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THE UNITY OF HAPPINESS AND REASON IN HEGEL

by

CARSON MONETTI

Under the Direction of Sebastian Rand, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the connection between happiness and reason in the work of Herder, Kant, and Hegel. First, I consider Herder's integration of satisfaction and rationality and Kant's complete separation of rational imperatives from particular experience. I discuss (and partially endorse) Kant's critique of Herder as arbitrary and overly reliant on analogy. I then turn to Hegel's response to this debate. I argue that Hegel's *Phenomenology* provides an integration of happiness (in the broad, Aristotelian sense) and reason that is not subject to the same pitfalls as Herder's solution. I examine two examples of rational critique in the *Phenomenology* and conclude with brief remarks about happiness and the rational society in Hegel's work.

INDEX WORDS: G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, German idealism, rationality, happiness, history, J.G. Herder, Immanuel Kant.

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by

CARSON MONETTI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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THE UNITY OF HAPPINESS AND REASON IN HEGEL

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1. Introduction: reconciling happiness and reason

What is the rational significance of happiness? There are attractive reasons to think it has none. We have all met apparently happy people who seem to behave arbitrarily; they may make others miserable, but they lack the critical or emotional capacity to be distressed by their own behavior. Perceptive, capable people might not be deceived in this way, but their happiness may still be an unreliable guide, since it is unavoidably affected by contingency. Oedipus was strong, rich, and clever, but he lacked knowledge of the lurking facts. And it is not only in fiction that the “best of men” are cut down by circumstances.¹ In short, a good mood is no guarantee. Two problems seem to block us from taking apparent happiness as a sign of rationally ordered life. First, one can believe in one’s own happiness despite the failure of that belief to cohere with other commitments, with known facts about the world, or with beliefs held at other times. Second, one can believe in one’s own happiness despite the existence of unknown facts or future events that would shatter one’s belief.

This line of thinking shows that we cannot reason from one’s belief that one is happy to the conclusion that one has put together a coherent and genuinely satisfying life. In other words, it shows that the mere belief in happiness is not very useful on its own as a resource for practical reason. Such belief often fails to diagnose problems with one’s organization of principles and purposes, and with the application of these to present circumstances. It is tempting to conclude that happiness and reason simply don’t have much to do with one another. But the line of thinking outlined above makes a crucial assumption: that happiness is only recognizable by a particular subject, in a particular emotional experience. More progress can be made toward the productive relation of happiness and reason with the counterargument that happiness is not

¹ Sophocles, “Oedipus the King,” in *Three Theban Plays*, tr. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984), line 57.

correctly understood as an idiosyncratic experience of pleasure. Observing the fate of pleasure-seekers can be a powerful motivation for this approach. In general, people who organize their lives reflectively, comparing their accomplishments to a coherent set of guiding concepts and aims, seem to fare better than those who seek pleasure in the short term. This observation provokes the thought that happiness is more than mere pleasure, since attaining durable self-satisfaction involves reflectively choosing to defer or reject particular opportunities for pleasure.

Aristotle is the prototypical advocate of this general approach. We often leave his word for happiness, *eudaimonia*, untranslated to highlight its difference from a mere emotional state. When Aristotle talks about a happy life, he means neither an ascetic life characterized by self-denial and emotional pain nor a hedonistic pursuit of immediate gratification. *Eudaimonia* means a harmony between the immediate demands of conscious existence and the pursuit of human excellence. A virtuous life, characterized by genuine happiness, “does not need to have pleasure attached to it as a sort of accessory, but contains its own pleasure in itself,” because the virtuous person takes pleasure in doing well.² This righteous pleasure serves several important purposes. First, it reinforces good habits, propelling the virtuous person to even greater deeds. Second, in contrast with the unhappy ascetic, the person who finds pleasure in a well-ordered life is better equipped (psychologically and materially) to pursue excellence. Aristotle points out that “it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources,” so a principle of self-denial turns out to be counterproductive for achieving excellence.³ Third, since virtue is perpetuated through role modeling, the truly virtuous person cannot be an object of pity. Balance

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. J.A.K. Thompson (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1099a.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a.

and good health are the outward signs of a kind of self-satisfaction that the student of virtue cannot yet grasp for herself.

Aristotle's idea of the good life, in sum, involves a teleological unity of the person's interests, faculties, desires, and social engagements. It is not self-destroying; it sustains itself in the individual and reproduces itself through social life. This ideal of organic unity, filtered through Enlightenment naturalism, is a crucial part of Hegel's philosophical inheritance. But Hegel, like many of his contemporaries, saw serious problems with the idea that norms could be justified merely by their coherence with one another, their persistent social transmission, and the professed satisfaction of their followers. Like many of his contemporaries, Hegel thought that human reason demands an understanding of its norms that does not take those norms as presuppositions. Aristotle hardly engages with competing systems of value, regarding critical discussion of alternatives as a lost cause. Since "the mind of the pupil has to be prepared in its habits if it is to enjoy and dislike the right things," it is not really possible to justify integrated systems of value and motivation against radical opposition.⁴

Hegel, as we will see, shares Aristotle's skepticism about cultivating a 'view from nowhere,' from which various perspectives could be evaluated neutrally. And Hegel has no illusions about the causal history of the rational, social consciousness described at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as "Absolute Knowledge." His work in history and anthropology is consonant with Aristotle's principle that "feeling seems to yield not to argument but only to force."⁵ But, unlike Aristotle, Hegel cannot take this fact as license to avoid the difficult project of rational self-justification. He is too modern, too aware of the contingency of happiness even in

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b.

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b.

Aristotle's broadened sense. For Hegel, organic unity must include satisfying the stringent demands of modern reason, grasping the lessons of history, and reconciling the various points of view that compete for attention and influence in a pluralistic society.

Despite these differences, Hegel follows Aristotle closely in the idea that our finite minds (and even our contingent emotional states) are not *overcome*, but progressively *educated* by the development of rational thought. If this is so, the satisfaction of a rational life is bound up with happiness. The educated individual cannot be reduced to a list of virtues or a collection of social roles; she can only take up her duties and values in concrete experience, and she only sustains them by actually living with them. Hence Hegel rejects both "empirical psychology," which focuses on "forces" and material conditions to the exclusion of conceptual content, and "the speculative approach" to psychology, which posits invisible thinking entities to the exclusion of anything concrete they might actually think about.⁶ For him, Aristotle's conception of mind as a dynamic unity of material fact and critical reflection was a guiding light. "*Aristotle's books on the soul*" are in his view "the most admirable, perhaps even the sole, work of speculative interest on this topic," and an "essential aim" of his philosophy was to "disclose once more the sense of those Aristotelian books."⁷

To do so, he had to understand rational life as an organic unity, despite philosophical and material conditions that seemed to be set against such an optimistic thought. Hegel saw that human history can be a "slaughter-bench," filled with bizarre and irrational episodes in which "happiness" and "wisdom" fail to win out.⁸ And he was well aware of the array of seemingly intractable limits to human understanding, thanks in part to philosophy's long history of

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, tr. Wallace, Miller, and Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 4-5.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), p. xvi.

cataloguing these limits. He confronted, on the one hand, theories that declared ‘progress’ and ‘unity’ without accounting systematically for the conflicting facts, and, on the other, theories that assumed too quickly the insolubility of material conflict by rational effort. Though he learned important lessons from both ways of thinking, Hegel was unsatisfied with both of these approaches. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he argues that experience can—and must—be our source of normative authority. Through a strikingly original form of internal critique, Hegel shows how unhappiness brought about by the limits of human consciousness can lead to the rational expansion of those limits.

Hegel engaged with an enormous range of philosophical thought on the way to developing his own system, but I will begin by discussing two important predecessors beyond Aristotle: Herder and Kant. Their debate about the limits of human perspective provides important context for Hegel’s critical project. Further, we have the advantage of knowing what Hegel thought about both parties’ achievements and shortcomings.

2. Perspective problems in Herder and Kant

Like Hegel, Herder and Kant think through the limits of human perspective in several dimensions: the finite sensory and cognitive powers of the individual, the values and practices of human communities, and the apparently contingent progress of history. Both Herder and Kant deny the possibility of individuals’ somehow transcending their perspective on the world; as Herder puts it, “the reason of man is human reason,” and “angelic reason” is not available to us.⁹ But neither is satisfied with treating our points of view as brute facts into which we lack insight. Herder pursues a naturalistic strategy of self-justification, describing a material process of trial

⁹ J.G. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, tr. T.O. Churchill (London: Bergman, 1800), p. 91.

and error that has culminated in beings like us, with our values and motivations. His picture of human understanding is thoroughly organic; Hegel rightly identifies in Herder “a positive hatred of metaphysics.”¹⁰ By explaining our cognitive powers as natural functions, Herder hopes to demonstrate the cooperative unity of our instincts, sensations, judgments, and social lives.

Kant, on the other hand, finds this approach perverse, arguing that rational beings cannot be satisfied by a theory that appeals to unexplained facts of nature. In his view, a basic part of our nature is the demand for cognitive independence from such givens. His alternative draws on his “critique” of the formal conditions of experience to set limits to our theoretical and practical activity, and treats the establishment of such limits as the proof of our rationality. This approach involves giving up on the hope of proving that any happiness it produces is rational, since for Kant happiness is always conditioned by self-set standards and the capricious workings of nature. Nevertheless, Kant’s commitment to the principle of rational unity drives him to postulate an unprovable, “slow development” of humanity that proceeds from “confused and fortuitous” behavior.¹¹ Hegel found fault with both strategies, and the problems he saw in them will serve as our entry point into his own unifying project.

2.1 *Organic existence and reason in Herder*

Herder’s philosophical psychology offers an acute sense of the obstacles we face in developing a unified self-understanding. Though he takes human beings to be “the crown of terrestrial creation,” he also describes ways in which our celebrated cognition leads to identity

¹⁰ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. xvi.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Political Writings*, tr. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 41.

problems and dissatisfaction.¹² We are conscious of an existence that includes numerous unresolved dualities: we are neither mere matter nor unbound thought, neither isolated individuals nor social amalgamations, neither defined by instincts nor by divine laws. Our desires, fears, and attachments are “thousandfold” and frequently in tension with one another.¹³ We persist, nevertheless, in describing ourselves one-sidedly, in the hopeless effort to write away this complication:

Angelic and devilish forms in the human being – fictional forms! – He nothing but the middle thing in between! – *defiant* and *fainthearted*, *striving in need*, *tiring in inactivity* and *luxury*, without *occasion* and *practice nothing*, gradually *progressing* through them *almost everything* – *hieroglyph of good and bad*, of which history is full – *human being!*¹⁴

At the center of Herder’s philosophical method is the conviction that theory is no cure for the recurrent unhappiness to which individual and social life are both subject. From the perspective of any theoretical self-conception, some elements of the subject are in focus, while others are vaguely present to peripheral vision and still others are invisible. For Herder, therefore, it is misguided to place one’s faith entirely in one conception of human life. “The philosopher is most an *animal* when he would wish to be most reliably a *God*,” since the vain attempt to hold up one partial view as the whole reduces him to a single way of understanding and thus to a lower form of reason.¹⁵ The distinctive feature of human existence is an “invisible seed of receptivity” that allows for *many* productive self-conceptions—thus, for many types of “virtue and happiness,”—but also for permanent tension among these conceptions.¹⁶

¹² Herder, *Outlines*, p. 463.

¹³ J.G. Herder, *This Too a Philosophy of History*, in *Philosophical Writings*, tr. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 334.

¹⁴ Herder, *This Too*, p. 334.

¹⁵ Herder, *This Too*, p. 334.

¹⁶ Herder, *This Too*, p. 335.

Despite the irreducible complexity of our existence, Herder is an inveterate optimist about human progress and human happiness. He places his hope in the workings of existence, examining history and nature for patterns that shore up our self-confidence and motivate us to further action. At first glance, it may seem that the reason for this strategy is simple necessity: since we are, in fact, constituted by material, social, and historical facts, we might as well take these conditions seriously. This sentiment is not absent from Herder's polemic against "abstractionists" like Descartes, who distrusted sensation and instinct and finally resorted to absurdity—he "hung up the soul in the pineal gland and made it think."¹⁷ Philosophy's habit of reducing humans to their thoughts (while perhaps acknowledging that these thoughts come in a human-shaped bag) ignores what we all know about the limits of cognition. Our thoughts are not all-seeing sovereigns. They have roots "in the obscure center of [our] being," and the effort to investigate these roots is checked by the fact that "when the pondering thought digs down that far and illuminates it with its torch, then it is no longer what it was."¹⁸ Our theoretical labor does not stand apart from existence; as we observe and interrogate ourselves, we gradually become different beings than the ones we began to observe.

Herder's argument, however, goes beyond this insistent realism. Not only are our explicit thoughts, beliefs, and values bound up with the "viscera" that make them possible, but any hope of understanding them also depends on this connection.¹⁹ Cognition develops out of the life experience of organic creatures, and its activity can only make sense to us in this context. This fact allows Herder to dispatch quickly certain kinds of constructed unhappiness, such as Cartesian doubt. These ways of thinking make disunity with oneself a foregone conclusion by

¹⁷ J.G. Herder, "On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul," in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 183, 181.

¹⁸ Herder, "On the Cognition and Sensation," p. 181.

¹⁹ Herder, "On the Cognition and Sensation," p. 181.

defining thought and material existence as opposites. But if we keep in mind that “cool reflection” is an “artificial state, one that is gradually achieved through experience, instruction, and habit,” we need not worry about the existence of the external world.²⁰ Such doubt is frivolous, since to think is already to be organic, not merely to *be*. Herder dismisses worries about causation (which persist in philosophy even today) in similar fashion: “If I fail to recognize the bond between cause and effect where I feel it through marrow and bone at every moment, where will I perceive it in its invisible, spiritual, heavenly nature?”²¹ For beings who think by virtue of a causally integrated system of organic functions, causal skepticism is impossible to take seriously.

By conceiving of abstract thought as one function among others, Herder casts human self-consciousness as a purposive mediation among various perspectives, many of which are not optional for us. Our thinking emerges from the value-laden distinctions made even by animals: ‘this sort of thing is edible,’ for example. These distinctions are cognition in its simplest form, “an obscure representation of perfection or unsuitability,” a vague sense attributable both to infants’ attraction to their mothers and plants’ inclination toward the sun.²² Crucially, such distinctions are grounded in the actual suitability of various objects and techniques. We do not face the daunting task of choosing among unlimited options, since we are “happily limited” by our real needs and capacities.²³ These limits are the material for our identities, and since our needs and capacities are more complex and varied than those of other animals, our work in constructing coherent identities is both more difficult and more rewarding. A dog’s identity is more strongly defined at birth than a human’s; the dog “moves securely on his four feet” almost from the

²⁰ J.G. Herder, “On Image, Poetry, and Fable,” in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, tr. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 364.

²¹ Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation,” p. 183.

²² Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation,” p. 180.

²³ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 92.

beginning, and the “strongly imprinted proportions of his senses and impulses are his guides” both for individual survival and for social life.²⁴

In contrast, a human being grows to need more than food, water, and company, and developing a human voice is more demanding than learning to bark. “Whoever is enlivened with many senses has to struggle with many senses,” and human beings are the most sensuously developed organisms on Earth.²⁵ As a result, we are uniquely conscious of the diversity of ends that can organize perception and behavior. Our experience, both in personal maturation and in the “many-toned dissonant history” of humanity, demonstrates the possibility of infinite systems of value and motivation, and this can have vertiginous effects.²⁶ In less thoughtful moments, we maintain the “beautiful delusion” of being the “central point” of the universe, measuring others in relation to our own priorities and positions.²⁷ But wise humans know that their own ways of thinking are rooted in nature, culture, and history; further, they know that others have thought differently based on different givens. Even more unsettling is the realization that *individuals* deploy countless systems of purposive organization in the course of a lifetime, and that these do not always line up clearly. Thinking abstractly, we might ask: “Is not everything means for *millions of purposes*? Is not everything the purpose of *millions of means*?”²⁸ No single system of teleology is handed down to us by an unquestionable authority, and reflection on this fact can make our projects seem arbitrary.

Instead of relying on reflective thought to provide a center of gravity in the midst of all this shifting uncertainty, Herder pins his hopes for happiness on the possibility of working out

²⁴ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 92.

²⁵ Herder, *This Too*, p. 337.

²⁶ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 229.

²⁷ Herder, *This Too*, p. 335.

²⁸ Herder, *This Too*, p. 335.

perspectival conflicts in shared experience. For him, the fact that humans are “born almost without instinct” is a great strength and a great challenge.²⁹ We are not born with desires, values, abilities and fears organized into neat hierarchies, nor even with a static list of these perspectives. Consequently, every reflective understanding of the whole will necessarily have its own conflicts and blind spots. In saying so, Herder anticipates Heidegger’s thought that “all revealing belongs within a harboring and a concealing.”³⁰ Even our most perspicuous thought both “*expresses and keeps quiet,*” giving us useful insight into some aspects of our experience while blocking our view of other aspects.³¹ However, the *partiality* of our view is balanced by the *elasticity* that comes from sensing our own limits. We know from experience that one perspective is not enough to solve any problem—in fact, we can define a ‘problem’ as a conflict between different organizations of means and ends. Our ability to consider and connect these divergent organizations is for Herder our greatest hope. We owe this ability, in large part, to our instinctive sociality. The “mightiest hunger and thirst” in human beings, like all organisms that mate, is their desire for one another, their need to “feel themselves one in their... shared stirring.”³² In humans, this urge is not merely a stimulus for sexual reproduction. It connects us with perspectives we do not initially understand; through these connections, we begin to see beyond ourselves and thereby to make progress on ourselves.

Herder’s vision for unified self-understanding depends on this minimal instinct to spur the development of a robust and satisfying social life. Our being with one another is part of who we are, so to understand ourselves as part of a healthy social organism is essential to our

²⁹ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 226.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), p. 25.

³¹ Herder, *This Too*, p. 337.

³² Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation,” p. 193.

happiness. Herder aims to show how we could rationally conceive of ourselves this way through a progressive view of history that connects various periods and ways of life in a dialectic of social achievement. Even the specifics of this theory are similar to those in Hegel: in both cases, the progress of social life depends on collaboratively recognizing and working through the conflicts into which humans are thrown by their natures and cultures. A central aim of such practice is to make sense of our histories, both the epic and the mundane. History can seem to us a showcase of “wreck upon wreck,” contingent, impermanent, and meaningless; in response, we must learn to speak with one another, to name things, to tell stories, and to build institutions.³³ In this process of social development, Herder says, “the whole structure” of our humanity “is connected by a spiritual birth.”³⁴ No supernatural layer is added to the jumbled group of individuals, but they come to understand themselves as part of an interdependent, historically guided people.

For Herder, this mutual understanding, negotiated continuously throughout history, represents the highest point of human development. As Fred Beiser helpfully puts it, the ideal at work here is “self-realization, the perfection of all a human being’s characteristic powers, whether they are intellectual, moral, sensitive, or physical,” where ‘perfection’ means a “harmonious unity” in which these powers reinforce one another instead of making incompatible demands.³⁵ This ideal is never fully achieved in history, even if we can identify various kinds of progress therein. Indeed, disunity and unhappiness are the motivating forces for further progress even in well-organized social groups. No general agreement replaces the stirrings of individual hearts: their “pain and misery,” their sense of religious awe, and their particular connections with one

³³ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 230.

³⁴ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 227.

³⁵ Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 213.

another.³⁶ Herder insists that our most basic needs never leave us, and make themselves known “in all states, in all societies.”³⁷ The constant renewal of human society by means of birth and death is a restriction as well as a blessing: a wise old generation’s way of thinking is inevitably redirected by the natural desires of its animal offspring.

Fittingly, Herder calls his dynamic ideal for human development simply *Humanität*, and the word does not only refer to humanity’s current social shape. Realizing the ideal requires no preordained values or practices; it is, instead, a word for the process of developing coherent, satisfying ways of life that respond to the inexhaustible particularity of persons and situations. Kristin Gjesdal puts it clearly: “to be able to see the world from different angles,” to deepen one’s limited perspective in mutual effort with others, “is not the means to the retrieval of a higher... synthesis.”³⁸ Productive dialogue among perspectives is the characteristic aim of human life and a genuine end in itself. But this does not mean that Herder’s idea of happiness is thoroughly without content. Not all social structures make unified self-consciousness possible in light of the minimal instincts possessed by its members. Neglect of the individual, including the enforcement of arbitrary inequalities and the failure to meet primal needs, will eventually cause the society’s collapse. Because of this natural form of social critique, “the noblest nation soon loses its dignity under the yoke of despotism; the very marrow is crushed in its bones” and a revolution is inevitable.³⁹ Further, the comparison of present circumstances with recorded history and reports from alien cultures can also provide material for criticism in cases of dissatisfaction.

³⁶ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 248.

³⁷ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 439.

³⁸ Kristin Gjesdal, “Hegel and Herder on Art, History, and Reason,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006), pp. 17-32.

³⁹ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 248.

With these critical tools available to us by virtue of our existence as physical, sensible, social and historical beings, Herder's optimism about happy unity is understandable. The very limits over which philosophers have so often wrung their hands in despair are the sources of our education into a satisfying way of life. Thus Herder urges: "what and wherever thou wast born, quit not the chain, set not thyself above it, but adhere to it firmly."⁴⁰ For him, our happiness and our dissatisfaction—and our ability to understand the complex relations between these experiences in terms of various purposes and situations—are to be understood as the most basic forces of rational progress.

2.2 *Kant, Herder and the demands of reason*

For Kant, the central problem with Herder's description of rational unity is simple: it fails to "derive everything from one principle," relying on the various pushes and pulls of organic life to establish a harmonious equilibrium in human society.⁴¹ In Kant's view, the contingency of our feelings, drives, and individual capacities rules out a rational life based solely on their coherence. For him, human reason cannot be satisfied with understanding itself as an accident of history and circumstance. Nor can it rest in possession of numerous purpose-relative views of itself, regardless of how well these views can be integrated. So one demand of Kantian reason is for *necessary* principles. Humans cannot understand themselves as rationally unified beings unless their judgments are motivated by such principles. Since Kant rejects the possibility that these principles could be derived from contingent happenings in experience, he argues that they must come from the nature of reason itself. A second, closely related demand of Kantian reason, then, is *autonomy*. When I act on the basis of necessary laws given by my own rational nature, I avoid

⁴⁰ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 229.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 5:91.

being thrown about by whims, chance, and social influence. By acting in accordance with laws given by the very form of my rational existence, my behavior is supposed to become coherent and predictable, so that I can understand it as truly my own.

As a result of these demands, Kantian reason has little to do with happiness. For one thing, “cognition of happiness rests on none but experiential data,” and it is subject to the “changeable” nature of individual opinion and social fashion.⁴² Herder, as we saw, is conscious of this fact, and he argues for a minimal set of primal interests that link together the vastly different practices and beliefs deployed in pursuit of happiness. But Kant also has a more fundamental objection to this sort of empirical grounding, and he offers it as an explicit objection to Herder’s philosophy of history. Specifically, he argues, “experience can teach us that something is constituted in such and such a way,” but it cannot “prove that it *could not possibly be otherwise*.”⁴³ In fact, our experience generally points in the opposite direction. “In all sections of society at any given time,” Kant observes, “we find a happiness which is precisely commensurate... to the circumstances in which it was born and grew up,” and we find it difficult even to compare the merits of these integrated, context-sensitive systems.⁴⁴ Their values and needs differ, so their self-satisfaction cannot be measured with an impartial rubric.

Again, Herder is aware of this possible objection—he says in the book Kant is reviewing he is “persuaded” that “no form of human manners is possible, which some nation, or some individual, has not adopted.”⁴⁵ But Herder is comfortable with the idea that societies cannot be ranked, and with its obvious consequence: that no society can understand its aims and practices

⁴² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:36.

⁴³ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*,” in *Political Writings*, p. 212. Note that Churchill translates the title of Herder’s *Ideen* as ‘*Outlines*.’

⁴⁴ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 219.

⁴⁵ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 230.

as necessary. Kant, however, is not. He finds it unacceptable that we cannot give a “satisfactory answer,” for example, about the value of a society living in “peaceful indolence.”⁴⁶ If the lives of such people cannot be normatively compared to other forms of life, how can we say “why they should exist at all,” and “whether it would not have been just as good if [their] island had been occupied by happy sheep?”⁴⁷ In a stroke, Kant evinces worry about the fate of alien societies and blithely dismisses their internal systems of justification and motivation. But under these conceited lines is a good point: Herder does not make it clear how there could be a productive dialogue among people who subscribe to different, apparently coherent ways of life.

Instead, Herder’s approach to cross-cultural comparison (and the comparison of humans with other animals), can resemble “a museum of natural history,” wherein various empirical facts about living beings are recorded and placed near similar facts about other creatures.⁴⁸ With this method, Herder has no problem identifying common elements of various forms of life; further, he is able to argue for numerous findings of local progress. He can show the various apparent adaptations that beings have made to their environments, and even throw such changes into relief with a background of similar features. Kant’s criticism of this method is trenchant and undeniable: Herder’s “ladder of organization... leads nowhere,” since the “great diversity of genera” makes it thoroughly uninformative that “the differences between them appear small when they are arranged in order of *similarity*.”⁴⁹ The enormous variety of natural existence makes it possible to draw up any number of taxonomic systems, and many of these systems will seem equally good when they are judged simply by *how similar* the items in their classes are.

⁴⁶ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 220.

⁴⁷ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 220.

⁴⁸ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 212.

⁴⁹ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 209.

Without a grounding explanation for the taxonomist's choices (e.g., the hereditary relationship of the creatures in question), the presentation of a coherent system tells us little. Unexplained continuities in a diverse set do not rule out the explanation that the diversity is random—or that it represents a *devolving* chain of beings. To Kant, Herder's principle seems to be that whatever grows in nature counts as a self-realizing unity, and that whatever relates in nature counts as a progressive relation.

Herder's "poetic imagination" is at its height in responding to this criticism.⁵⁰ He posits a "kingdom of invisible powers" that organize all the diversity of nature into a progressive whole, on the basis of his faith that "intelligent Nature never sports without design."⁵¹ Kant's quip about this idea has outlasted the rest of the debate in the memory of modern commentators: "what are we to think," he asks, "of the whole hypothesis of invisible forces... and hence of the author's attempt to explain what is not understood in terms of what is understood even less?"⁵² Herder invites this reaction with unclear language, but it is not entirely fair; the 'invisible kingdom' is not offered as a causal explanation or a deduction from first principles. Instead, it is a "human truth," an analogy used to organize our experience and make it comprehensible.⁵³ Herder grasps the difference between such analogies and proofs. Though fruitful comparisons do not bear the stamp of logical necessity, Herder thinks that they are required for us to become "master of the chaos of the sensations assailing" us.⁵⁴ Again, he anticipates Heidegger in holding that "our whole life... is to a certain extent *poetics*."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Kant, "Reviews of Herder's *Ideas*," p. 209.

⁵¹ Herder, *Outlines*, p. 108.

⁵² Kant, "Reviews of Herder's *Ideas*," p. 209.

⁵³ Herder, "On the Cognition and Sensation," p. 188.

⁵⁴ Herder, "On Image, Poetry, and Fable," p. 359.

⁵⁵ Herder, "On Image, Poetry, and Fable," p. 358. Compare Heidegger, "Poetically man dwells," in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), p. 216: "Poetry does not fly

Kant's official doctrines about human action and historical progress proscribe this reliance on poetic comprehension of our experience. The austere requirements of necessity and autonomy lead to a great suspicion of "our pathologically determinable self," which is affected not only by "inclination... hope or fear," but also by the unprovable affinities and tensions we sense in our experience.⁵⁶ If we act according to our impulses and inchoate assumptions, we cannot understand our actions as necessary. And if we put our faith in the evolving practices of our community, we sacrifice our autonomy, and we are forced to view any "cultural advances" not as progress but merely as "the further transmission and casual exploitation of an original tradition," itself grounded in nothing but contingent events and instinctive responses.⁵⁷ In light of these restrictions, Kant's resources for rational self-understanding are limited. It seems he can turn neither to experience nor to supernatural laws and justifications.

Nevertheless, his parallel solutions for regarding oneself and one's history as rational are cleverly efficient in their use of these resources. Despite the fact that contingent forces and feelings "thrust [themselves] upon us first," we retain the ability to choose how and how much to respond to each of these stimuli.⁵⁸ Hegel calls this ability "the mystery... of freedom," i.e. "the necessity with which it emerges from the *natural* phase of the will and adopts a character of *inwardness*."⁵⁹ In responding to our natural urges, which vary in their emotional and physical manifestations, ebb and flow mysteriously, and frequently conflict, we already exhibit a form of independence and reflective distance from these urges insofar as we devise ways of prioritizing and fulfilling them. Onora O'Neill describes Kant's conclusion: "Not only does he deny that

above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling."

⁵⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:74.

⁵⁷ Kant, "Reviews of Herder's *Ideas*," p. 218.

⁵⁸ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:74.

⁵⁹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §139.

reason is or ought to be the slave of the passions; he actually insists that there are no merely instrumental reasoners.”⁶⁰ For Kant, the idea of a reasoner completely in thrall to her whims is self-contradictory. Even instrumental reason requires an act of “overcoming... the impressions made upon our sensible power of desire.”⁶¹

This capacity to reflect and choose among potential actions allows Kant to develop an idea of rational unity based only in the formal nature of our own experience—and, therefore, an idea that satisfies his criteria of necessity and autonomy. The ever-present power to decide for ourselves is a necessary element of human experience, and each of us can sense it in ourselves without appealing to contingent facts. Specifically, we can tell that our activity of rational self-limitation differs from other activities because it produces a special sensation, unlike “the feeling of gratification or pain.”⁶² When we judge our actions based on their formal features, such as their self-consistency,⁶³ their invariance in divergent conditions,⁶⁴ and their independence from material interests, we experience a distinctive kind of satisfaction. This satisfaction cannot be a species of pleasure, since it has a “negative effect on feeling” in general.⁶⁵ Autonomous action in accordance with purely formal requirements causes an “impairment to the inclinations,” a reflective diminution of their motivational force.⁶⁶ We experience this impairment as “a feeling that can be called pain,” recognizable in every act of self-control, but also as a “subjective effect”

⁶⁰ Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), B830.

⁶² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:91.

⁶³ See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:21, 5:27-28 for examples. Both the lying promise and stolen deposit cases turn on the consequences of principles that simultaneously depend upon and undermine the trust of other rational beings. The latter case more clearly involves a consistency criterion: “such a principle, as a law, would annihilate itself.”

⁶⁴ See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:20-21: practical laws “must be independent of conditions that are pathological and that hence adhere to the will contingently,” and they “refer solely to the will” rather than to any object.

⁶⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:72.

⁶⁶ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:72.

called “*self-approval*.”⁶⁷ In regarding an action as a constraint on feeling, we are simultaneously able to see it as a genuine accomplishment of reason.

In this way, Kant’s idea of rational self-understanding establishes a consistent relation between the contingent and the necessary parts of human identity, but this relation is positioned as an eternal conflict. Unlike Aristotle and Herder, Kant argues that the rational person can never trust her feelings. A rationally driven agent is not in “*possession of a complete purity of the will’s attitudes*”—instead, she engages in a permanent “*struggle*” with her attitudes.⁶⁸ To resist our urges and act autonomously requires continual “sacrifice” and “self-constraint, i.e., inner necessitation to do what one does not do entirely gladly.”⁶⁹ The struggle cannot be won, because its ongoing experience of self-division is our only proof that contingency cannot push us around. But along with rational reassurance comes a definition of the self that privileges reflective thought and devalues happiness. One has to choose, according to Kant, which parts of oneself to embrace and which to reject if one hopes to be more than an aggregate of caprice and circumstance.

Kant’s description of social progress works along the same lines. Just as individuals struggle to understand themselves as more than their impulses, societies must make themselves into more than “creatures who act without a plan of their own.”⁷⁰ And again, the mechanism for their development is “a continual antagonism among [the] members” of a society.⁷¹ In Kant’s view, conflict is a result of the “*unsocial sociability*” of humans, that is, their need for social life combined with their “resistance” to being organized into a greater whole.⁷² Just as rationality depends on the basic human tendency to avoid being determined by contingent events, sociality

⁶⁷ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:73, 5:81.

⁶⁸ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:84.

⁶⁹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:83.

⁷⁰ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” p. 42.

⁷¹ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” p. 45.

⁷² Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” p. 44.

depends on their tendency to want things their own way. Kant even expresses gratitude for our “enviously competitive vanity” and our desire for power, since the violence and instability they cause lead us to develop a law-governed order “by sheer necessity.”⁷³ He takes it for granted that people naturally reject governance and want “unrestrained freedom,” so his picture of society includes as much struggle as his picture of rationality.⁷⁴ Once again, it is the struggle itself that grounds our belief in the independence of social life from contingency. We avoid regarding our laws as the product of arbitrary desires by understanding them as limits to those desires.

In one respect, it has to be granted that Kant achieves his goals with these parallel ways of understanding our rational activity. He does not promise the unity of reflective judgment and instinct, nor of the individual’s desires and social laws. He seeks only a “completely systematic unity of [our] *cognitions*,” and his rejection of the normative significance of our natural instincts allows for consistent (if, perhaps, unsatisfying) thought without relying on specific experiences.⁷⁵ But if this is all Kantian reason demands, what are we to make of the “regulative principles” and “postulates” Kant offers in his political philosophy, in Book II of the second *Critique*, and throughout the third *Critique*?⁷⁶ He is concerned, in various places, with advancing the hope of perpetual peace, reconciling virtue with happiness, regarding nature as teleologically organized, and even arguing for the existence of God. These hypotheses are always carefully given as mere organizing principles, “well-grounded ideas” that are “not provable” but useful to humans in their efforts to make experience coherent.⁷⁷ For example, though he criticizes Herder for “a ready facility for discovering analogies,” Kant helps himself to the “analogy” between natural existence

⁷³ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” pp. 45, 46.

⁷⁴ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” p. 46.

⁷⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:91, emphasis mine.

⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:401; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:122.

⁷⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:401.

and teleological organization with the warning (also given by Herder) that this analogy is not to be taken as an “explanation.”⁷⁸

While Herder justifies his optimistic analogies with carefully selected observations about the world, Kant offers his postulates as necessities of practical reason. In keeping with the speculative limitations established by Kant’s critical project, human beings face a world of appearances they can neither explain nor escape. Their only hope for rational development is an endless process of self-control, in which they enact formal limitations on the contingent feelings and occurrences that might otherwise drive all their behavior. In this situation, Kant’s postulates are necessary for two connected reasons: first, without assuming their content, the pursuit of reason seems futile, and second, if the postulates’ claims are understood as descriptive, Kant’s autonomy requirement is jeopardized. The reason for the content of the postulates is fairly intuitive: we need to postulate immortality, freedom, and the existence of a god because these postulates allow us to believe (respectively) that there is enough time for an endless struggle, that we have the necessary “independence from the world of sense,” and that nature is ordered so that happiness and reason can be in harmony.⁷⁹

But these ideas can only be postulates, and not only because “no human understanding will ever fathom them.”⁸⁰ If we knew these optimistic claims from experience, then our rationality *would not count as our own achievement* by Kant’s standard. In that case, our purported rationality would merely be a response to motivating stimuli. Hence Kant’s declaration, in the first *Critique*, that he “had to annul *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.”⁸¹ The autonomy

⁷⁸ Kant, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*,” p. 201; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:360.

⁷⁹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:132.

⁸⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:133.

⁸¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxx.

requirement, viewed in this light, is surprisingly strong. To be independent of the biological, emotional, cultural, and historical happenings we suffer means not merely to develop a critical distance from such contingencies, but to enact a total displacement of their motivational force. Since we cannot actually depart from the world of contingency, the only way to make headway on Kant's autonomy requirement is to posit another world, beyond space and time—and to do this without believing in that world *too much*, which would mean to “transform it into an appearance” like the others.⁸² The motivation for our actions must not come from the concrete hope of a better life, but rather from the satisfaction of demonstrating our independence.⁸³

Kant's opposition to the concrete promises made by religion certainly accords with his idea of rational motivation. What is surprising is that he offers the assurance of his postulates at all. Kant achieves cognitive consistency in an inconsistent world by describing an unbridgeable gap between reason and contingent experience; in the process, he denies the value of contingent and non-autonomous motivations, such as the desire for a happy life. His efforts to reassure readers that they can still hope for satisfaction, and even that it is consistent with endless struggle, however, undermine this strict division. These efforts turn on the idea that there is a “happiness commensurate” to the accomplishments of practical reason, even if contingency may not always award happiness to the worthiest parties.⁸⁴ A state of the “highest good” would match a thoroughly rational character with the complete satisfaction of that character's “wish and wit” in contingent experience.⁸⁵ This idea is in tension with Kant's picture of rational motivation, which does not require any hope of contingent success—indeed, it is essentially characterized by the

⁸² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxx.

⁸³ See Kant's various discussions of respect in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For example, at 5:92, the type of motivational force suitable to rational beings is described as “a respect such as no human being has for inclinations of any kind,” and which in fact is experienced as “a peculiar kind of *sensation*...” of “constraint.”

⁸⁴ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:124.

⁸⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:124.

experience of diminishing such hopes as objects of concern. Kant seems to be saying that rational life would be an even higher good if it came with contingent happiness, even though seeking such happiness is irrational. If this is the case, what Kant might mean by calling contingent happiness a “good,” even a marginal good, is a difficult puzzle.

Kant’s inclusion of contingent events in an idea of the highest good suggests a conclusion that Hegel embraces wholeheartedly: our natural existence, including contingent desires and the workings of history, are cognitively relevant in ways Kant’s opposed dualities fail to acknowledge. Hegel agrees with Kant that *ad hoc* comparisons and convenient organizing principles are not enough to effect unity between our contingent and rational natures, since we need to understand our way of thinking as a necessary development that we achieve for ourselves. But he is closer to Herder in his holistic definitions of “our way of thinking’ and ‘ourselves.’ In Hegel’s view, we cannot conceive of our experience as rational if we regard mandatory perspectives, such as the contingent needs that never leave us, as normatively irrelevant, or, worse yet, as evil.

2.3 *Hegel and his inheritance*

Hegel expressed specific criticisms of both Kant and Herder on the problem of organic unity; we should review these on the way to reconstructing his original solution. I will spend more time discussing the exchange between Kant and Hegel than the one between Herder and Hegel, for two reasons. First, Hegel’s critique of Herder is in many ways similar to Kant’s. Second, Hegel himself was far more preoccupied in his writing with Kant than with Herder. An entire section of *Faith and Knowledge* is dedicated to criticizing Kant, as are sections of Hegel’s history of philosophy, the *Encyclopedia*, and, somewhat more obliquely, the *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel shares with Kant the idea that philosophy must “consider the object in its necessity, not

merely according to subjective necessity,” but the two disagree on the meaning of this requirement and its relation to rational autonomy.⁸⁶ Neither believed that philosophy could rely on anthropological studies to draw conclusions that bear the mark of necessity. But Hegel rejects the reasoning that leads Kant to his autonomy requirement. Since material processes are not random, but proceed according to internal rules, we can have insight into our natural and historical origins. These unchosen origins are recast in Hegel’s philosophy as cognitive resources and conditions of our rational identity.

Since he does not share Kant’s autonomy requirement, Hegel does not take issue with Herder’s systematic relation of natural and cultural facts. Instead—since Hegel does hold a version of the necessity requirement—he argues that Herder is insufficiently critical in arriving at his progressive theories. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel praises Herder for “hit[ting] upon ‘the right word’ with wonderful felicity,” but attributes this descriptive success primarily to “analogy” and “speculations.”⁸⁷ It’s hard to argue with Hegel’s criticism, despite the illustrative richness of Herder’s psychology and history. Herder’s enthusiastic, wide-ranging synthesis of philosophical and scientific ideas is compelling, but it often lacks a clear argumentative structure, and the architectonic of the whole is difficult to discern. Appropriately, Hegel calls Herder’s work a “theodicy,” in which the “objectivity of History” is compromised by the attitudes of “the genial preacher” and “the entranced admirer of the works of God.”⁸⁸ To be sure, Hegel puts more faith than Kant in the usefulness of narrative, but he argues that genuine science cannot ground itself in an unsystematic assortment of narratives. Though such an assortment purports to be an empirical sample of psychological, historical, and cultural

⁸⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 11.

⁸⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. xvi.

⁸⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. xvii.

perspectives, its selection must rely on the preconceived notions of the person taking the sample. Thus Hegel's most important critique of Herder is that he puts "a reflective concept in the place of rational thought."⁸⁹ His idea of human progress covertly guides him in selecting stories and facts.

But Hegel cannot endorse Kant's abstract alternative to the idiosyncratic storytelling in Herder. Hegel acknowledges that Kant's approach has a "satisfying" aspect: in it, "the truth is at least set within the heart," since I can accredit only what conforms with "my determined nature."⁹⁰ The problem is Kant's conception of this nature. For Kant, human beings are creatures of thought who find themselves afflicted by physical existence. He sees that "we crave for universality and necessity," but also accepts Hume's argument that these "do not exist in external things."⁹¹ So the Kantian subject is defined by a struggle against itself: against the cravings of its animal nature and the contingencies of its material world. And its tools for working through this struggle, as we saw in Kant's attempts to bridge the gap with tenuous postulates, are severely limited. "Since thought is subjective," the Kantian subject can rely on nothing but the formal principles that unite its own thought.⁹² As a result, "the capacity of knowing the absolute," that is, truth unconditioned by its particular existence, "is denied to it."⁹³ Kant argues that the only real ground of rational self-understanding is the structure of thought, but he denies the possibility of knowing much about the reasons for that structure. Our experience has its roots in the "blind"

⁸⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, tr. Cerf and Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 118.

⁹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, volume III, tr. Haldane and Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 458.

⁹¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, pp. 427-428.

⁹² Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, p. 425.

⁹³ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, p. 425.

work of a mysterious “synthesis... without which we would have no cognition whatsoever, but of which we are conscious only rarely.”⁹⁴

But Kant is not a skeptic, and Hegel argues that he turns to unjustified assumptions in order to avoid the doubt and disorganization that follow from his skeptical premises. “We are all well aware,” says Hegel, “that Kant’s philosophy took the easy way in its *finding* of the categories.”⁹⁵ This criticism is often paraphrased in secondary literature as the charge that Kant simply lifted his logical categories from Aristotle, rather than deducing them from *a priori* premises. But Hegel’s argument cuts deeper. He says in multiple places that the idea of deriving the categories from sources acceptable to Kant is misguided, since to do so requires the use of the very categories being derived. Kant wants to “get to know about the *instrument*, before undertaking the task that is supposed to be accomplished by means of it”—this is the project of a critique of pure reason.⁹⁶ But this investigation of cognition “cannot take place in any other way than *cognitively*,” and “to want to have cognition *before* we have any is as absurd as the wise resolve of Scholasticus to learn to *swim before he ventured into the water*.”⁹⁷ (Kant’s plan is perhaps *more* absurd than this, since one can at least practice the motions of swimming outside the water; in contrast, there exists no accessible ‘outside’ for cognition in Kant.)

In light of the unacknowledged paradox in Kant’s critical method, his importation of the categories should be seen merely as a symptom of his rigidly limited idea of the human mind. Ironically, the total lack of external reference points for self-investigation leads Kant to accept his concepts of sensuousness, understanding, and reason “quite empirically, without... proceeding

⁹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B103.

⁹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, tr. Geraets, Suchting, and Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §42.

⁹⁶ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §10.

⁹⁷ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §10. See also Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, p. 431: “Since the investigation of the faculties is itself knowing, it cannot in Kant attain to what it aims at because it is that already—it cannot come to itself because it is already with itself...”

by necessity.”⁹⁸ For all his criticism of Herder’s psychological storytelling, when it comes to describing the faculties of human cognition Kant, too, “simply narrates.”⁹⁹ Kant argues that the forms of cognition he articulates are necessary conditions of our experience, but Hegel points out that “necessary subjectivity” is only “something conditional that pertains to the intellect,” and then only to the specific kind of intellect examining itself.¹⁰⁰ As Kant admits, the conditional nature of his investigation means that there is no way to prove the rationality of the forms of experience themselves, e.g. against other possible forms. So “philosophy terminates in faith” in our inescapable way of thinking, even if we can identify a logically coherent system therein.¹⁰¹

The limits of abstract coherence are perhaps even more obvious in Kant’s ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of history. The formal principle used by Kant to limit the normative force of our whims and desires is *universalizability*, and Hegel points out that numerous systems of universal law are possible. Kant wants us to ask whether our actions could serve as a universal principle, but the answer to this question ends up relying on the norms we already acknowledge in our beliefs and practices. Hegel gives Kant’s discussion of property ownership as an example:

Property ought to be respected, for the opposite of this cannot be universal law. That is correct, but it is quite a formal determination: if property is, then it is. Property is here presupposed, but this determination may also in the same way be omitted, and then there is no contradiction involved in theft...¹⁰²

Like his formal epistemic principles, Kant’s ethical conclusions are only conditionally necessary. That is, they are necessary only given that they already fit into the established ways of thinking—and therefore, the social history—of the beings under examination. And, as we have seen, Kant’s

⁹⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, p. 433.

⁹⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, v. III, p. 433.

¹⁰⁰ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 67.

¹⁰¹ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 67. And see above, pp. 22-23, on Kantian faith.

¹⁰² Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 461.

efforts to understand the contingent facts of history and culture as part of a rational system depend on his *faith* that such facts cohere in an order beyond our cognitive grasp. Hegel does not hold this kind of assumption in high esteem: “these postulates express nothing but the synthesis, devoid of thought, of the different moments which contradict one another...”¹⁰³

Hegel’s alternative to Kantian faith is a more thorough and thoughtful synthesis of our cognition with its organic conditions. He accepts Kant’s idea that human thought involves taking a perspective on objects, from which the thinker is thereby differentiated. But he finds this idea limited insofar as it treats the process of differentiation as a unique and problematic feature of our cognition. Kant’s philosophy “apprehends simple thought as having difference in itself, but does not yet apprehend that all reality rests on this difference.”¹⁰⁴ Hegel follows Aristotle, Herder, and Schelling in advancing the idea that existence always involves primitive forms of self-differentiation. For him, our thought develops out of the relations already present in plant and animal life, so it cannot be conceived as a world of its own. Hegel’s philosophy of mind, therefore, is naturalistic, but it is important to remember that it is not reductive or purely materialistic. To understand nature only as “materiality” is an “untruth which is inadequate to the concept dwelling in it,” since in its self-organization and development it continually “sublates its externality and individualization.”¹⁰⁵ Nature is not a static collection of items animated by the mysterious work of human cognition. Instead, our thought participates in an ancient play between what we are thrown into and what we make out of it.

But Hegel does not merely assume an original unity between thought and existence. Instead, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he sets out to prove that the fractured metaphysics of

¹⁰³ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 463.

¹⁰⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 426.

¹⁰⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 30.

abstract individualism, on the one hand, and the vague assumption of absolute unity, on the other, are not only dissatisfying, but also *inconsistent*. I will spend the rest of this essay discussing the method Hegel devises for this purpose and its application to various stages of conscious development. But his critiques of Kant and Herder already give us the parameters for his rational demonstration of organic unity. He cannot take for granted the primacy of any part of that existence—neither our power of abstract thought nor our material interests and abilities. Nor can he take the easy route of celebrating all explanatory perspectives and declaring them united, since this would “surround the diversity of [our] existence in a kind of fog” and refer our questions to an “indeterminate divinity” that cannot give determinate answers.¹⁰⁶

The problems confronting Hegel, then, are how experience itself (as opposed to a preconceived or abstracted conceptual regime) could have normative significance and, if it can, whether its significance can be understood as a systematic unity. To answer both questions in the affirmative, our experience must give us determinate guidance, and this guidance must be “open to a philosophical, not merely historical or sociological explanation.”¹⁰⁷ In Kant’s terms, we must be able to have *insight* into the norms that arise out of our contingent experience. Otherwise, they just push us around, and we are forced to admit that our rational self-conception is a fantasy. Hegel’s solution, as Robert Pippin puts it, is to argue that “a form of irrationality can be experienced as a kind of suffering,” or, in other words, that unhappiness can be determinate and rationally grounded.¹⁰⁸ We can reflectively trace its roots to a structural conflict in experience,

¹⁰⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), ¶9.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Pippin, “The ‘logic of experience’ as ‘absolute knowledge,’” in *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Moyar and Quante (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 214.

¹⁰⁸ Pippin, “The ‘logic of experience’ as ‘absolute knowledge,’” p. 225.

and we can have good reasons to think that our resultant action gives us a new, more productive point of view on that conflict.

3. Rational unhappiness in Hegel's "shapes of consciousness"

In order to explain Hegel's idea of unhappiness as a structural conflict, I'll need to say more about his general approach to structural analysis. Such a discussion must begin with a look at 'shapes of consciousness,' the series of experiential arrangements proposed and considered in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

3.1 What is a shape of consciousness?

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* progresses from Sense-Certainty,¹⁰⁹ a description of thoroughly immediate consciousness that merely apprehends sensory phenomena, to Absolute Knowledge, in which the practical and theoretical activities of a whole society are described as a self-knowing, progressive unity in historical time. These descriptions are a "kaleidoscope of cultural and cognitive phases," and interpreters have struggled to understand their systematic relation.¹¹⁰ Some interpreters of the *Phenomenology* read it as two separate parts, divided by the achievement of social life: first, an epistemic discussion of (individual) shapes of consciousness, and a historical, political, and psychological one about (social) shapes of spirit.¹¹¹ To distinguish between the two categories of shapes is useful, but it is important to note that for Hegel spirit is achieved exclusively through consciousness. The *Phenomenology's* preface says so clearly: "spirit develops itself within [the] element" of consciousness, and all forms of social understanding

¹⁰⁹ Throughout my discussion of the *Phenomenology*, I will render section titles, such as Sense-Certainty, in title case, and the shapes of consciousness described therein, such as sense-certainty, in lower case.

¹¹⁰ J.N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (London: Routledge, 1958), p. 31.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 16: "What is discontinuous in Hegel's text is not just the text itself, but the whole of human history..."

therefore “come on the scene as shapes of consciousness.”¹¹² The *Phenomenology* will show that consciousness cannot consistently describe itself as isolated from nature and history, but, in keeping with the principle that spirit develops in conscious experience, it will not treat specific minds and bodies as less real than the concepts that develop in their progressive relation.

Instead, Hegel describes each shape of consciousness as a distinctive attempt to unify “knowledge and the objectivity that is negative to knowledge.”¹¹³ Each shape of consciousness, in other words, tries to use its conceptual structure to organize its experience. Since experience is not completely controlled by any conscious being, the results of each attempt at organization serve as a critique of existing concepts. A contemporary reader might expect the critical tension between conceptual and objective experience to consist in a comparison between propositions and material facts, but this assumes too much for Hegel’s purposes. Theories that treat conscious existence as the application of explicit norms and beliefs “abstract from the only thing of any interest,” namely, the “mode of determinacy” of consciousness, the complex functional unity in which explicit concepts are only participants.¹¹⁴ The knowledge of each shape of consciousness includes explicit self-conceptions and beliefs about the world, but it also includes “know-how... ways of handling things,” forms of knowledge present “in the limbs,” in language, and in hidden assumptions.¹¹⁵ (In this we can hear the echo of Herder, for whom knowledge begins in “marrow and bone.”)¹¹⁶ In Hegel’s philosophy, therefore, no particular opposition between subjectivity and objectivity is assumed. Each shape of consciousness is faced with the task of reconciling its perspectives and practices with one another, with their aims, and with their consequences. This

¹¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶36.

¹¹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶36.

¹¹⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, p. 274.

¹¹⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §66.

¹¹⁶ Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation,” p. 183. Cited and discussed above, p. 8.

task can involve a great diversity of purpose-driven distinctions between subjective thought and objective fact.

From where does Hegel draw these shapes of consciousness? Here, the distinction between shapes of consciousness and shapes of spirit demonstrates its value. Shapes of spirit are evaluated by the same general method as shapes of consciousness, and they subsist in the same minds and bodies as shapes of consciousness. The difference, rather, is in the level of abstraction required to describe the two kinds of ‘shapes.’ The “shapes *merely* of consciousness” Hegel considers, including Sense-Certainty, Perception, Self-Consciousness, and Reason, seem to be drawn from the history of philosophy rather than the history of human civilization.¹¹⁷ They are all rigid attempts to define the relation between subject and object from the perspective of the individual thinker; as such, they are “abstractions from” spirit, the complex world in which perspectives collide and change.¹¹⁸ Shapes of spirit, on the other hand, are “shapes of a world,” which include both the norms and beliefs that have been “rendered into thought” and the “*activities* of each and all” that are the materials and consequences for such thought.¹¹⁹ As Terry Pinkard puts it:

Any shape of spirit embeds within itself a joint conception both of what the *norms* are within that form of life and what it is about the *world* that makes those norms *realizable*, what in the world *resists* their realization or tends to make their realization *rare*, and what in the world is thus to be *expected*.¹²⁰

But these conceptions, advanced as they are, neither float above nor lurk under human activity.

They have their substance not only in the values of spirit’s individual participants, but also in the

¹¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶440, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶439.

¹¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶438.

¹²⁰ Terry Pinkard, “What is a ‘shape of spirit?’” in *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Moyar and Quante (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 114.

actual ways in which those participants live—i.e., in their families, their institutions, their customs, their languages, and, unavoidably, in their inchoate hopes and fears.

There can be no permanent, complete description of the shifting sources of authority that organize a form of life; therefore, no “shape of spirit” on the page exhaustively describes a concrete form of life. Hegel repeatedly acknowledges this limitation of theory, and he does not propose to achieve an organic unity of perspectives through conceptual effort alone. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel poetically reminds us that “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk,” meaning that philosophy can only do its work once “a shape of life has grown old.”¹²¹ Theory plays an important role in evaluating and revising forms of life, but the abstract shapes it can depict are not the representatives of a deeper level of reality. Hegel’s shapes of consciousness and shapes of spirit are no exception. The point of drawing these sketches is neither to carve up experience into truer categories nor to tell a hidden story about the causes of experience. For Hegel, the task of modern philosophy “consists not so much in purifying the individual of the sensuously immediate... it consists to an even greater degree in doing the very opposite.”¹²² Philosophy’s most urgent enterprise is not to proliferate and refine static categories, but instead to “set fixed thoughts into fluid motion” by showing the ways in which each limited conceptual arrangement provides the momentum for its own critical expansion.¹²³

Reflective concepts like shapes of consciousness and spirit, then, are better understood as the *tools* of philosophy than as its *subject*. Each shape reflects (from a specific point of view) on the knowledge, relationships, capacities, and accomplishments of a form of life. Though forms of life can be informed by reflectively established standards, such standards can respond only to

¹²¹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.

¹²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶33.

¹²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶33.

what happens in lived experience. Hegel, therefore, tries to make his judgments about shapes of consciousness and spirit without reference to anything beyond the experience they describe and their ways of describing it. Like Kant, Hegel understands the central task of a form of life as its rational unity with itself; unlike Kant, Hegel does not beg the question by establishing in advance an idea of reason with which all admissible unity must conform. Therefore, he considers shapes of consciousness and spirit alike on their own terms, evaluating them by their internal standards. His critique invariably takes the same general form: the attempt to live out a limited self-conception results in the conscious recognition of its limits. In each case, an internal conflict arises, and in each case the conflict is determined by the specific character of the limits the shape of consciousness sets for itself. Finally, the guiding self-conception at work in each shape of consciousness undermines itself; it demonstrates through its specific inability to fully achieve its aims that it is only a perspective and not the whole world. The unhappiness of self-criticism culminates in new insight: namely, in a broadened consciousness that views its old shape as “one aspect of an existence.”¹²⁴

3.2 *How are shapes of consciousness¹²⁵ evaluated?*

Hegel’s reputation for systematicity might lead us to expect that this unhappiness and self-criticism proceed, in each case, according to the same principles. Though there are structural similarities among the transitions in Hegel’s “scientific system,” his process of internal critique

¹²⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶53.

¹²⁵ From this point forward, I will use “shapes of consciousness” as a general term, meant to include both shapes of consciousness and spirit. The choice, in my view, is somewhat arbitrary, since (1) neither the individual perspective privileged by “consciousness” nor the social perspective privileged by “spirit” provides a complete description of the life to which they both refer, and (2) both are evaluated in the same way. I choose the word “consciousness” to highlight Hegel’s naturalistic position that spirit is built up in conscious existence. It is also true, however, that consciousness is nothing without the connections that bind it to spiritual existence, as the bizarre, inadequate descriptions of solitary consciousness at the beginning of the *Phenomenology* show.

does not allow for universal reasons independent of the shape of consciousness in question.¹²⁶ In his view, criticism cannot maintain static indifference to its objects; no concept can generate rational progress “as long as its development consists in nothing but the repetition of the same old formula.”¹²⁷ Instead, productive criticism means “dwelling on the thing at issue” and “forgetting” external demands that would not be intelligible to the shape of consciousness itself.¹²⁸ Perhaps the most important systematic distinction in the *Phenomenology* is between the way things look for us, the philosophical observers, and the way they look for the shape of consciousness under examination. The principle of Hegel’s critique turns on this distinction: only reasons that count *for it* are admissible reasons for us to regard a shape of consciousness as incomplete or inconsistent. Hegel rejects the idea of an “external or autonomous philosophic standpoint... above the fray,” from which we could summarily judge other standpoints.¹²⁹ His alternative to the view from nowhere is the critical adoption of each limited view.

What makes Hegel think that this method will work? It is not immediately obvious that every flawed shape of consciousness must collapse under the weight of its own inconsistencies. As Pippin observes, “the empirical evidence is pretty strong that human beings can live with the putative burden of irrationality or indeterminacy for quite a long time.”¹³⁰ True enough, but Hegel’s objective is not to show that these shapes of consciousness could not be sustained if they were lived out. The goal of each step in the *Phenomenology* is to show that the partial view under consideration points to a broader view by means of its specific limitations. In his lectures on the

¹²⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶5.

¹²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶15.

¹²⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶3.

¹²⁹ Robert Pippin, “You Can’t Get There From Here: Transition Problems in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 52-85, at p. 60.

¹³⁰ Pippin, “The ‘logic of experience’ as ‘absolute knowledge,’” p. 225.

Encyclopedia's outline of logic, Hegel argued that *every* limit “contains a contradiction within itself, and so proves itself to be dialectical.”¹³¹ We might use Kant’s limits on human cognition as an example. He claims that we can only know the phenomenal, never the noumenal. But to say even *this* about noumena is to say something about them, to put them in relation (however obscure) to phenomena, and to include an idea of them in our cognition. For Hegel, this paradox of limitation is “the general nature of the finite, which, being something” with particular limits, “does not stand over against the other indifferently.”¹³² A being’s limits “drive it beyond itself” insofar as they constitute its relation with what lies beyond them.¹³³

This understanding of limits is evident in the critical method of the *Phenomenology*. As Adorno puts it, Hegel is convinced that “the concept that remains true to its own meaning must change.”¹³⁴ New stages of the critique are not achieved by gaining access to some external perspective, but instead thanks to fully realizing the self-undermining ends of the conflicted shape of consciousness itself. The result of this new consciousness, which “accumulates... like an electrical charge” as the shape of consciousness is confronted with the destabilizing effects of its standards and practices, is a new context for old problems.¹³⁵ The limiting structural conflicts of the previous stage are included in the higher perspective of the new stage, but they are reconceived as one meaningful type of distinction, among others. Progressive conceptual effort, in Hegel’s view, overcomes its obsession with old problems, but it does not reject, forget, or overthrow itself. To do so would be to succumb to an irrationality in which new perspectives are not based on the insights of old ones.

¹³¹ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, addition to §92.

¹³² Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, addition to §92.

¹³³ Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, addition to §92.

¹³⁴ Theodor Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, tr. Shierry Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 71.

¹³⁵ Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” p. 77.

3.3 *What counts as rational unhappiness?*

As we have seen, in each transition between shapes of consciousness, the old stage has engendered through its own activities and ideas a state in which contradictory self-conceptions are authoritative for it. This sort of internal conflict is not called unhappiness in Hegel until the arrival of Self-Consciousness, the first stage capable of explicit reflection on itself, and it is called unhappiness only a few times thereafter. Still, I think the term is useful in describing all of the transitions in the *Phenomenology*; it serves as a good reminder of what distinguishes Hegelian critique from other prominent methods for evaluating conscious life. It evokes the Aristotelian idea that conscious unity is achieved in the fullness of experience, not only in abstract reflection or in the clinical evaluation of outsiders. It highlights Hegel's insistence on attending to the "immanent rhythm" of the shape of consciousness, rather than imposing "wisdom acquired elsewhere."¹³⁶ And Hegel does use the term at key moments in the *Phenomenology*. For self-consciousness, unhappiness is an understanding of itself as "a doubled, merely contradictory creature," capable of recognizing its contingent nature and wishing for something beyond itself, but incapable of regarding any of its actions as progress toward this wish.¹³⁷ This structural conflict, first developed in Unhappy Consciousness, is recalled several times in the course of the text. For the "unhappy, so-called *beautiful soul*" in social life, the "created world" of "speech," in which it can proclaim the "purity of its heart" without exposing itself to ethically complex existence, cannot be reconciled with its view of itself as a "thing."¹³⁸ And religion's transformation into absolute knowledge is marked by "the unhappy consciousness that God

¹³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶58.

¹³⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶206.

¹³⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶658.

himself has died,” a proposition the former cannot square with its experience of religious life as having genuine “substance.”¹³⁹

Still, we need to distinguish Hegel’s idea of rational unhappiness from the emotional, reactive unhappiness that may come to mind when we think of self-critical episodes in our own experience. If his transitions can live up to the standard of necessity he shares with Kant, they must not be moments in which a shape of consciousness gives up on its efforts at rational unity and tries something completely different. Hegelian unhappiness may include an experience of frustration, but it does not amount to mere frustration. When I turn my apartment upside down looking for something lost, I may be inclined to violently flip over furniture and dump out boxes of breakable objects on the floor. But this frustration does not imply that I am looking in the wrong places, or in the wrong way, and it is not likely to lead to a broader perspective on my task. Despite my frustration, it remains clear that looking for something is an appropriate response to losing it. In contrast, Hegelian unhappiness is characterized by a consciousness that enacts a limited perspective and is then forced by the results to recognize its limits.

Hegel’s summary of the Unhappy Consciousness section gives a compact example of this kind of perspective shift:

The unhappy self-consciousness emptied itself of its self-sufficiency and agonizingly rendered its *being-for-itself* into a thing. As a result, it returned from self-consciousness into consciousness, i.e., into that consciousness for which the object is a *being*, a *thing*. However, this, the thing, is self-consciousness.¹⁴⁰

Hegel’s language here is not straightforward, but it is worth going slowly to grasp this central point. In this passage, Hegel describes the link between two shapes of consciousness as an agonizing act of unhappiness, and to this act he ascribes the achievement of a new perspective on

¹³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶785.

¹⁴⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶344.

the old shape of consciousness. He also describes the structure of this act: the transition between shapes occurs when the old shape “emptie[s] itself of its self-sufficiency.” The reflexive nature of the act is essential. The shape of consciousness recognizes limits in itself through its own activity; i.e., the development of limited activities culminates in the conscious recognition of their limits. A new shape of consciousness is created by this recognition, and for this new shape, the old shape is regarded as “a thing,” describable in terms of its newly understood limits. One can see why this shift would be agonizing. The self-conception of the old shape of consciousness loses its absolute authority and takes its place as a determinate, limited shape among others.

Hegelian unhappiness, as a painful recognition of limits, should also be distinguished from existential despair, which prominently includes such a recognition. Since Kierkegaard paid sustained attention to Hegel, and since his thinking on this topic informs so much of the work of his existentialist successors, I will use his concept of despair as a point of comparison. Both Hegelian unhappiness and Kierkegaardian despair arise from a “misrelation,” a structural problem in which one’s self-conceptions cannot be reconciled with one another.¹⁴¹ And, like Hegel, Kierkegaard views this kind of misrelation as the basis of a recognition that the conscious person is not self-sufficient: it shows the “inability of the self to arrive at... equilibrium and rest by itself.”¹⁴² Strikingly, however, the next step of Kierkegaard’s reasoning comes closer to resembling Kant. Since human reason finds itself mired in self-contradiction when it tries to address its deepest questions, we are to draw the conclusion that our existence involves an inescapable “dependence” on a deeper level of reality beyond our comprehension (namely, our

¹⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 14.

¹⁴² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 14.

relation to God).¹⁴³ Kierkegaard, like Kant, urges us to fix our attention on this limit, and to guard against the foolish belief that we can overcome it. And, like Kant, Kierkegaard views the ensuing struggle as the defining feature of human existence. To deal honestly with unavoidable limitation, and still to have faith, is for him the highest possible achievement.

But Hegelian unhappiness does not terminate in moral restraint or in religious ecstasy. He argues that we are capable of reaching a standpoint from which the experienced limitations that engender unhappiness can be coherently understood. The reason for this optimism is that for Hegel, unhappiness is always determinate. It is driven by “the poverty of its acts,” or the determinate limitations in its experience.¹⁴⁴ Since each instance of Hegelian unhappiness is an experience of specific limits, each unhappy shape of consciousness contains within itself the materials for a specific expansion of its understanding. This expansion, therefore, takes place by means of the very efforts each shape of consciousness makes to enact its limited perspective, and requires no insight into hidden essences. For example, consciousness becomes self-consciousness when it does to itself what it has been doing to things in the world: it makes itself its own object. Though Hegel describes this gradual self-criticism as a “path of despair,” it never embraces the desperate conclusion that any particular form of finitude is inescapable.¹⁴⁵ As a result, the transitions in the *Phenomenology* need not resort to “madness,” as Kierkegaard must after denying the coherence of rational critique.¹⁴⁶ Instead, each transition shows that an unhappy shape of consciousness is implicitly committed to the particular form of its self-revision.

¹⁴³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶226.

¹⁴⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶78.

¹⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 14.

The distinction between unhappiness and existential despair is especially worthy of emphasis because of the surprising number of commentators who have paid it little attention. Even friendly readers have been prone to characterize Hegel's transitions as psychologically informed, conceptually arbitrary acts. One influential reader describes the transition from Self-Consciousness to Reason as a "sudden upswing" caused by frustration with the isolated dualism of self-consciousness.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, another commentator reads that transition as an *abandonment* of the concerns of self-consciousness. Those concerns, he writes, were mistakes, "a construction to solve a problem we should not have caused in the first place."¹⁴⁸ These descriptions correctly point out that consciousness can learn from unhappiness, but they fail to capture the positive justification for each conceptual move. They validate the idea that Hegel means to eliminate all contradictions, and they defy Hegel's view that genuine criticism finds its force only in the distinctive structure of the consciousness in question. "The non-selfsameness which takes place between the I and the substance which is its object," i.e. the particular failure of each conscious description to coherently grasp the existence to which it refers, is not merely to "be viewed as the *defect*" of a shape of consciousness, but also as its "very soul, that is, what moves" it.¹⁴⁹

The *specificity* of each defect, and of each resultant critical movement, is essential to Hegel's method. Since he prohibits the use of assumptions outside the experience described by each defective shape of consciousness, his argument cannot proceed with the help of a general law against defects or even inconsistency. Nevertheless, a popular line of thinking in Hegel commentary proceeds from this faulty assumption. This way of reading Hegel has him assert, after a series of puzzling failures of shapes of consciousness on their own, limited terms, that

¹⁴⁷ Robert Solomon, *In The Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 470.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Kain, *Hegel and the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 62.

¹⁴⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶37.

conflict is the inescapable form of human cognition, and that the various preliminary stages are futile forms of denial about this fact. One commentator sums up the progress of consciousness as “a process of hope and despair” in which “consciousness often forget[s] itself and ha[s] to begin all over again.”¹⁵⁰ The not-so-triumphant result, in his view, is “getting free of the illusion of synthesis” among the various perspectives consciousness has tried out.¹⁵¹ Another writes that the achievement of absolute knowledge at the end of the *Phenomenology* is a moment in which “the infinitely longing consciousness drops its opposition to the world, and thereby loses its dissatisfaction with itself,” finally coming to terms with an “inclusiveness and fallibilism” it had staunchly rejected in previous forms.¹⁵² Still another argues that Hegel’s achievement is to show that “self-criticism and constructive mutual assessment are fallible and (fortunately) corrigible,” so that “internal critique,” oddly, involves the consideration of “all relevant alternatives.”¹⁵³

One problem with this ‘fallibilist’ reading of the *Phenomenology* is that Hegel clearly rejects it. For him, “scientific cognition requires that it give itself over to... the inner necessity of the object before it and that it express this inner necessity.”¹⁵⁴ Each shape of consciousness is partial, but Hegel’s method simply does not work if thinking through each limited shape leads only to a series of rejections, summed up in a chastened pluralism of perspectives. The critique is supposed to show the way to a shape of consciousness that has better reasons for its actions than any of the narrower perspectives it has incorporated. It is supposed to show that *synthesis is not an illusion*, nor does it amount to equal distrust in all perspectives. This skeptical Hegel is the mirror image of an old smear: that Hegel rejects the law of non-contradiction and reconciles all

¹⁵⁰ Donald Verene, *Hegel’s Absolute* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 34.

¹⁵¹ Verene, *Hegel’s Absolute*, p. 35.

¹⁵² Larry Krasnoff, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 144-145.

¹⁵³ Kenneth Westphal, “Hegel’s Phenomenological Method and Analysis of Consciousness,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 5, 27.

¹⁵⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶53.

perspectives in a mystical, all-embracing whole.¹⁵⁵ As Hegel would surely remind us, the empty principle that accepts all contradictory perspectives as true amounts to the same as the empty principle that treats all perspectives with equivalent, content-insensitive skepticism. If he is to succeed, he has to show how each limited perspective undermines itself and leads to a specific, more inclusive view.

4. Overcoming the unhappy consciousness

Since Hegel's idea of rational progress rules out the existence of general reasons for every transition in the *Phenomenology*, it is not possible for one paper to justify each step of the critique. Instead, I will use Hegel's discussion of the unhappy consciousness, the transitional phase at the end of his treatment of self-consciousness, as an example. My aim is to show that this transition is a rational self-criticism rather than an arbitrary act of despair. If this is the right reading, we ought to be able to say exactly how self-consciousness' new conception of itself grows out of the problematic old conception. The latter must not only be a mistake; it must be a productive part of the new understanding of rational existence.

4.1 The structural limitation of self-consciousness

Self-Consciousness is perhaps the most widely read section of the *Phenomenology*. (Its subsection on mastery and servitude, commonly referred to as the "master-slave dialectic," is particularly well known.) The appearance of multiple self-conscious beings at this point in the text, coupled with Hegel's assertion that "the concept of spirit is... on hand for us" early in the

¹⁵⁵ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 255: "As everyone knows, the Hegelian philosophy has done away with the law of contradiction..." and Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 743: "Thus there can be only one true statement, there is no truth except the whole truth. And similarly nothing is quite real except the whole..."

discussion, has given many readers the impression that Self-Consciousness is about the dawn of sociality. In the most minimal sense of “sociality,” this idea is undeniable, since the section does involve interactions between self-conscious beings. But there are serious problems with glossing Self-Consciousness as the moment when individuality gives way to sociality. Consider the surrounding structure of the *Phenomenology*. The section after Self-Consciousness is not Spirit; it is Reason, which describes an individual observer’s attempt to organize its experience according to universal principles.¹⁵⁶ Keeping in mind Hegel’s critical method, which relies on the internal standards of one shape of consciousness to generate a new, broader shape, this fact about the way shapes of consciousness are related in the *Phenomenology* should already make the social reading of Self-Consciousness seem dubious. It would make little sense for sociality to be achieved, then abandoned, then regained through progressive self-criticism.

Without forgetting the broad cues from Hegel that social self-consciousness is on its way, and the arrival of multiple conscious beings on the scene, I intend to let my interpretation of Self-Consciousness be guided by the explicit structure Hegel outlines therein. Fundamentally, this structure is characterized by an opposed set of perspectives:

As self-consciousness, consciousness henceforth has a doubled object: The first, the immediate object, the object of sense-certainty and perception, which, however, is marked *for it* with the *character of the negative*; the second, namely, *itself*, which is the true *essence* and which at the outset is on hand merely in opposition to the first.¹⁵⁷

On the one hand, self-consciousness knows itself as its experiences in the world of sense. On the other hand, it has come to understand that these diverse experiences belong to its consciousness.

¹⁵⁶ A full reading of Reason is outside the scope of this project, but I do not think this basic claim is contentious. Even Hegel’s subsection titles in Reason drive home the point that this section is not about self-consciousness that has achieved any meaningful kind of sociality. E.g.: “The actualization of rational self-consciousness by way of itself,” “The law of the heart, and the insanity of self-conceit,” “Individuality, which is real in and for itself.”

¹⁵⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶167.

At this stage, the relationship between these two perspectives is merely formal. In other words, there is no specific content to the opposition between self-consciousness' grasp of itself as the unitary subject of conscious experience and its grasp of itself as its perceptions. This is what Hegel means by saying that the content of consciousness is "marked... with the character of the negative," and that the subject of consciousness is "on hand merely in opposition" to its content. The "I" of self-consciousness, which it regards as its "essence," is an empty category that draws experiences together regardless of their specific character.¹⁵⁸ Accordingly, self-consciousness regards its experiences as inessential, changeable members of this essential category.

This structure, as Hegel shows throughout Self-Consciousness, is inherently unstable. For self-consciousness to attain "certainty of itself," it must demonstrate the truth of its formal structure: the simplicity and unchanging nature of the "I" and the inessentiality of particular objects of experience.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, self-consciousness faces a paradox. The "I" is only defined by the negative stance it takes on experience. Self-consciousness generates a stable identity out of its certainty of "the nullity of the other," or the inessential nature of experiences bound together by the "I," which persists, unchanging, as the subject of all experiences.¹⁶⁰ At first, self-consciousness attempts to maintain this opposition by consuming and destroying the various impermanent objects of its experience. Hegel's name for this putative self-conception, in which the stability of the "I" is supposed to be shown through its domination of other things, is "desire," and this proves to be an apt characterization.¹⁶¹ The need for external objects over which to demonstrate

¹⁵⁸ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶172, in which the "reflected unity" of self-consciousness is opposed to the "immediate unity" of unreflective consciousness and described as "the *simple genus*, which for the movement of life itself does not exist as this 'simple.'" And cf. ¶174: "The simple I is this genus... the *negative essence* of the shaped self-sufficient moments."

¹⁵⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶174.

¹⁶⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶174.

¹⁶¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶174.

its power is bottomless, and in the end self-consciousness only proves its own dependence on the persistence of those objects. “For this act of sublating”—or, roughly, appropriating—“objects even to be, there must be this other,” the external things themselves.¹⁶² Desire cannot resolve its “negative relation to the object” once and for all; self-consciousness always requires new objects, and thus “re-engenders the object” as something with a significance of its own.¹⁶³ In its attempt to prove that conscious experience is subordinate to the reflective “I,” self-consciousness learns that such experience has a “self-sufficient nature.”¹⁶⁴

Hegel’s discussion of mastery and servitude follows from this new understanding of conscious life. Despite self-consciousness’ realization that it must “sublate the *other* self-sufficient essence,” namely the living world of consciousness, “in order to become certain of *itself*,” it still views this other essence as an aspect of itself.¹⁶⁵ The interactions described in this section, in which self-consciousness attempts to satisfy itself by identifying itself in relation to another being it takes to be self-conscious, do look like those between subjects. Indeed, Hegel writes that self-consciousness now realizes that “a one-sided activity would be useless,” since the world of conscious experience must be understood both as self-sufficient and as the negative counterpart to the “I.”¹⁶⁶ But we should note well the specific way Hegel mentions the apparent sociality of these interactions. He does not say that spirit has been achieved, but that its “concept” is now “on hand *for us*.”¹⁶⁷ As observers, we can see that the interactions among individuals will serve as the materials for a broader concept of identity—but this concept is yet to be realized at this stage.

Self-consciousness is still absorbed in the project of “sublat[ing] *itself*,” despite the appearance of

¹⁶² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶175.

¹⁶³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶175.

¹⁶⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶175.

¹⁶⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶180.

¹⁶⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶182.

¹⁶⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶177, emphasis mine.

another self-consciousness.¹⁶⁸ It understands the other only as the indefatigable sign of its living existence, its unavoidable dependence on the world of sense; “this other” it tries to dominate and define “is itself.”¹⁶⁹

The most crucial lesson learned by self-consciousness through its attempt to secure the primacy of the reflective “I” by dominating a living consciousness is that the latter is not merely “an externality.”¹⁷⁰ On the one hand, the “self-sufficient consciousness” that tries to isolate itself from concrete life by controlling another self-consciousness finds that “his truth is to an even greater degree the unessential consciousness” it has defined itself against.¹⁷¹ Its attempt to prove that it is self-sufficient—that it stands above and commands all worldly activity—proves, instead, that it is dependent upon a worldly consciousness. And on the other hand, the labor of the servile consciousness, which was meant to prove that it only exists for the self-sufficient consciousness, proves instead that the particular life of self-consciousness “has dominance over some things.”¹⁷² It has a positive existence that cannot simply be subordinated to the “pure form” of reflective self-consciousness.¹⁷³ As a result of these discoveries, brought about by the attempt to put the two aspects of self-consciousness into hierarchical relation, self-consciousness is forced to realize that it consists of both, apparently contradictory parts. It is capable of abstract thought, but it also possesses a specific, living existence, and it is subject to all the infirmities thereof.

The shape of self-consciousness that has come to understand itself in both of these ways, and that has already gone through the fruitless process of trying to divest itself of its specific existence (in stages Hegel calls stoicism and skepticism) is called the unhappy consciousness. For

¹⁶⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶180.

¹⁶⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶180.

¹⁷⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶196.

¹⁷¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶193.

¹⁷² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶196.

¹⁷³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶196.

us, the observers, unhappy consciousness can already be recognized as a reflexive structure that “brings together and keeps together pure thought and individuality,” but it does not understand itself as such.¹⁷⁴ As unhappy consciousness it “has not yet been elevated to that thought for which the individuality of consciousness is reconciled with pure thought itself.”¹⁷⁵ Though it knows itself in both of these ways, it understands them as incompatible. Its knowledge of itself as the simple subject of experience cannot be reconciled with its actual experiences, which seem disordered and arbitrary. Since unhappy consciousness conceives of its reflective part as an empty medium for experience, it can generate no specific norms or concepts for itself. It “does not conduct itself towards its object in a thinking manner,” since from the reflective standpoint, all its objects are equally unsatisfying.¹⁷⁶ Yet it “launches itself in the direction of thought,” an activity that can have no content beyond abstract “longing,” a “shapeless roar.”¹⁷⁷

Since unhappy consciousness has no choice but to exist, this hopelessness does not stop it from acting. In fact, in its earlier form as the servile consciousness, it has already experienced labor, so it knows that it can set goals and achieve them in the world. Its work remains unhappy, however, since no way it could determinately exist would ease the conflict with its grasp of itself as pure thought, free of determinacy.¹⁷⁸ Unhappy consciousness defines itself by the attempt to make its “animal functions” worthy of its thought, but “by fixating on the enemy” in this way, its thought becomes an obsession with itself as “polluted.”¹⁷⁹ Its reflection becomes an inflexible, negative judgment of its existence as “a nothing, a doing of nothing, as an excremental function,”

¹⁷⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶216.

¹⁷⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶216.

¹⁷⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶217.

¹⁷⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶217.

¹⁷⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, ¶200: “Freedom in thought merely has pure thoughts as its truth, a truth without any culmination in life, and thus it is also merely the concept of freedom and not living freedom itself...”

¹⁷⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, ¶225.

a crude contingency.¹⁸⁰ We could cast this conflict in normative terms: self-consciousness wants to do something worth doing, but its norm is a rejection of every action. Or we could use descriptive terms: it wants to understand its existence, but its only concept is freedom from existence. Nor is its self-rejection limited to its existent part. Since all the thoughts of unhappy consciousness are simple negations of immediate consciousness, there is no “universal” part of its existence that is free of “the very lowest” and “the most individual” parts.¹⁸¹ Through a persistent effort to control and destroy its contingent existence, unhappy consciousness has limited even its thought “to itself and its own petty acts.”¹⁸²

4.2 *Two interpretations: arbitrary and rational critique*

The question, then, is how self-consciousness could escape from this situation. The only move it knows how to make, as I have emphasized, is a negative judgment of its particularity, which now seems to have infected even its reflective part. The solution, if it is to accord with Hegel’s statements on method, must proceed only from this impoverished form. In contrast, even the most detailed and systematic commentaries seem to lose heart at this point, resorting to leaps of faith that can only regard themselves as irrational. The popular story is as follows: unhappy consciousness despairingly gives a “mediator,” usually personified as a priest, the authority to think for it and to choose how to dispose of its material possessions.¹⁸³ The result is that “the unity of the unchangeable and the inessential comes about,” since the submissive self-consciousness can take itself to be engaged in a practice that “in principle” makes both its

¹⁸⁰ Judith Butler, “Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection: Rereading Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness,” in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 50.

¹⁸¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶226.

¹⁸² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶225.

¹⁸³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶228. A.V. Miller’s English translation, long the standard in the English-speaking academy, uses the word “minister” rather than Pinkard’s more exegetically neutral “mediator.”

perspectives into something universal.¹⁸⁴ Accepting the authority of the mediator finally provides unhappy consciousness with the warrant for a specific link between concepts and objects. It takes itself at this stage to be nothing more than the instantiation of a category given by the mediator—namely, a congregant—both in its thought and in its concrete activity.¹⁸⁵ Consequently, as one commentator puts it, unhappy consciousness “comes to realize that it must give an account of the social whole and its own relation to it” in order to describe itself coherently.¹⁸⁶ It has contingently discovered something wholly new, an inspiration from an unknown source that turns out to be necessary for its coherent self-understanding.

This standard account broadly follows the narrative of the Unhappy Consciousness section, but it fails to show how self-consciousness’ new strategy follows from its previous efforts. At this early point in the *Phenomenology*, we should be wary of interpretations that posit a “social whole,” and those that take the transition to reason as a free decision in which unhappy consciousnesses “determine the value that they shall place on the words of the mediator-priest.”¹⁸⁷ Both readings come too close to saying that self-consciousness does something wholly novel at this stage; again, if that were the case, then its progression could not be rational by Hegel’s lights. Unhappy consciousness understands the relation of thought to particular actions only as a subordination of the latter to the former, and its efforts even at the end of Hegel’s discussion originate from this rigid, atomic bipolarity. Hegel is quite clear about this point—“the content of this activity” of becoming rational “is what consciousness is undertaking, namely, the

¹⁸⁴ Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 160.

¹⁸⁵ It turns over its “decision” as well as its “property and consumption,” Hegel says in ¶229.

¹⁸⁶ Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 161.

¹⁸⁷ Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 161; Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 77.

obliteration of its individuality.”¹⁸⁸ Its reason for submitting to the mediator is emphatically not, e.g., self-consciousness’ status as “essentially a social creature, created and shaped in a social environment.”¹⁸⁹ For us, the observers, it is easy to predict that self-consciousness will not be able to justify its actions with reference to itself alone, or that it will not be able to justify any actions it does not choose freely. But a proof for self-consciousness must accord with its limited structure.

Hegel’s way out, in contrast, does not involve abandoning self-consciousness’ ongoing effort to destroy its individual existence. He argues, rather, that the negative activity of self-consciousness, at its most fanatical extreme, finally *succeeds* at overcoming itself. On this reading, unhappy consciousness’ state of disunity with itself is precisely what allows it to reinterpret its one-sided perspective. This logical structure accords with Hegel’s observation that consciousness is circular, determining its activities by means of principles and purposes themselves determined by engagement in worldly activities. Even in the achievement of absolute knowledge, “nothing is known that is not in experience, or, as it can be otherwise expressed, nothing is known that is not available as felt truth.”¹⁹⁰ External solutions to consciousness’ internal conflicts cannot succeed; for Hegel, truth is worked out materially in practices with self-set but responsive standards. Truly radical alternatives to such practices will have no force, since they cannot count as reasons from the standpoint of the consciousness being criticized.

What justifies unhappy consciousness in submitting itself to the mediator, then? The decisive realization for the former, as I mentioned above, is that even its thought is not free from arbitrary contingency at this stage. Unhappy consciousness is obsessed with its own individuality,

¹⁸⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶227.

¹⁸⁹ Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, p. 161.

¹⁹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶802.

and its thoughts have no higher content.¹⁹¹ By fixing its thoughts on an individual existence it regards as arbitrary and contingent, unhappy consciousness has brought about the unity it sought between reflective self-consciousness and immediate consciousness. What had been a hopeless mismatch between the freedom of thought and the determinacy of existence can now be seen as a “relation” that is “positive *in itself* and will engender its *unity* for this consciousness itself.”¹⁹² Its thought is no less a part of the relation that makes up the lowly individual than is the individual’s concrete existence. As a result, self-consciousness need not suddenly discover the authority of some priest in order to accede to the arbitrary demands of a mediator. It grasps itself as an arbitrarily specified individual, so its own standards justify its submission to an arbitrary concept. This idea makes sense of the otherwise puzzling lack of specification in Unhappy Consciousness about who or what the mediator is. The point of the transition to Reason is not that a new, more reliable reasoner comes on the scene, but that unhappy consciousness finally sees that it has no more claim to control of its thought than it does to its action. Thus it comes to view itself as existing “within the middle term,” i.e. as having neither form nor content except as the conscious reflection and material result of the mediator’s activity.¹⁹³ Self-consciousness has made itself into the empty locus of a concept that it does not think and a corresponding object that it does not control. “The very ownness of its decisions and its freedom, and, with that, any blame for its own acts” are transferred to the mediating power.¹⁹⁴

In short, self-consciousness has finally arrived at an honest expression of its aims. “It could prove the worth of its self-renunciation solely by this actual sacrifice,” in which both parts

¹⁹¹ See *Phenomenology* ¶225 (discussed above, pp. 49-50): “What we see here is merely a personality limited to itself and its own petty acts; we see a brooding personality, as unhappy as it is impoverished.”

¹⁹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶226.

¹⁹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶228.

¹⁹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶228.

of itself are negated, since it has always viewed the two poles as standing in an immediate relation.¹⁹⁵ Its efforts to identify itself uniquely with the unchanging ‘I’ of reflective thought amount to nothing but talk and “deception,” since its own understanding of itself makes clear that such an I could exist only as the subject of contingent experience.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, despite the fact that unhappy consciousness accedes to “an alien decision,” the new shape that results is not “an alien, meaninglessly specified content.”¹⁹⁷ The project outlined in the opening pages of *Self-Consciousness*, which was supposed to yield certainty for the conscious being by means of sublating a self-sufficient object, comes to fruition in unhappy consciousness’ act of self-sacrifice. Its achievement of unity between the two poles of self-consciousness, and its subsequent certainty that the unified poles are rightly described by a concept, allow it to view “its doing and its being as this *individual* consciousness” as “being and doing *in itself*.”¹⁹⁸ The certainty it has attained leads to a “sorrowful” existence, to be sure, but self-consciousness has followed its strategy to completion. And Hegel claims that this sort of internally justified accomplishment is the only way for a form of consciousness to overcome its limited view of itself.

That claim reinforces a crucial difference between Hegelian unhappiness and Kierkegaardian despair. For Kierkegaard, despair is confusion and denial, and its solution consists in the problematic thought being “broken off” rather than “thought through.”¹⁹⁹ Hegel,

¹⁹⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶229. As for self-consciousness’ view of its parts as related immediately, see ¶208, in which self-consciousness is described as an “immediate unity of both... opposed consciousnesses,” the “unchangeable” and the “changeable,” and ¶167: “The being of what was meant, along with the individuality and the universality opposed to that individuality in perception, as well as the empty inner of the understanding, no longer exist as the essence. Rather, they exist merely as moments of self-consciousness. That is to say, they exist as abstractions or distinctions which are at the same time nullities for consciousness itself, that is, they are no distinctions at all but purely vanishing essences.”

¹⁹⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶229.

¹⁹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶229.

¹⁹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶230.

¹⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 275.

on the other hand, believes thorough internal understanding of a form of life to be instrumental in gaining new perspective on it. “If one is to begin to work oneself all the way up to the point of cultural maturity,” he advises in the preface, “one will first of all have to carve out some space for the seriousness of a fulfilled life.”²⁰⁰ Without taking the apparent problem with one’s form of life seriously and attempting to work it through on its own terms, one can only produce “lifeless universal” resolutions without comprehensible reasons.²⁰¹ This analysis suggests that the necessary and contingent aspects of Hegel’s transitions are the reverse of the popular view described above. If spirit acts in desperation, abandoning old strategies for new ones, it may contingently discover something necessary about itself.²⁰² But if it acts rationally, persistently judging its activity by its best conception of its standards, it necessarily discovers something contingent about itself. For Hegel, that is, the full expression of a problematic way of thinking—and these are always wrapped up in the contingent existence of the being in question—necessarily gives the being a new perspective on its completed acts. It learns what it is, and this entails knowledge about what it might become.

In the specific case of unhappy consciousness, self-consciousness’ existing practices force a self-revision. It is not that self-consciousness was always covertly rational, so that in its submission to the mediator it simply hits upon what it wanted all along. Instead, Hegel claims that self-consciousness’ understanding of itself is not coherent, so that the full achievement of its ends must be recognized as a complete expression of what it wanted—the negation of individuality—yet also as something “positive.”²⁰³ Its submission differs from mere servitude, in

²⁰⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶4.

²⁰¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶3.

²⁰² See above, p. 51.

²⁰³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶229.

which the servile self-consciousness surrendered to a show of force. This new acceptance of authority is more genuine and more complex: it is not only the agreement to follow a certain agenda (which would just be a negation of its particular side) but also the recognition of that agenda as “universal,” or, as Hegel will later say about the proposed laws of reason, “validly in force” for it.²⁰⁴

And this validity is achieved by self-consciousness’ own activity. It is by virtue of the correspondence between unhappy consciousness’ empty and undifferentiated negative thought and its meaningless contingent existence that it can see itself as instantiating a universal without remainder. Recognizing the results of its negative labor, it becomes “that to which the category exhibits itself in the form of being,” a consciousness that regards its particular existence as the ideal representation of universals.²⁰⁵ This perspective, too, will yield in the *Phenomenology*’s progress to several successive social forms of reason, which are achieved by the practice of reason and which serve as temporary solutions to its unhappiness. At each stage, a specific deficiency of the whole system—reason’s asociality, spirit’s inattention to history, and so on—leads to the adoption of a new set of relations. Unhappiness is the fulcrum on which each transition turns.

5. Persistent unhappiness in absolute knowledge

One final issue remains. If Hegel believes that every limited shape of consciousness exhibits rational unhappiness and makes way for a higher synthesis, what can we make of his announcement of “absolute knowledge”? At this final stage of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel is, indeed, exuberantly optimistic about the possibility of happiness. But Hegel’s idea that spirit has won “the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne” is not an endorsement of the whole of

²⁰⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶419.

²⁰⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶344.

modern life.²⁰⁶ Instead, absolute knowledge is a form of conscious existence in which broad structural problems do not frustrate in advance the hope of achieving meaningful life. Each of the previous stages was overcome because its conflicting aims led, in each case, to dramatic revisions of its identity. In contrast, absolute knowledge grasps and reinterprets every previous stage, referring each to the others in a systematic understanding that provides ways to overcome any of the stages' particular unhappiness. By naming, thinking through, and giving a determinate role to each standpoint of consciousness, we are able to achieve a freedom in which none of them alone sets the terms of our activity, but each contributes to its multifarious meaning:

The content shows that its determinateness is not first received from an other and then externally pinned onto it; rather, the content gives itself this determinateness, it bestows on itself the status of being a moment, and it gives itself a place in the whole.²⁰⁷

In this process, “the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind,” since we know where to turn to work through any difficulty in terms of a particular spiritual perspective.²⁰⁸ We can overcome unhappy consciousness by appeal to reason, we can sort through divergent rational paradigms in social life, we can make corrections to social life with reference to history, and we can stand against faulty readings of history with appeals to the facts. Further, by coming to recognize the closed relation among these perspectives—i.e. their circularity of justification and action—we are able to see each perspective as equally our own. By doing so, we are forced to recognize our interrelation with and dependence on others, leading to the humility and forgiveness needed to sustain a social life in which multiple perspectives can coexist. All of this assumes that absolute knowing will include unhappiness and conflict—if it is to include

²⁰⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶808.

²⁰⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶53.

²⁰⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶679.

numerous theoretical perspectives and numerous agents, that consequence is obvious. But Hegel contends that human development leads to a state in which unhappiness is no longer hopeless.

5.1 *The structural limitation of Religion*

We reach that state in the *Phenomenology's* grandest dialectical movement: the reconciliation of the productive existence of “acting spirit” with the target of religion: “the otherness for consciousness,” stable truth.²⁰⁹ Religion’s “content,” its “activity of representing” the community as teleologically unified in concrete social arrangements, is for Hegel in fact the content of “absolute spirit.”²¹⁰ Religion as a genuine social activity includes, in Hegel’s analysis, the integration of a legal state, an expressive culture, and developed (though incomplete) theoretical efforts. These practices of religious life have made thoughtful progress toward developing a vibrant understanding. In his discussion of religion as art, Hegel writes that the aesthetic achievements of religion are only possible for “self-conscious people who know their own rights and purposes” and who “know how to state” them.²¹¹ Religious life is already self-critical and expressive; it has tools to understand its world and institutions in which to pursue its understandings. Nevertheless—even though it consciously builds and enforces a system of values and practices that are richly informed by individual, social, and historical experience—the subjects of religious life have not recognized their integrated self-conceptions for what they are. Though they have already achieved the structure of self-grounding social certainty, they are not conscious of their own nature and wrongly attribute their successes to something beyond their grasp. Spirit’s progress so far has generally been a succession of representational tactics, a search

²⁰⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

²¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

²¹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶732.

for objectivity. Now that the actual system of relations that animates religious life has so forcefully articulated itself that it has implicitly become “absolute spirit,” a self-sufficient, rational society, the task at hand is the society coming explicitly to understand its representations as absolute.²¹²

Just as we saw in the transition to reason, this insight—that the meaning of religious life is immanent, not transcendent—is achieved through the development of religion’s own ends and practices. This development leads to a more secular world, but Hegel would certainly not have welcomed the proselytizing of our contemporary atheists, which often aims to tear down and replace religion for reasons unacceptable to the religious. In fact, the development of self-sufficient knowledge relies on the genuine successes of religious life, despite its failure to understand itself. If religious life can rationally transform itself into self-grounded social life, the justification for the latter “must have already resulted from the shapes consciousness has assumed.”²¹³ The religious community’s attempts to transcend human particularity by uniting itself with something universal are not abandoned, but completed in a way that changes the meaning of universality. Religious life in Hegel’s sense is “the movement from its immediacy to the achievement of the *knowledge* of what it is *in itself*,” and through its various expressive feats it proves too good at this task to maintain the idea of a transcendental divinity.²¹⁴ The members of religious communities succeed in developing the internal meaning of their own practices, and in the end there is nothing left of the mysterious, distant seat of meaning they meant to approach.

Like the unhappy consciousness, the religious community only grasps the full meaning of its expressive work at its completion. With the development of practices and narratives that allow

²¹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

²¹³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

²¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶680.

the community to be “perfectly happy within itself” comes “the loss of all *essentiality*,” the consciousness that abstract divinity is not the motive force of existence.²¹⁵ In other words, the religious community's quest for stable self-knowledge has led to the conclusion “*that God has died*.”²¹⁶ But this triumph of determinate, finite beings over their picture of the universal also has a positive consequence. “Death is transfigured from what it immediately means,” Hegel writes; it is no longer conceived as the limit for human existence but instead as “the universality of spirit which lives in its own religious community, dies there daily, and is daily there resurrected.”²¹⁷ Hegel seems to be thinking of Christianity, in which the death of Christ is interpreted as a life-giving act, but the point is more broadly applicable. To witness the emergence of meaningful life from particularity (as we do in our rituals, our stories, and our relationships) is finally to understand existence as more than a mere limit. It is to conceive of particular existence as the source of universality, i.e. as the condition of existence that is not merely mine. To say “until death do us part,” for example, is to enter into a compact whose meaning depends on our self-knowing particularity, on a self-possession that makes it possible to pledge *all*. Hence the “self-emptying” of all existence, its view of itself as a thing, “has not only a negative moment but a positive one as well.”²¹⁸ In absolute knowledge, this positive meaning is available “for self-consciousness itself” for the first time.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶752.

²¹⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶752.

²¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶784.

²¹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

²¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶788.

5.2 *Unhappiness and the community of absolute knowledge*

The perspective that emerges from this interpretation of particularity is vastly more meaningful and interesting than the empty self-identity posited by self-consciousness. The equation is no longer the comparatively simple identity of transient existence with abstract reflection. Absolute knowledge has expanded its sources for comparison and complicated its understanding of identity. Abstractly, we can say that this new self-development relates the various perspectives of the earlier shapes of consciousness, but the shapes do not come forth monolithically and negotiate with one another, nor do they fit together geometrically. Instead, Hegel says, their preservation in absolute knowledge consists in “the moments exhibit[ing] themselves as determinate concepts and as the organic self-grounded movement of these concepts.”²²⁰ The actual movement of creating an identity from the perspective of absolute knowing, then, consists in the lived experience of, e.g., being German, teaching philosophy and participating in a scholarly community, experiencing beauty, developing relationships with family and friends, and so on.

All of this activity is in terms of some set of principles and experiences, and these are enriched by the knowledge of history and its phenomenal organization, but the life of absolute knowing is by no means an abstraction. Hegel is quite clear: the achievement of knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, happens in the world of “pure determinateness” first dealt with in Sense-Certainty.²²¹ Therefore, the *Phenomenology* is a circle, in a way that it must be if it wants to call itself a phenomenology. If the subject of the book is the phenomenal experiences that present themselves to consciousness, then its efforts must always be directed toward showing how

²²⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶805.

²²¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶805.

conscious beings can deal with their own perceptual difficulties and learn to experience a more coherent world.²²² It must proceed both from and to phenomena. “Self-knowing spirit,” Hegel argues, “precisely because it grasps its own concept... is sensuous consciousness – the beginning from which we started.”²²³ The result of phenomenological life’s growth and development is not some alien life. It is consciousness, enriched by the conscious articulation and refinement of its overlapping practices of reflection and engagement with others. It has developed a complex and meaningful life, and its form of happiness has good reasons.

Can we say that such a life admits of unhappiness? It is already clear from the structure of the transitions that Hegel’s view of spiritual progress does not involve securing permanent, simple answers. This general view is articulated in lecture notes on the *Philosophy of Right*:

Infinity has rightly been represented by the image of the circle, because a straight line runs on indefinitely and denotes that merely negative and false infinity which, unlike true infinity, does not return into itself. The free will is truly infinite, for it is not just a possibility and predisposition; on the contrary, its external existence is its inwardness, its own self.²²⁴

In one sense, unhappiness is not possible from the standpoint of absolute knowledge. From this highest perspective, we can no longer misunderstand infinity as the measure between heaven and earth. Spirit has developed itself to the point of understanding its own circular motion, a process that deepens human life infinitely rather than extending it infinitely or bringing it close to some infinitely distant ideal. If we take the metaphor of the circle seriously—and since Hegel deploys it in several places, it seems to me that we should—the question of the end of the dialectic is no question at all. Though Hegel claims that we can come to a phase of human life in which unhappiness is not total—in which, perhaps, happiness could be the norm because of good

²²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶805.

²²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶806.

²²⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §22.

decisions, good relationships, good institutions, and so on—he does not herald the end of unhappiness. Such a conclusion would commit him to a theory of spirit based on the linear infinity he criticizes, as it would amount to a development culminating in permanent stasis.

Hegel emphasizes the continuing dialectic in absolute knowing in his discussion of its “object.”²²⁵ At this stage, spirit is able to understand its “immediate consciousness” as “in part, an othering of itself.”²²⁶ It understands that its existence involves both identifying itself with others and distinguishing itself from them. A connected set of distinctions—between subjects and objects, between the self and another, between the person and the community—have gradually been brought under the self-conscious scrutiny of human practices. But this is not to say that they have been abolished, so that all actuality is affirmed as consistent just insofar as it is actual. Instead, the community is able to use its increasing understanding and command of its meaningful activities to build a reflective, responsive social life in terms of the various perspectives outlined by the *Phenomenology*, recontextualized by their progressive expression. And since this life can exist only in determinate consciousness, anything it accomplishes is done by agents: parents, artists, judges, and philosophers alike.

If they wish to understand themselves fully, these agents must allow their practices and goals to be “absorbed in the night” of theoretical reflection, but their “existence is preserved in that night.”²²⁷ The power of theory depends on particularity, the preservation of genuine distinctions, and thus the possibility of unhappiness. Hegel rejects theoretical efforts that avoid “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience” of actual existence; such abstractions fail to assume

²²⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶789.

²²⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ¶789. (This is the only citation to Miller, who is a bit more vivid here; all others are to Pinkard.)

²²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶808.

“the labor of the negative.”²²⁸ They amount to mere “triteness,” abandoning the difficult work of drawing conclusions from our successful and unsuccessful forays in existence.²²⁹ These conclusions, the material of “conceptually grasped history,” are our only rational basis for action.²³⁰ And though the *Phenomenology* overflows with triadic generalizations and schematic overviews of progress, Hegel never claims that these amount to absolute knowledge. Rational self-sufficiency is not achieved by theory alone—“this knowledge is supposed to be disclosed merely in its coming-to-be.”²³¹ Genuine understanding develops in the concerted, conscious efforts of existing individuals, in their perplexities and innovations, in their experience of “felt truth.” To achieve absolute knowledge is not to cure unhappiness, but to take ownership of it: to form communities that can channel it productively and thereby to know it as a condition of thoughtful existence.

²²⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶19.

²²⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶19.

²³⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶808.

²³¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶789.

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