

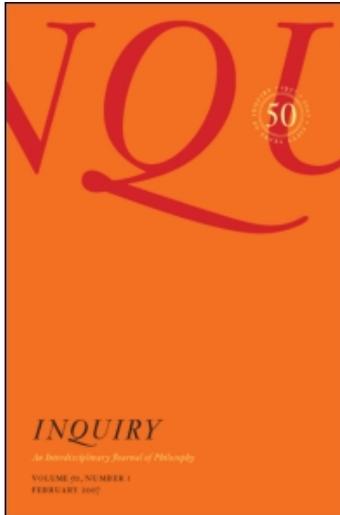
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# Hegel on Political Philosophy and Political Actuality

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**ABSTRACT** *Hegel is the most prominent philosopher who argued that “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought”, and he argued for this with an elaborate theory about the necessarily historical and experiential content of normative principles and ideals, especially, in his own historical period, the ideal of a free life. His insistence that philosophy must attend to the “actuality” of the norms it considers is quite controversial, often accused of accommodation with the status quo, a “might makes right” theory of history, and the abandonment of philosophy’s critical and reflective task. In this article, I explore Hegel’s case for this position in his Phenomenology of Spirit, using as a model for his argument his account of the way the intention of an action can only be properly understood as it is “actualized” in an action, and I consider some of the standard objections in the light of this model.*

## I.

Any human social world is obviously finite, limited in resources and space, comprised of agents whose pursuit of individual ends unavoidably must limit what others would otherwise be able to do, often directly conflicting with such other pursuits. This situation forces the issue of power; who will be subject to whose will; who will subject whom. But these individual agents are finite as well, unable to achieve most of their ends without forms of cooperation and dependence. The biology of human development insures a profound familial dependence throughout childhood, and the variety and breadth of the distribution of human talent, the frailty and vulnerability of human life, all insure that various forms of social dependence will be impossible to avoid. So it has long been acknowledged that a human society is both deeply

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conflictual and competitive, as well as necessarily cooperative and communal. Our natures insure a constant tension between a self-regarding desire for independence and freedom from subjection to the will of other self-regarding agents, as well as a powerful need to achieve some stable form of dependence and relative trust. The major, though not at all exclusive, arena where solutions to this basic problem are proposed and tried out is commonly known as the political.

Even if we presuppose a great deal of agreement at some time within some community about the proper form of the political (already a great idealization), we cannot ever be sure of the trustworthy compliance of everyone with the basic rules and procedures. So all political life involves the use of violence and the coercive threat of violence by one group of people against another. The claim that there *is* such a thing as political life amounts to the claim that, while there is such violence and coercion, its exercise is legitimate, that power may be justifiably exercised over those who may in fact resist such an exercise. Those who, like Marx and Nietzsche, reject the idea that there really is such a thing as politics, deny this claim and so argue that what some call political power is just a disguised version of the exercise of violence by one group against another or by one type against another. On some versions of such a critique, like Alexandre Kojève's, there never are rulers and subjects, representatives and citizens; never even "human beings" as such. Until the final bloody revolution insures classlessness, there are always and everywhere only masters and slaves, those who subject the will of others to theirs, and those whose will is subject to the will of others.<sup>1</sup>

Those who defend the claim to legitimacy, the claim that there is politics, argue in familiar ways. An ancient claim is that no true human excellence may be achieved without hierarchical relations of power, that without such coercive constraint, the baser instincts of human beings would reign and nothing worthwhile could be collectively achieved. Such baser passions, it is claimed, are not subject to persuasion or argument, and there are some human beings in whom such passions are forever paramount. These people (sometimes said to be most people) must be constrained "from above" just as any one individual's passions must be ruled, rather than allowed to rule. The appeal to this sort of argument in the project of European colonialism (and the long history of male exercise of power over "naturally inferior" or "emotional" or "irrational" women) has understandably made it difficult for any such possible claim to be entertained now without the suspicion that it must be an apology for the brute exercise of self-interested power, masquerading in the form of such an argument. We are much more suspicious either that anyone is ever free of such putatively tyrannical passions, and so that "natural rulers" always present the same danger as the "naturally ruled", or that what looks base and nearly inhuman might look perfectly fine to another culture.

One might argue that everyone would simply be better off under some system of political rule, perhaps better off with respect to necessary common

goods that no one could reasonably reject; perhaps better off merely by avoiding a state of such anarchy that no sane person could reasonably prefer it. Those inclined to think this way often think that even if there are a few who are very, very much better off, a coercive use of violence to preserve order is acceptable if everyone is at least better off than they would be otherwise. This kind of argument has its colonial echoes too. (“Yes, we got fabulously wealthy, but we ‘gave’ them the gift of English, or French schools, or developed industrial societies. Think how much better off they are.”) Or one might argue that what appears to be coercion really isn’t; that *inuria non fit volenti*, and everyone can be presumed to have reasonably consented to such an arrangement. Or they would consent if they were rational and so really free agents. On an extension of this approach one could argue that the use of force to protect basic human entitlements, human rights, is not only permissible but required, that no claim for the existence of such rights would be coherent unless measures, even violent and coercive measures, could be taken to protect and enforce them. There is no loss of freedom when one is constrained from doing what he may not do or is compelled to do what he must, what is a universal and rational obligation.

This is all familiar and proceeds as classical and modern political philosophies always have; by assuming that the question of legitimacy (or the goodness, the value) of some form of rule involves a search for a rationale, an argument, a demonstration by force of the better case, in favor of some arrangement of power and against some others, all in the service of resolving the original tension noted at the outset. But I have sketched this set of issues in its abstract forms in order to stress that these familiar ways of looking at the issue *are* abstract. In order for philosophy to get a grip on the core problem of dependence and independence a great abstraction must be made from, let us say, the complex psychological stake that individuals have in achieving and maintaining independence and the ways they come to care about and understand their varieties of mutual dependence. Of course some of all this might inevitably have something to do with what can be rationally defended, justified without reliance on particular interest or bias. We can certainly come to care about such a standard a great deal, and base a great deal on it. But there is no *a priori* reason to think that such a consideration always and everywhere trumps other ways of mattering, other stakes and investments, and there is no reason to think that we could ever agree on what counts as the actualization of such a standard. Its persuasive trumping power might be illusory, might stem simply from its abstractness. To add to the problem, these different ways of caring and kinds of investments vary a great deal across different communities and across historical epochs.

And all of this makes philosophical abstraction both understandable and problematic. One wants some view of the resolution of this tension or problem that can be *shared*, and there is no reason to believe that one’s particular investment or the way things happen to matter to one (or to one’s group)

will or can be shared. The assumption of a rational standpoint, entertaining considerations that rely on no particular point of view, would appear the only way to proceed.

But this comes at a high price. Since no one actually occupies such a rational standpoint (it is artificial, a fiction for the sake of argument) it is unclear what can be expected about its results for finite, concrete agents. We cannot simply assume that, no matter their particular attachments and investments (their parents, their children, their group, their status, the motherland, their God) they can be assumed to care *more* about what reason demands: the greatest good for the greatest number, what form of law is consistent with pure practical reason, the supreme importance of avoiding the state of nature, what they must be assumed to have consented to, and so forth. None of these considerations have any obvious or inherent *psychological* actuality, and it seems absurd to wave away such concerns with actuality as a matter of mere irrationality or contingency that cannot concern philosophers. That approach threatens to turn political philosophy into a mere game, operating under initial abstraction conditions so extreme that they allow no actual role other than as ideals that we might hope to approach asymptotically, if even that. Indeed, an insistence of the putative purity of such ideal considerations—the claim that the philosophical cogency of an argument form is one, wholly distinct thing, its possible application in a colonial project another—is just what inspires suspicions that the argument form itself is mere ideology. What can be said about such a situation?<sup>2</sup>

## II.

Hegel is the most prominent philosopher who argued that “philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought”, and he argued for this with an elaborate theory about the necessarily historical and experiential content of normative principles and ideals, especially, in his own historical period, the ideal of a free life. His insistence that philosophers must attend to the actuality of the norms it considers is quite controversial, often accused of accommodation with the status quo, a “might makes right” theory of history, and the abandonment of philosophy’s critical and reflective task. That is an important criticism, but for the moment, we should note that Hegel’s project marked the beginning of what we now call critical theory, a social theory with a critical implication for an assessment of social reality. This sort of attention to actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) depends on one crucial premise that I would like to explore briefly in what follows.

The problem I am interested in is particularly clear in Hegel’s theory of freedom. I argue in *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy* that Hegel has a rational agency theory of freedom. This means that he joins with Kant and Fichte in arguing (a) that a condition for both the inherent worth, the inherent dignity of a human life and the actual substance of a satisfying or fully realized

human life is that it be a self-ruled or autonomous life, such that a subject can truly be said to be leading such a life and (b) that *this* condition can only be fulfilled if such a leading or self-rule be understood as a self-constraint and self-direction by norms, only in so far as a subject is a rational agent. Difficulty emerges when we understand what Hegel considers to be the nature of such a rational agency, or how he understands the self- and other-relation constitutive of such agency. He seems to want a rational agency theory without any reliance on any notion of reason at home in the Platonic, Aristotelian-Thomistic, Kantian, contractulist or consequentialist traditions. Although it is again controversial, I want to say that Hegel conceives of such practical rationality as a “social practice” or that he conceives of it “pragmatically” or that he has a “historicized” view of what counts as the appeal to reasons. The point is that he understands practical reason as a kind of interchange of attempts at justification among persons each of whose actions affects what others would otherwise be able to do, and all this for a community at a particular time, and so in a way that changes.

However, it is also true that Hegel does not consider reason as merely a subjective faculty exercised by individuals and this has consequences for both the subjective and objective sides of practical-reason-giving-and-demanding. Subjectively it means that the reflection and deliberation essential to such a subjective dimension (the entertaining of considerations about what one ought to do) is not formalizable, does not involve a method or permanent set of rules or a moral law or any sort of calculus. One deliberates, as he says, “qua ethical being” (*sittliches Wesen*). Concretely, this means that considerations like “because I am her father”, or “because that is what a good businessman does”, or “you cannot, because that is my property”, or “because I am a citizen” simply *are* practical reasons. They are not initial steps requiring a full deduction of a further claim that, say, one ought always to do what is required of a modern citizen of a *Rechtsstaat*, all before such a subjectively offered reason could “really” be convincing or successful. The ultimately Kantian conception of autonomy and rationality that supports such an intuition is, Hegel claims, a dangerous fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

Since for Hegel such an embodied and social conception of practical rationality can only get a grip within, at the particular moment, the basic institutions of bourgeois modernity, there remains a question about the objective or institutional rationality of such *institutions*, and Hegel has set things up such that any answer that averts to “what rational *individuals* would will” has been closed off. (This contractulist conception is simply *one* of the kinds of reasons offered in social exchanges, relevant perhaps under some conditions, at a time; it is not formally constitutive of such exchanges.) This all then requires a much different narrative or developmental account of objective rationality, and this is what inspires the obvious skepticism. Someone might obviously complain that no consideration of the genesis of a historical practice could ever be relevant to its rationality or normative

sufficiency in general. Down this path, goes the criticism, lies mere historical sociology, or the history of what communities have *taken* to be normatively sufficient, not an account of such sufficiency.

This latter issue, the problem of objective rationality and its developmental justification, bears an enormous amount of weight in Hegel's project. If Hegel's theory of practical rationality is a social and institutional theory in the sense just described, one is led immediately to questions about why justifications offered like "because I am a member of the National Socialist party", or "in the Mafia", or "you cannot have that job because you are woman" should not count within a community at some time as effective justifications if they are as a matter of fact offered and accepted as such. Hegel treats the subjective side of practical rationality as interwoven with everyday practices of justification, and so treats even reflective assessments of such claims—assessments say of *whether* being a woman should disqualify someone from a job—as also manifestations of a practice at a time, at least if these reflections can also play a part in the actual practice of attempts at mutual justification. Hegel may have a view about why justifications offered from positions of unequal power, well short of mutually recognitive social positions, cannot be effective or "actual" justifications, but his own style of reasoning does not allow him to rely on such a standard as a formal or abstract norm within a social practice. We need to know what *counts* as such "full mutuality" and exactly why, and what concretely he means by "fails" to be an actual or effective justification, and this will require his developmental account, and that will raise again the suspicions that the essentially normative function of philosophical reflection, calling social practices and moral claims to account before the bar of reason, will have been abandoned.

There is no question that these kinds of questions pose problems for Hegel, but it is also important to see that Hegel is starting in a far better position to address an obvious fact about practical norms than most traditional theories. These norms change; sometimes radically. We are living through one of the greatest of such changes in human history—the beginning of the end, at least in Western societies, of the normative authority of any claim for a gender-based division of labor. One can take a huge step in Hegel's direction simply by conceding that it is, at the very minimum, highly implausible that the right explanation for this change (and the right way to take account of it in a philosophical theory of normativity) is that someone or some group discovered a moral fact that had lain hidden for thousands of years, in principle accessible to human beings but unfortunately (for the thousands of generations involved and the talent wasted and squandered) undiscovered. One could say the same thing about slavery, segregation, child labor, colonialism. Even more globally, we could and should raise the same question about *why* in Western societies the ideal of freedom should have attained such importance, or how and when the boundaries determining who gets to count as an agent and why came to be determined, and so forth.

So, if such a narrative is to be effective, it must do more than tell one of many possible stories about such a development. If we are specifically interested in basic normative proprieties, we seem bound to try to determine retrospectively something initially quite vague but, given the situation just described, clearly and unavoidably on the agenda: something like why essential features of a certain form of life, say essential features of modern moral and ethical and political identity, have come to have the grip they now do, why it would be difficult to imagine a livable form of life, given such a history, assuming any other form. (Put in its negative form, a moral institution like liberalism, say, needs what Bernard Williams called an “error” theory to account for its belatedness, the recentness of its authority.)<sup>4</sup> Such a project would have to be painted on a large canvas. It should probably include as many dimensions of spirit as possible: the history of religion, of politics, of art, or philosophy and certainly the history of “spirit’s experience of itself”, a “phenomenology of spirit” in its self-education and development. Such a project might fall well short of a claim about necessity, a claim that matters could not have been otherwise, but, given some minimum historical continuity and historical memory, and given the context created by various forms of social breakdown, normative failure, and so the inappropriateness, the lack of traction possible, for many merely hypothetical historical alternatives, something a great deal more than a “one damn thing after another” account might be possible. Some claim that, given the context created by human attempts to justify themselves to one another, one set of alternatives has its natural home in such a context, and others do not, cannot (could not simply make much sense in such a context).

Finally, there is a more formal objection to this whole approach. Practical reasons are being treated as institution and time bound considerations demanded and offered within a social practice as justifications for actions that impede what others would otherwise be able to do. (This is already a matter for a great deal of clarification. Everything one does might potentially be construed as falling under such a category and even some clear-cut inhibitions of others need not require justifications.) But one could reasonably charge that at bottom such a pragmatic consideration is either incomplete or circular.

Whatever is proposed as a justifying consideration can only be said to do any justifying work by virtue of some substantive claim made about what *is* appropriate or permitted or required, and *why*; not by virtue of its functional characteristic as mediating social conflict or actualizing mutuality of recognition. Such a proffered consideration can only do *that* on the basis of *what* is actually claimed, and whatever that is, whatever is claimed, will count as rational or not independently of the role it plays, will count as rational on some theory of substantive practical rationality. That is, one cannot offer as such a consideration something like “whatever will do the job of mediating our conflict or achieving mutual recognitive status”.

But this objection would confuse the philosophical level at which something like the theory of objective spirit, or the phenomenological justification of the Absolute standpoint operates and “lived” experience, “on the ground”. At that latter level, Hegel’s examples are all substantive and contentful: I have a right to expect fulfillment of that contract because we both signed it; I may do that because I am your father, and so forth. Such are what the “actuality” of the norm of freedom (and its required mutuality) have turned out to be, and they have that status (truly function as reasons) not as the result of a philosophical deduction but as the result of, one has to say with breathtaking sweep, the historical experience of, the self-education of, spirit. It is at that level of understanding that Hegel’s account should be considered a pragmatic one.

This is an *extremely* controversial position, even when stated with some modesty. We live in a post-Foucauldean world, see brute contingency everywhere in historical change, and where change is intelligible, we apparently now like to think of it as the mere contingent result of a constantly shifting struggle for power, for control of the social agenda. But it is important at least to sketch something like Hegel’s opening gesture in response, the principle on which such reconstruction and interpretation would depend. So, how *does* Hegel understand his “demonstration”, what he even went so far as to call, in describing the Jena *Phenomenology*, a “deduction”? I want to give some sense of his view of the issue, as that view is expounded in the opening and closing discussions of that work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>5</sup>

### III.

In face of all these issues, I want to make four relatively uncontroversial claims about the book.<sup>6</sup> First, the great contrast in the book is clearly between an initial mode of self-understanding in relation to the world, to one’s deeds and towards others that Hegel designates as “consciousness” or “natural consciousness” or sometimes the point of view of “understanding”, and an achieved self-understanding as Spirit. In more traditional philosophical terms this amounts to a new theory of subjectivity, of what it is to be a cognizing and acting subject, making up one’s mind about facts and events and resolving to act, one opposed to Cartesian interiority, Kantian transcendentalism, Christian dualism, and self-causing models of individual agency like Kant’s. What this successor notion of subjectivity amounts to, what Spirit is, is clearly the major issue in the book, but there is no question that the heart of his claim is introduced at the end of the first three chapters, when Hegel announces, “With this, we already have before us the concept of *Spirit*”, and offers his famous initial definition: “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (110, §177).

Secondly, whatever else the *Phenomenology* is, its logic, the way it presents the case it wants to make about Spirit’s ultimately successful self-knowledge

and sociality is, broadly speaking, developmental, not deductive or analytic. Later parts are, at the very least, supposed to rely or rest on what transpired in earlier passages, especially on the inadequacy or partiality of the point of view entertained in any one section, and on some sort of improvement or correction or more comprehensive perspective.

Some commentators have even claimed that this developmental logic is actually a kind of narrative and that its logic or the coherence of its ordering is much closer to the logic of a *Bildungsroman* than an ever more logically consistent treatment of ever more self-conscious presuppositions. This clearly goes too far since Hegel wants to claim that the development and self-realization of Spirit is some sort of a rational process, although it is also true that, since Hegel is insisting on a “living” and “fluid” form of such rationality, it is initially unclear just what one would be claiming against a more dramatic or literary notion of narrative development.

Third, the engine that drives all of this forward is, stated most broadly, “negation”; more specifically, a kind of self-negation. Natural consciousness is said to suffer a kind of “violence” at its own hands. It would take a long time to explore adequately the distinct use of the term “the negative” and its many cognates. Suffice it to say here that everyone (Hegel, the idealists, the Romantics) understood the term to be originally a Kantian one. Consider just one casual remark by Schlegel: “Kant introduced the concept of the negative into philosophy. Wouldn’t it be worthwhile now to introduce the concept of the positive into philosophy as well?”<sup>7</sup> The image is of a subject embodying a point of view or world-orientation or self-understanding or practice, which is born in such a way that such a subject comes to create a dissatisfaction with its own deepest principles and commitments. Such disaffection, whatever it is, is not something that can be said to happen *to* whoever the subject of the narrative is; it is *self*-inflicted. Obviously, one such way is Kant’s transcendental turn, his concern with critical limitations on claims to know, and so his “negation” of the claims of metaphysics. (In the Preface, compressing almost the whole book into a formula, Hegel remarks on “the mediation of becoming-other-to-itself [*Sichanderswerdens*] with itself”, and as he often does, defines true human subjectivity as “pure, *simple negativity*” (10, §18). These two notions—the developmental nature of Spirit and this self-negating quality—are combined in that quite paradoxical and frequent characterization of Spirit in the *Encyclopedia* that reappears with great frequency throughout Hegel’s works, however hard it is to understand: that Spirit is a “product of itself” and so is the foundation of the claim that “the Absolute . . . is essentially a *result*” (11, §20).

Fourth, and most important, this turn against itself is explicitly said by Hegel *not* to be like what we now think of “critical reflection”, the attempt to examine unexamined assumptions, to take nothing for granted, to think for oneself and not blindly follow the lead of others, in general to see if one can reflexively defend some norm or principle to which one is committed. Hegel

briefly argues in the Introduction for the claim noted above: that all such attempts must commit the very sin against which they preach: any determinate attempt at such reflection must embody something unreflected, as standard or criterion, in order to move forward at all. What I want particularly to stress is that Hegel says, that in any case, what is going on in the *Phenomenology* is *not* this story, or not primarily the story of this sort of education, as if it were a Socratic expansion of what is more and more examined in a life or within a culture. In the most relevant passages from the Introduction, Hegel first notes that the “doubt” in question in his book will *not* correspond to the usual notion of doubt, which he calls “shilly-shallying about this or that presumed truth” (49, §78). He speaks instead of “this thoroughgoing scepticism” (50, §78), and of an experience of losing one’s way that is so profound it is said to involve “the loss of its own self” (49, §78), all of which he contrasts explicitly with the kind of language Kant had used to define the practical motto of Enlightenment: *sapere aude*. This difference corresponds for some commentators (such as Ludwig Siep) to a difference in the senses of “experience” [*Erfahrung*] invoked by Hegel.<sup>8</sup> The critical, reflective sense just refers to one’s correcting false beliefs and substituting, if not true, than at least better grounded beliefs, on the basis of “experience”. The more dramatic sense that Hegel appears to invoke is much closer to a complete overturning or conversion of consciousness, the kind of change we think of as a religious experience or deep political transformation. I think it is right that Hegel is thinking more of the latter sort of “experience”; and therein lies the problem. This last is exactly the sort we think most certainly has *no* “logos” or account. It seems to happen to us for a very wide variety of reasons, and the idea that we actually bring this about ourselves, and there could be a science of experience in *this* sense, a “logic” to this sort of experience, indeed as part of some collective purposive activity, seems very counter-intuitive.<sup>9</sup> Indeed it was Hegel’s claim to be able to formulate such a “logic” or inner rationality to life itself that so amused the romantic critics of Hegel like Schlegel and Novalis, who constantly mocked in particular this aspect of Hegel. If there is any sort of illumination of “life as lived” it will surely come from poetry, they argued, and it will not involve a logic.

So the question of Spirit raises the question of the status of sociality (in contrast with reflective individuals and self-causing agents), the nature of a developmental logic or a form of rational development for “living”, “moving”, “fluid” concepts, and the somewhat unfamiliar notion of self-negation. I suggest that the last question is the best window onto the others: why does Hegel here invoke a level of self-inflicted doubt that reaches *despair* to describe the nature of phenomenological development, and if it is *not* “doubt that my beliefs might not be true” or doubt “that I am really entitled to the normative claims I make”, what sort of doubt/despair is it? Put in terms of another powerful image which Hegel uses much later in the *Phenomenology* to describe the problem facing Spirit (and which he repeats in such generality

at the beginning of his *Lectures on Fine Art*), what does it mean to say that Spirit or even human existence itself is like a “wound” that is (i) self-inflicted, (ii) one which Spirit itself can heal, and even more astonishingly, (iii) one which, when healed, leaves no scars (407, §669). Put another way: Wittgensteinians sometimes talk about being “caught in” or “grabbed by” a “picture”. What Hegel appears to be addressing is the problem of what it is for a “picture” or shape of spirit to lose its grip, cease to command allegiance, fail in some way, *and all this in a way that is open to a philosophical, not merely sociological or historical explanation*. Indeed, Hegel seems to think that making philosophical sense out of such a process just *is* what it is to heal this experience of loss; to heal it so well that no scars remain. This of course requires an answer to the very largest question of them all: what is it to have obtained “absolute knowing” and how could *that* be said to heal, without scars, the wound of existence itself?

Raising this question obviously forces our attention to the surprisingly few “meta-phenomenological” digressions inside the *Phenomenology* itself about itself and clearly calls for some, let us say, de-mythologizing work, a way of rendering the notions of “wound”, “self-inflicted”, “healing” and “scars”, “fluidity”, “looking death in the face”, and “violence” less metaphorical and more prosaic. That is what I propose to do briefly in what follows.

#### IV.

So far these just seem to be reformulations of the problem and they serve mostly as a warning about how much and what sort of attention to historical change would have to be involved to understand properly both the content and the authority of “thick” concepts like “freedom”, “justice”, “explanation”, “beautiful”, “pious” and so forth. But in the next paragraph, Hegel takes a giant step towards clarity when he tells us, and then repeats several times throughout this pivotal chapter, that a paradigmatic instance of the logic of self-externalization and so fulfillment and reunification with externality is “the self-assured Spirit that *acted*” (484, §796). He is appealing here, I would suggest, to the two most important discussions of action in the *Phenomenology*, Vc, “Individuality which takes itself to be real in and for itself” (a passage the point of which is to show that individuality *cannot* be “real in and for itself”) and VIc, “Spirit that is certain of itself. Morality” (the point of which again is to show that a subject could *not* coherently carry through a merely self-certain conception of itself). Or, in other words, he is pointing to the passages that are the keystones for this interpretation of his practical philosophy. In both passages, Hegel offers a phenomenology of what amounts to the standard or default understanding of the distinction between actions and events in the modern Western tradition, and of the relation between individual and deed, and he exposes their limitations in ways ultimately of great relevance for the question of absolute knowing.

In both the relevant sections of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to exhibit phenomenologically the severe limitations of the standard, individualist, position (the “inner” determining the “outer”) and proposes instead to look not at several distinct causally initiated phases of an action but to view actions as evolving and changing expressions of a subject’s intentions over an extended time, determinate only in extended confrontation and reaction within what Terry Pinkard has called “social space”, and not the causal results of a discrete event.<sup>10</sup> That is, here as well as in the passages we have studied, Hegel denies that the right way to fix the determinacy of an action, to determine just what it was that was done, is to look exclusively to a subject’s *ex ante* formulated intention. He insists that such putative intentions cannot, if they are to be understood as “actual” intentions, be temporally isolated from their expression in action, that such subjective formulations and reasons change in the course of the deed, and that it is quite possible that persons can be wrong about their actual intentions and motivation, that only as expressed in the deed in this public, social space, is it clear what they are committed to and sometimes clear why. In the present context, this position makes intuitively clearer why Hegel is referring so frequently to his position on action as a way of explaining why there is no strict separation between a concept and its “actualization” or “fulfillment”, why the comprehension of conceptual content requires attention to the “fluidity” and “living spirituality” of a norm. In Hegel’s view in the relevant sections of the *Phenomenology*, actually to have an intention *is* to struggle to express that intention in a public and publicly contestable deed, subject to great temporal fluidity and to appropriations and interpretations by others that can greatly alter one’s own sense of what one is about.

It is, to use Hegel’s frequent term, to “sacrifice” the purity and certainty (and so security) of one’s self-understanding and to subject oneself to the reactions, counter-claims and challenges of others. Were one to remain in the Inner Citadel of Subjective Certainty, or cling only to what can be formally definable, one’s self-understanding would have to remain suspended in doubt—the question of whether I am actually committed to what I take myself to be, the question of the “actuality” of any self-image, or any claim about normative propriety, would be left suspended, and because of that could be counted as much a fantasy of resolve or intention or commitment as genuine. Action must be understood as a self-negation in this sense, a negation of the subject’s pretension to complete ownership of the nature and import of the deed, and therewith the sharing of such authority with others, or even the sacrifice of philosophy as an ahistorical *a priori* discipline in the traditional, both Platonic and Kantian, senses. All of this can seem like “the way of despair” just in the sense Hegel suggested, “the loss of its own self” (49, §78).<sup>11</sup> But as in many other examples of Hegel’s Christian imagery, the experiential *Bildung* can show that by this loss of a false independence and mastery, one has gained true independence, referred to in the *Philosophy of Right* as being “with itself . . . in this other”.<sup>12</sup>

## V.

In this context he reverts to his sacrificial metaphors and notes how each side of this opposition—formal universality versus rich, living content, or a purely self-certain formulation of subjective intention as the essence of an action, versus the meaning and scope of responsibility assigned to one by others, or pure duty versus the inescapable relevance of all too human, sensible motivations—can be said to “die” (*sterben*) to the other. The paradigm picture he keeps reverting to is of an acting subject so stubbornly insistent on the decisive role played by his subjectively formulated intention, so insistent on the individual authority to determine the determinate content of what was done and what scope the action should include, that the actual transition from intention to action is experienced as a regrettable qualification and intrusion on such purity. The execution of an intention is as much a violation as expression. The reception and reaction of others is regarded as the irritating and ultimately irrelevant intrusion of others into one’s own business, “like flies to spilled milk” as he says in Vc. This is shown to lead to a “experiential” impasse, generating various existential pathologies: “the law of the heart”, “the frenzy of self-conceit”, “the spiritual animal kingdom and deceit, or ‘the matter in hand’ itself”, and “the ‘beautiful soul’”, “evil”. Neither side of this fantasy world, either a self-conception as a contingently motivated, passion-satisfying engine, or a pure self-legislating noumenal subject, can actually *act* on its self-conception and so would die a kind of living death without the moment of reconciliation and “sacrifice” that Hegel points to.

So from an initial, subjectively self-certain point of view, action looks like a self-negation, a violation of the purity and exclusive ownership of the deed thought to be a condition for seeing myself in the deed and so for freedom. But Hegel tries to illuminate the enormous burden carried by such a self-understanding, tries to render experientially plausible the claim that such stubbornness will eventually “break” under such a burden (as in “the breaking of the hard heart” in “Morality” (407, §669))<sup>13</sup> and that ultimately such a subject will come to understand such a negation of its own pure subjectivity as the true *realization* of such subjectivity. This burden is not solely or even mainly a matter of logically incompatible commitments and this “breaking” is not merely the conceptual resolution of such incompatibilities. To think of it this way would be to perpetuate the one-sidedness whose hold the *Phenomenology* is trying to break.

I think Hegel is right that this reliance on the analysis of action to illuminate the central movement of the *Phenomenology* is helpful. If one keeps it in mind, passages like the following are clearer. In commenting on the content of an I’s self-knowledge, he remarks:

It is only when the ‘I’ communes with itself in its otherness that the content is *comprehended*. Stated more specifically, this content is

nothing else than the very movement just spoken of; for the content is Spirit that traverses its own self and does so *for itself* as Spirit by the fact that it has the ‘shape’ of the Concept in its objectivity. (486, §799)

So I have claimed that Hegel’s account of norms for thought and action is anti-formalist and functional, that conceptual or normative content can only be understood by understanding actual historical practices of claim-making and action justification, that Hegel is particularly interested in the failure or breakdown of normative proprieties, understood as a “self-negation” or self-undermining, and that Hegel is right that the logic of action is a useful paradigm for understanding the general relation between concept and actualization.

With this general picture in view, we can see a bit more clearly how Hegel understands the developmental and progressive character of such practices. He clearly wants to claim that we get better at justifying ourselves to each other the more objective institutions embody mutuality of status, and the less we appeal to unmediated, putatively “external” or independent guarantors of such authority, like revelation or tradition or moral intuition or insight.

But there is no methodological way to claim that such practices must be progressive. (The question one is often asked is “How does Hegel *know* that these developments are progressive?” And the answer is that neither he nor anyone can show that historical change must be progressive. Said in a Rortyeian way, he is simply suggesting that we stop asking such pointless questions.) We only get to make such a claim if we can show that some practice and its failure and a community’s recovery after such a failure can be understood in these terms. Hegel’s accounts of Greek tragedy, the Enlightenment’s quarrel with religion, Jacobin politics, romantic notions of interiority, and his account of the lived-out implications of modern moralism, are all compelling examples of such an approach once we know, in effect, what to look for.

There is a good deal more to this story. Hegel also wants to tell a story about the practical unavoidability of the claims for mutual justifiability and the various ways in which the temptations of immediacy undermine such practices. This story starts with his gripping account of the struggle for recognition. But I also want to say that Hegel considers that our understanding all of this, in effect, understanding this last summary, is what understanding “the Absolute Idea” amounts to. It is understanding conceptuality itself, and so is “Absolute Knowledge”. And I would like to close with a brief defense of such a claim.

After all, the position arrived at amounts to the claim that “the Concept in its truth” is to be *always* understood “in unity with its externalization” (483, §795). This must mean that those who think that an independent category theory, or that a doctrine of self-moving conceptual or actually noetic structure underlying the apparent world, constitutes the basic Hegelian position have missed the most important lesson of the *Phenomenology*, have failed to

be properly educated by it. Hegel must, on the contrary, be referring to the totality of Spirit's self-knowledge made possible by "knowing what Spirit is in and for itself", and that means not only the *Encyclopedia* as a whole, but its proper phenomenological preparation and the "externalizations" manifest in the history of art, religion, politics and world history.

Indeed, we have already seen that *The Science of Logic* itself clearly manifests this warning against partial and logicizing readings of Hegel. If nothing else, the poetic passage from the beginning of "The Concept Logic" itself manifests what was for Hegel the unforgettable and non-isolatable lesson of the *Phenomenology* in his project and the relation between historical experience and philosophy. The point is even expressed in imagery appropriate to the *Phenomenology*:

The universal . . . is itself and takes its other within its embrace, but not without doing violence to it; on the contrary, the universal is, in its other, in peaceful communion with itself. We have called it free power, but it could also be called free love and boundless blessedness, for it bears itself toward its other as towards itself; in it, it has returned to itself.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Kojève, A. [1947] (1969) *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. J.H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books).
2. For an account of how this sort of treatment of the issue, formulated in the same terms as those used here, looks in an account of literary "actuality", see my (2010) "The Paradoxes of Power in the Early Novels of J.M. Coetzee", in: A. Leist and P. Singer (Eds.) *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 19–41.
3. One can certainly entertain considerations about what one ought to do in regard to actions that do not seem to affect what others would otherwise be able to do. But the point here is that this is not the primary form of practical reasons, the type from which we should orient discussion. Hegel clearly considers this type marginal (he deals in the *Philosophy of Right* only with social forms relevant to justification to others —claims of right, obligation and "ethical" well-being), and even in their marginality they still inevitably raise some social issue, such as, at the minimum, bare permissibility.
4. For a full discussion, see Williams, B. (2005) *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
5. All parenthetical references in this essay are to Hegel, G.W.F. [1807] (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Citations take the form (page, §paragraph).
6. A more extensive discussion of these same issues can be found in my (2008) "A 'Logic' of Experience? On Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*", in: D. Moyar and M. Quante (Eds.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 210–27.
7. Schlegel, F. (1971) "Athenaeum Fragments", in: *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), p. 161.
8. Siep, L. (2000) *Der Weg der "Phänomenologie des Geistes": ein einführender Kommentar zu Hegels "Differenzschrift" und "Phänomenologie des Geistes"* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp), pp. 63–64.

9. The two issues—that such an experience is self-made, and is rationally explicable, are linked. The link could be said to be Kant’s modernity, the claim that reason knows best only what it makes, that reason knows only itself.
10. Pinkard, T. (1994) *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
11. Cf. especially with respect to the speculative identity Hegel maintains exists between inner and outer in action: “The power of Spirit is only as great as its expression, its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition” (6, §10).
12. Hegel, G.W.F. [1823] (1991) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 42, §7A. Hegel makes what he would consider a “logical” point about the major events in “both” bibles. The story of creation in the Hebrew Bible represents the insufficiency of a God merely contained with himself, and so the need to “empty” [*entäussern*] himself in creating the world. (There is little doubt that Hegel accepts the Lutheran take on this word—Luther’s translation for *kenosis*—and goes farther, claiming as a meaning for the image that God had to empty or lose or externalize himself in what appeared other than him in order finally to be God.) And in the New Testament the imagery is even more Hegelian. God the Father had to become his own son, externalized in the world and lost to him (to himself), preparing the way for reconciliation, or the Holy Spirit. The deeper point here is also, I would argue, ultimately political and ethical: Christ’s iconic status as both Master and Servant, his own father and his own son, at the same time.
13. This is the same paragraph where Hegel makes the remark, “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind” (407, §669).
14. Hegel, G.W.F. [1812] (1969) *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, (London: Allen & Unwin) 603, §1331.