

McDowell's Hegel: Quietism versus the Dialectic*

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ABSTRACT: John McDowell interprets Hegel from his Wittgensteinian quietist position. McDowell's quietism, unlike some past versions, does not see philosophical problems as pseudo-problems but as real problems which vanish when sufficiently worked through. McDowell's application of this to the "Consciousness" and "Self-Consciousness" sections of the *Phenomenology* are revealing, but they founder ultimately on Hegel's conception of self-consciousness as "infinity." In part, this fails because it pushes him, as it has many interpreters of Hegel who wish to make him representative of some other favored philosophical approach, into seeing Hegel's arguments as only "allegories" of favored philosophical positions.

KEYWORDS: John McDowell, Hegel, Self-Consciousness, infinity, teleology.

John McDowell is a kind of Wittgensteinian quietist about philosophical problems, and he enlists Hegel for his cause. That has struck many as an odd match, for others as surprising, but there are deeper and perhaps compelling reasons for the alliance. McDowell's version of quietism departs from what we might think of as the 'classical' quietists. What we can call the 'classical' quietists are those who thought that all philosophical problems were pseudo-problems, and the best approach to a pseudo-problem is simply to point out how it is not really a problem at all and that you have been fooled by the circumstances into thinking it was a problem. The criteria among the classical quietists varied – the most notorious were those who championed something like 'the verification principle' – but the upshot was the same. Other classical quietists, influenced by the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, thought that the problems were generated by a misuse of language and a failure to pay attention to the criteria at work in the ordinary use of language. For example, problems of skepticism were thought to be shown to be phony because they misused all the ordinary senses of 'know'.

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McDowell does not belong to either group, although he shares with them the idea that philosophical problems are never solved but merely dissolved such that at the end of a philosophical investigation one who had the problem no longer has it. The problem was not solved but went away. Like them, he enlists a form of 'therapy' that gradually brings the patient (which in some cases is oneself) out of the problem and into a state of clarity where the problem no longer exists. However, McDowell does think that the problems are in a relevant sense real. It is not that those with the problems are forgetting or violating the rules of common usage, but they are nonetheless creating the problem for themselves. The best way to get out of a self-created problem is to get rid of the problem by looking at how you got into it, and sometimes that takes a lot of work.

1.

McDowell's update of the Wittgensteinian conception of 'therapy' as the best response to a philosophical problem has to do with the nature of reflective mindedness itself. Philosophical problems are those which will eventually be generated by our own reflective relations to ourselves, and they are in that sense not pseudo-problems at all. They will inevitably be generated by anybody who takes a certain reflective turn. The person who asks herself, for example, what it was that she was seeing when she saw a yellow rose but there turned out to be no rose there at all is not misusing the obvious rules of English in particular or language in general. The problem is real: What did I see if it follows that I did not see what I took myself to be seeing? After all, I saw something 'yellowy rosy', but there was no yellow rose there. It was something I saw, so I must have seen something, so there must be things like sense-data, etc. McDowell's own version of disjunctivism is meant to dissolve that problem. At the end of the therapeutic process, once we have worked our way back and forth among the arguments about the nature of the perceptual object, we will have come to see that we should have been saying what we were claiming all along: We did not see something (a yellow rosy something) that wasn't there, since you cannot see what is not there. We only seemed to see something. You are either perceiving something (and it is there), or you are not perceiving at all but having a completely different experience. (That's the short version of the argument, and anybody schooled in the literature will know that there are

many more sides to the debate.) McDowell's method, however, is to stick with the debate and offer yet more arguments about why something like the disjunctivist view is correct, not as a view to be placed alongside other views (such as realist, metaphysical, idealist, causal, etc. views) but as the dissolution of the claim that such a philosophical view of the perceptual object and the perceiving experience is needed at all.

For the really hard problems, the therapeutic process typically takes a long time, it requires painstaking rigor in philosophical argumentation, and if successful, it results in a complete dissolution of the issue. It does not consist in applying any kind of rule about the ordinary use of 'see' or 'perceive' and then arguing that the opponents of disjunctivism are violating that criterion. Nor is it holding up the claims of 'common sense' as normative for all other claims (such that philosophical claims that violate 'common sense' would be ruled out). The claims of conceptual necessity that seem to drive such problems – such as, "well, there is nothing there, but I was seeing 'something', so there must be 'something' I was seeing" – themselves dissolve into claims about how we think about the world and ourselves, and those claims are 'grammatical', descriptions of how we think and must think, which, once we reach the level of metaphysical necessity, are always already in order. What looked like disorder turns instead into order, and we are now ready to rid ourselves of the problem that is no longer there.

It is not a far leap to see Hegel as doing exactly the same thing. When we read the chapters in Hegel's *Phenomenology* on, for example, Sense-certainty and Perception, we seem to be practicing something that looks very much like a McDowell/Wittgenstein course of therapy. One person says that they are experiencing and therefore know some individual thing, some this-here-now, without having to know anything else. A challenge arises: It could not be the case that one is really doing that because that would generate all kinds of contradictions. More argument. At the end of the chapter, it turns out that the proponents of the 'position' of Sense-certainty turn out not to have that particular problem. What they had been saying was something more mundane, namely, that we do indeed perceive individual objects as exhibiting general properties, and the issues that provoked the claim of Sense-certainty as an a priori philosophical position dissolve in front of us. Of course, as we begin to read about Perception we see that very similar reflective quandaries also arise in that case, and it turns out that the various moves needed to defend the Perception position themselves dissolve under the pressure of their own contradictions, such that

it also turns out that we had all along been speaking not just of our perceptions of objects but of the ways in which they appear as they do, how sometimes appearances are deceiving, about how we need to construct more general explanations (perhaps invoking ‘forces’), and so forth. All of that is true – we do indeed perceive things, and we do indeed try to explain them – but there is nothing particularly philosophical or conceptual at stake, even if there are all sorts of other things at stake (such as: Will a molecular theory of heat do the job as well as a competing theory?) which require intelligence, reflection, and attentiveness. What they do not seem to require is philosophy – at least until philosophy has teased out the conceptual problems that seem to lie in these more mundane uses of our intelligent, reflective capacities.

On McDowell’s interpretation, it was Hegel’s genius to show how we do that in all kinds of ways, and it was Hegel’s genius to show that at the end of the day (at the conclusion of the system), all (or at least almost all) the big problems have been dissolved. Subject and object are at one, we were always in touch with the world, and we are now reconciled and at peace with ourselves (until the next round of philosophers disturb the peace). Moreover, Hegel claims that the moves that take us to this point are each necessary, and what else could that necessity be except that of the necessity of thinking in the way that we must think? After all, if we did not think in that way, we would not be thinking differently. Rather, we would not be thinking at all.¹

Take the statement: “The world is all that is the case.” That is not a statement about what is proximally and for the most part true, nor is it a statement of a hypothesis to be tested. It is a statement, so it seems, that also claims some kind of necessity. It seems to call out for a special justification. When the orthodox religious believer says that it is not true that there is nothing beyond the world which is also true or more real, she is challenging the necessity of that statement. It seems odd to say, moreover, that she is merely misusing the word, ‘world’ or something like that. Yet when we think about the necessity it is supposed to state, it would seem that the only necessity it could claim would be that of logical necessity. What then is the justification of logical

¹ This is of course the classical statement by Wittgenstein in the WITTGENSTEIN, L. **Tractatus logico-philosophicus. The German text of Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung.** London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Humanities Press, 1963: “That logic is a priori consists in the fact that nothing unlogical can be thought.” 5.4731. But see also TOLLEY, C. Kant on the Nature of Logical Laws. **Philosophical Topics**, v. 34, n. 1-2, 2006, pp. 371-407.; PIPPIN, R. The Significance of Self-Consciousness in Idealist Theories of Logic. **Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society**, cxiv, part 2, 2014, pp. 145-166.

necessity? We cannot explain logical necessity in terms of something else. (Nor can we derive the normative from the non-normative and so forth.) When we realize that we are only making a grammatical point about such necessity – it is the way we think, and to think otherwise than the way we think is not to think outside of logical necessity but simply not to think at all – we are led to see that the philosophical problems, as ‘conceptual’, as involving a kind of necessity that is not that of causal necessity, vanish. Logic is our way of making sense (and, for the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, so are many other ways of talking and carrying on), and we make sense of making sense by appealing to logic.² Logical necessity isn't another sort of necessity; it operates within thought such that there is no ‘outside’ to contrast it with. To explain logical necessity by something outside of thought would be to explain making sense by something that makes no sense. But isn't that what Hegel said? Isn't his *Logic* just a description of the way in which we make sense of making sense by ultimately explaining that all the ways of generating some kind of extra-logical necessity ‘outside’ of logic themselves just end up contradicting themselves, such that at the end we have the unity of subject and object, that is, the quietist view that thinking is just thinking in terms of the way we must think, and there is no outside to that, since that ‘outside’ would have to be something that made no sense to us?³

2.

This is obviously a provocative and a very deep way of interpreting Hegel. One can anticipate the various protests: What of Hegel the great theorist of modernity? Isn't that a real problem and not one for which a quietist response is adequate? A McDowellian quietest need not deny that modernity presents a set of pressing problems, she need only deny that it is a specifically philosophical problem.⁴ How capitalism moved from its early Mediterranean beginnings to its

² MOORE, A. W. *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³ There is a worry that someone might raise, as Barry Stroud did years ago, that we are tacitly assuming a ‘verification principle’ to the effect that we are assuming all that is has to be verified or made intelligible by human thought, and that such a principle is itself not obviously true. For the genuine Wittgensteinian quietist, this has to be submitted to therapeutic discussion. The ‘inside/outside’ motif is what leads us astray.

⁴ The McDowellian denies the very premise of the very title of one of Robert Pippin's books: PIPPIN, R. B. *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: on the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*. Cambridge (Mass.)/Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. A non-philosophical attack on the idea of modernity as a philosophical problem is

takeoff in northern Europe may indeed be a problem, but it isn't an issue of philosophical necessity. (Ferdinand Braudel and not the philosophers may be the person to read on that.) How, if and why honor ceased to be an orienting virtue in the move from early modern Europe to the French Revolution is indeed a real problem but not one that is especially conceptual in the philosophical sense. (Keith Thomas and not the philosophers may be the person to read on that.) The role of gender is a vexing problem for the moderns, but it is not especially philosophical (until the philosophers generate the problems at work in making claims about identity, sameness, and the like. That is one area in which the philosophers are still causing trouble.). On that view, what is needed in sorting through the problems of modernity is not something especially philosophical in nature, but it does require attention to fact, clarity in thought, and imagination in explanation. Sadly or gladly, it does not require philosophy.

Or at least we could in fact take Hegel to be arguing for such a claim. For the quietest Hegelian, it may indeed have looked at one point as if a set of philosophical problems about necessity were at issue, and certainly many people at the time thought there were a set of philosophical issues at work that had to be settled, but in the last analysis, subject and object were always one, so solving the philosophical issues was not really at stake. What was at stake were the issues of who was giving orders, who was subordinate to whom, how rights were to be conceived and distributed (a legal, although not really philosophical issue), what types of contracts were to be enforceable, what institutions best fit into the emerging order of nation-states, and so forth. Wittgenstein had little to say about those things (his 'little to say' approaching zero), but (on the quietist reading) Hegel simply had many warnings about how we needed to remain continually reflective about these issues and about how swiftly we could be led into thinking that there was indeed some solution to some philosophical problem when what was at stake was not the solution but the dissolution of the troubling philosophical problem. If philosophy is about conceptual necessity (that is, not 'philosophy' in the more colloquial sense of coming up with a general worldview), then modernity may not present us with any particular conceptual necessities, even though it may

presented by Frederick Cooper, 'Modernity' in COOPER, Frederick. **Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History**. University of California Press, 2005, pp. 113-152.

present us with all kinds of other, more mundane necessities about making a living and how to fashion a just legal order.

As an interpretation of Hegel's overarching view of philosophy as providing a kind of reconciliation, this has much to recommend it. It is a way of making sense of some of the more vexing of Hegel's statements – such as the identity of subject and object – without taking on any of the traditional metaphysical baggage that has seemed to be necessary for making the trip. Moreover, it does not rest simply on a distaste for metaphysical baggage but on an argued position that holds that ultimately “philosophy... leaves everything as it is.”⁵ It does not deny that problems of modernity are crucial and call for inventive thought. It just denies that they are philosophical problems that require ‘solutions’. It reconciles us not to the world as it happens to be (where there is much inequity and cause for sorrow), but it does reconcile us to a world where the issues are not the conceptual issues that make up the self-renewing self-trouble that is the currency of philosophy.

This is why the test case for McDowell's interpretation of Hegel turns on self-consciousness. Almost all readers of the *Phenomenology* have been inspired, baffled, irritated or astonished at how the more narrow discussions of sensing, perceiving and explaining rapidly shift into a discussion of how a master violently demands and receives recognition from an ‘other’ who becomes his slave. Is Hegel changing the topic (a frequent interpretation)? Or is the movement to mastery and servitude intrinsic to the argument presented in the discussions of sensing, perceiving and explaining?⁶ McDowell argues for the latter, but this poses an especially pointed issue for the quietist. On the surface, an account of a struggle in which one person (the master) violently forces another into submission and the other gradually (in working for the master) comes to a better and more realized form of self-consciousness looks like something that would not be particularly susceptible to a treatment for which everything is in order as it is. Yet the quietist holds exactly that view: As a struggle between individuals over who will give the

⁵ WITTGENSTEIN, L. *Philosophical investigations*. New York: Macmillan, 1953, p. 124.

⁶ See the discussion in PIPPIN, R. B. *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pippin claims Robert Brandom endorses the ‘change of topic’ interpretation whereas McDowell endorses the ‘further development’ interpretation.

orders, there is no conceptual necessity at stake in the struggle even though there may be some sound psychological or very general sociological insights at work.⁷

If this is a test case, it is one for which McDowell's arguments can make a claim to being a convincing interpretation. MacDowell argues that the struggle between one self-consciousness and another self-consciousness is itself only an allegory. What emerged from the discussions of sensing, perceiving, and explaining was the idea that consciousness is self-consciousness – roughly, the idea that for me to making any kind of claim (exemplarily, a judgment) or acting in any way consonant with what action really is is necessarily to be knowing what it is I am doing, at least at some level. If I have no idea, for example, what it is that I am saying, then I am not really saying anything. If Heidegger is hammering a nail into a wall, Heidegger knows he is hammering or something like that.

Whatever puzzle cases emerge do so by virtue of our distinguishing our self-consciousness from our consciousness of objects. Now, on the McDowellian interpretation, in our consciousness of objects, we have already arrived at the quietist position after the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology*. As understanding that we have arrived at this position, we are not only conscious of “whole expanse of the sensible world,”⁸ we are conscious of ourselves, and in distinguishing our own self-consciousness from that consciousness encumbered by the perception of objects, we have created a new problem for ourselves, since it seems we can generate skeptical puzzles about our own consciousness in our standing back from our ordinary claims and submitting them to the claims of a reflective self-consciousness. It looks like consciousness has to do with the objects of belief and action, whereas self-consciousness is the power to stand back from all those beliefs and actions and pass judgment on them. Nonetheless, the distinction of the conscious self from the self-conscious self can in fact seem so great that it might seem necessary, and not optional, to think of them as something like two different individuals. However, the ‘otherness’ that self-consciousness faces is just that of itself as it stands back from itself. It is in performing the sublation, the *Aufhebung*, of this otherness, that consciousness restores its unity to itself. It sublates the otherness when it comes to understand that the claims of self-consciousness just are

⁷ The idea that Hegel is presenting a different version of a deep psychological truth is the position taken by Slavoj Žižek.

⁸ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Terry Pinkard, 2010, § 167.

the claims of consciousness itself. They are both claims of thought, and the idea that consciousness and self-consciousness occupy two different spaces of thinking is the kind of problem to which a reflective consciousness is rather naturally driven and which it must learn to dissolve.

The allegory works in this way: The 'slave' is consciousness reporting on the world in view ("There are red things over there"), and the master is self-consciousness as sitting back independently from those reports and exercising judgment over them (saying to the slave, "It is I who will decide if there are indeed red things over there, according to criteria of my own"). At the end of the allegory, however, master and slave have become identical. The master does not sit off to one side in independent judgment of the deliverances of sensibility, and sensibility carries its own conceptual content (the 'master') within itself. Consciousness and self-consciousness are at one. Once we are in that position, we are on the way to the Hegelian statement that "reason is all of reality" as the final outcome of the dialectic of master and slave, and the statement that "reason is all reality" is just the Wittgensteinian-quietist view itself. What had looked like a life and death struggle between two individuals has dissolved into 'grammatical' remarks about our awareness of the world around us. The struggle between master and slave was just the struggle within each of us as thinkers over what seemed like the necessity of sharply distinguishing sensibility from judgmental faculties, a sharp and absolute distinction which, so it turned out, wasn't necessary at all.

3.

There are two small textual worries about this interpretation. McDowell notes one, only to dismiss it, namely, Hegel's explicit statement in the section on stoicism and skepticism that the struggle over mastery and servitude involved two individuals, whereas the Unhappy Consciousness which succeeds that struggle has an opposition only within a single individual.⁹ McDowell rereads it so that it is not as damning as it first appeared – he says: "This remark might seem difficult for me.

⁹ "The doubling, which was previously distributed between two individuals, the master and the servant, is thereby brought back into one individual." HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 206.

But as before, the point about division into two individuals is that that is how things looked to the consciousness in question, not that that is how things really were.”¹⁰ Difficult as it is as a purely textual reading, that keeps McDowell's interpretation consistent with itself. Once again, problem dissolved.

The second textual worry has to do with several passages which McDowell overlooks but which are more troubling for his interpretation and which he ignores in his development of the Hegelian struggle between master and slave. These passages all have to do with 'infinity'. That Hegel would put so much emphasis on 'infinity' is not surprising: It is one of the most difficult of all the philosophical-metaphysical-mathematical concepts to make any sense of. It brings with it a whole chain of paradoxes: those having to do with infinite divisibility, the infinitely big or small, adding infinites to each other, etc. In fact, it brings in the whole set of Kantian antinomies with itself. Hegel first mentions infinity when he is discussing the opposition between the 'the inverted world' and the world of appearance we more normally take to be the case. Hegel asks something like the following question: What rules out the idea that, since our world is an appearance of an underlying reality, the underlying reality might be the total negation of what we otherwise experience? What we see as red is really green, what tastes sweet is really sour, what is just and good for us is really vile and criminal (and maybe what seems to be water is really xyz), etc.

Hegel's answer comes in the form that the opposition between both of these 'worlds' is a reflectively made distinction. The world as an appearing world (the result of thinking through Force and the Understanding) is a world that already embodies reflective distinctions within itself. We explain the appearing world by enlisting causes that are not themselves part of immediate perceptual experience, or we explain it as the appearance of something in one way or another (such as when we explain the tie's looking green in the dimly lit tie shop but looking blue under the sunlight outside). The distinction between the two worlds is, Hegel says, an 'inner distinction' made within our conceptual grasp of our sensible experience, not a distinction between two worlds at all.¹¹ In seeing the world as an appearance of a reality, we are both distinguishing the

¹⁰ McDowell, J. H. **Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars**. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 165.

¹¹ "Only in that way is it the distinction as *inner distinction*, that is, the distinction *in itself*, that is, is the distinction

world of appearance from the world of the real (“The tie looked green in the shop, but it turned out to be blue”), and we are identifying the two as two moments of a whole, not as two separate entities.

Hegel draws a strong conclusion from this: “When infinity is finally an object for consciousness, and consciousness is aware of it *as what it is*, then consciousness is *self-consciousness*.”¹² Self-consciousness is ‘infinity’. Hegel does not jump to ‘self-consciousness’ as a new topic but takes it to be an implication of something else: ‘infinity’. I suppose that one could take that passage as also allegorical, or as shorthand for something innocuous. However, Hegel does seem to be arguing for something stronger, namely, for a problem that cannot be dissolved even if it can aim at an actual reconciliation. If our consciousness is directed to objects, our self-consciousness has to do with how we are related to those objects. That, of course, has infinity within itself, since it seems to threaten an infinite regress: How are we related to how we are related to our being in relations to objects?

Hegel ties this into the structure of life itself (a discussion of which immediately follows the chapter on Force and Understanding, and he repeats it again in other places in the *Phenomenology*¹³). Life is inherently purposive not in the sense that all living things consciously aim at purposes (that is false), but in the sense that it always makes sense to ask of an organ or of an element in the life of a species what good it does for that organism – what purpose it serves – given the species it is. Non-organic things have no such good.¹⁴ Just as Kant before him had

as *infinity*.” HEGEL, **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 160. (*Nur so ist sie der Unterschied als «innerer,» oder Unterschied «an sich selbst,» oder ist als «Unendlichkeit.»*)

¹² HEGEL, **Phenomenology of Spirit**, § 163. (*... und indem sie endlich für das Bewußtsein Gegenstand ist, als das, was sie ist, so ist das Bewußtsein Selbstbewußtsein*).

¹³ For example, HEGEL, **Phenomenology of Spirit**, § 258: “However, *self-consciousness* is equally as much constituted by its distinguishing itself from itself and at the same time having no distinction emerge therein. Hence, it finds in the observation of organic nature nothing else but this essence, that is, it is to be found as a thing, as a *life*, and yet it makes a distinction between what it is itself and what it has found, a distinction which is no distinction at all. Just as an animal’s instinct is to seek and consume food, without its thereby bringing forth anything but itself, so too does the instinct of reason only find itself in its seeking. An animal stops with self-feeling. In contrast, the instinct of reason is at the same time self-consciousness. However, because it is merely instinct, it is set off to one side as opposed to consciousness and has its opposite in that consciousness. Hence, its satisfaction is estranged by this opposition. It surely finds itself, namely, finds the *purpose*, and it likewise finds this purpose as a *thing*. However, the purpose first falls *outside the bounds of the thing* that presents itself as a purpose. Secondly, this purpose as purpose is at the same time *objective*; in its eyes, it thus does not fall within the bounds of itself as consciousness but into those of another understanding.”

¹⁴ HEGEL, G. W. F. **Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften II**. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1969, §371, p. 521; HEGEL, G. W. F.; MILLER, A. V. **Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopedia of**

distinguished self-conscious subjectivity not in terms of the ‘stuff’ out of which it was made, but in terms of its activities, what it does (namely, judge and will), Hegel distinguishes life from non-life by what life does, namely, organize itself so as to maintain itself and reproduce itself. Animal organisms are, moreover, capable of self-movement in pursuit of their natural purposes, but unlike self-conscious subjects, they cannot take their purposes ‘as’ purposes. Likewise, non-self-conscious animals can respond to truths but not ‘as’ truths. Self-consciousness is present not just in responding to reasons – the living animal can do that when it responds to the predator’s charge as reason to flee – but in this ‘as’ relation. The distance between the reason and self-consciousness taking it ‘as’ a reason is present, but the distance is also no distance (or is infinitesimally small). Self-consciousness is inherently present in the activities of persons in the sense that no activity can count as the activity it is unless the person knows what she is doing, even if that knowledge is not itself a separate reflective act from the activity itself (as if there were two acts – I am sewing, and I am thinking that I am sewing).. For this reason, Hegel adopts the phrase he uses throughout the *Phenomenology* to characterize self-consciousness: “the difference that is no difference.”¹⁵

Self-consciousness is thus originally a ‘two-in-one’, to adapt L. E. J. Brouwer’s mathematical term for a different context.¹⁶ It is not an original ‘one’ that then splits itself up into

the Philosophical Sciences. Translated from Nicolin and Pöggeler's edition (1959), and from the *Zusätze* in Michelet's text (1847). Oxford: Oxford University Press; New York: Clarendon Press, 2004, p. 429: “The stone cannot become diseased, because it comes to an end in the negative of itself, is chemically dissolved, does not endure in its form, and is not the negative of itself which expands over its opposite (as in illness and self-feeling). Desire, the feeling of lack, is also, to itself, the negative. Desire relates itself to itself as the negative—it is itself and is, to itself, that which is lacking.”

¹⁵ One example: HEGEL. **Phenomenology of Spirit**, p. 235: “Now, this category, that is, the *simple* unity of self-consciousness and being, has the *distinction* in itself, for its essence is precisely this, that it is immediately selfsame in *otherness*, that is, immediately selfsame in the absolute distinction. Thus, the distinction *exists*, but it *exists* as a completely transparent distinction which is at the same time therefore no distinction at all.”

¹⁶ Hegel would have endorsed Brouwer’s conception of mathematics as resting on an ‘Ur-Intuition’. (*oerintuitie* in the original Dutch, translated into English as ‘basal intuition’). For Hegel, the ordinals do in fact rest on something like Brouwer’s two-in-one, but Hegel thinks is by virtue of the nature of what he calls the ‘quantum’, which is a development late in the Doctrine of Being in his *Logic*. The quantum gives rise to the ordinals because it is, in Hegel’s not fully lucid terms, already outside of itself, already a two-in-one, and that is because it arises out of the finitude of more qualitative distinctions. Brouwer, himself almost certainly non-conversant with Hegel’s *Logic*, could see no further mathematical basis for this two-in-one and thus claimed that this basis (what Hegel calls the ‘quantum’) must be given by an ‘Ur-Intuition’ (which in turn sounds an all too Schellingian note). J. J. Brouwer. **Intuitionism and Formalism**. In: BENACERRAF, P.; PUTNAM, H. **Philosophy of mathematics: selected readings**. Cambridge; Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 77-89: “This intuition of two-oneness, the basal intuition of mathematics, creates not only the numbers one and two, but also all finite ordinal numbers, inasmuch as one of the elements of the two-oneness may be thought of as a new two-oneness, which process may be repeated indefinitely; this gives rise still further to the smallest infinite ordinal number ω . Finally this basal intuition of

a duality (and then forever seeks to restore itself, as the Romantics typically understood it). In its origin, it is unitary and split. The two-in-one is indeed a unity, but a unity that is at odds with itself. This is the pulse of the dialectic, and it does not resolve itself into a finite understanding of mind and world.

Why so? First of all, this kind of infinity is a bounded infinity. Between having a reason and having it as a reason, there are an infinity of other possible reasons. Put into an image, the relation resembles a circle, in which one returns to the same point in a full revolution. The person is aware of an object, but is aware of itself 'as' aware of the object. The person acts for a reason, but also takes the reason 'as' a reason. This is a bounded infinity in a similar way that the infinite series, '1 + ½ + ¼... 2,' is also both infinite and bounded. A finite agent is therefore always confronted with infinity as something in principle not given in experience and which therefore cannot possibly be traversed. The agent, as a finite agent, is also bounded in the infinity of possible reasons. The question is whether anything like this concept of infinity is intelligible at all.

What closes the gap between having a reason and having the reason as a reason? Appeal to some immediate knowledge of a thing or a good to close the gap is a non-starter. (The argument against such immediate knowledge is a key part of the extended argument of the *Phenomenology*.) What then could close the gap? Unlike the animal, which relies on instinct to close the gap (for example, to fight or flee), the self-conscious person confronts a potentially infinite set of reasons that cannot be traversed (for the infinite, as Aristotle argued, is exactly that which cannot be traversed) but which calls nonetheless for a resolution if action is to occur.¹⁷

Hegel sets up the struggle over mastery and servitude over this point. Something is needed to close the gap, and the answer turns out to be some form of social authority. However, social authority is not equivalent to reason, which in turn demands more than mere acceptance of social rules – social rules might provide a 'common' will but not a 'universal' will. If nothing else, at least the gap between reason and the fact of acceptance is one of the main 'lessons' that Self-Consciousness has taken over from the three chapters on Consciousness. Since an isolated self-

mathematics, in which the connected and the separate, the continuous and the discrete are united, gives rise immediately to the intuition of the linear continuum, i.e., of the 'between', which is not exhaustible by the interposition of new units and which therefore can never be thought of as a mere collection of units."

¹⁷ On the idea of the infinite as that which cannot be traversed, see the discussion in MOORE, A. W. *The Infinite*. London; New York: Routledge, 2002. I have drawn on Moore's discussion here.

conscious subject does not have the authority to validate itself, its validation must come from outside of itself. Unless the world itself speaks to it – which is not possible since the world apart from us does not talk – the authority of self-consciousness requires another self-consciousness to validate itself.

This lands us in Hegel's dilemma: At the first, there is no definitive reason to rank one bounded self-consciousness in its attempt to come to terms with infinity over another bounded self-consciousness within its own attempt to come to terms with infinity, and the result is a struggle over authority which has to be settled at first by force, not by reason at all. (One of them at least is willing to make it a matter of life and death, which forces the other also to make it a matter of life and death. The life and death struggle continues – or only temporarily ceases – until one of them emerges as master.) If there is to be any action or thought at all, the gap must be closed, but the nature of infinity is such that no agent or collection of agents could traverse that infinity. The resolution of the need for validation thus takes on a fully contingent character, and, if it were left at that, then what we call 'rational' would really just a fancy and obscuring name for the exercise of non-rational power. Or so it would seem.

Here the concern is not with the details of what Hegel says about that struggle and its resolution as with what he takes to be the import of the struggle and the conclusions to be drawn from it. What we see in the struggle is the form of thought itself (or, what Hegel calls the 'universal will' insofar as it is the form of thought of practical reality) taking shape in the participants even though at first it is also only a shared thought.¹⁸ Only when the relation of mastery and servitude has stopped making sense do the master and slave realize their speculative identity with each other. The identity is that of the "I that is We, and the We that is I."

Hegel uses some language that is a bit opaque to describe this, but once we have understood his point, the relative opacity of his description both clears up, and we also see why it probably had to be initially opaque.¹⁹ The 'We' at stake in such a 'speculative identity' (more on that later)

¹⁸ This forms the passage from §§436-37 in HEGEL, G. W. F. **Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III**. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1969. §§43-39. The sections, §§436-37, carry the title *Das allgemeine Selbstbewußtsein* whereas the sections, §§ 438-39, carry the title *Vernunft*.

¹⁹ I have in mind something like this: HEGEL, **Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III**, §436: "Das *allgemeine Selbstbewußtsein* ist das affirmative Wissen seiner selbst im anderen Selbst, deren jedes als freie Einzelheit *absolute Selbständigkeit* hat, aber, vermöge der Negation seiner Unmittelbarkeit oder Begierde, sich nicht vom anderen unterscheidet, allgemeines [Selbstbewußtsein] und objektiv ist und die reelle Allgemeinheit als

is not necessarily the shared 'We' of a common project (as it might be in a sentence like, 'We are writing together the definitive commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'). It is the 'we' in phrases such as "We speakers of English say..." or more universally, "We thinkers think..." It is just the way we talk and the way we think. Husserl, for example, thought of such a 'we' as part of the transcendental shape of mind and world. At the base level, so Husserl argued, had to be something like a transcendental 'I' (the way 'I' must perceive world, 'I' must think of mathematical objects and proofs, 'I' must reason about things) that is at the same time bound together (in a way Husserl never satisfactorily explained) with other such transcendental 'I's' to form a transcendental 'I-We', which, on Husserl's account, is a component of the transcendental correlate of the 'I-We' and the 'World'. Each 'I' is a monad, but each monad comprehends that its own monadic (presumably judgmental and linguistic) activity is a function of the shared standpoint with other monads, and that this basic correlation cannot itself be inferred from any more basic facts.²⁰

The 'We' of which Hegel speaks is like that transcendental 'We', but it operates on several levels, and that is where the so-called 'speculative' element enters. From the standpoint of reason, the 'We' is abstract. It is the 'We' of "We thinkers, as thinkers," Below that is a more concrete but still abstract 'We' of something like "We German speakers think that S is a well formed sentence in German."²¹ Below that is the even more concrete 'We' of 'We Enlightenment thinkers' or 'We modern Europeans' or 'We members of this family...' ²² Each of these 'We'

Gegenseitigkeit so hat, als es im freien anderen sich anerkannt weiß und dies weiß, insofern es das andere anerkennt und es frei weiß. / Dies allgemeine Wiedererscheinen des Selbstbewußtseins, der Begriff, der sich in seiner Objektivität als mit sich identische Subjektivität und darum allgemein weiß, ist die Form des Bewußtseins der *Substanz* jeder wesentlichen Geistigkeit, der Familie, des Vaterlandes, des Staats, sowie aller Tugenden, der Liebe, Freundschaft, Tapferkeit, der Ehre, des Ruhms. Aber dies *Erscheinen* des Substantiellen kann auch vom Substantiellen getrennt und für sich in gehaltleerer Ehre, eitlem Ruhm usf. festgehalten werden."

²⁰ "Consequently the constitution of the world essentially involves a 'harmony' of the monads: precisely this harmony among particular constitutions in the particular monads; and accordingly it involves also a harmonious generation that goes on in each particular monad. That is not meant, however, as a 'metaphysical' hypothesizing of monadic harmony, any more than the monads themselves are metaphysical inventions or hypotheses. On the contrary, it is itself part of the explication of the intentional components implicit in the fact of the experiential world that exists for us." HUSSERL, E. **Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology**. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1960, V, #49. Kant's 'I think' is also, like Husserl's, a 'universal we' (and thus also a 'we think'). Kant is not explicit on that point, although there are passages in the Critique of Judgment that might be taken to argue against the idea that Kant does not distinguish adequately between 'I' and 'We.'

²¹ These would correspond to what Hegel calls *allgemeine Selbstbewußtsein* (HEGEL, **Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III**, §436).

²² These are more the concrete forms of the 'We' that he calls *ihre reellen Allgemeinheit*. HEGEL, **Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III**, §436 *Zusatz*.

thoughts is thought by an 'I' who comprehends herself as a 'We' in these various stages, but each thinker also an independent 'I' thinking these thoughts. Each of these 'We' thoughts is thus also a self-conscious thought, and as self-conscious, it is subject to the various strains of trying to make sense of self-conscious infinity. The self-consciousness that understands that its own infinity cannot be adequately comprehended except in the speculative proposition that infinity as incomprehensible to the 'understanding' – since how can one traverse the untraversable? – turns out to be comprehensible to thought only in the sense that we have comprehended the principles that necessarily generate this incomprehensible thought of infinity – namely, through a logic that is both different from our more ordinary ways of speaking about the infinite but is also very familiar to those ways of thinking.²³ In grasping its reasons for action, the subject thinking of itself as an 'I' that is also a 'We' comprehends that its reasons are part of what seem to be an ungraspable infinity, and thus it is driven, most often, to see some immediacy intervening to stop what looks like an incomprehensible infinite regress.²⁴

The problem is that the inability of finite beings to fully grasp the infinite in finitist terms – almost by definition, since whatever you have come up with as a statement of the infinite, there is always, as it were, one more thing to be added (or subtracted) to it – is itself an inability that is fully intelligible to thought. This feature of thought, to be always to be able, as it were, to add (or subtract) 'one more' is what Hegel calls the 'self-referring negativity' of thought, our ability to comprehend the thought of infinity as that which cannot be traversed.²⁵ (Or, put more colloquially,

²³ HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III*, §436 Zusatz: "Dies Verhältnis ist durchaus *spekulativer* Art; und wenn man meint, das Spekulative sei etwas Fernes und Unfaßbares, so braucht man nur den Inhalt jenes Verhältnisses zu betrachten, um sich von der Grundlosigkeit jener Meinung zu überzeugen. Das Spekulative oder Vernünftige und Wahre besteht in der Einheit des Begriffs oder des Subjektiven und der Objektivität. Diese Einheit ist auf dem fraglichen Standpunkt offenbar vorhanden. Sie bildet die Substanz der Sittlichkeit, namentlich der Familie, der geschlechtlichen Liebe (da hat jene Einheit die Form der Besonderheit), der Vaterlandsliebe, dieses Wollens der allgemeinen Zwecke und Interessen des Staats, der Liebe zu Gott, auch der Tapferkeit, wenn diese ein Daransetzen des Lebens an eine allgemeine Sache ist, und endlich auch der Ehre, falls dieselbe nicht die gleichgültige Einzelheit des Individuums, sondern etwas Substantielles, wahrhaft Allgemeines zu ihrem Inhalte hat."

²⁴ "No truly ethical existence is possible until individuals have become fully conscious of their ends. They must attain knowledge of the unmoved mover, as Aristotle calls it, of the unmoved motive force by which all individuals are activated." HEGEL, G. W. F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, Reason in History*. Cambridge (Eng.)/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 77.

²⁵ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge (Eng.)/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, §7: "... this innermost insight of speculation – that is, infinity as self-referring negativity, the ultimate source of all activity, life and consciousness."

as the thought of always being in the position to add or subtract one more, such that infinity is not a goal to which we can infinitely approximate. The thought of infinity is not the thought of a determinate goal at which we are aiming and forever getting closer).

The thought of infinity is thus at first paradoxical. As finite agents, we cannot think it since we cannot traverse it even in thought. When we think about it, we generate paradoxes. Yet, when we understand that we necessarily fail as finite agent to comprehend the infinite, we actually succeed as agents in comprehending ourselves. Yet in understanding truths as truths, we understand that the gap between truths and truths-understood-as-truths is both infinitesimally small (so that there is no difference) and yet that there is a difference.

Hegel's basic claim is thus twofold: First, all philosophical problems arise not out of language going on holiday or out of failures to abide by ordinary criteria of usage but out of a basic problem within human agency itself, namely, self-consciousness itself as the 'two-in-one' of 'speculation'. Second, the problem was so basic, so Hegel thought, that it required a fundamental rethinking of what is going on in logic itself.²⁶ Rethinking what was going on in logic itself required rethinking what it meant for thought to be taking shape in us. Logic is indeed the shape of thought, and we become thinkers in taking on that shape of thought within ourselves – or, as Hegel puts it, as self-consciousness animals, we are “the concept which has progressed into existence.”²⁷ Thought, however, is not like a game with rules, such that we are the current players in the game (and will be succeeded later by others). On that conception, following the rules is not optional – if we are following the rules, we are playing the game, and if we are not, we are simply not playing the game. Part of the 'speculative' problem is that without the players, as it were, there is no game at all, and the 'game' is such that its rules are developing as we develop ourselves and the 'game.'

In fact, the entire 'game' analogy is misleading. It suggests that we need to distinguish sharply constitutive rules and normative rules. The constitutive rules define the game itself, such

²⁶ “The task of proving and explaining in more detail this innermost insight of speculation – that of infinity as self-relating negativity, this ultimate source of all activity, life, and consciousness – belongs to *logic* as purely speculative philosophy.” HEGEL, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §7, p. 42.

²⁷ “Der Begriff, insofern er zu einer solchen *Existenz* gediehen ist, welche selbst frei ist, ist nichts anderes als *Ich* oder das reine Selbstbewußtsein. Ich *habe* wohl Begriffe, d. h. bestimmte Begriffe; aber Ich ist der reine Begriff selbst, der als Begriff zum *Dasein* gekommen ist.” HEGEL, G. W. F. *Wissenschaft der Logik II*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1969, p. 253.

that when you are not abiding by the rules, you are not playing the game badly – you simply are not playing the game at all. Normative rules are rules that can be transgressed and for which one can assessed penalties. On this view, you are either in the game or not at all; or you are in the game but violating some of the rules (you are offside, unnecessarily rough, double-dribbling, starting before the gun, out of your lane, etc.)

There is a third possibility, however, that Hegel lays out but which is all the more difficult for Anglophones to understand, since Anglophone philosophy has by and large adopted only one coverall term for the domain in which we mark the distinction between good, right, appropriate, true and the like from what actually is the case or what actually happens, and that term is ‘normativity’. That in turn suggests that we work with a sharp distinction between the constitutive and the normative (or perhaps in more Kantian terms, between the constitutive and the regulative). Hegel suggests a third alternative: There are indeed shapes of thought that make sense until those shapes of thought have developed themselves enough to the point where their internal tensions and contradictions are becoming more and more evident. At that point, such a shape of thought, which had looked constitutive, begins to look merely normative, and as it becomes merely normative, it loses its grip on us. As a shape of life loses its grip on the norms that held it together, it loses its grip on itself. When that shape of thought dissolves, the human world it had built around itself also dissolves, and what had made sense turns more and more into senseless babbling. The key to this is understanding how difficult it is to get a grip on the thought that we finite creatures cannot comprehend infinity except by comprehending how it is that we continually generate the concept of infinity and how we come to terms with what role the infinite plays in finite life. The individuality of each ‘I think’ combined with the universality of each ‘I think’ (and ‘we think’) means that formulating what it is that all thinkers must think will be itself historical and not something particularly susceptible to a quietist resolution.

Thus, we have constitutive norms and transgressible norms, and, so it seems, no word for this third alternative. Actually, we do have such a word: It’s called ‘dialectic’. This is why Hegel also says, “the Idea also has . . . the hardest opposition within itself; its being at rest consists in the security and certainty with which it eternally creates and eternally overcomes that being at

rest and therein brings itself together with itself.”²⁸ The infinite is not simply a problem that philosophers create for themselves and which they have to dissolve. It is not a dissolvable problem, and it is the structure of self-consciousness itself. That has far reaching implications, if it's true. Quietism isn't one of them.

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²⁸ HEGEL, **Wissenschaft der Logik II**, p. 468; HEGEL, **Hegel's Science of Logic**, p. 759: "... die Idee hat um der Freiheit willen, die der Begriff in ihr erreicht, auch den *härtesten Gegensatz* in sich; ihre Ruhe besteht in der Sicherheit und Gewißheit, womit sie ihn ewig erzeugt und ewig überwindet und in ihm mit sich selbst zusammengeht."

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