Hegel's notion of *Geist* as "a *self*"[33] as having "the structure and unity characteristic of the self-conscious self."[34] In the course of his explanation of this idea Brandom provides an interpretation of the historical dimension of meaning as well as of the process in which meaning arises which might seem to suggest that the criticisms I have made have in fact been based on a reduced reading of his position. That is to say, because Brandom is trying to encompass the notion of *Geist* within his account of history he surely must be acknowledging the historical and resultant dimension of meaning that I, nevertheless, have claimed is absent from his account of Hegel. Despite Brandom's effort to account for these fundamental ideas of the *Phenomenology*—history, process, *Geist*—it turns out that these ideas are

presented in limited ways which, however, are consistent within the disputable pragmatist interpretation.

What is missing in fact in the notion of process is the sense of progress—and the appropriate attendant idea of history—which cannot be excised from Hegel's position. By progress is meant here the increasing revelation of truth as ultimately the absolute grounds of experience become transparent. Brandom explains this differently, offering no consideration of the resultant nature of knowledge in Hegel's position. He puts it as follows: "[the historical arises] because negotiating and adjudicating the claims of reciprocally conditioning authorities, administering conceptual norms by applying them in actual cases (to particulars that immediately present themselves), is a *process*. In that process of experience, conceptual norms develop, along with the body of claims or judgments expressing the commitments that arise from applying those concepts. This developmental process of progressively determining the content of concepts by applying them in concert with their fellows is to be understood as the way determinately contentful conceptual norms are instituted."[35] And that "prior applications are authoritative regarding the meaning or content of the concept."[36] But the recognitive structure means that prior applications although authoritative are not fixed for all time, as exemplified by jurisprudential reasoning in the common law tradition where past judgments—applications of concepts—are authoritative in so far as they are understood to be correct. Past and future judgments, in effect, may reciprocally exercise authority. In this process, then, there is a recognitive structure between past applications of concepts and future ones, and thus Brandom appears to account for the historically progressive element of meaning.

The explanation of history here is strong, and indeed it lucidly and rigorously provides the underpinnings of what might be found in some post-Hegelian notions of history, such as were to be developed in the subsequent hermeneutic tradition. We can see that in the following statement: "The reciprocal recognitive structure within which Spirit as a whole comes to self-consciousness is *historical*. It is a relation between different time slices of Spirit, in which the present acknowledge the authority of the past, and exercises an authority over it in turn, with the negotiation of their conflicts administered by the future. This is the recognitive structure of *tradition*, which articulates the normative structure of the process of *development* by which concepts acquire their contents by being applied in experience."[37] But Brandom then concludes with the extraordinary claim that it is this very process of making explicit the recognitive structures of tradition that "Hegel calls 'Absolute Knowledge.'"[38] What Hegel means by absolute knowledge, however, as Stern puts it, "relates to the idea of complete or unimpaired rational cognition of the world…"[39] And this is a cognition fully aware of its progressive-resultant content in that the all prior standpoints have been revealed in their limitations, whilst also being seen to have set a path towards completed cognition. To liken this process to what Brandom outlines as "making it explicit" would require further explanation from Brandom himself.

What Brandom offers here is nevertheless hugely appealing. It surely captures the processes at work in living traditions of knowledge. But it again must be asked whether it is a compelling account of Hegel's particular notion of historical understanding. The major difficulty with what is proposed by Brandom is that, in effect, it places historical understanding in a historicist framework which cannot account for Hegel's notion that there is a definitive story to be told of the dialectical process in which knowledge is eventually considered. The Hegelian account of this

progressive unfolding operates on two levels, neither of which are compatible with Brandom's account of Hegel. The first one to consider is the notion of *Geist* contained in Hegel's notion of philosophical history in which the development of the modern notion of freedom is played out. It accounts for a process in which only modern agents seem to be in a position to understand the significance of the historical process, and thus that earlier articulations of the concept of freedom were somehow one-sided, incomplete and not fully transparent to contemporaneous agents. There is certainly no historicism, in the relativist sense, in this position. For that reason it is clear that an account of meaning which acknowledges history only in so far as it is interested in it from the point of view of a non-progressive process—such as the jurisprudential one—is not what Hegel's notion of history tries to capture. Ultimately Brandom explains the historical structure of meaning from the standpoint of a meaning user, but the Hegelian standpoint is the absolute standpoint. The difference is great. The difference comes down, in fact, to the historicism which Brandom's position supports—hardly surprising given its Wittgensteinan commitments—whereas Hegel's position, though historically conscious, seeks to establish quite non-relativistic conclusions.

The second level of progressive unfolding is—as indeed we have already seen—that of experience. This level is, as mentioned above, articulated from within a phenomenological attitude which requires that we uncover the fundamental concepts of our experience. The sense of lateral relations among inferentially related concepts cannot do justice to this dimension of Hegelian phenomenology. The *Phenomenology* itself is the effort to work through the conditions of experience—from the sensuous to the social—and it is clear that the conclusion, absolute knowing, is a culminating and necessary end-point which has given a direction to the enquiry. Hegel's idea of

necessity is not of the Kantian order, of experience conforming to rules that lie outside the phenomenal realm. However, that does not mean that necessity is contingent upon content. Rather the very operations of reason, in its phenomenological experience of concepts, necessitates certain problematizations and attendant solutions. It is precisely the element of necessity that the pragmatist position cannot explain simply because its sphere of operations is the contingent world of ordinary experience (as instanced by Brandom with the example of color concepts). When we think of Hegel's notion of meaning—of truth, no less—as resultant we see it as a necessary result which has mapped out the fundamental concepts and commitments of our experience.

The various criticisms of the pragmatist readings that I propose can be seen to have centered on the question of whether Hegel is really interested in clarification of the use of language or whether he is attempting to reconstruct a system of knowledge in which the validity or appropriateness of fundamental concepts is developed. I have argued for the latter because it seems to me that the most fundamental aspects of Hegel's phenomenology—its concern with the rational structure of experience, its valorization of reflection over ordinary experience and the necessity of progress in knowledge—cannot be accommodated within the framework of semantic pragmatism.

Notes

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1. Brandom's reading first appeared in Brandom 1999a, but is expanded in Brandom 2002.

2. Brandom 1999b: 147-148.

3. Brandom 2002: 212.

4. Brandom 1999b: 146.

5. Brandom 2002: 214-215.

6. Brandom 2002: 214.

7. Brandom 2002: 214.

8. Brandom 2002: 215.

9. McBride 2002: 237

10. Hegel 1971: III 78 / Hegel 1977: 55.

11. Hegel 1971: III 65 / Hegel 1977: 43.

12. Flay 1984: 9.

13. Solomon 1983: 266.

14. Hegel 1971: III 74 / Hegel 1977: 51.

15. Hegel 1971: III 24 / Hegel 1977: 10.

16. Stern 2002: 41.

17. Taylor 1975: 135.

18. Hegel 1971: III 24 / Hegel 1977: 11.

19. Westphal 2003: 74.

20. For this reason Beiser's explanation of a motivation of the *Phenomenology* as a transcendental deduction analogous to Kant's is interesting though controversial. For Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, according to Beiser, "the ideas of metaphysics are a necessary condition of actual experience" [Beiser 2005: 170-1].

21. Hegel 1971: III 75 / Hegel 1977: 51.

22. Hegel 1971: III 65 / Hegel 1977: 43.

23. Hegel 1971: III 78 / Hegel 1977: 54-55.

24. Hegel 1971: III 75 / Hegel 1977: 52.

25. Brandom 2002: 215.

26. Hegel 1971: III 73 / Hegel 1977: 50.

27. Brandom 2002: 223.

28. Brandom 2002: 223.

29. Hegel 1971: VIII 172 (§81) / Hegel 1991: 128 (§81).

30. Brandom 1994: 475.

31. Brandom 2002: 226.

32. Brandom 2002: 227.

33. Brandom 2002: 227.

34. Brandom 2002: 228.

35. Brandom 2002: 229.

36. Brandom 2002: 229-230.

37. Brandom 2002: 234.

38. Brandom 2002: 234.

39. Stern 2002: 196.

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