Contents

Notes on the contributors  
Preface  
List of abbreviations and citations  

1 Substance, subject, system: the justification of science in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit  
Dietmar H. Heidemann  

2 "Science of the phenomenology of spirit": Hegel's program and its implementation  
Hans-Friedrich Fulda  

3 The Phenomenology of Spirit as a "transcendentalistic" argument for a monistic ontology  
Rolf-Peter Horstmann  

4 Sense-certainty and the "this-such"  
Willem A. Devries  

5 From desire to recognition: Hegel's account of human sociality  
Axel Honneth  

6 "Reason . . . apprehended irrationally": Hegel's critique of Observing Reason  
Michael Quante  

7 What is a "shape of spirit"?  
Terry Pinkard  

8 Ethical life, morality, and the role of spirit in the Phenomenology of Spirit  
Will Dudley  

v
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9  Self-completing alienation: Hegel’s argument for transparent conditions of free agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEAN MOYAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Practical reason and spirit in Hegel’s <em>Phenomenology of Spirit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUDWIG STEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Religion and demythologization in Hegel’s <em>Phenomenology of Spirit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS A. LEWIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 The “logic of experience” as “absolute knowledge” in Hegel’s <em>Phenomenology of Spirit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT B. PIPPIN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 12

The “logic of experience” as “absolute knowledge”
in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit

Robert B. Pippin

The problem with Hegel’s characterizations of the new philosophical form that he invented, a Phenomenology of Spirit, is simply that there are far too many descriptions. Some are clearly reformulations or specifications of others; but in many other cases the descriptions seem inconsistent, or to reflect different periods in Hegel’s rapidly evolving thought between 1802 and 1806 in Jena. The Phenomenology was originally a “Science of the Experience of Consciousness.” He names it “the Science of the Phenomenology of Spirit” and the “Introduction” to the “System of Science.” It was also the first part of such a system. The Encyclopedia calls the Phenomenology “the scientific history of consciousness.” In the body of the work, Hegel calls the work “the way of the soul which journeys through the series of its own configurations as though they were the stations appointed for it by its own nature, so that it may purify itself for the life of the Spirit, and achieve finally, through a completed experience of itself, the awareness of what it really is in itself” (55, ¶77). He famous calls the Phenomenology “the pathway of doubt,” indeed “the way of despair” (56, ¶78), and thereby “the detailed history of the education of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science” (56, ¶78).

And this is only the beginning. All at once in the first pages of the “Introduction” and in the “Preface,” we are introduced to something that is not only, as just noted, an introduction, a first part of a system, a self-purification, spirit’s self-knowledge, and the “history” of the education of natural consciousness, but also “Spirit’s insight into what knowing is” (25, ¶29), a “ladder” to the standpoint of science (23, ¶26), a record of the way Spirit “look[s] the negative in the face,” and “tarries with it” (27, ¶32), a way of coming to an understanding of “the True” as “the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; yet ... each member collapses as soon as he drops out” (35, ¶47), and all this by means of that constant struggle with doubt and despair. In a slightly more prosaic image in the

"Preface,” and one which clearly identifies Hegel’s unique and original contribution to philosophy, Hegel notes that the Phenomenology will serve a need peculiar to our own age: “to give actuality to the universal, and impart to it spiritual life” (28, ¶33). It will do this by “freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity,” that is, “to bring fixed thoughts into a fluid state,” and so to make “the pure thoughts become concepts,” that is, “spiritual essences” (28, ¶33).

And of course any serious reader must also confront a number of longstanding and relatively unresolved philological questions. There is the famous problem of the alternative, truncated version of “Phenomenology” in the Encyclopedia and there is Hegel’s summary of the Phenomenology — as a “propaedetic” — for his students at Nürnberg, both of which summaries present the work as concluding with the Reason chapter, raising endless questions about two famous issues: The role of the treatment of historical Spirit and religion in the published work, and the systematic place of Phenomenology, either as introduction or propaedeutic on the one hand, or as the second moment of a Philosophy of Subjective Spirit on the other. There are also complex questions about the putative unity or incompleteness of the text (there is some suspicion that it may be a palimpsest) and what appear to be frequent alterations in Hegel’s own mind about his system and its Introduction.

In the face of all these issues, I want to make four relatively uncontroversial claims about the book, all of which together will raise immediately the question I want to pursue. 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’” (108, ¶77).

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 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. The urge 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 (apparently, for some reason, unavoidably or inevitably) to create a dissatisfaction with its own deepest principles and commitments. Such dissatisfaction, whatever it is, is not something that can be said to happen to whoever the subject of the narrative is; it is self-inflicted. In the Preface, compressing almost the whole book into a formula, Hegel remarks on “the mediation of becoming-other-to-itself [Sichanderswerdendes] with itself” and, as he often does, defines true human subjectivity as “pure, simple negativity” (18, ¶18).

These two notions — the developmental nature of Spirit and this self-negating quality — are combined in the Encyclopedia’s quite paradoxical and frequent characterization of Spirit as a “product of itself” and is the foundation of the claim that “the Absolute . . . is essentially a result” (19, ¶25).

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. For, as Hegel briefly argues in the Introduction, 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 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” (56, ¶78). He speaks instead of “this thoroughgoing skepticism” (56, ¶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” (56, ¶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.1 The critical, reflective sense just refers to one’s correcting false beliefs and substituting, if not true, then 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 counterintuitive.2

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 masochistic 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

---

1 Siep (2000), 63–64.

2 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.
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 (1) self-inflicted, (2) one which Spirit itself can heal, and even more astonishingly, (3) one which, when healed, leaves no scars (360, ¶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 “metaphenomenological” digressions inside the *Phenomenology* itself about itself and clearly calls for some, let us say, demythologizing 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.

There is one interpretive problem that must be addressed first. The language I have quoted is very dramatic and seems to refer to some sort of existential failure in a “shape of Spirit,” perhaps as manifest in Attic tragedy or the French Revolution. Yet there are a large number of transitions in the *Phenomenology* that do not seem to involve any such notion of failure. The first three chapters come to mind in this respect, as do many of the transitions in Chapter V. No despair, no bold facing up to death or tarrying with the negative, no religious conversion, seem involved by the realization that perceptual discrimination requires the active work of the understanding, or for the realization that “physiognomy” is self-refuting.

I suggest that Hegel must have in mind two different questions posed by the *Phenomenology*, questions that must be posed separately if we are to understand both why Spirit must be understood phenomenologically, and what it is to understand Spirit phenomenologically, an approach that, from Chapter VI onwards seems much more tied to historical actuality. There is a difference, in other words, between the question of possible models of cognizing and acting subjectivity, or putative candidates for such a status which, as quite fragmented, partial, and so distorted “shapes” of a possibly experiencing subject, can not actually stand as models of experience at all, and, on the other hand, a self-dissolving (sich-auflösende) “actuality” (as he calls it) experience in the full sense, experienced by a historical “shape of Spirit,” now understood in sufficient complexity to count as a full subject of experience but which just thereby can be shown to undermine its own satisfaction. This distinction, between failing to be a possible model of experience at all, and an actually experiencing subject which can be “shown” to experience its inability to carry through or realize its commitments, is not a hard and fast one, and at some points in the text it is, admittedly, not clear how Hegel is organizing these possibilities. At some point the appeal to the spiritual life and the fluidity of concepts just seems to amount to a rather forced “personification” of positions in epistemology or theories of freedom, with such representative “characters” arguing back and forth. At other points, there seems instead to be an appeal to an existential logic of sorts, or a demonstration of a different sort of insufficiency or failure, as in the account of the French Revolution or of Rameau’s nephew. At some points, both strategies seem in play, as in the paradoxes of mastery, which are both conceptual (coerced recognition is not recognition) and, for want of a better word, existential (there is something unsatisfying in being recognized by one whom one does not recognize).

However, formally, this is not at all a mode of argumentation that is foreign to Hegel. In his *Philosophy of Right*, abstract right and morality are not distinct *experiential* stages, partial alternatives to what will turn out to be ethical life. The failure of such limited putative forms of normative-mindedness stems from precisely the doomed attempt to think them independently of; as if prior to, and independent of, ethical life. As he says at the end of the Morality section, by contrast with such a view:

> The sphere of right and that of morality cannot exist independently (für sich); they must have the ethical as their support and foundation.

These earlier stages cannot then be said to be “actually” educative or formative in the way that experience in the family or modern civil society can indeed be said actually to form a rich, living sense of the relation

---

1 It is also open to a critic to say at this point: If Hegel wanted to say, as you seem to be suggesting, that the *Phenomenology* really only truly begins in Chapter VI, he could have said so. I am trying to respond that, in a way, that is exactly what he did claim.

2 Hegel (*PhR*), 186, §341 A.
between individuality and universality in a rational form of life. He goes so far as to say, when explaining the differences between the abstractions "person," "subject," and the concrete aspects of ethical life, that it is only well along in the account of ethical life, in a distinct form of sociality—certain relations of needs—that it is even possible for the first time to refer to such a putative bear of right as "the human being." And this seems to mean just what it says: That putative (vermeintlich) relations merely of right or morality cannot, considered on their own, be said to be fully human relations.

Something very similar is going on in the crucial third paragraph of Chapter VI:

Spirit is thus self-supporting, absolute, real being. All previous shapes of consciousness are abstract forms of it. They result from Spirit analyzing itself, distinguishing its moments, and dwelling for a while with each. This isolating of those moments presupposes Spirit itself and subsists therein; in other words, the isolation exists only in Spirit which is a concrete existence. (339, ¶440)

We still need to know how Spirit can be "self-supporting" as well as just thereby being self-negating or "self-wounding," but the point for the moment is to notice how Hegel makes this separation between the analysis of what will turn out to be non-separable moments of Spirit, abstractly considered as if possibly distinct models of experience, and Spirit's "actual" experience of itself, as Hegel keeps putting it. At this point, just at the conclusion of his account of the ultimately impossible attempt to consider practical reason in such an isolated way as a faculty of an individual subject, he puts the point this way:

Finally, when this Reason which Spirit has is intuited by Spirit as Reason that exists, or as Reason that is actual in Spirit and is its world, then Spirit exists in its truth; it is Spirit, the ethical essence that has an actual existence. (339, ¶440)

Another very odd formulation—a transition from a subject which has reason to one which sees itself as reason—but as in many other formulations about this break in the text (from, let us say, the component conditions for the possibility of Spirit to the attempts by actual Spirit to know and realize itself), the key phrases concern "actuality," "actual," and "actualization." Such an emphasis continues in the crucial metaphenomenological remarks at the beginning of the "Religion" chapter.

Here Hegel makes a distinction between what should be phenomenologically represented as happening in time and what should not. In making pretty much the distinction noted above, he says quite explicitly that the "presence" of the moments consciousness, self-consciousness and reason in Spirit, and Spirit's representation to itself of its own significance in religion are "not to be represented as occurring in Time" (365, ¶679). This is only one way of considering the elements of and possibility of experience that Hegel is treating as preliminary, if also crucial and indispensable. Such a way of considering such inseparable moments in separation from one another is then distinguished from the representation of "the totality of Spirit":

Only the totality of Spirit is in Time, and the "shapes," which are "shapes" of the totality of Spirit, display themselves in a temporal succession; for only the whole has true actuality and therefore the form of pure freedom in face of an "other," a form which expresses itself as Time. (365, ¶679)

This interesting but very compressed passage connects the themes of actual Spirit (as opposed to possible models of Spirit), temporality, and freedom, and so provides a hint of how and why Hegel thinks of Spirit's self-realization in time as a manifestation of freedom. For the moment, though, the point is that, if only the totality of Spirit or Spirit as Spirit is in time, and so must be studied as such, and we have not been doing so heretofore, then we have not yet begun the study of Spirit in its "actuality." It is only now, after all, that we are beginning to get in view what Spirit as an actually experiencing subject is. Even the subject of Chapter VI is still a limited treatment because, as Hegel says at the beginning of the Religion chapter, Spirit does not yet know itself as Spirit and so regards religion, the representation of its (ultimately) absolute status, as but one of the distinct experiential components of a life. This is confirmed quite clearly and definitively when Hegel, in describing what the Phenomenology will now be about, compared to its earlier discussions, says:

These shapes, however, are distinguished from the previous ones by the fact that they are real Spirits, actualities in the strict meaning of the word, and instead of being shapes merely of consciousness, are shapes of a world. (340, ¶441)

We are, in other words, under way in just what Hegel often says the Phenomenology is, an Introduction or even a prolegomena. For most of the Phenomenology, we are, strictly speaking, not yet studying or coming to understand Spirit; we are coming to understand what such a mode of self-knowledge would have to be, and to speak plainly, we are coming to see that it must be historical, that Spirit is only what it has made itself in actuality. Only as historical can consciousness be given "the form of free actuality," and so be understood as Spirit; "but only Spirit that is object to
The "logic of experience" as "absolute knowledge"

driven and such experience does not function as an independent validator or external test but as helping to fix or realize or "fulfill" the determinacy of some self-understanding or conceptual content itself. Experiential manifestations are not "instances" of such content, or examples; such dimensions make up the concept's content. Hegel points out that it was precisely the error of the beautiful soul and a strict moralism of pure duty to regard itself as in opposition to an external public world subject to the interpretations of and implications for others that a subject could not control and so would cease to recognize as "his." When Hegel tries to explain what it would be to give up such an attitude, he begins to describe what he clearly regards as the most important "movement" in all of the Phenomenology. His introduction of this explanatory language is important enough to warrant a full quotation:

Since the Concept holds itself firmly opposed to its realization, it is the one-sided shape which we saw vanish into thin air, but also positively externalize itself and move onward. Through this realization, this objectless self-consciousness ceases to cling to the determinateness of the Concept as against its fulfillment; its self-consciousness gains the form of universality and what remains is its true Concept, or the Concept that has attained its realization; it is the Concept in its truth, viz., in unity with its externalization. [426, ¶799]

This passage introduces formulations that would become canonical in Hegel's work, especially the insistence that we need to understand a concept in its "actuality," that so understanding conceptual content is true understanding, a comprehension of the idea, defined as the concept together with its actuality. And it formalizes the Phenomenology's claim to understand concepts in their "spiritual lives" and as always "self-moving," as well as the claim that this notion of "living" content is the result of an content-constituting, unavoidable self-externalization, not the submission of an ex ante determined content to an external experiential test.

So far, these just seem to be re-formulations of the problem, and they serve mostly as a warning about how much and what sort of attention to

---

* Any full discussion of this issue would have to take account of the implications of Hegel's criticism of the way Kant distinguishes concept and intuition in his first Critique. Put another way, what I am claiming in this passage is that there are the implications of denying any strict separability of concept and intuition.

7 This is a crude and simplistic summary. Hegel is no nominalist. He seems to think of his positions on universals and particulars as Aristotle's "immanentist," anti-chorism position, with the crucial and huge additional claim—that such universals "move," are in time, change.
historical change would have to be involved to understand properly both the content and the authority of “thick” concepts such as “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” (426, §796). He is appealing here, I would suggest, to the two most important discussions of action in the Phenomenology – V.C, “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 VI.C, “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). 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.

That default modern distinction understands actions as things done intentionally by individuals, purposely, for a purpose. This is sometimes said to mean: Acting from or on or because of an intention. Or, of the many possible descriptions of some occurrence, it is an action if there is a true description under which is intentional. The relation between an individual and his deed is, in both the Humean and Kantian sides of the modern tradition, understood causally. In the former this is natural causality and in the latter noumenal causality, but in both cases the assumption is that had not a discrete mental event initiated a body movement there would not have been action, and that the proper focus for any explanation of an action is on this causally efficacious, determinate, prior mental state or intention, whether a passion or a maxin.

In both the relevant sections of the Phenomenology, Hegel tries to exhibit phenomenologically the severe limitations of this position 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, determine only in extended confrontation and reaction within what Terry Pinkard has called “social space,” and not the causal results of a discrete event. That is, 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. This is a counterintuitive position. It means that a subject can often only “learn from the deed,” as Hegel says, what it is he did and what his stake in the deed actually was, and it implies a deep dependence on the reception of the deed in society as helping to fix determinately what was in fact done. But in our context, this position makes intuitively clearer why Hegel is referring so frequently to this position 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, what I have identified as the core position of the Phenomenology. 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 term, to “sacrifice” the purity and certainty (and so security) of one’s self-understanding and to subject oneself to the reactions, counterclaims, and challenges of others. Were one to remain in the Inner Citadel of Subjective Certainty, or clinging 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” (56, §78). But as in many other examples of Hegel’s Christian

8. Cf. especially with respect to the speculative identity that 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).
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.”

This is the sort of language Hegel uses several times in the Absolute Knowing chapter. He remarks:

Through this movement of action, Spirit has come on the scene as a pure universality of knowing, which is self-consciousness, as self-consciousness that is the simple unity of knowing. It is only through action that Spirit is in such a way that it is really there, that is, when it raises its existence into Thought and thereby into an absolute antithesis, and returns out of this antithesis, in and through the antithesis itself. (427, ¶796)

What is highlighted in the Hegelian account of the nature of action, what he takes as paradigmatic for the logical form of “reconciled” experience and knowledge of this requirement (i.e. absolute knowing), is what he had described in the following way:

This letting-go is the same renunciation of the one-sidedness of the Concept that in itself constituted the beginning; but it is now its own act of renunciation, just as the Concept which it renounces is its own Concept. (426–427, ¶796)

And so:

to set in motion the immediacy of the in-itself ... or conversely, to realize and reveal what is at first only inward (the in-itself being taken as what is inward), i.e. to vindicate it for Spirit’s certainty of itself. (428, ¶801)

In this context, Hegel 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

9 Hegel (FR), 42, §7 A. 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 “empyre” (entstauen) 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. I follow here Terry Pinkard’s translation and reading in his forthcoming translation of the Phenomenology.) 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 politico-ethical: Christ’s iconic status as both Master and Servant, his own father and his own son, at the same time.

The “logic of experience” as “absolute knowledge”

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 Hegel 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 V.C. This is shown to lead to an “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” (360, ¶669))10 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 in 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:

10 This is the same paragraph where Hegel makes the remark: “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind” (407, ¶669).
It is only when the 'I' communes with itself in its oneness 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. (428, ¶799)

But this appeal by Hegel to his account of action raises the question of why he thinks there are such important implications of that account for the Phenomenology's account of conceptuality itself. This is a large topic, but if I would suggest that Hegel treats the problem of conceptuality as in general the problem of normativity, where that simply means: The question is what ought to be done to render a phenomenon intelligible and how actions ought to be justified (what ought to be believed and what ought to be done, one could say), not how the brain processes information or what actually motivates human beings. A recent commentator (Brandom) is right that for Hegel the "realm of das Geistige" is "the normative order," and it is now well known and much appreciated that conceiving of the central modern dualism not as a metaphysical issue about nature and freedom, or materialism and immaterialism, but as a "logical" or categorial issue about the natural and the normative, or the space of causes and the space of reasons, has catapulted Hegel back onto the world, especially Anglophone, contemporary scene in a very exciting way. It is also true that Hegel thinks of concepts or norms functionally, in Kantian terms as predicates of possible judgments and then goes much farther than Kant in linking any possible comprehension of conceptual or normative content to actual use within a linguistic and norm-sensitive or "judging" community. Moreover, although a much larger issue than can be dealt with here, the direction of this interpretation ultimately requires that the nature of the authority of such normative constraints and ideals is "self-legislated," that Hegel's self-making language (that Spirit is a product of itself) is not an entry into philosophical anthropology, but the beginning of an account of the nature of such authority and echoes Kant's famous claim in the Groundwork about our having to be the author of whatever laws we are subject to, subject ourselves to. Under these assumptions, exercising normative authority is understood very much like the expression of intention in a public, social space, functioning as authoritative only if there is a sufficiently harmonious social, meaningful context, and responsive, in the right way, to possible challenges to such authority.12

The "logic of experience" as "absolute knowledge" 225

However, as in the account of action, Hegel's attack on the one-sidedness of intentionalist and causalist accounts and on all notions of conceptual formalism, is not an invitation to behaviorism, as if "others" determine, independently of any subject's view of what is happening and why, what was done. So in the general position which the theory of action serves as an image for, the same applies. Hegel's position is not a prolegomenon to the transformation of philosophy into a mere conventionalism or a sociology of knowledge.

This is so for two reasons. The most important is that Hegel links the comprehensibility of normative claims to some process of rationalization for the individuals and the communities at issue, and this means that for us or for any phenomenologist of these claims to justification, the thesis is that we have to be able both to understand the bases of such claims for the participants (why and in what sense they find the claims justifying) and be able to understand in a broad enough way how "justification" works in order to understand the failure or breakdown of such practices of reason-giving and reason-demanding. That is, secondly, Hegel regards as a condition of such comprehension the ability also to understand the determinate partiality of such normative principles and so the philosophical reason for their breakdown. (There is no gap for Hegel between understanding what was taken to be justifying and the question of the quality of that claim. We are not interested in what vocalizations subjects would emit when challenged, but whether and if so why, their expressions count for them as justifying.)

Admittedly, this sketchy summary assumes quite a lot. In fact it is enormously contentious. Also, the idea that a form of irrationality can be experienced as a kind of suffering, one determinate enough to explain the cycles of authority and loss of authority in the normative history of community, is an extremely controversial one. The empirical evidence is pretty strong that human beings can live with the putative burden of irrationality or indeterminacy for quite a long time.

But Hegel makes no claim that his account is predictive. It is clearly a retrospective and reconstructive sort of teleology, and it targets for comment only those "actual" moments where some correction in the abstract opposition between putative normative content and its "externalization" come to be experienced in a way less subject to such a dualism, and to comment on the significance of such moments within an overall account of Spirit's self-knowledge. Of course, it would take several studies, no doubt

11 See Pippin (2003).
12 In the Preface, Reason is glossed as "purposive activity" (12, ¶32).
several books, to work out the details of this account of determinacy, understood as a kind of self-negating or self-externalization that not only concedes that a coherent social context and appropriate social reception is necessary for meaningfulness, but that the contestations inherent in such a context can be shown to have an intelligible form, prior to all such distinctions, and then a few more studies to understand why Hegel thinks that this view is superior to the Kantian doctrine of concept and intuition, or Fichte on the self-positing of the Not-I, or Schelling's *Indifferenzpunkt*.

Hegel's account, understood in the way suggested, does have two large implications for understanding the claim to absolute knowledge. The first has to do with the infamous completeness or closedness (*Abgeschlossenheit*) problem and so the question of what sort of completion is reached at the end of the *Phenomenology*. It is true that Hegel remarks that:

> the unification of the two sides [Hegel appears to mean Spirit's "pure" knowledge of itself, and a putatively external constraint, limit and opposition to such self-understanding in the public social world, an opposition eventually sublated] has not yet been exhibited [Hegel appears to mean in the self-understanding of Religion]; it [apparently the unification achieved in this chapter, "Absolute Knowing"] is this that closes the series of the shapes of Spirit. (425, ¶794)

And in the next paragraph, Hegel speaks of a certain "completeness" in the presentation of the "content ... of self-conscious Spirit" (425, ¶795).

But in general there is actually not much "content" presented as the content of a phenomenological notion of absolute knowledge and this completeness is that of an Introduction. The thematic content of the claim made for absolute knowing is for Spirit simply to have arrived at a point of "knowledge of itself not only as it is in-itself or as possessing an absolute content, nor only as it is for-itself as a form devoid of content, or as the aspect of self-consciousness, but as it is both in essence and in actuality, or in-and-for-itself" (425, ¶794). This merely prepares us for an understanding of any particular claim to legitimate normative content, and as of yet in the *Phenomenology*, makes no such claim. (Most famously and very consistently there is no account of the modern objective Spirit or ethical life.)

Such a study of an "actualized" Spirit would be a truly "scientific" one, and that raises the second point that follows from this kind of interpretation.

---

13 That the action-theoretic orientation of account of absolute knowledge is not merely exemplary but essential finds partial confirmation in the 1805-6 Jenaer Geistphilosophie, where das sittliche

14 In his remark on "Logic or speculative philosophy" (1823, §37).

15 See here the especially helpful remarks in Siep (2000), 256–257.

16 Hegel (SE), 603, ¶1331.