Hegel on Historical Meaning: For Example, The Enlightenment
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I

"Reading the morning paper is a kind of realistic morning prayer."¹
Hegel's best known treatment of the European Enlightenment (in his Phänomenologie des Geistes) singles out the problem of religious faith, or the new, modern struggle between insight and faith, between enlightenment and what its defenders saw as mere "superstition".

This treatment is distinctive and on the face of it highly controversial. For one thing, while the topic is simply announced as die Aufklärung, Hegel makes no attempt at a comprehensive survey. Bacon, Swift, Smith and the British seem to play no discernable role; oddly, neither do Lessing or Mendelssohn or the German, "Berlin" Enlightenment. If there is a focus in these highly typological and categorial distinctions, it is clearly le siècle du lumiére, not die Aufklärung or the Battle of the Books; if there is a representative figure, it is unquestionably Diderot; if there is a theme, it is ethical and broadly normative, not scientific or even political.

This unusual sort of treatment already signals the first important interpretive problem, one of three I would like to begin to approach below: just what question or what sort of question is Hegel trying to address in offering such a view of the meaning of the Enlightenment? Not, it would appear, questions concerning the meaning or causes of scientific paradigm changes, new world discoveries, mercantile capitalism or new class relations. The Enlightenment is treated, it would appear, as an attempt to come up with a collective, ethical norm of some sort, a solution to a common problem of ethical meaning and collective aspiration. The problem is overcoming "Die Welt des sich entfremdeten Geistes," not the resolution of late scholastic paradoxes about divine omnipotence, social adjustments to new modes of production, any reaction to new astronomical calculations, or any willful rejection of ancient moderation. (The new norm, paradigmatically and originally "pure insight", or "the spirit which calls to every consciousness", is simply, "be for yourselves what you are in yourselves – reasonable."² And this treatment seems to assume that there always are, even must be, such fundamental and commonly held, orienting norms, intimations of some absolute aspiration, in all human societies; as if the French case provides the world-historically significant example of the early modern aspiration and as if the Hegelian questions are: what could a life directed by such a norm be like (hence a "phenomenology") and, could it be coherently sustained, how successful could it be expected to be (as if an assessment informed by philosophical considerations could account for the initial appeal and ultimate revision of such a norm).³
In this sense, Hegel's treatment of the Enlightenment is quite typical of his extraordinary approach in the *Phenomenology* as a whole to everything from metaphysics and political programs to cultural styles and religions. Realisms and idealisms, accounts of the nature of scientific law or of observation, are all treated as what we can still loosely and with the right Hegelian echo, call "spiritual" phenomena, as if not just attempts to get things right, but views about the practical project of trying to get things right in determinate ways, with determinate ambitions, about what getting things right would do for us, why, in what sense, we would care about that in the first place. The issues are about mattering or meaning, aspects of Spirit's self-understanding, and not competitions among possible procedures and methods floating in some intellectual void. All of Geist's doings and makings and initiating must be understood within a kind of collectively purposive, teleological framework in order for them to be understood, and the *Phenomenology* is "introducing" us to that basic framework. The simplest presumption to a "sense-certainty" will be shown already to require an attending or active discriminating that will already begin to raise, in a suppressed and only deeply implicit way, the necessarily teleological structure of any such activity, the question of how to understand the meaning or point of such initiations, projections, self-constraints in various observations and infirmations and claim-makings. And Christianity or Stoicism or classical tragedy or romanticism or ultimately the Enlightenment "absolute", "utility", will also finally be treated as moments in what Hegel, at the most basic level, insists is a continuous struggle for the only possible absolute human satisfaction, true mutuality, or mutual recognition. They will be treated largely as social norms, not as primarily (with respect to meaning) more or less accurate world-views or religious revelations, or as isolated, unconnected experiments in living, or results of exogenous, or non-Spiritual causes. It is within this project that the Enlightenment is to be understood at a moment of the most profound ethical estrangement, not as the invention of a methodology, or as some creative, contingent decision to propose: live this way, not that.

Or, at least, so I would like to interpret Hegel's famous claims in his Preface, that, "the living substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual (effective, wirklich) only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering (Sichanderswerden) with itself...It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out (durch die Ausführung) to its end, is it wirklich".  

I take this famous "Substance must be understood as Subject" claim to be a claim for the primordiality of the category of purposive action in the sense described above at least in accounting for human affairs and projects and ultimately prior with respect to the structure of intelligibility itself or its "logic" (the collective, purposive project of rendering intelligible). And this is all something very like a great intensification and extension of the Kantian argument for the primordiality of the practical point of view, a comparison to which we shall return. (I realize that it seems more natural here to see what seems to be an absolutization of an intentional (or subjective) context of explanation in religious or metaphysical terms, as if all is basically intelligible as a manifestation or expression of God's or World-Spirit's purposive activity. But I can only note here that the direction I am proposing is self-consciously set in opposition to such a supposition).  

This would then be typical of the great Hegelian ambition, an attempt, as it were, to extend the category of purposive actions, and so to involve the great criteria of actions as such, reasons and justifications, over far more human projects and collective events than had ever been attempted. It is true in other words, in this case as in so many others, that Hegel "sees reason everywhere", where none on else had (in some sort of parallel to how Freud would later see Unreason, even if also psychological motivation, everywhere, or where few had detected it), but that is because he sees actions everywhere, purposive doings, linked to strategies of justification that are, at some basic and socially effective level, necessarily unfolding over time.

Whatever question is at issue however, the details of Hegel's actual account are also everywhere controversial, especially given Hegel's obvious doubts about the way religious life is characterized in the French Enlightenment project, and given his own rather striking treatment of the Encyclopaedists as a religious sect and his framing the Enlightenment struggle or war with faith as itself a religious, sectarian war, with all the dialectical ironies he seems so fond of: A typical formulation of his central thesis: "It [the Enlightenment] declares an error and a fiction the very same thing as it itself [Enlightenment] is". This is typical because yet another echo of the many dialectical ironies, in a way the same dialectical irony, prominent since the "inverted world" and the dialectical standoffs familiar in the Master-Slave.  

With regard to the Enlightenment, Hegel has here formulated a kind of charge and countercharge now long familiar to us: by some, say "positivists", that religion is incomplete and unsatisfactory science, now superseded by the real thing; by others that these positivists have made a religion out of science itself, complete with chiliasmic expectations and a sacred eschatology, a religion, though, afraid to speak its name. And Hegel indicates with such formulations that he will not take the safer, post-Kantian route out of such difficult antinomies, the route of separate and incommensurable spheres of activities, with different, incommensurable conditions. Both charges are correct, and neither is a criticism.

This is the second of the obvious problems raised by Hegel's treatment. If we can understand what it would be to treat the problem of Enlightenment as a "problem of Geist" and its phenomenology, what justifies the claim that, within that sort of treatment, this very unusual and paradoxical result should follow?

However, to come to the greatest controversy, apparently Hegel would also have us understand the Enlightenment as a particular episode within what he treats as the self-alienation of the human spirit itself, or as an aspect of the slow and painful dissolution of some original, early ethical harmony, all presumably necessary for some eventual re-integration of individuality and common ethical life at some new, higher level. Most famously: the decisive
human conflicts, between peoples or among religions, or world-views, all represent conflicts of Spirit with itself. Such a conflict is not permanent or tragic. (Hegel oddly shares with Nietzsche the view that any such position is religion, not philosophy). A certain kind of human, historical dissatisfaction can come to an end (the great issue again being: what sort of dissatisfaction).

This means not only that he treats the Enlightenment as if an answer to some distinctively human problem of ethical life or possible ethical "meaning", but also that he has a particular set of terms in mind at this stage. The Enlightenment, at least in its French manifestations, is to be understood as a reaction to the distinct historical unsustainability of late medieval (or early modern) court culture and its ethical ideals (the ideals of honor and service). The late feudal world is said to have understood itself in a deeply unstable way, reflecting both the preeminence of the ideals of state and state power and sacrifice for the sake of such a whole, and the inseparable ideals of the faintly emerging civil society, individuality and wealth. Since there is as yet no common ethical culture within which the significance of private wealth or the cultivation of individuality could be understood, the only available attempt to reconcile such a tension for such a society is a culture of words, a show of service and a dissimulation about private gain, a chattering, vain spectacle of flattery and, ultimately, a self-dissolution. It is in this context, supposedly, as a reaction to this alienation, or a situation of collective work necessarily animated by some telos, but now one which cannot be confidently affirmed, that the original enlightenment experience, let us say, the struggle between a modern understanding of faith (as a resolution of the emptiness of such vanity, directed at something which could transcend this empty, vain, posturing world) and pure insight (as an equally necessary, alternative reaction, one which could provide some substance to the hope to live in this world, all by finally understanding it) is to be understood. And, in the Enlightenment insistence on self-certainty and in its attack on mere positivity and "the beyond", such a positive aspiration is to be understood as an early preparation for an ideal of freedom confusedly and disastrously at work in the French Revolution and in modern moralism, but an ideal eventually capable of a satisfying and in some sense final realization in modern ethical life. We are, apparently, in eighteenth century France especially, both at the very apogee of human self-alienation, and, just thereby, in sight of home.

These three problems are undeniably linked in Hegel's treatment: the unusual normative or ethical framework within which the Enlightenment question is posed, the dialectical treatment itself (faith and insight, religious consolation and the norm, utility, reflect two sides of the same coin), and the great narrative whole within which both these issues are treated. And the link is some sort of logical dependence. If the narrative framework, wherein historical change in normative aspirations must be understood as some sort of rational development, is indefensible, then the way Hegel poses the problem of the Enlightenment is just one of many possible readings and the emphasis on religion and the dialectical paradoxes just a possible, and somewhat idiosyncratic, interpretation of a contingent episode, with no particular claim to truth, or large philosophical significance.

It would, though, be an exaggeration to say that these last, most comprehensive meta-views about how to understand the meaning of the Enlightenment, or Hegel's comprehensive framework, are controversial. There is no controversy because such an Hegelian aspiration to articulate some continuous and comprehensively narratable human adventure within which the Enlightenment could be said to have this or that kind of place, has virtually no contemporary resonance whatsoever. There has long since ceased to be for us any confidence in a common human adventure or project, any hope for an account of something like Spirit. Or, whatever controversy there is about this Hegel commentary consists in establishing just how unacceptable such an aspiration is and why.

No doubt this sort of thoroughgoing skepticism about the larger Hegelian framework results from the experiences of post-Hegelian history, all the apparently unanticipated and undeniably world-historically significant phenomena we now take for granted, but which do not seem to be echoes of anything in the Phenomenology or Philosophy of Right. It is just obvious to many that Hegel's Grand Narrative Framework, with its central, manifestly Christian notions of self-alienation or fall and eventual recovery or salvation, cannot account for such developments or render them intelligible, and Hegel's treatment is often now also suspected of some willful subjectivism and denial of contingencies, and of deep, fateful connections with European self-satisfaction and imperialism. Such a framework is said to be based on a progressive and now, it would seem, crudely naive notion of massive human irrationality as incomplete rationality, or even of untruth as a limited manifestation of truth, and so forth. If one wants a Big Theory, better Nietzsche say many (Hegel's mad twin, in many current frameworks), with ideals of rationality mere expressions of some deeper irrationality, the aspiration to truth a self-deceived realization of the inescapability of untruth.

An even deeper skepticism arises in strictly philosophical terms, is quite familiar, and would prohibit the three-fold structure sketched above from every getting off the ground. That question concerns: the very possibility that there could be a philosophical account of the meaning of the European Enlightenment. There might of course be a philosophical account of the possibility of uniquely historical knowledge, or of the possibility of historical experience itself, or perhaps a philosophical account of the historicity of human norms. There could be an account that could, possibly, both identify the concepts required for a distinct sort of historical explanation and that could defend their objectivity, or that might clarify and defend the general claim that human beings, perhaps alone among animals, experience their lives historically, take up, in their religions, universities and wars, the past, all in a way so unique among sentient beings as to admit no possible naturalistic explanation; or that could show that the principles or rules actually governing interaction and conflict in societies cannot be based on natural or divine or rational laws, but must be, and always are, created in time, always and necessarily in response to specific and ever changing, wholly contingent situations.
But the idea that a certain sort of philosophical understanding is necessary to understand the meaning of the Enlightenment, that the governing narrative framework (presumably only accessible philosophically) is necessary, that it requires us to pose the question in this geistig manner, and that this all leads to Hegel’s paradoxical formulations about religion and reason, are all obviously much more ambitious and puzzling claims. They prompt understandable and familiar speculations. There might be, au fond, some sort of philosophical anthropolgy behind everything in Hegel, a general account of human nature, or fundamental human interests, desires, and aspirations, for which historical events might serve as examples, either as illustrations or confirmations of claims about such a nature. Perhaps Hegel’s theory is somewhat like this, driven by a metaphysical claim about the nature of the unique human dissatisfaction with its own products, its theories, laws, religious doctrines, empires, etc., perhaps the Phenomenology just is the presentation and defense of such a theory of self-negation and necessary unfolding, or perhaps it is illustrative of and thereby introductory to what Hegel calls science, an account of the logical necessities inherent in any possible nature or spirit.

But at the risk now of heaving more balls into the air than can possibly be juggled at once, I want to suggest a different way of understanding the framework within which Hegel poses his historical-phenomenological questions (for example, concerning the Enlightenment), and thereby a different sort of account of the direction taken by his actual analysis.

Only a sketch will be possible, and so it is easy enough to summarize such an alternative. The issue will not be anthropological, metaphysical or theological, but something else also quite important to him and already alluded to above: the distinct conditions necessary for us in any account of, any possible understanding of, intelligible human action (what we must do in order to understand such action), the link between such conditions and historical norms, and the rationality assumptions governing Hegel’s treatment of norms.

In other words, what is important in Hegel’s account of the Enlightenment is not any substantive claim about the necessary role of the Encyclopaedist, the world historical necessity of Diderot, d’Alembert or Rousseau, or Pietism, or the Iassenists, or some necessary transformation, leading inevitably from the mores of the court culture of Louis XIV to Robesbiere. What is important in his account is the way the question about the Enlightenment is framed, what we must understand is why Hegel asks the particular sort of question he does and pursues it as he does. He of course attempts his own possible answer, one that makes much of Rameau’s Nephew and early Enlightenment attacks on believers. But there are, I believe he would admit, other possible answers consistent with what is important and foundational in Hegel’s treatment, and there is no particular reason to rest everything on the details of the dynamic Hegel sketches. (Indeed it would be quite odd to do so. Hegel was basically reading Rameau’s Nephew, which may be the most frequently, explicitly cited work in the Phenomenology, as he was composing the work itself. Goethe’s translation only appeared in 1805; he must have been writing and reading on the same days. It is not as if that

work occupied his thoughts during years of reflection on modernity and was carefully interwoven into a well thought out narrative, the details of which form the basis for the whole approach. What Hegel has to say about modern culture is of course extremely interesting in itself; but I am interested in how he says it and what he’s looking for.)

II

Admittedly, it may not be necessary or even very advisable, to try to tie Hegel’s account of the Enlightenment to any general theory of the historical character of human intentionality, and the putative, inherent “rationality” of such history. That all seems to promise some philosophical dead end, and, besides, much of what Hegel says, about Rameau’s Nephew, for example, is independently fascinating, as a critical, internal, analysis of the possibility of such a position on freedom, without any Grand Theory. (The same could certainly be said for his independently interesting account of the new role of private wealth in the ethical culture of early modernity, or his striking account of the relation between the use of language in court culture and the origins of the idea and initial appeal of absolute monarchy.)

There is no general answer to such cautionary approaches to Hegel, except to point out that the justification for it, for making use of Hegel’s analysis at a level so far below his own ambitions, will depend on what one thinks one needs caution about, the Grand Theory itself, and that itself might be worth some evaluation before abandoning the ambition. Before assessing any of the Grand Narrative, anthropological or metaphysical assumptions that may lie behind Hegel’s account of the Enlightenment, however, some simpler assumptions clearly at work in his account can first be noted. They elaborate the suggestions made above about how to read the inclusion of all these topics with the one grand category, Geist. The assumptions include the following.

The Enlightenment should be understood as a human activity, not a happening but a doing. This is simply what it means for him to include it (and not discoveries, or inventions, or fashions, or plagues or madness) within a phenomenology of Geist, and for Hegel as for many others this means, as an intentional project of some sort. Whatever kind of account Hegel is trying to give of the Enlightenment, it is obviously not a nomological-deductive explanation, and he makes no attempt to explain what caused the Enlightenment or what the Enlightenment caused. His account is tied to standard assumptions, in the “manifest image” let us say, governing the distinct understanding of human actions as actions, not merely as occurring events. The Enlightenment is such an initiation.

These assumptions presume some particular notion of intentionality. The Enlightenment is to be understood, at least in some sense (it will be greatly qualified in a minute) in terms of what its participants thought they were doing, what they believed in, intended, what goals were being formulated and sought and why, etc. And this means that we understand the project by understanding what motivated (justified to the participants)
proposing it. (One of course needs here to leave very wide open indeed the question of Hegel's views on what it would be to have a thought, to judge or to believe. In fact, this issue, which essentially involves Hegel's anti-Cartesian and anti-representationalist account of meaning, how for him thinking a thought or having a commitment to a principle is neither a natural relation, nor a grasp of any Platonic or mental entity, not an individual mind's "holding" a "belief," is the key to everything in Hegel of permanent philosophical interest. It is also the hardest to state clearly, since the tendency to interpret him on this issue in either materialist or group-mentalist terms, or as having a metaphysical theory of content, is nearly unavoidable, although, I believe, deeply misleading.)

However, the terms within which the participants in this enterprise intend it (terms like "faith", "insight", "God", "reason", and "superstition") must also be properly understood, their meaning properly appreciated, and here any account limited to the self-understanding of the agents involved would be radically incomplete at best and quite misleading at worst. (In other words, the meanings of such terms of self-understanding cannot be viewed as instituted and sustained just by the actual practices and attitudes of participants.) And this, I take it, in the simplest sense; as in, say: understanding that one should rise when someone enters a room is not a full understanding of what one means to do by standing, given the complex history of the practice and the complexity of its place in a network of other possibilities and prohibitions, often only dimly understood when enacted.) Such terms or practices all have historical dimensions, implications, imply certain proprieties, rule out others, commit one to some things rather than others, regardless of what went on in one's mental life at t, and even the way in which participants in a like-minded enterprise have come to understand that history itself has a history.

Of course a narrative of such enterprises framed in such explicit self-understandings, with some aspects of the historical dimensions of such ways of looking at things, could be produced and might illuminate a good deal, but at least for Hegel, the question as to whether we had understood, in terms of this intentional, practically teleological aspect of understanding, what the Enlightenment meant, was about, would not have been thereby answered. The question of what Diderot and his colleagues were after cannot be settled by pouring over their letters and diaries.

To understand why members of some like-minded community came to view matters as they did (and so truly to understand what they intend in their commitments and aspirations) we especially need to understand why they stopped viewing matters in some other way, how it is that a certain sort of like-mindedness could change. Or this is the dimension of the historical story Hegel thinks most essential, since his story is one of perpetual dissatisfaction and self-negation.

And here all the Hegelian problems begin because it is here that he seems to introduce a very strong rationality assumption into any possible understanding of such a shift, or so, I would suggest, we ought to view the matter. One might agree that there are certain sorts of social events in time ("the Enlightenment") which are not properly accounted for in social-theoretical, economic or bio-evolutionary terms, which require distinct intentional explanations, and that such explanations must be everywhere sensitive to the historicity of the agents involved, but Hegel now seems to argue (at this stage of this reconstruction anyway) that some assumption attributing some sort of developmentally rational continuity must be made, all, if we might put it this way, as a necessary condition of the overall intelligibility of the phenomena. (Various passages in the Phenomenology's Introduction about internal self-critique and continuous development, about our just having to stand back and watch, makes such claims very strongly.) Or, the implicit claim appears to be: unless some such a principle governed our reconstruction of the historical changes at issue in the Enlightenment project, we would be in no position to understand fully or adequately what the project meant, was about, or, in the sense suggested above, what its participants were after. This assumption is both what frees our account, however intentional, from the particular self-understandings of the participants and that draws the possibility of such an account closer to, in fact identifies its possibility, with philosophy. Only a philosophical, even, apparently a priori theory of the nature of the unavoidable aspiration to rationality necessarily inherent in human sense-making practices can successfully discharge this necessary assumption.

III

Well, perhaps it may discharge it, but can the assumption itself even be defended? What does it involve? Let me state, unjustifiably at this point, and all at once, making use of the language suggested above, what I believe is behind the structure of the kind of analysis Hegel gives of the Enlightenment.

The central presumption is that if we understand what must be involved in the possible holding of norms by subjects, the possibility of collectively shared, historically authoritative aspirations and commitments, we will thereby have understood why, given what it would be to hold these norms in the first place, it could not be the case that such like-mindedness could simply change, as if collectively, we just changed the subject, started to try out something else, or as if we could be said to come to be attracted to another aspiration because of some social or economic cause.

This sort of approach to Hegel obviously has a vaguely Kantian ring to it. From this perspective, both Kant and Hegel proceed from an assumption about the undeniable (or irreducibility) of the practical point of view. In the Groundwork, Kant called this the "intelligible" standpoint, and in Hegel it is represented in the Encyclopedia by the necessary distinction between Nature and Geist. The presupposition of the intelligible or geistig standpoint is freedom, and the dispute between Kant and Hegel turns on the differing accounts of the necessity involved in the claim that we must assume human beings are free in order to understand their activities (here again the basic claim about the anti-dualist, anti-individualist
nature of mentality on which everything in Hegel hangs), and on the implications of this
ascription of freedom in their practical philosophies. Neither is satisfied with merely negative
accounts of freedom, mere freedom from external constraint or sensible impulses, and both
look to some positive notion of action on reasons as a foundation for any such positive notion.

And, to complete the familiar story, where Kant looked at the mere form of practical
rationality to supply this criterion, Hegel, while following Kant (I believe) on the necessity for
such a practically free context in understanding human affairs, and on the importance of the
regulative assumption of rationality in any such account of actions as such, veers off
dramatically at this point, rejecting such a formal criterion as decisive, and insisting that what
agents must always rely on in attempting to justify what they do (and so really to choose) can
only be social norms, and that these norms, given what they are, must change and develop.16

Something like these assumptions about freedom and rationality must also be governing
Hegel’s treatment of historical communities or “shapes of consciousness” as if they were free
agents (as if we must treat such norm-governed totalities as if they were agents), asking
“them” why, what justified, their doing what they did.

And whereas Kant officially said: we understand that anything done by an agent is an
action by practically presupposing the agent is free, and that that means that he always in
acting gives himself, acts on, justifications or reasons, Kant seemed, to Hegel, to then take all
this back by then saying: of course, in all cases except unconditionally justified reasons, the
subject isn’t really acting on reasons, he is really motivated by interests. We may be able to say
that he acts on maxims to satisfy his interests, maxims he counts as reasons, but we have very
little idea why he adopts such maxims, and so at some point, our intelligible standpoint breaks
down, and we revert to explanations based on what is, in Kant, a rather crude, hedonistic
psychology. Hegel’s more ambitious claim is that we can maintain this intelligible framework
for all moral and non-moral actions if we expand the notion of some consideration counting as
a reason for an agent, expand it beyond the details of individual deliberation and calculation,
and the events of an individual mental life, and consider the agent within a collective, on-going
project of formulating norms which govern such considerations. On Kant’s assumptions, no on
could be said to act, “just because he wanted to”, as if that were a reason, or “for no reason”.
And, for Hegel, on Kantian assumptions, no social community can “just” change its mind
about what is important, about what we all should be doing.

(Different this, it should be parenthetically noted, both makes things easier or
smoother, and more difficult for Hegel. It means that he is not trying, like, apparently, the
Kant of the Groundwork at least, to derive some moral conclusion directly from non-moral
premises. In Hegel the non-moral is still normative, tied everywhere to the requirements of
“the space of reasons”, and while a very great deal about “what it would be rational for me to
do” is shown to be a consequence of what it would be for me to act as an agent at all, a very
great deal of this remains within the non-moral domain, the broadly ethical or normative. But
he seems to have to face, at some point in the narrative of this unfolding attempt to figure out
together what we all should be doing, the skepticism about whether these continuous
negotiations about what we ought allow each other to do, constrain each other from doing, or
try collectively to accomplish, are so wholly “internal” as to be only a narrative, a great
Bildungsroman where even Bildung itself is part of the (ultimately contingent) story, what has
come to merely count for us as Bildung. Hegel, I believe does not meet this criticism, as much
as try to deny its point, to “disolve” it, but that is another vast story.)

Now if the possibility of normativity in general and the sustaining of normative
structures requires the intentional structure implicit in the very category of Geist, or action-
among-other-agents, we are just thereby restricted in any account of (any possibility on our
part of understanding) conceptual or normative change. Norms can only be norms if held and
sustained for reasons, and since reasons or conceptions of what counts as authoritative reasons
are norms too, they too are intentionally sustained and challengeable. We understand the ideals
animating like-minded communities by understanding what was taken to justify such ideals,
and we could not understand the structure of such justification as “just” a practice for them, a
ritual or bizarre code of signs and gestures. Our understanding of what originally must have
inspired them and then must have broken down is thus necessarily a kind of evaluation, a co-
participation.

This opens Hegel already to the familiar objections (many in the twentieth century
stemming from Heidegger’s attack on Hegel’s subjectivism) that others or others in our own
past are simply, and in a way, violently rendered intelligible thereby almost an act of will,
made into one of us by such assumptions, otherwise benignly called assumptions of charity ( a
velvet glove intellectual imperialism, perhaps). (For example, these assumptions play a very
large role in what is in effect Hegel’s “defense” of “faith” against the Enlightenment, denying
that that practice could be understood as deception by priests, belief in the animating power of
stone statues and wooden relics, or mysterious properties closed to “pure insight”.) Whether
this criticism of the assumptions holds or not, whether, however stated, Hegel’s rationalist
assumptions remain hyper-rationalist, they are, I think, the assumptions behind the narrative he
creates in the Phenomenology, he is fully aware of what he is doing and is trying to defend
them, and this all at least allows us to begin to see why he seems to tie so tightly together the
understanding of human practices with some putative historical rationality. The linking
argument would be the analysis of the possibility of norms for action, the account of mentality
such a norm presumes, and what is required of us in understanding various manifestations of
such mentality.

Or it suggests first anyway a certain limited form of such rationality, one that links the
intelligibility of some conceptual or normative change to a possible rational reconstruction of
the justification for such a change, and which denies that there could be any final sense to any
notion of merely counting as rational for them. We couldn’t hope to enter the game of
justifications so central to understanding if we just tried to see how they do it. We would be
mimicking, not understanding. We would have no way of understanding what sort of game was being played.

This would all get us to some possible strategy for a defense of what Kuhn called an appraisal at least of an evolution from what we do now to doing it better, even if not a full blown evolution towards what we wish ultimately to know or to do, what Blumenberg called sufficient rationality, what Rorty calls "switching from pride in being closer to Reality to pride in being farther from the cavemen." It would not deny that masses of people act (genuinely act) irrationally, nor claim that the manifest unjustifiability of some norm need have any social power or force. All that is claimed is that in accounting for such episodes we must be able to understand that: a process of practical justification did break down, that impulsive, arbitrary, desperate, confused initiatives are undertaken and sustained, and that that is what they are, that understanding that is what they are requires a background of contrast, a "dialectical" formulation of reason and unreasonable of some sort. And it commits us only to a model of account-giving for those transformations that can be understood, where intelligibility does not break down, and where a reconstructive narrative, based on the assumptions sketched above, is possible.\textsuperscript{11} Is it possible for the Enlightenment?

IV

I don’t think there is any a priori answer to such a question. But the stakes are very high for Hegel in any more internal assessment of his case, because, to return to the very general issue, this is as decisive a Wendepunkt, or turning point, as any in the book’s case for this way of looking at things. The "process of its own becoming" described in that quotation from the Preface, is right here beginning to "bend back around", its end is beginning to be illuminated as its origin. We are at the point where it most appears, in our collective historical experience, that the whole structure of justification and mutuality, has completely and irrevocably broken down. Geist is estranged, not just from its world or its work or from God, but from itself, beginning now to recognize itself as origin or source, but finding its own products, the world due to it, especially the language of the political and cultural life that it has created, empty and vain.

The stakes are also high because so much of Hegel’s differentiation of the ancient and modern world, so important for so much of what he wants to say, is on view here and must be defended, and so many of his unusual terms for that defense are explicitly in play. With respect to the former, Hegel is conceding as fast as he can all the usual points usually made by modernity critics (paradigmatically, of course, by Rousseau): honor has been replaced by selfishness, warriors by courtiers, action by speeches (or noble deeds by clever chatter), a living whole by fractured parts, now not even held together by the formalities of Roman law, simple dignity by dressed up finery, and so forth. But he counts all this, however still provisional, as world-historical progress. And such provisionality highlights the second issue:

we ought, if anywhere, to be able to see here how the whole framework of the problem of Geist sketched above is of some help in understanding the provisional status of culture and the becoming of Enlightenment. What would it be for us to treat some cultural ideal, typified in some way or other, as in some way practically unsustainable, bound, in its inherent instability to require some revision? (Hegel even goes so far as to say that we can detect in Rameau’s nephew, in ‘his’ “openness” (Offenheit), and in his "shaking" or "convulsing (erschütternden) depths" a final, definitive “pull” (Zug) to a kind of reconciliation that will finally be the Phenomenology's consummation: a reconciliation of “Geist with itself”.\textsuperscript{12}

There are actually three points in the first two sections of the middle division of Chapter VI (the heart of Hegel’s claims about the Enlightenment) where these issues come to a head. Why the feudal notions of state service and private wealth create (must be understood to create) an instability in some practical sense unsustainable, resolvable (if so), by the creation of a court culture of absolute monarchy and a reality wholly linguistic; why the ensuing dualism between the honest consciousness (das ehrliche Bewußtsein) and the rent-asunder consciousness (das zerissene Bewußtsein) can be said particularly to motivate, to justify rationally, first the Encyclopaedia project and then the general Enlightenment project or pure insight; and finally what it means to insist that the Enlightenment “absolute,” “utility,” must ultimately be experienced as just as empty, just as “beyond,” as faith’s aspirations, and this in a way which somehow educates the members of this community about the nature of absolute freedom, about itself as the necessary origin of such norms?

In the space remaining, I shall concentrate only on the second issue, essentially Hegel’s treatment of the significance, the meaning of Diderot’s Rameau’s Nephew (although obviously throughout Hegel’s account, the figure of Rousseau and his scorn for the vanity of society is just as important).\textsuperscript{13} Given that phenomena, whence “the Enlightenment?”

What I hope I have time to do here is first to summarize Hegel’s treatment of the “becoming of pure insight”, and then to discuss whether the above discussion of the framework of Geist itself and its conditions is of some help in understanding Hegel’s approach.

There are two key passages in Hegel’s analysis of the kind of Zerissenheit that might be said to provoke or prompt the aspiration for “pure insight”, the first key move of the Enlightenment. The position occupied by das zerissene Bewußtsein, “he” in Diderot’s dialogue is one so mistrustful of the mere vanity, sheer contingency and emptiness of any substantial social role or ethical category or even fixed goal that he can exist only by perpetually nothing who he is (was), “proving” himself committed to no empty form and so no fool. He is as postmodern a self as there ever was, even a kind of self-deconstructive hero. Long before there was The Man with No Qualities, or Rocquotin, or Nietzsche (to whom the nephew sometimes bears an uncanny resemblance) (or even long before Benny Profane, or Zelig) there was das sich auflösende Bewußtsein. And this, again, represents for Hegel the ultimate consequence of the dissolution of ethical harmony (or even any traditional culture) into mere
subjectivity and an individuality so radical as to be without continuing identity, dependent as that would be on some commonality among moments.

There are obviously many sorts of literary and historical and sociological questions one could ask about the emergence of this kind of character in world literature. But what Hegel looks for in such a stance or cultural style is the possible answer to a special sort of question, a kind of question motivated by the considerations we have been discussing. What he asks, as he always does, is whether the stance itself, the views adopted (and there must be such views, even for Rameau’s elusive, flighty nephew) are consistent with the possibility of there being such views, given what “views adopted and sustained by subjects” must be. This means: whether there could be reasons to take up and sustain the nephew’s stance, given what is articulated within it. (Of course, as Hegel presents the case, there are reasons enough to decry the vanity and emptiness of the court culture of Louis XIV. It is a different question, though, to ask why it is important to decry such vanity and emptiness, to see it everywhere, to ask what sort of result one seeks to attain and embody. And with that question, the question of the project of enlightenment, the importance or meaning of enlightenment, begins.)

And here Hegel’s description of the stance gives the crucial clue. These zerißende Urteile, always tearing apart and tearing down, represent “dies sich auflösende Spiel mit sich selbst” “this self-dissolving game with itself.” (I have no idea why Miller decides to introduce Jacobi’s terminology here in the translation and to translate sich auflösende as “ nihilistic”. That is both deeply misleading and far too portentous a term for the Nephew. Not to mention that without the reflexive form in view, the whole point Hegel is trying to make is lost.) For Hegel now requires that this active “dissolution” of any ethical substantiality account for itself as an activity, a project intentionally undertaken for reasons. This “game” being played is a self-dissolving game, played with itself, it is not fated or necessitated or caused; it is self-initiated and self-sustained. It thus must, for reasons sketched above, aspire to some justification and thereby a universal significance or point which the viewpoint itself cannot or will not (yet) acknowledge.

It thus, to come to the second of the important passages, reaches a point where it’s “rationale” has to break down, prove insufficient. The crucial remarks are:

Since it knows the substantial from the side of the disunion or conflict, which it unites in itself but does not know as unified, it understand very well how to pass judgment on [beurteilen] it, but has lost the ability to comprehend [fassen] it. 14

This is the ability it must gain in order just to continue to dissolve or unmask. Its witty, destructive talk, has freed it from substantial commitments and traditional prejudices, but it is not and cannot be finished.

...this particular self qua this pure self, determined neither by real nor thought determinations, develops into a spiritual self that is of truly universal worth.

And

...the positive object is merely the pure I itself and the torn-apart consciousness in itself this pure identity of self-consciousness that has returned to itself. 15

It must now find significance in its state in itself and the importance for it of exposure, negativity, the attack on unreflective substantiality, and so forth, find significance in what is available to it without a regression “back” into the sort of complacent substantiality, or unreflective, conventional wisdom often offered as advice to such torn apart souls. Typically, the resolution Hegel suggests involves a kind of radicalization or acceleration; not an application of cautionary or let us say, Burkean or Humean brakes. In this case that means first collecting together its witty sayings and wise critiques and self-satisfaction; it means an Encyclopedia, a new kind of “sacred book” to rival the old one, and so ultimately a new round in Spirit’s understanding of its religious aspirations.

I don’t think any of this should be summarized by saying that Hegel is trying to show why the project of the Encyclopedist had to result from the dialectic of Bildung and its self-estrangement, or that he is investigating what moment of Spirit’s necessary self-development requires such a move, or really that any Grand Narrative, based on any doctrine of logical necessity or the self-manifestation of God is relevant, all anyone than we need some full theory of human nature in order to try to understand why Madame Bovary acts as she does. We do need to know what reasons she finds compelling, and we need to know, to try to understand, why she would find those reasons compelling, but to know the latter and so truly to understand her, we need to know, not the pure form of practical rationality in itself, but what practical reasons at a time had been compelling and why they ceased to be. (This is like saying that to understand even our own ability to understand and appreciate Madame Bovary, we have to understand what is dissipating, unjustifiable about the emerging bourgeois world represented, say, by Homais. Here again, the extremity and scope of Hegel’s ambitions.) To understand all that though, we need to know something about the having and sustaining of reasons collectively and here Hegel makes another controversial claim, about the availability of such matters as natural laws, or the will of God, or revelation, or the way we always did it, to count as reasons, or even, as is relevant in these passages about the Nephew, the attempt to rely no reason at all, a reason based on there being no reasons.

In effect this commits him to looking for a particular kind of possible account of our attraction in our past to such types and projects; and to a general account of why he is looking for such matters, why he must if there is to be some intelligibility for human affairs, and what would be the consequences if he didn’t. Nothing guarantees that he will get answers to his
question. I submit that he has only formulated the right question to ask, formulated as imaginative and detailed a set of answers to it ever developed, and challenged us to do better if we can. I'm not sure anyone has, or can.

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3 For a full and, I believe, accurate account of the "sociality of norms" and the importance of this theme in the Phenomenology of Spirit, see Terry Pinkard, Hegel's Phenomenology (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1994).

4 PhG, p 18; PhS, p 10.

5 Hegel’s own gloss on these claims: “What has just been said can be expressed by saying that Reason is purposive activity. [zwechaufmige Tun]. PhG, p 22; PhS, p 12. The importance of coming to terms in the right way with the meaning of his “substance as subject” framework can easily be underscored by noting its ubiquitous relevance to the Enlightenment discussion. The general framework for the analysis of all the various dualisms invoked by Hegel to account for the great instability in early modern European society – state power and wealth; Good and Bad; Noble and Ignoble; The Honest Consciousness and the Torn Apart (zerissemene) consciousness; Faith and Pure Insight - is either explicitly an argument for the necessity that any reliance on some stable and external substantiality be understood as the work of subjectivity, or is likewise expressed in similar terms (like “essence” and “self-consciousness”.

6 PhG, p 297; PhS, p 334. Equally striking are his concluding remarks about faith and enlightenment: both agree that any putative Absolute cannot be predicated of, that it must be “unknown and unknowable.” Only the Enlightenment is “satisfied Enlightenment” thereby; faith “unsatisfied Enlightenment.” PhG, p 310; PhS, p 349.

7 “The Master is recognized by one whom he does not recognize”. Observing Reason’s combination of “the high and the low” is like Nature’s combination of the “organ of generation with the organ of urination”; or “The heartthrob for the welfare of humanity therefore passes into the ravings of an insane self-conceit”; or “The truth about this honesty however is that it is not as honest as it seems” and so forth.

8 This problem already plays a discernable role in Hegel’s account of the nature of the conflict between “der Glaube” and “die reine Einsicht”. Faith is said only to “have” thoughts, not to “think” them, or do not know that they are thoughts, so, for his, rather unusual reason, its thinkings are “representings.” “...hat das Bewußtsein nur diese Gedanken, aber es denkt sie noch nicht oder weiß nicht, daß es Gedanken sind; sondern sie sind für es in der Form der Vorstellung.” PhG, p 286; PhS, p 321.

9 There are all sorts of good reasons for why this could not be the case. See Robert Brandon, Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp 626-7, and in general on the various fatal problems in what he calls “regularism.” How the latter is to be distinguished from his own “normative phenomenism” is a problem the complexity of which is worthy of Hegel himself, and in fact is a Hegelian problem, like the ones addressed here with respect to the Enlightenment.

10 This Kantian ring is unmistakable in Hegel but admittedly is greatly complicated by a necessary concession. Hegel's account aspires to be historically phenomenological “all the way down” as it were. Any view about normativity and its conditions, even a putatively transcendental one, is itself a moment of the self-expression of Geist, an appearance or itself the result of a particular sort of conceptual change. It is itself concretely normative; the expression of a position we all ought (now) to believe and which Hegel can be entitled to believe only given the phenomenological account it, supposedly, itself justifies and makes necessary. For the moment, I would like to put that large meta-issue aside and concentrate on the account of normativity itself, however ultimately it is to be understood.

11 Hegel’s ambitions are obviously greater. He obviously thinks that any of these moderate forms of historical rationality themselves must depend on some implicit telos, that the notions of better or sufficiency or really “farther” along than ancestors, at least implies that we presume to be understanding better what it is for us to improve on the past and transform the present. But we have enough of such a teleological framework to return briefly to the account of the Enlightenment.

12 PhG, p 284; PhS, p 318.

13 There is ample justification for focusing on this section in particular: “Die Sprache der Zerissenheit aber ist die vollkommene Sprache und der wahre existierende Geist dieser ganzen Welt der Bildung.” PhG, p 282, PhS, p 316.

14 PhG, p 286; PhS, p 320.

15 Ibid.