



Cambridge Elements

The Philosophy of
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Hegel and the Pittsburgh School

Steven Levine



ISSN 2976-5684 (online)

Cambridge Elements

Elements in the Philosophy of Georg Wilhelm

Friedrich Hegel

edited by

Sebastian Stein

Heidelberg University

Joshua Wretzel

Pennsylvania State University

HEGEL AND THE PITTSBURGH SCHOOL

Steven Levine

University of Massachusetts Boston



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009559553

DOI: [10.1017/9781009559546](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009559546)

© Steven Levine 2026

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI [10.1017/9781009559546](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009559546)

First published 2026

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this Element is available from
the Library of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-009-55955-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-55953-9 Paperback

ISSN 2976-5684 (online)

ISSN 2976-5676 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

For EU product safety concerns, contact us at Calle de José Abascal, 56, 1º, 28003
Madrid, Spain, or email eugpsr@cambridge.org

Hegel and the Pittsburgh School

Elements in the Philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

DOI: 10.1017/9781009559546

First published online: August 2026

Steven Levine

University of Massachusetts Boston

Author for correspondence: Steven Levine, steven.levine@umb.edu

Abstract: In recent years, John McDowell and Robert Brandom have developed influential interpretations of Hegel's thought. It is often assumed that their work is complementary, which is why they are said to be members of the same philosophical school, the Pittsburgh School. In this Element, the author asks the question of whether they actually are part of the same school by examining their readings of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On the one hand, their readings of the text significantly diverge. While McDowell reads the *Phenomenology* in a therapeutic spirit, Brandom reads it as constructing a complex pragmatic-semantic theory. But, on the other hand, they both read the text as an account of thought and experience that, while avoiding the Myth of the Given, is nonetheless able to vindicate its objectivity. For this reason, the author argues that McDowell and Brandom belong to the same philosophical school.

Keywords: Hegel, John McDowell, Robert Brandom, The Myth of the Given, The Pittsburgh School

© Steven Levine 2026

ISBNs: 9781009559553 (HB), 9781009559539 (PB), 9781009559546 (OC)

ISSNs: 2976-5684 (online), 2976-5676 (print)

Contents

Introduction	1
1 McDowell and Hegel	6
2 Brandom and Hegel	27
3 Identity and Difference	56
References	64

Introduction

This Element is about the relationship between Hegel and the Pittsburgh School. The Pittsburgh School is comprised of three main members, all of whom taught or currently teach at the University of Pittsburgh: Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom.¹ What is it about these philosophers that makes us think they comprise a single philosophical school, and what does Hegel have to do with this designation?

There are, as far as I can see, four reasons for thinking that one philosopher belongs to the same school as another: they share a methodology; have significantly overlapping substantive positions; are working out the same basic philosophical insight; or they self-consciously stand in the same tradition of thought. McDowell and Brandom do not share a methodology, nor do they share many substantive philosophical positions.² But they do share and work out one basic philosophical insight that they self-consciously inherit from a tradition of thought that begins with Kant and comes down to them via Sellars. To put it simply, this insight is the Kantian one that “intuitions without concepts are blind.”

This insight has a negative and a positive side. On the negative side, it entails a critique of what Sellars calls the myth of the given, specifically the myth of the sensory given. This is the myth that the mere having of sensible intuitions can itself, prior to deployment of concepts, be thought or knowledge. On the positive side, the insight requires that the theorist develop an account of judgment, which is the act through which intuitions and concepts are unified, and an account of how judgment is related to the world. Simply put, we need an account of thought and knowledge that does not take recourse to the given.

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars meant to attack the whole “framework of givenness,” which he argues informs not just “skeptical empiricism” but also “dogmatic rationalism.” It is not only sensible intuitions that can be given, but also universals, categories, and abstract entities. Indeed, for Sellars this framework is so pervasive “that few, if any, philosophers have

¹ While there are other important figures that are part of the Pittsburgh School, McDowell and Brandom are the only members that have developed detailed accounts of Hegel. For this reason, I focus on them in this Element. For somewhat wider views of the school, see Lance 2009 and Sachs 2019. For a general account of the Pittsburgh School, see Maher 2012, and for an account of the Pittsburgh School’s relation to the tradition of Hegelian thought, see Redding 2007. Due to its publication date, however, Redding’s excellent book does not consider McDowell’s essays on Hegel nor Brandom’s main work on Hegel, *A Spirit of Trust*.

² The grounds for these assertions will be provided in the next three sections. In saying that McDowell and Brandom do not have share many philosophical positions I disagree with Maher, who argues that “the main point in calling them a ‘school’ ... and not just a ‘mere group’ ... is that they share concerns and views” (Maher 2012, 2). See Wanderer and Levine 2013.

been altogether free of it; certainly not Kant, and, I would argue, not even Hegel, that great foe of ‘immediacy’” (Sellars 1997, 14). Kant can be read as not free of the framework of givenness because one can read the *Critique of Pure Reason* as saying that the operations of the faculty of sensibility provide subjects with intentional states or episodes prior to the involvement of the operations of the understanding. While the application of the concepts of the understanding further determines these states and episodes, the mere availability for a subject of an object in space and time does not depend on this application. If it did, then the content of empirical experience would depend upon the conceptual operations of the mind, and this, in turn, would seem to threaten us with a kind of idealism that undermines the independence of the empirical world. On this reading of Kant, givenness is not a mythic vice but a virtue insofar as it allows us to make sense of the objectivity of thought.

If one recognizes the need to explain the objectivity of thought, as Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom do, then one is faced with this question: how can one’s account of thought and knowledge avoid the myth of the given while also not falling prey to an idealism that undercuts the independence of the empirical world? It is in attempting to answer this question that Hegel becomes centrally important for McDowell and Brandom, for they both argue that the idealism articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is unique in being able to meet these two desiderata.³ They both think that the *Phenomenology* is able to demonstrate how thought, though rationally unbound by anything outside of itself, *anything given*, is nonetheless *answerable to*, able to capture in its net, how things are in themselves.

Sellars, in contrast, argues that Hegel, like Kant, is not able to avoid the myth of the given, and that his thought gives rise to a “dialectic which leads from Hegel’s *Phenomenology* to nineteenth-century idealism” (Sellars 1968, 16) – that is, an idealism in which thought is not constrained by the objective world. In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars traces this dialectic back to a different reading of Kant than the one in which givenness is a virtue rather than a mythic vice. He argues that Kant, and following him Hegel, blur a distinction between two kinds of intuitive representation that belong to sensibility: a singular yet conceptual representation of an individual “this-such” and a “radically different kind of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual” (Sellars 1968, 7). The first kind of representation, though not general or predicative, has conceptual content. It does so because it is a product

³ While McDowell and Brandom mention other works of Hegel, they both focus on the *Phenomenology* and its program. In this Element, I follow them in this.

of that “interesting meeting ground of receptivity with spontaneity which is the ‘productive imagination’” (Sellars 1968, 4).

The second kind of representation, which is a product of our sheer sensory receptivity, stands outside of the conceptual sphere altogether. Now one might think that positing this second kind of representation just *is* to fall prey to the sensory myth of the given. Here, one has the feeling that Sellars is contradicting himself. But this is not the case because this kind of nonconceptual representation is “postulated rather than ‘found’ by careful and discriminating attention,” postulated to make sense of the “concept of human knowledge as based on, though not constituted by, the impact of independent reality” (Sellars 1968, 9). In other words, the manifold of sheer receptivity is not given within experience at all but is rather a *theoretical* postulation that we make from the “side-ways on” to explain the possibility of knowledge. If the theory is well-grounded then we have a strong basis to think that thought is constrained by an independent reality, and so a basis to avoid the dialectic which leads from the *Phenomenology* to nineteenth-century idealism.

On Sellars’s view, Hegel falls prey to the myth of given because, in not having a notion of theoretical postulation, he is led to think that the categories that are used in our perceiving, thinking, and acting, those of the so-called manifest image, are not replaceable by more fundamental categories, those found in the scientific image of the world.⁴ Though Hegel thinks that the categories of the manifest image are subject to dialectical movement, and so are not given in *that* sense, they are given in the sense that they, as a system, *are* the categories that articulate being and our knowledge of being, rather than a successor set of categories. Here, Hegel falls prey to another version of the myth of the given, the myth of the categorical given.⁵ Hegel therefore not only follows Kant in running together the two kinds of intuition, undercutting the possibility, in the manifest image, of securing knowledge of the independent world, he also has no inkling that the manifold of sheer receptivity that is posited to secure this knowledge can, in the right circumstances, be replaced by another theoretical postulate, one in-line with the more fundamental categories developed by the natural sciences. While Hegel takes it that the categories used in our perceiving, thinking, and acting capture the way things are in themselves, we

⁴ For the distinction between the manifest and the scientific image, see Sellars’s classical paper “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in Sellars 1991. In chapter six of *A Spirit of Trust*, which is about chapter III of the *Phenomenology*, “Force and the Understanding; Appearance and the Supersensible World,” Brandom argues that Hegel in fact has a notion of theoretical postulation, but one that does not lead to the primacy of the scientific image.

⁵ See O’Shea 2021 for this version of the given.

can see, from the perspective of Sellars's scientific realism, that they only capture the way things appear to us.⁶ As Sellars puts it:

A consistent scientific realist must hold that the world of everyday experience is a phenomenal world in the Kantian sense, existing only as the contents of actual and obtainable conceptual representings, the obtainability of which is explained not, as for Kant, by things in themselves known only to God, but by scientific objects about which, barring catastrophe, we shall know more and more as the years go by. (Sellars 1968, 173)

McDowell and Brandom resolutely reject Sellars's idea that there is a theoretically posited manifold of sheer receptivity that could be replaced by another, and so the idea that the world of everyday experience is phenomenal in the Kantian sense. For this reason, they are both "left-Sellarsians" who accept Sellars's stress on the normativity of thought and knowledge and reject his idea that in the dimension of describing and explaining the scientific image has primacy over the manifest.⁷ They both take it that the critique of the sensory given puts the very distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves into question, which opens up a path to making sense of the objectivity of thought in the wake of its modern problematization. While Kant was not able to consistently walk this path, Hegel, in the *Phenomenology*, was. Because they both read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in this way, and endorse the philosophical project found there, we can, I claim, see McDowell and Brandom as part of the same school of thought.

McDowell famously resists this conclusion; resists "being cast as the hind legs of a pantomime horse called 'Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism'" (McDowell 2002a, 98). Though I will ultimately disagree with McDowell about whether he and Brandom comprise a single school, he has good reasons for this resistance. For as we shall see, he and Brandom execute this shared program in completely different ways. McDowell, on the one side, argues that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* outlines a position that presages the "minimal empiricism" that he gives in *Mind and World*, in which thought, thought conceptually unbounded, is constrained by the world because conceptual capacities are operative in receptivity. He argues that the *Phenomenology* must ultimately be read therapeutically, as undoing intellectual knots that we tie ourselves into, which allows us to become self-conscious of what we already know, namely, that there is a speculative identity between mind and world. Brandom, on the other side, argues that the

⁶ For more on Sellars's relationship to Hegel see DeVries 2017 and the papers in Giladi and Sachs 2019.

⁷ For their rejections of this idea, see the first chapter, respectively, of McDowell 2009 and Brandom 2015.

Phenomenology develops a complex pragmatic-semantic theory in which conceptual contents gain determinacy through the experience of error, as well as through the rational recollection of the path by which individuals and recognitive communities rectify their commitments in light of such error. The *Phenomenology* should not be read therapeutically but constructively, as outlining a theory that explains how the contents of the concepts that we apply in our first-order thoughts and judgments can correctly be about the way things are in themselves.

Furthermore, both McDowell and Brandom recognize that the text does far more than give an account of the way thought or judgment is rationally constrained by the world. The *Phenomenology* also involves an account of rational agency, as well as an account of the path by which we become self-conscious about the kind of creatures we are, that is, spiritual creatures. Both therefore develop accounts of spirit: McDowell, in terms of Hegel's Aristotelian inheritance; Brandom, in terms of his Kantian inheritance. Brandom argues that the chapter on "Spirit" in the *Phenomenology* gives us a history of spirit, an account of how we moved from Ancient to Modern *Geist*, and how we ought to move from Modern to an envisioned Post-Modern *Geist*. McDowell, in contrast, sees "Spirit" as concerned with the social-historical conditions that make it possible for individual subjects to both identify with, and reflectively distance themselves from, the norms and practices that make up the ethical life of their community. While the chapter involves a kind of historical recounting, it is for the sake of making sense of the modern individual's ability to actualize their rationality and freedom.

In the next two sections, I aim to give sympathetic accounts of McDowell's and Brandom's readings of the *Phenomenology*. While I sometimes point out differences from more orthodox interpretations, these sections are meant to be constructive rather than critical. I will not, therefore, be very much engaged in the project of examining whether McDowell and Brandom "get Hegel right."⁸ My goal is rather to provide readers with a sufficiently nuanced and integrated account of their positions so that they will be able to judge whether, and to what extent, these two scholars illuminate Hegel's thought. In section three, I examine similarities and differences in McDowell's and Brandom's overall readings of Hegel and the *Phenomenology*, and in this light, come back to the question of whether they are part of the same philosophical school.

⁸ For accounts of McDowell along these lines, see Houlgate 2009–10 and Stern 1999, and for Brandom, see Pippin 2007, Houlgate 2020, and McDowell 2020.

1 McDowell and Hegel

1.1 Introduction

In the Preface to his seminal book *Mind and World*, McDowell tells us that he conceives of the work “as a prolegomenon to a reading of the *Phenomenology*” (McDowell 1996, ix). Since writing *Mind and World*, where Hegel’s presence is mostly in the background, McDowell has, in a series of articles, developed a quite sophisticated reading of *Phenomenology*. In this section, I aim to explicate this reading. I begin with Hegel’s role in *Mind and World* (1.2) and then discuss McDowell’s account of the path that leads from Kant to Hegel (1.3), his heterodox reading of chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* (1.4), his Aristotelian account of spirit (1.5), and finally, his therapeutic reading of the *Phenomenology* (1.6).

1.2 Hegel and *Mind and World*

In *Mind and World*, McDowell famously aims to escape an oscillation that he sees as distinctive of modern thinking, between the myth of the given and coherentism. To see what role Hegel plays in this escape, let me briefly outline the oscillation.

While the myth of the given has many guises, the version that is important for us claims that the immediate givenness to our senses of an object is enough for us to have an intentional thought about that object. The given is attractive because in pointing “to something that is simply received in experience” (McDowell 1996, 6), to something that comes from outside the concepts that we use to form thought or judgment, it ensures that they are *constrained* by the empirical world. But, McDowell argues, the given cannot do what it is supposed to do because it “offers exculpations where we wanted justifications” (McDowell 1996, 8). The given is supposed to explain how the mere impact of an object on sensibility registers *for a subject* as something that provides them with a *reason* for their judgment that something is the case. But if a sensible manifold can be a reason for a subject, then it is no longer merely sensible (as it must already be in the “space of reasons”), and if it can’t be a reason for a subject, then it is not justificatory for them but merely exculpatory, that is, explanatory of their behavior from the “side-ways-on.”

Because the given cannot perform its function of making sense of how thought can be answerable to the empirical world, we swing to a Coherentism in which the only rational constraint on our deployment of concepts in judgment is internal to the system of concepts that we already possess. For McDowell, this position is represented by Davidson, for whom “nothing can count as a reason

for holding a belief except another belief” (quoted in McDowell 1996, 14). But in not being able to explain how thought is rationally constrained by anything outside of itself, this view pictures thought as a “frictionless spinning in a void.” (McDowell 1996, 11). This produces an oscillation back to the myth of the given. But this position, as we know, is hopeless.

For McDowell, we can avoid this oscillation by rethinking receptivity. Receptivity, of course, is one half of a Kantian distinction. For our purposes, receptivity is the involuntary operation of our sensibility that is brought about by the impact of the world, while spontaneity, the other half of the distinction, is the ability to freely and self-consciously employ concepts in a judgment, as well as the ability to revise one’s judgments in light of recalcitrant experiences. McDowell takes it that we can prevent the oscillation by keeping “a firm grip on this thought: receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation [of receptivity and spontaneity]” (McDowell 1996, 9). Receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution, because “conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity,” and not “*on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity” (McDowell 1996, 9). This means that we “should understand what Kant calls ‘intuition’ – experiential intake – not as a bare getting of the extra-conceptual given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content” (McDowell 1996, 9). While there is a difference between a spontaneous exercise of our conceptual capacities in a judgment and an intuitive episode that is brought about in response to the impact of an object, between *judgments* and *experiences*, McDowell insists that this difference does not hinge, respectively, on the one being conceptual and the other not. Instead, the difference is between episodes in which conceptual capacities are freely and responsibly exercised in judgments, and episodes in which conceptual capacities are involuntarily actualized in response to a perceived object.⁹

Because experiences are receptive “they can satisfy the need for an external control on our freedom in empirical thinking” (McDowell 1996, 24). But because conceptual capacities are at work in them, because they are receptivity in operation, experiences can provide one with reasons to judge that things are thus and so. In basing judgments on experience, one does not need to cross a gulf between the sensible and the conceptual, the causal and the rational. When one goes as far as one can along the chain of reasons or justifications “the last step does not take us outside the space of concepts” (McDowell 1996, 10),

⁹ In his paper “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” McDowell adjusts his position, claiming that experiences have intuitional content. While such content is nondiscursive, it remains conceptual in the sense that it is always “already suitable to be the content associated with a discursive capacity” (McDowell 2009, 264).

outside the space of thinkable contents. In McDowell's language, the conceptual is *unbounded*. While *acts* of thinking and judging, specific exercises of spontaneity, are bounded by the world, the *content* thought in such acts of thinking is not. As McDowell puts it:

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so*. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are. (McDowell 1996, 26)

In the Wittgensteinian language that McDowell calls upon, when we are not in error, what we think in thinking, thinkable content, does not stop anywhere short of the facts themselves.

McDowell takes it, I think correctly, that he is here expressing a Hegelian thought, for it “is central to Absolute Idealism to reject the idea that the conceptual realm has an outer boundary.” What McDowell wants to do is “domesticate the rhetoric of that philosophy” (McDowell 1996, 44) by showing that the denial of an outer boundary for the conceptual does not undermine the possibility of our being answerable to the world, but in fact makes it possible. From this point of view, “Hegelian rhetoric . . . can be interpreted as expressive of a philosophical outlook that is precisely protective of the ordinary realism of common sense” (McDowell 2007, 78). It is positing a reality outside of the conceptual, a thing-in-itself, that undermines answerability, for if there is a thing-in-itself then our empirical thinking must always “fall short of the genuine article” (McDowell 1996, 43). Here McDowell has Kant in mind.

In *Mind and World* McDowell argues that Kant is a philosopher at odds with himself insofar as his Transcendental Idealism contains two standpoints, “the standpoint of experience” and the transcendental standpoint, which is a “sideways-on-view.” “Kant comes within a whisker of a satisfactory escape from the oscillation” (McDowell 1996, 42) because he often takes the former point of view. If we restrict our theorizing by not permitting a sideways-on-view of our cognition, committing ourselves to remain within the standpoint of experience, then there is no place from which we could identify in cognition an “isolatable contribution” (McDowell 1996, 41) from receptivity. But Kant ruins things by also positing a transcendental point of view from which we know that there is “transcendental givenness” (McDowell 2007, 78), that is, something, the thing-in-itself, that is not capturable from within the point-of-view

experience. In this way, we know that even if we are not in error our empirical thinking stops short of the things-themselves.

This account of Kant, which depends on the so-called “two-world” reading of the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves, has come in for heavy criticism.¹⁰ In light of this, McDowell, in his later papers on Hegel, gives a different account of how Kant undermines what is best in his own thinking, one that does not depend on the two-world reading. I discuss this account below.

However, arriving at the conclusion that the conceptual is unbounded is not in fact McDowell’s ultimate aim in *Mind and World*. His ultimate aim is to provide us with a *diagnosis* for why modern thinking continually falls into the oscillation between the myth of the given and coherentism, and why receptivity in operation and consequently the unboundedness of the conceptual are not so much seen as theoretical options to move past the oscillation. The main reason, McDowell posits, has to do with the dominant conception of nature that one finds in Modernity. His diagnosis is that this conception, where nature is understood as disenchanted, makes it impossible for us to understand how responsiveness to reason might be operative *in* perceptual experience. We have no means of understanding this because, in light of the controlling modern conception of nature, it is impossible to understand how sensory consciousness, a natural sentient capacity that we share with animals, could be shaped by rationality, which is seemingly “non-natural.”

We have this problem, McDowell argues, because we have become “forgetful of the very idea of second nature” (McDowell 1996: 85), forgetful of the fact that responsiveness to reasons is itself natural, not when nature is parsed in terms of the controlling disenchanted conception, but in terms of our initiation, in the normal course of our coming to maturity, into the space of reasons. According to McDowell’s “relaxed naturalism,” nature includes more than what is subject to natural–scientific forms of intelligibility, that is, it includes second nature, and it is the forgetting of this fact that makes it seem as if responsiveness to reasons must either be explained in natural–scientific terms or be seen as something outside of nature – something supernatural.¹¹ In the dialectical context of *Mind and World*, the purpose of the concept of second nature is to disarm this position, not by offering a counter theory, but simply by offering a *reminder* that what is second-natural, including our rationality, is genuinely a part of nature. And the point of this reminder is to help bring about “liberation from a philosophical anxiety” (McDowell 2008, 221).

¹⁰ For this criticism, see Bird 1996 and Allison 1997. See Sedgwick 2000 for a defense.

¹¹ In McDowell 2008, McDowell expresses regret that in *Mind and World* he characterized the form of naturalism that he opposes in terms of natural law. He instead begins to speak of nature, on this conception, as what is subject to natural scientific-intelligibility, and I follow him in this.

Like Hegel, McDowell wishes to undermine the dichotomies that structure modern thinking – between intuitions and concepts, receptivity and spontaneity, appearances and the thing-in-itself, mind and body, reason and nature. But McDowell’s goal in doing so is *therapeutic*. He wants to help us leave the anxieties generated by bad philosophy behind, not by giving us a better philosophical theory, but by reconsidering the dichotomous conceptions that generated the anxiety in the first place. If this reconsideration is properly guided by healthy common sense, then the conceptual problem that generated the anxiety will dissolve, and the anxiety will disappear.

Hegel, in contrast, holds that the above dichotomies structure common sense, which interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by theoretically informed self-conceptions.¹² The goal of philosophy is accordingly not to overcome anxieties produced by bad philosophy, but to overcome the one-sidedness of both philosophy *and* common sense by achieving an absolute account of ourselves as thinkers and doers. The *Phenomenology* is the ladder to this absolute account, to Science: a ladder that is meant to be used *by* common sense, that is, by the various forms of “natural consciousness” that the *Phenomenology* works through. Speaking baldly, we could characterize the difference between McDowell and Hegel thus: while Hegel thinks that common sense must be brought – through taking the “path of despair” outlined in the *Phenomenology* – to the standpoint of philosophy, McDowell thinks that philosophy must be brought to the standpoint of healthy common sense.¹³

But is the difference between McDowell and Hegel as sharp as this? After all, in Hegel the one-sidedness of our self-conceptions, philosophical and commonsensical, produce anxiety, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness, and one of the goals of the *Phenomenology* is to help us come to grips with what would be necessary, existentially and not just theoretically, to get beyond such dissatisfaction. And in McDowell, despite what he says about his therapeutic intentions, we get a *metaphysical* account of the form of the rational animal, which is an account of spirit. To see whether McDowell and Hegel can be brought closer together, we need a clearer grasp of McDowell’s reading of the *Phenomenology*. And in a series of papers written after *Mind and World* was published, this is precisely what we get.

¹² For Hegelian critiques of McDowell’s therapeutic use of the concept of second nature, see Halbig 2008 and Levine 2015. For an overall critique of taking a therapeutic approach to Hegel, see Pinkard 2018.

¹³ For more on these differences, see Stern 1999 and Bristow 2005.

1.3 From Kant to Hegel

In these papers, McDowell follows Robert Pippin in reading Hegel through Kant.¹⁴ He argues that Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* “almost achieves an idealism that is authentic by Hegel’s lights” (McDowell 2009, 70). He fails, however, because he pulls back from positing that the conceptual is unbounded.

McDowell argues that the second edition version of the Transcendental Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the so-called B-deduction, is organized to avoid a potential objection that arises due to the structure of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the Transcendental Aesthetic we get an account of the conditions necessary for an object to be given to our senses that it is given in space and time, which are the pure forms of sensibility. In the Transcendental Logic we then get an account of what is necessary to think this given object, that is, that the manifold of sense be unified by the pure concepts, the categories, of the understanding. Because these conditions are enumerated separately and sequentially, it seems – and has seemed to many interpreters – as if “objects could satisfy the condition for being present to our senses without conforming to the requirements of the understanding” (McDowell 2009, 81). Here we have a kind of two-stage account of cognition: first there is an object presented to our senses, a presentation that has objective purport prior to the operations of the understanding, and then this purport is judged through a concept.¹⁵ The problem with this account, according to McDowell, is that the unities provided by the pure concepts, that is, our grasping the object before us in terms of substance and accident, cause and effect, and so on, are seen as merely a “subjective imposition, superadded to the requirement for things to be present to our senses” (McDowell 2009, 81). Categorical unities do not characterize objects themselves as they are given to the senses, rather, they are the product of a subjective projection. On this view, Kant’s idealism is subjective idealism.

McDowell argues that Kant in the B-Deduction aims to avoid this outcome by showing that any object that presents itself to the senses must conform to the requirements of the understanding by showing that intuitions can have objective purport, be immediately of objects at all, only if they display the logical unities that are characteristic of judgment. To judge is to make up one’s mind about something by putting together concepts, which is something one does rather than something that merely happens. Judging is therefore free cognitive activity for which one is responsible. Because it is one oneself that is responsible for bringing about synthetic unity in judging, Kant argues that in making a judgment one must be able to be aware that it is one oneself that so judges.

¹⁴ See Pippin 1989.

¹⁵ For a very clear presentation of the two-stage account, see Conant 2016.

Here we have the transcendental unity of apperception, which is the highest condition on the judgmental unity brought about through use of the categories.

Such unity, which belongs to our spontaneity, is for Kant actualized *in* intuition. As Kant says in a programmatic passage that McDowell often quotes: “The same function which gives unity to the various representations in a *judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations *in an intuition*; and this unity, in its most general expression, we entitle the pure concept of the understanding” (Kant 1998, B 104–105). The point is not that intuitions *are* judgments – free exercises for which one is responsible – as is sometimes suggested by Kant. This would, McDowell thinks, implausibly overextend the notion of freedom. Rather, capacities for judgmental unity are actualized in intuitions through our being affected by objects. It is precisely because there is a “passive synthesis” within intuition that the unity effected in them can become explicit in a judgment, something of which one can endorse and for which one takes responsibility.

What is the single function that given unity to both judgments and intuitions? In the second half of the B-Deduction it is identified as the synthetic unity of apperception operating as the figurative synthesis, in which the productive imagination works within sensibility on behalf of the understanding. It is through this synthesis that the supposedly nondiscursive forms of intuition, that is, space and time, are shown to be subject to the powers of the understanding. In a passage from *Faith and Knowledge* that McDowell often quotes, Hegel outlines this thought:

[In the transcendental deduction] the original synthetic unity of apperception is recognized also as the principle of the figurative synthesis, i.e., of the forms of intuition; space and time are themselves conceived as synthetic unities, and spontaneity, the absolute synthetic activity of the productive imagination, is conceived as the principal of the very sensibility that was previously characterized only as receptivity (Hegel 1977, 69–70, quoted by McDowell 2009, 149–150).¹⁶

The demonstration that the synthetic unity of apperception is, via the productive imagination, the principle which provides for the unity of the spatial–temporal manifold given in an intuition averts the threat of subjective idealism, because if “the formedness of our sensibility, the topic of the Aesthetic, cannot after all be fully in view independently of apperceptive spontaneity,” then “the requirements of the understanding are not just subjective requirements but requirements on objects themselves” (McDowell 2009, 74). This is the conclusion that

¹⁶ McDowell’s fills out this thought by giving an account of Kant’s notion of “formal intuition,” which is discussed in a famous footnote at B 160.

McDowell is after, for if the operations of the understanding go all the way out to the spatial and temporal givenness of objects to our senses, then an account of an object as a substance that is causally ordered in space and time is not just an account of our *taking it* to be so, but also an account of its *being* so. Here we have arrived at an “equipose between subjective and objective, between thought and its subject matter,” which is “plausible to see as an inspiration for Hegel’s conception of absolute knowing” (McDowell 2009, 150).

But Kant, McDowell argues, undermines this equipose, opening up room for Hegel to make a further step in articulating an authentic idealism. Kant does so because he thinks that the extension of the operations of the understanding “into the terrain of the Aesthetic can reach as far as the fact that our sensibility has forms, and not the specific forms it has: its spatiality and temporality” (McDowell 2009, 75). In other words, while space and time as a *synthetic unity* of matter is a product of the productive imagination (working on behalf of the understanding), the matter itself, the fact that it gives things *as* spatial and temporal rather than in some other way, is not. The fact that what is made manifest in intuition is spatial and temporal is a psychological fact about us, one which is merely *given*. Because this given fact stands outside of our spontaneity, the requirements of the understanding cannot be requirements on objects themselves. For if “the spatial and temporal organization of things as objects of our experience reflects a fact about us rather than characterizing things themselves” (McDowell 2009, 152 n), then transcendental idealism falls back into being the kind of subjective idealism that Kant in the B-deduction worked so hard to escape.¹⁷

1.4 The Heterodox Reading of Lordship and Bondage

McDowell reads the *Phenomenology of Spirit* primarily as an attempt to bring about the equipose between subject and object delineated above. The most distinctive aspect of his reading is his attempt to read chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, “Self-Consciousness,” in light of this program.¹⁸

Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* is motivated by a contradiction that self-conscious living subjects face. On the one hand, self-conscious subjects, as living, are subjects whose life and consciousness are necessarily related to, conditioned by, and dependent on the sensuous world. But on the other hand, subjects have learned, through the dialectic described in “Consciousness,” that they are self-conscious, able to freely take a stand on how they are to engage the sensuous

¹⁷ In this case, “things themselves” means things as they are given to our senses, not things as they are in themselves independently of the way they are given to creatures like us.

¹⁸ See especially his paper “The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Toward a Heterodox Reading of ‘Lordship and Bondage’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*” in McDowell 2009. I discuss McDowell’s reading of “Consciousness” in section three.

world, both cognitively and practically. How can this subject assure itself that its essence is found in its newly discovered freedom and independence, underwritten by the synthetic activity of its pure apperceptive self-consciousness?

The orthodox way of reading the chapter is that natural consciousness undergoes a learning process in which it comes to understand that its freedom and independence can only be exhibited – made objective – if the object on which it depends, and which disrupts its self-understanding as free and independent, is not merely another living thing that can be negated (e.g., eaten), but another living self-consciousness that remains self-sufficient through its negation. The negation of the object of desire cannot exhibit to us our freedom and independence from it because this exhibition is continually dependent on this very negation. When negated, the living thing just reappears – because desire always reappears. Here we are “sunk in life,” caught in a bad infinity. We can get out of this endless process only when the object that we negate is another living self-consciousness. This is because they can bring about a “negation of itself,” self-negate its own freedom and independence, while reflecting back to us, recognizing, ours. For the orthodox reading, therefore, “*Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*” (Hegel 2018, § 175).

For the orthodox reading, the struggle to the death and the master–slave dialectic therefore represent *interpersonal* or *social* relations between two or more self-conscious subjects. What we get in “Self-Consciousness” is an account of the minimal social conditions necessary for self-conscious subjects to be individual subjects, which is a nascent account of spirit, the “I that is a We and the We that is an I.” And this reading seems to be confirmed by the fact that Hegel famously says in section 177 that in “Self-Consciousness” “the concept of *spirit* is thereby present and available for us.” Indeed, in this chapter, Hegel says, consciousness leaves behind both the sensible and supersensible worlds, and “steps into the spiritual daylight of the present” (Hegel 2018, § 177).

McDowell rejects the orthodox reading. “On the readings of the kind I resist, Hegel’s aim in these sections of the Self-Consciousness chapter is to urge that self-consciousness requires a context of interpersonal relations, and to begin to elaborate this required social context” (McDowell, 2009–10, 34). While McDowell admits that the concept spirit becomes available in “Self-Consciousness,” he stresses the fact that in section 177 the introduction of the concept spirit clearly follows from the fact that “Self-Consciousness” makes available to us an object that “is just as well an I as it is an object.” In other words, *spiritual* is a term that applies to the kind of being who can both be an I and an object, that is, a living thing. A spiritual being is one that is both subject and object, one in which the structure of self-consciousness is the *form* of their living body (their Aristotelian soul). Despite the surface appearance of

the text, the struggle to the death and the master–slave dialectic do not concern the interaction of distinct individuals. They are rather “allegorical depictions of pathologies in the self-understanding of a single individual” (McDowell 2009–10, 31).

On the one hand, the struggle to the death “is an allegorical depiction of a self-consciousness that thinks it needs to declare that mere life is inessential to it, but learns that this is not so” (McDowell 2009–10a, 59). It learns “that the life it is attempting to disown is something whose continuation is necessary to its continued independence” (McDowell 2009, 162). The master–slave dialectic, on the other hand, is an allegorical depiction of a self-consciousness that, in having learned this lesson, “acknowledges that the subject of mere life belongs to it in some sense, though it refuses to identify that subject with itself” (McDowell 2009–10a, 59). Instead of identifying with the living subject that it is, it takes it allegorically to be another subject who works on its behalf. Of course, this attempt too comes to grief, as pure self-consciousness (the master) can’t be independent without contents and determinations *from which* it is independent, contents that come from empirical consciousness (the slave). And this empirical consciousness, through fear, service, and work, develops within itself the capacities to itself become free and independent. Within the allegories, there are protagonists struggling to the death, relations of master and slave, and so on. But what these allegories are allegories of is the struggle of an individual subject to develop a unified picture of itself.

But what argument does McDowell give for this reading? His account relies on taking Hegel at his word concerning the program for the chapter that he outlines in the programmatic section, 167. There, Hegel states that the goal of “Self-Consciousness” is to arrive at a speculative identity – a dynamic unity or equipoise – between two moments: empirical consciousness that is related to the sensuous world, and pure apperceptive self-consciousness. Because this unity is not apparent to self-consciousness itself, it must “exhibits itself therein as the movement within which this opposition is sublated, and within which, to itself, the equality of itself with itself comes to be” (Hegel 2018, § 167). The movement described here is one in which a self-conscious subject becomes self-conscious that it is a self-conscious subject that nonetheless remains related, through embodied consciousness, to the empirical world. McDowell’s central argument against the orthodox reading is that it loses touch with this program.

My reading, now, is controlled by this thought: surely in this development Hegel cannot mean to have simply abandoned the form in which the antithesis first appeared, as an antithesis between empirically accessible reality and the

subject consciousness . . . Otherwise how can an *Aufhebung* of the antithesis, in the form in which it now appears, be a way to achieve what Hegel described as the movement of self-consciousness, at the beginning of the chapter? (McDowell 2009–10, 33)

For the orthodox reading, the condition of possibility for explaining the ability of a subject to grasp its own unity is that this subject participates in social relations of recognition. For a grasp of the unity of ourselves as subjective and objective requires that a subject be able to view themselves from both the inside and from the outside, through the perspective of the Other. But as McDowell points out, this outbreak of the social does not seem to fit in with the second section of Chapter IV, on “Freedom of Self-Consciousness,” nor with where we have ended up at the beginning of Chapter V, “Reason,” which do not concern interpersonal relations of recognition. “Freedom of Self-Consciousness,” which contains sections on Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness, concerns various ways thinking self-consciousness grasps itself so as to negate its dependence on the world, ways that involve different configurations of pure self-consciousness and living empirical consciousness, and the overall upshot of Chapter IV, as outlined at the beginning of “Reason,” is that self-consciousness, now called reason, “is the certainty which consciousness has of being all reality” (Hegel 2018, § 233).

Reason is certain of being all reality because what self-consciousness has learned through “Self-Consciousness” is that to be related to oneself, one must be *related* to the world (in empirical consciousness), and that to be related to the world one must, at least implicitly, be in a *self-related* (apperceptive) relation to it. There is nothing outside of these interpenetrating relations, nothing outside of reason. As Hegel puts it in the *Encyclopedia Phenomenology*:

Freedom and reason consist in this: I raise myself to the form of $I = I$, I recognize everything as *mine*, as *I*, I grasp every object as a member in the system of what I myself am – in short . . . I have in *one and the same* consciousness *I* and the *world*, in the world I find myself again and, conversely, in my consciousness have what *is*, what has *objectivity*. (Hegel 2007, § 424Z)

Here we have, according to McDowell, an “*Aufhebung* of otherness between subject and object” (McDowell 2009, 154), an account of the “the identity-indifference of thought and reality” (McDowell, 2009, 198). While through the chapters “Reason” and “Spirit” we learn that we can only be fully at home in the world if we make it our own through inquiry, social action, and participation in recognitive social relations, and that our appropriation of this world can only be successful if we work through the history of the pathological self-understandings that emerge in Modernity and grasp how that same history makes the

actualization of freedom possible for the first time, already at the end of “Self-Consciousness” we have arrived, from the *formal point of view*, at absolute knowing, a knowing of what knowing, the relation of subject and object, is.

1.5 Spirit and Freedom

The heterodox reading leaves McDowell with an important explanatory desideratum, however, for if Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* does not concern spirit understood in terms of social relations of recognition, then we need an alternative account of spirit.

McDowell develops his account of spirit in opposition to Pippin’s social-constructivist account, in which spirit is seen as “a kind of socio-historical achievement” (Pippin 2008, 42, quoted in McDowell 2017, 18).¹⁹ Spirit is a sociohistorical achievement because the norms implicit in our social roles and practices are conferred in historical time through relations of recognition, through our collectively taking or treating each other as bound by them. For a subject to inhabit a particular social role, or for them to be a free agent at all, depends, Pippin argues, on their “being recognized as one by others whose free bestowal of this recognition depends in turn on their being recognized as such free bestowers” (Pippin 2006, 128, quoted in McDowell 2009, 166). Spirit in its most basic form is the “normative like-mindedness” implicit in these historically produced patterns of recognition.

According to McDowell, Pippin’s notion of spirit stems from socializing Kant’s notion of self-legislation (see McDowell 2009, 170–171). For Kant, the free action of an individual must stem from choice that is in accord with a self-given law. By giving ourselves the law, by freely acknowledging its authority over us, we determine ourselves rather than being determined by an Other. Kant partly defends this idea through ruling out alternatives, most importantly, Humean naturalism and rationalist intuitionism. While Humean naturalism thinks that norms and the reasons for action that they generate are determined by our natural desires and inclinations, rationalist intuitionism takes it that such reasons are objectively there, “constituted independently of anything human” (McDowell 2009, 170). In both cases, norms and reasons are not self-legislated, but simply *given*, impressed upon one from either the inside or the outside. Pippin argues that Hegel follows Kant here, but “Pippin’s Hegel replaces a position in which norms are legislated by pure practical reason with one in which norms are constructively determined in the recognitive practices of

¹⁹ Pippin in Pippin 2018 expresses regrets that he called his position constructivist. But I do not think he alters his position in any way that would lead McDowell to stop using that term to describe it.

historically actual communities.”²⁰ These recognitive practices do not merely acknowledge the legitimacy of norms, “but *creates* their legitimacy” (McDowell 2009, 171).

McDowell argues that Pippin’s social-constructive version of self-legislation faces two problems that afflict Kant’s individualized version: the problem of “arbitrariness” and the problem of the “normative void.”²¹ Here is how he puts it in a long passage:

Pippin is surely right that the central image in the German idealist tradition is one of legislating for ourselves. But the idea of subjectivity as source needs delicate handling if it is not to put at risk the fact that, as Pippin puts it, “we cannot legislate arbitrarily.” The point of the image is that subjection to norms should not be an infringement on freedom; we are authentically subject only to norms whose authority we acknowledge. Thus the norms that bind us are our own dictates to ourselves, not alien impositions. But any intelligible case of agency, legislative or any other, whether on the part of an individual or a group, must be responsive to reasons. It makes no sense to picture an act that brings norms into existence out of a normative void. So the insistence on freedom must cohere with the fact that we always find ourselves already subject to norms. Our freedom, which figures in the image as our legislative power, must include a moment of receptivity. (McDowell 2002, 276)

Pippin thinks that this is not a problem because any self-binding always happens in the context of norms that have been socially legislated by a prior historical community. We never find ourselves not already subject to norms. But we do find ourselves in situations where there is indeterminacy and contradiction in our norms, which entails that we, individually and collectively, must engage in activities so as to move past the impasse. These activities change the normative patterns of recognition that constitute a historical community’s social roles, practices, and form of life. But this, Pippin argues, is not a historical form of conventionalism or relativism, because part of what the *Phenomenology* does is track changes in the socially self-legislated normative order in such a way that we can retrospectively come to grasp the necessity that this order be constituted by relations of *mutual* recognition.

For McDowell, this is not sufficient to overcome the arbitrariness problem. If self-legislation is not to be arbitrary, we need an account in which relations of mutual recognition are right not because they are *made* right by the retrospective story that we can tell by working through the *Phenomenology*, but because,

²⁰ This follows from Hegel’s famous empty formalism objection to Kant, where the validity of a given reason (a maxim) cannot be merely a formal matter, a matter of its being able to be universalized. A reason, to be a valid reason, must have content, which can only come from the particular social-historical order in which an agent lives.

²¹ For much more on these problems, see Stern 2007.

given our initiation into the space of reasons, we can discern that they *are* right. On McDowell's picture, one is self-determined when "one conforms to the authority of a reason that one appreciates as such." Here, "one's thought or action is determined by the power in one by virtue of which one is able to recognize that authority and think or act accordingly. And it is in exercising that power that one is truly oneself" (McDowell 2010, 9). In other words, one is self-determined when one acts through the exercise of what is most properly one's own, that is, one's rational capacity to acknowledge reasons. For McDowell, this acknowledgement is not the *origin* of the legitimacy of reasons but is rather – using the term in a more colloquial way – the *recognition* of this legitimacy.

By making a "one-sided attribution of independence to the practices," by "refusing to countenance any sense in which reasons have . . . independence, as against the practices" (McDowell 2009, 172), Pippin denies Hegel's idea, found in the *Philosophy of Right*, that what is good in and for itself, what is objectively good, transcends what we, individually or collectively, take to be good. Though McDowell does not put it this way, we can see him as saying that Pippin's account of spirit is a *socialized* form of what Hegel calls formal conscience. Conscience is the final form of moral subjectivity outlined in the *Morality* chapter of *Philosophy of Right*, and the final assertion of the "right of subjectivity" made by modern subjects. "Conscience expresses the absolute entitlement of subjective self-consciousness to know in itself and for itself what right and duty are, and to recognize only what it thus knows as the good" (Hegel 1991, § 137 R). But there are two forms of this entitlement: *formal conscience* and *true conscience*. For both forms, the commitments that stem from conscience have a kind of sacred character. But while formal conscience holds that one's commitments are sacred *because* they come from our subjectivity, because one *takes* them to be good or true, true conscience holds that they are sacred because in having them one's subjectivity is disposed to be in touch with what is genuinely good or true. "True conscience is the disposition to will what is *good in and for itself*, it therefore has fixed principles, and these have for it the character of determinacy and duties which are objective for themselves" (Hegel 1991, § 137). McDowell's critique of Pippin is, in essence, that he ignores true conscience, in which a subject's initiation into ethical life puts them in a position to will what is good in and for itself.

The upshot for McDowell is that, in his practical philosophy, as much as his theoretical philosophy, Hegel aims at "a characteristically Hegelian balance, with independence and dependence on both sides. This yields a realism of a different kind" (McDowell 2009, 172). In this different kind of realism, we can respond correctly or incorrectly to the layout of the space of moral reasons,

but this space does not exist, as it does for rationalist intuitionism, independently of the social-discursive practices through which this layout is reproduced. But this does not undermine its objectivity, the fact that an action's correctness or incorrectness transcends what an individual or community takes to be correct or incorrect.²²

McDowell agrees with Pippin that our ability to respond to reasons, and so be a free agent, depends on participation in social practices. But he disagrees about how we should understand this dependence. For Pippin, an agent's ability to respond to reasons is not just *made possible* through initiation into social relations; rather, such relations constitute *in an ongoing way* what it is to be such an agent. Without our continuing to be taken as free agents in a socially recognitive community, we would not be free agents. For McDowell, this position is objectionably counterintuitive. To illustrate, he – following Pippin – proposes that we take speaking a natural language as a model for free agency. It is a good model, because a natural language is an historically generated norm-governed social practice. To participate in this practice, to be a speaker of a language, one must be able to recognize others as speakers, and others must be able to recognize oneself as one. But, McDowell asks, must one, to so much as be a speaker, not only be initiated into this social practice but participate in it in an ongoing way? His answer is no: once I have learned how to speak, my being exiled alone on a desert island does not deprive me of this capacity, though it might diminish my ability to exercise it. Similarly, once one has acquired the capacity to respond to reasons and be a free agent, the exercise of this capacity no longer depends on others recognizing one as having this capacity.

McDowell recognizes, of course, that human infants must develop the capacity to respond to reasons by being initiated into a social linguistic practice and acquiring a second nature, and that this capacity might not be actualized, owing to biological or social defects. But if this initiation goes well, then it:

makes a *metaphysical* difference. In this respect achieving free agenthood is quite unlike reaching voting age. Responsiveness to reasons, the very idea of which is inseparable from the idea of communal practices, marks out a fully-fledged human individual as no longer a merely biological particular, but as being of a metaphysically new kind. (McDowell 2009, 172)²³

²² The origin of this realism can be found in McDowell's work on Aristotle. See McDowell 1998.

²³ For Hegelian critiques of the idea that acquiring a second nature makes a metaphysical difference in the kind of beings we are, see Thompson 2022, Kern 2022, and Suther 2025. These critiques take a step beyond the debate between transformative and additive conceptions of rationality. See Boyle 2012 and 2016.

This metaphysically new kind of being is a *spiritual* being. McDowell's account of spirit is accordingly metaphysical rather than social-constructive. Specifically, it is Aristotelian. Here, McDowell takes his cue from Hegel's remark, in § 378 of the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, that:

the books of Aristotle on the soul . . . are still the most excellent, or rather the only works of speculative interest on this object. The essential aim of a philosophy of Geist can only be that of reintroducing the Concept into the knowledge of Geist, and therewith opening up again the sense of those Aristotelian books. (quoted by McDowell 2017, 15)

For Aristotle, all living things have souls, which characterize the form of unity that the activities of that particular kind of living thing take. Plants maintain unity through nutrition and reproduction, animals through locomotion and perception, and rational animals through *logos*, the ability to speak and respond to reasons in their thinking and doing. Of course, animals and rational animals, like plants, eat and reproduce, and rational animals, like nonrational animals, move and perceive. But in each case these lower-level capacities are transformed by the presence of the higher-level capacities, such that, for example, the form of locomotion and perception in a rational animal is distinct from that taken in a nonrational animal. In pursuing the good and attempting to gain truth, movement and perception are placed in a different order than they had when they were the activities of an animal, that is, a rational order. Spirit, Geist, is the kind of soul that participates in this order:

Geist is Hegel's counterpart to what figures in Aristotle as the kind of soul that is characteristic of rational animals. It is human beings whom Aristotle defines as rational animals . . . Geist is the formally distinctive way of being a living being that characterizes human beings: in Aristotelian terms, the form of a living human being qua living *human* being. (McDowell 2017, 16)

McDowell argues that we should think of Geist adjectivally rather than nominally: instead of talking about Geist as a thing, a collective subject or underlying substance, we should instead talk about living beings who are *geistig*. Living beings are the only substances present. Geist characterizes the *kind* of living being whose formal unity is provided by the self-conscious ability to respond to reasons. It does not characterize the kind of being who, in bootstrapping their way into normatively governed relations of recognition, “leaves nature behind,” as Pippin says.²⁴ Rather, “[w]ithout ceasing to be the

²⁴ See Pippin 2002.

concept of an animal species, it is a categorical concept in the logical, or, as Hegel says, speculative treatment of the formal character of life that Aristotle initiated” (McDowell 2017, 19).

What is formally distinctive of beings of this kind? McDowell answers this question through a reading of what Rödl calls the principle thought of German Idealism that “self-consciousness, freedom, and reason are one.”²⁵ Rational animals actualize rationality by responding to reasons. Nonrational animals also respond to reasons, for instance, when they flee in response to danger. But rational animals respond to reasons *as* reasons, or to reasons as the reasons they are. What capacities must be in play for this to be possible?

To count as being able to respond to reasons as the reasons they are, one must be able to step back, as it were, from the fact that a certain circumstance, for instance perceived danger, inclined one toward acting in a certain way, for instance towards fleeing, and raised the question whether one *should* act in that way. If one resolves such a question and acts in the light of one’s resolution of it, one’s acting reflects the capacity that distinguishes rational animals from the rest. (McDowell 2010, 6).

By having the capacity to put reasons for action, even those that strongly incline one to act, *into question*, one is able to *self-consciously* respond to reasons as reasons. In having this capacity, reasons do not, as it were, *act through me*, as they do for an antelope fleeing danger; rather they become considerations *for me* in a field of other potential considerations. I become, even minimally, distanced from these considerations, hold them apart from me, and evaluate whether they ought or ought not move me to act. In this “free distanced orientation” (see Lecture VI of McDowell 1996), the possibility for autonomy or self-determination opens up for us. For if a person, “having stepped back, determines that she should make the circumstance her reason for acting, and acts for that reason . . . [t]here is then a sense in which what she does is determined by herself. In contrast, the antelope’s behavior is determined by forces that naturally operate on it (or perhaps we should say ‘in it’)” (McDowell 2010, 6).

But this package, in which reason, self-consciousness, and freedom are one, depends on the capacity to speak, the capacity to take part in *logos*, which comes about through initiation into language. It is this that makes the metaphysical difference in the kind of being that we, human beings, are. Here is how McDowell put it:

The image of stepping back is an image for a distanced orientation towards circumstances that otherwise would have merely induced inclinations to do things. It seems plausible that this distanced orientation becomes a possibility

²⁵ See Rödl 2007, 105, quoted in McDowell 2017, 17.

with the acquisition of language. If one can say how things are, one can hold a circumstance with the tendency to influence one's motivations at arm's length, as it were. Describing a circumstance gives one a means to adopt a partly contemplative attitude towards it, as opposed to just being practically immersed in it. The ability to frame a circumstance in words puts one in position to ask oneself whether the circumstance constitutes a reason for doing what it inclines one to do, and if so, whether the reason is enough to act on. (McDowell 2010, 6–7)

Pippin responds to McDowell's metaphysical picture of spirit by pointing to Hegel's well-known thesis that the historical changes in social life that we associate with Modernity made it possible for subjects to actualize a kind of free agency that was not available to premodern subjects (see Pippin 2018). For Pippin, this is a historical transformation *in* spirit, a transformation of which McDowell's metaphysical account, which thinks that the importance of the social is exhausted by an individual's initiation into language, can make no sense.

McDowell agrees with Pippin that there is an important difference between modern and premodern subjects. Modern subjects, unlike premodern ones, can gain “awareness that one is in touch with reasons only by virtue of one's formation in a *Sittlichkeit*, combined with a critical attitude to the conception of reasons one finds oneself with” (McDowell 2009, 181). But nonetheless he argues that premodern subjects were free agents just as much as modern subjects. To make this point, he distinguishes between two kinds of freedom: one that a subject must have to be an agent at all, and one that agents can actualize to a greater or lesser degree owing to social–historical developments.

The first kind of freedom is “part of being a rational subject; it is in play whenever a human being regards a consideration as having rational force” (McDowell 2017, 31). This kind of freedom is not an achievement, a result of an exercise of autonomy, but is something that happens to us through our initiation into the space of reasons. Once it is a fact that we are able to self-consciously respond to reasons, a “fact of reason,” we cannot help but regard ourselves as being in the business of determining for ourselves what to think and do. If our upbringing is not defective, we are, as Sartre would put it, condemned to be free in this sense. But just because I self-consciously respond to reasons in determining what to think and do does not mean that the reasons that I respond to are cogent, valid, or correct. You may come along and say: “you only accept reason *x* because of your upbringing or because of an ideology, not because you are actually responding to the reason that *x* is.” Because of the possibility of this kind of debunking, we must posit a second kind of freedom:

Our upbringing determines which considerations we find ourselves regarding as reasons when we become self-conscious. It is a betrayal of autonomy to

stay unthinkingly at that starting point; rationality brings with it an obligation to be critical of all inherited conceptions of what is a reason for what. We can reject the idea that being a rational subject is the result of an exercise of autonomy without failing to respect the Kantian thought that rationality requires avoiding dogmatism. (McDowell 2017, 21)

Freedom in the second sense, which requires putting the reasons one sets out with into critical question, “comes in degrees. The more one’s life is led in light of considerations one knows to have the rational force one attributes to them, the freer one is” (McDowell 2017, 31). Freedom in this second sense, “is not exactly a sociohistorical achievement, but an individual achievement made possible by modernity, which is a sociohistorical development” (McDowell 2017, 31). In other words, it is an achievement of individuals who are *geistig*, and so free in the first sense, but this achievement is made possible by socio-historical developments, that is, by the forms of reflectiveness made possible by the institutions that comprise modern ethical life.

McDowell therefore agrees with Pippin that sociohistorical arrangements are not external to human freedom. But this point applies only to the second form of freedom, not the first. Geist itself, the ability of a living subject to rationally, self-consciously, and freely respond to reasons as reasons, is not a sociohistorical achievement, but is the content of the categorical concept that characterizes the kind of being that we, human beings, are.

1.6 The *Phenomenology* and the Therapeutic Conception of Philosophy

How does McDowell’s reading of the *Phenomenology* relate to the therapeutic notion of philosophy outlined in *Mind and World*? In that work, McDowell aims at undermining the theoretical dichotomies that structure modern thinking not by developing a new theoretical picture of how things are, but by undermining the concepts that produce the anxieties that lead to the dichotomies in the first place. When placed alongside his reading of the *Phenomenology*, we find, I think, two interrelated elements of his therapeutic reading. The first concerns the function of the “Spirit” chapter, the second the status of absolute knowing.

As I mentioned above, the shapes outlined in “Spirit” recount the socio-historical developments that make it possible for an individual to both recognize that its ability to think and act is made possible by its participation in intersubjective communal practices, *Sittlichkeit*, and to take a critical attitude toward the norms and reasons implicit in these practices. In Greek *Sittlichkeit* there was direct identification with the norms and reasons that structured one’s identity and social roles. When Greek *Sittlichkeit* was undermined, one’s identification

with these norms and reasons came into question, became something upon which the individual had to take a stand. This was experienced by individuals as a loss, a loss of certainty and orientation. What the chapter on “Spirit” recapitulates is the “laborious recapturing of *Sittlichkeit*, but without giving up the individuality whose coming on the scene figures at first as a loss of *Sittlichkeit*. The result is a certain conception, in a sense formal rather than involving any specific content, of one’s relation to norms *überhaupt*” (McDowell 2009, 182). In other words, the chapter recounts the historical developments that make it possible for an individual to form a “conception of what it is to be an autonomous inhabitant of the space of reasons *at all*” (McDowell 2009, 181), an inhabitant of a space that they initially respond to rather than make, but which they can then work within to put into critical question.

McDowell argues that this new critical posture towards the world brings about its own distinctive anxiety, an

anxiety that, as modern individuals, we are (in a way) *right* to feel, or at least to be aware that we risk feeling: the anxiety of responsibility. In reflecting about how to think and act, we cannot take on trust the deliverances of any received authority. We are entirely on our own. Full awareness of this fact and its significance is the result of the *Phenomenology*’s progression. (McDowell 2009, 183)

The notion that “we are entirely on our own” might seem to be inconsistent with McDowell’s realism, the fact that we respond to and do not make the norms and reasons that comprise the ethical life in which we stand. But McDowell is saying that we are on our own as individuals in determining what to think and do *because* we are inhabitants of the space of reasons. For what we learn in the *Phenomenology* is that there is nothing outside the space of reasons, nothing given, to ground *it*. This is what induces the anxiety of responsibility, and this is what Hegel aims to counteract by providing us with “an open-eyed awareness that that is how things are for us.”

The vision Hegel aims to convey is a clear-sighted awareness of groundlessness, bringing with it the understanding that *all* such attempts at grounding are misguided. Hegel aims to liberate us from the felt need to have philosophy fill what, when we feel the need, presents itself as an alarming void: the supposed need that expresses itself in an empiricistic foundationalism, or in a rationalistic postulation of insight into the independently constituted intelligible structure of reality, or in a transcendental grounding for a conceptual scheme . . . [or in] a developmental story conceived as a successor and counterpart to a transcendental grounding. There is no ground, and it was wrong to suppose there was any need for one. (McDowell 2009, 184)

Given that one might think that absolute knowing is fully grounded knowing, self-grounded knowing, this leads us to the second element of McDowell's therapeutic reading. McDowell argues that absolute knowing, the knowing that "the forms of thought are the forms of reality," is "a platitude" (McDowell 2009, 197). For Kant, an account of absolute knowing cannot be a platitude because if the pure concepts of the understanding are genuinely pure, independent of sensibility, then it is a *substantive task* to explain how they can so much as enter into thoughts of objects given to the senses. But if we follow Hegel and "reconceive sensory receptivity as a 'moment' in the self-realization of the concept, the result is a picture within which that problem does not arise. This is indeed a different approach to Kant's problem. But it is not an answer in different terms to Kant's question. It reconsiders the conceptions that pose Kant's problem, with the result that the problem disappears" (McDowell 2009, 197). Here, Hegel shows us how, through following the movement of the *Phenomenology*, to dissolve rather than solve Kant's problem.

Of course, "it takes work to enable it [absolute knowing] to present itself as the platitude it is" (McDowell 2009, 198). This is the work of the *Phenomenology* itself. But nonetheless, the identity-in-difference of thought and reality is something that is already implicitly grasped by *us* as we follow the movement of natural consciousness through the *Phenomenology*. While the movement through the *Phenomenology* is a learning process – as we grasp how one shape necessarily emerges from another, which natural consciousness continually forgets – it also brings to self-consciousness what we already implicitly know. What is known at the end of the path of despair is known at the beginning, but with an important difference: in having gone through the learning process, we now self-consciously know what we know. What we already knew, and what we now self-consciously know, is that there "is no way to conceive reality except in terms of what is the case, and there is no intelligible idea of what is the case except one that coincides with the idea of what can be truly thought to be the case" (McDowell 2009, 197). If this were not already implicitly grasped by agents before embarking on the journey outlined in the *Phenomenology*, they would not be able to bring reality within the orbit of their thought at all.

Absolute knowing is therefore not a knowing that is finally grounded through itself, but a self-conscious knowing that the platitudinous place where the *Phenomenology* both starts and ends is *not* grounded. We could say that *self-conscious* knowing of what we already knew is grounded through the movement of the *Phenomenology*. But this movement into the ground does not make it the case that there is an equipoise between subject and object, thought and being. What is the case at the beginning and end has no ground, and the

Phenomenology, McDowell argues, aims to show us that there is no need to go beyond this very fact by engaging in constructive philosophy.

2 Brandom and Hegel

2.1 Introduction

In 2019 Brandom published *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*.²⁶ This book, which Brandom worked on for almost thirty years, offers the reader a highly complex yet unified interpretation of the *Phenomenology*. It is a big book, coming in at more than 800 pages. It will therefore be impossible for me to touch on, much less analyze, everything that Brandom discusses. I instead focus on the claim that I made in the “Introduction,” namely, that Brandom reads the *Phenomenology* as providing us with an account of thought or judgment that is able to account for its objectivity while avoiding the myth of the given, as well as on the implications that he thinks this has for our social–historical practices. I begin with a brief account of the relationship between *A Spirit of Trust* and Brandom’s prior major work, *Making it Explicit*.

2.2 From *Making it Explicit* to *A Spirit of Trust*

Brandom’s reading of the *Phenomenology* is a semantic reading, one that sees it as primarily concerned with developing “a radically new conception of the conceptual” (Brandom 2019, 3). The text, Brandom claims, is

focused on one central, core topic: the nature of discursive activity and the sort of conceptual contentfulness things show up as having in virtue of their involvement with that kind of activity. As I read him, everything else he addresses should be understood to stand downstream in the order of explanation from his pragmatist semantic insights. (Brandom 2019, 636)

Brandom recognizes that this is an unusual way of reading the *Phenomenology*. But he thinks that if we utilize the correct interpretive strategies, the importance of this core topic becomes apparent. These strategies involve reading the text allegorically and through a *de-re* hermeneutic that is guided by what he calls “semantic descent.”²⁷ Let me go through these.

Like McDowell, Brandom uses allegory in his reading of the *Phenomenology*. Brandom argues that an allegorical reading requires:

²⁶ Brandom published many writings on Hegel prior to *A Spirit of Trust*, the most important of which can be found in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* and *Reason in Philosophy*. In this section, I only examine *A Spirit of Trust*.

²⁷ His reading is also highly selective. Shapes of consciousness and spirit that don’t clearly address the core topic, for instance Observing Reason and Religion, are simply left aside.

keeping two sets of books throughout: on how to understand what happens *within* the allegory (e.g., of Mastery, or the *Kammerdiener*) and on how to understand what point the allegorical story is making about what it is allegorical for: a metaphysics of normativity with the structure of subordination and obedience . . . and reductive naturalism, respectively. (Brandom 2022, 750)

While it seems on the surface as if the dialectic of master and servant concerns a contradiction that afflicts hierarchically structured interpersonal relations, or an imagining of such relations, such that we are able to begin to think through the social conditions for freedom, Brandom reads the episode as also an allegory for a defective understanding of our discursive social practices, where the configuration of normative attitudes and statuses cannot deliver fully determinate conceptual contents. Here, “abstract constellations of normative practices, statuses, and attitudes are embodied in the human figures of the Master and the Servant” (Brandom 2019, 315). Similarly, the mean-spirited Valet (the *Kammerdiener*) and the magnanimous Hero, discussed by Hegel in the chapter on “Spirit,” are read as standing in for different kinds of interpretive postures toward the world: a reductive one that reduces the normativity at play in human behavior to naturalistically construed subjective attitudes, and a charitable one that takes such attitudes as reciprocally intertwined with genuine normative statuses. Brandom reads most of the rest of the shapes outlined in the *Phenomenology* in this way: Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness, as well as the figures outlined in “Spirit,” Antigone and Creon, State Power and Wealth, Faith and Enlightenment, and most importantly, the Acting and Judging Consciousness.²⁸ The brilliance of Brandom’s interpretation of the *Phenomenology* is that his allegorical reading is able to map onto and make sense of so much of the text.

But while both McDowell and Brandom employ allegory in their reading of the *Phenomenology*, they do so in quite different ways. McDowell employs allegory as part of an interpretive effort to make sense of how the section on mastery and servitude is continuous with what comes before and after it. Regardless of whether his interpretation is correct or not, the allegory is deployed as part of a *de-dicto* hermeneutic, an interpretation of the text in light of the commitments that McDowell takes Hegel to actually hold. Brandom, in contrast, deploys allegory as part of a *de-re* hermeneutic, which is a “rational reconstruction” (Brandom 2019, 1) of the text in terms of commitments that Hegel ought to have held (given the collateral commitments held true by Brandom) rather than what he in fact held (an interpretation given in terms of the collateral commitments held true

²⁸ Brandom does not read “Sensuous-Certainty” and “Perception” allegorically. The strategy begins with “Force and the Understanding,” where force metonymically stands in for theoretical entities *tout court*.

by Hegel).²⁹ The major collateral commitments assumed by Brandom's *de re* reading are those that fill out the pragmatic-semantics that Brandom first developed in *Making it Explicit*: namely, to an inferential semantics, a normative pragmatics, and an expressive theory of logical vocabulary.³⁰ How, specifically, do these commitments inform Brandom's reading of the *Phenomenology*?

First, Brandom argues that the *Phenomenology* contains an inferential semantics in which meaning is understood in terms of use, in which the content of the concepts that are applied in our thoughts and intentional actions are understood in terms of the role they play in material and not just formal inferences. The contents of such concepts are conferred through relations of material incompatibility and consequence, which are Brandom's translation of Hegel's notions of determinate negation and mediation. Hegel is therefore interpreted as holding, as Brandom did in *Making it Explicit*, that the content of the concepts applied in our judgments and actions is specified in terms of what their application rules out, follows from, and entails.

In *Making it Explicit*, Brandom underwrites his inferential semantics with a normative pragmatics. A normative pragmatics is an account of how the norms implicit in our linguistic practices, which govern the correctness or incorrectness of material inferences, are instituted by the *practical attitudes* of agents, whereby they each *take* or *treat* norms as committing and entitling other agents and themselves to further commitments – through both *acknowledging* them oneself and *attributing* them to others. This is Brandom's social scorekeeping model. In *A Spirit of Trust* this account is said to be given by Hegel's theory of recognition, which is, Brandom claims, an account of the social nature of normativity. Here *normative statuses* of authority and responsibility are instituted by intersubjectively complemented *normative attitudes*, our mutually recognizing each other as subject to such statuses.

Lastly, Brandom's reading of the *Phenomenology* is governed by the last major commitment found in *Making it Explicit*, namely, an expressivist theory of logical vocabulary. An expressive theory of logical vocabulary is based on the thought that social scorekeeping is an *autonomous* discursive practice, meaning that, in principle, scorekeepers could participate in this practice and grasp conceptual contents without being able to use logical meta-vocabulary. Such vocabulary is not *constitutive* but *expressive*, in that, it allows us, the

²⁹ For more on these two forms of hermeneutic, See *Tales of the Mighty Dead*. Because his hermeneutic is *de re*, one is tempted to always say "Brandom's Hegel" or "Bregel," as some have it. I have resisted this temptation.

³⁰ For accessible presentations of the main arguments found in *Making it Explicit*, see Wanderer 2008 and Loeffler 2017.

theorist, to make explicit in what is *said* what agents implicitly are able to *do* by participating in discursive social practices. On this view: “Logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness” (Brandom 1994, xix).

This expressivist view shows up in *A Spirit of Trust* as a methodological strategy for reading the text, which Brandom calls “semantic descent.” He does not claim that this strategy is the one that Hegel himself uses. Brandom’s claim is rather “that what he does do can be understood – in many ways, *better* understood” (Brandom 2022, 764) – by adopting an interpretive strategy in which logical concepts or categories are understood not as constitutive for the ability of first-order agents to think and act, but rather as *semantic meta-concepts* that allows the theorist to make explicit in what is said what these agents implicitly do. The strategy is one of descent because the aim in outlining the “defects and virtues of the various ‘shapes’ of self-consciousness” outlined in the *Phenomenology* is to grasp what they “mean for our understanding of the use and content of ordinary determinate empirical concepts” (Brandom 2019, 6). In other words, we evaluate the logical or categorical concepts that comprise the shapes of consciousness by examining how well they explain the ability of first-order agents to use concepts in their empirical and practical experience. Such concepts are therefore “the expressive organs of self-consciousness” (Brandom 2019, 5), the self-consciousness that the theorist develops through acquiring the pragmatic-semantic theory outlined by the *Phenomenology*.

But Brandom’s reading of the *Phenomenology* is not simply the result of an application of these prior commitments, for *A Spirit of Trust* develops three ideas that are nowhere to be found in *Making it Explicit*. Indeed, based upon the core commitments outlined above, the development of these new ideas is the main work of the three parts of *A Spirit of Trust*.

In part one of the book, “Semantics and Epistemology: Knowing and Representing the Objective World,” which I discuss in Section 3 below, Brandom augments his inferential semantics with a nonpsychologistic account of the conceptual, where “the way the world objectively is, in itself, is conceptually articulated” (Brandom 2019, 54). He calls this thesis “conceptual realism.” He aims to demonstrate that conceptual realism, when coupled with an account of experience understood as an error-driven learning process, makes knowledge of the objective world possible.

In part two of the book, “Normative Pragmatics: Recognition and the Expressive Metaphysics of Agency,” which I discuss in four and five below, Brandom adds an historical dimension to the social-recognitive account of normativity mentioned above. He does so because a synchronic account of recognition is unable to answer the question of why the normative statues that

confer content onto a community's concepts, as well as their truth, are not relative to that community's status-instituting attitudes. He therefore argues, on Hegel's behalf, that normative statuses are instituted not just socially but also historically through the recollection of a progressively expressive history of concept application. It is recollection that ultimately explains how the content of our concepts can be rationally constrained by the way things are in themselves.

Part three of the book, "Recollecting the Ages of Spirit: From Irony to Trust," which I discuss in six and seven below, is almost a book in itself. Based upon an interpretation of Hegel's account of confession, forgiveness, and trust, Brandom outlines the practical payoff of the normative semantics given in the first two parts of the book. He gives an account of the transition from the Ancient to Modern Geist and argues that these social-historical epochs are built on distinct metaphysics of normativity. Ancient Geist takes it that the normative attitudes of individual subjects answer to normative statuses, which are understood as objective features of the world, while Modern Geist takes it that statuses are instituted by, and so answer to, the attitudes of individual subjects. The ultimate goal of *Phenomenology*, according to Brandom, is to overcome these one-sided pictures by bringing about in the reader a semantic self-consciousness such that they are able to grasp the reciprocal dependence of normative attitudes and statuses, which makes evident the necessity of instituting new practices, those of a new postmodern age, the age of trust.³¹

2.3 Rational Constraint and the Possibility of Knowledge

In part one of *A Spirit of Trust* Brandom lays out several conditions that must be met if the *Phenomenology* is to be able to explain how objective thought and knowledge are possible. The most important of these conditions are the "Genuine Knowledge Condition" and the "Rational Constraint Condition."³² To meet the Genuine Knowledge Condition one's epistemology cannot be based in a semantic theory of representation that "rules out as unintelligible the very possibility of knowing how things really are" (Brandom 2019, 44); and to meet the Rational Constraint Condition, one's semantic theory must be able to "portray what is represented as exerting *rational* constraint on representings of it" (Brandom 2019, 46). In other words, it must be able to give an

³¹ As we shall see, for Brandom the concept of the postmodern has nothing to do with the concept as it was developed by Lyotard (or by his teacher Rorty), where the postmodern is defined as a suspicion of meta-narratives. Brandom, in contrast, says of himself that he "is helpless in the face of an emerging narrative" (Brandom 2019, 764), including a meta-narrative.

³² This is an updated version of what Brandom called the "rational constraint constraint" in a prior debate with McDowell about the nature of perceptual knowledge. See Brandom 1996 and McDowell 1996a.

account of how the world rationally rather than just causally constrains representations that are of the world.

Hegel famously begins the “Introduction” to the *Phenomenology* with a discussion of a natural supposition that one may have, namely, that before we can have cognition of what is true, we must first come to an understanding of cognition itself. This supposition is general enough to inform Cartesian Rationalism, Lockian Empiricism, and Kantian Transcendentalism. Hegel challenges this supposition, arguing that it makes explaining the possibility of knowledge of things-in-themselves impossible. Just as we can’t learn how to swim before entering the water, we can’t learn what cognition is before cognizing. Hegel instead thinks we should enter the water straightaway, that is, we should come to know about knowing through trying to know. It is the various attempts at knowing something posited as true (an immediate “this,” the thing with many properties, the inner force of an object, oneself as a desirous being, oneself as an independent being, oneself as a thinking being, etc.) that are tested by the various shapes of consciousness outlined in the *Phenomenology*.

Brandom, however, does not think we can enter the water straight away. He rather, on Hegel’s behalf, unpacks the assumptions built into the natural supposition by examining the positive model of cognition that informs it, where cognition is, as Hegel says, understood either as an instrument or a medium (see Hegel 2018, § 73). Both models are in essence Cartesian, for they both assume that subjects have immediate knowledge of their inner representations and mediated knowledge of what those representations represent. Given the difficulties that early modern philosophers had in answering the question of how, based upon this model, knowledge of the objective world can be secured, this picture opens up the gulf, characteristic of modern thought, between representation and represented, appearance and reality, mind and world.

The problem with the picture that is built into the natural supposition is not the mere idea that there is a distinction between representation and represented. Indeed, Brandom will try to rehabilitate this distinction on non-Cartesian grounds. Rather, what gets us into trouble is the related “idea that only what we think, and not the world we think about, is conceptually articulated and so immediately (non-representationally) graspable” (Brandom 2019, 64). If we have to span *this* gap, between the conceptual and the nonconceptual, then “knowledge of how things are in themselves . . . will be ruled out in principle as unintelligible” (Brandom 2019, 65). We will not be able to meet either the Genuine Knowledge or the Rational Constraint Condition.

To have the right epistemology, therefore, requires having the right semantics, the right account of conceptual content. Brandom calls this right account “conceptual realism,” which is the “ground floor of Hegel’s intellectual edifice”

(Brandom 2019, 666). Simply put, conceptual realism is the “view that not only thought, but the non-mental world that is the object of our knowledge and the arena of our action has a generically *conceptual* structure” (Brandom 2019, 363). To say that the world is conceptually structured is to say that for something to *be* the *determinate* property or kind of thing that it is, it must stand in alethic modal relations of incompatibility and consequence. In Hegel’s terms, it must be subject to relations of determinate negation and mediation.

By ‘determinate negation,’ Hegel means material incompatibility or Aristotelian contrariety: relations of exclusion of this sort that **triangular** stand in to **circular** among properties of plain figures and **copper** stands in to **aluminum** among kinds of metals. It is *impossible* for one thing at one time to exhibit both properties. By ‘mediation’ – a term inspired by the inference facilitating role played by middle terms in Aristotelian syllogisms – Hegel means subjunctively robust relations of material consequence: relations of inclusion of the sort that **triangular** stands in to **polygonal** and **copper** to **electrical conductor**. It is *necessary* that if a thing exhibits one property, it exhibits the other. (Brandom 2019, 2)³³

Alethic modal relations of exclusion and inclusion do not depend on the discursive practices of thinking and acting subjects. If no one were around, it would still be impossible for something to both be copper and aluminum, and it would still be necessary that copper conduct electricity. Hegel therefore accepts “a commonsense realism about the asymmetrical dependence of subjects on the objective world they inhabit” (Brandom 2019, 365). But it is also true that these “objective material incompatibility and consequence relations underwrite *inferences* (Brandom 2019, 364), which is something that thinking subjects do. We can make inferences from one commitment to another because conceptual content takes two forms, one objective, the other subjective. Hegel therefore has a bimodal “hylomorphic conception” of conceptual content in which there is “one content, two forms” (Brandom 2019, 80). While the objective form is comprised by alethic modal relations, the subjective form concerns the deontic normative relations that ought to structure the inferences are about such relations. While it is impossible for an object to stand in incompatible relations, and necessary that it stand in certain relations of consequence, one ought not have incompatible commitments about that object, and one ought to inferentially draw the necessary consequences from one’s commitments. If one is committed to something being copper, one should also be committed to its not being aluminum, to its conducting electricity, and so on. But one may in fact be committed to the idea that it is a kind of copper and that it insulates electricity.

³³ Brandom takes this to be the lesson of Spinoza’s principle: *Omnis determinatio est negatio*. Brandom reads the *Perception* chapter as the primary place where this lesson is worked out.

Here one's deontic commitments are not in alignment with the alethic modal relations that articulate the content of copper. What is for-consciousness is not in accord with how things are in themselves. One has fallen into error. The question is: how can we overcome error and reestablish a condition in which the form of thought and world share a common conceptual content?

Because we can fall into error, Brandom's conceptual realism is not one in which the conceptual structure of the world is given to us, for instance through rational intuition. Rather, this structure becomes manifest through an error-driven learning process in which our commitments are refined and progressively become more determinate. This process is what Brandom, following Hegel, calls experience. The nature of this process, which is abstractly described in the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology*, is outlined in detail in the first three chapters of the book. While "Sensuous-Certainty" contains "150 years before Sellars . . . an argument against the Myth of the Given" (Brandom 2019, 114), "Perception" and "Force and the Understanding" outline ways in which the conceptual structure of thought, object, and world is progressively made and found to be more determinate and concrete.

For reasons of space, I can only describe the process of experience in an abstract way. Brandom's example of error is seeing a stick submerged in water as bent and then as straight when it is taken out of the water. Given the background belief that the stick does not change its shape when pulled from water, in this case one comes to have incompatible commitments: to the stick being bent, and to the stick being straight. When one acknowledges this incompatibility, one has an experience of error. But one can't rest content with this incompatibility, for as a rational being, one has the *task-responsibility* to *critically* reject commitments that are incompatible with one's current commitment, to *amplify* one's commitments by acknowledging those commitments with which it is now compatible, and to *justify* one's commitment by citing other commitments from which it materially follows. Using Kantian language, one must unify one's experience by bringing about a synthetic unity of one's commitments. Hegel's term for this "process by which new commitments are integrated into a constellation of old ones is 'experience' [Erfahrung]" (Brandom 2019, 75). In experience, one restores "the synthetic unity characteristic of apperception by repairing the incoherence that results when a subject finds itself with incompatible commitments." (Brandom 2019, 76).

This allows us to begin making sense of the Rational Constraint Condition because the experience of error implicitly involves a grasp of the distinction between appearance and reality – between one's *representation* of things, what

things are *for consciousness*, and the things that one's representations are *about*, what things are *in themselves*. As Brandom puts it, this distinction comes about:

when a subject inevitably eventually discovers that it is in some instance *wrong*, that things are not in fact as they seemed. It is in having to *give up* a view that becomes untenable that it becomes visible as a *view* (a representing), normatively answerable for its correctness to how things actually are (what is represented). When an error is practically acknowledged, what was *to* the subject a reality is unmasked and revealed as merely a guise, an appearance, a way things were only *for* the subject. (Brandom 2019, 677)

When a subject explicitly acknowledges that it has incompatible beliefs, it, at the practical level, treats them “as being about one object, and as attributing incompatible properties to *it*. In other words, it is treating them as representings of a common represented.” (Brandom 2019, 76). Both the straight stick belief and the bent stick belief are practically taken to be modes of presentation (appearances) of a single reality distinct from them. At the same time, through the revision of these commitments, one practically treats the straight stick belief as providing “a *reason* for rejecting the bent-stick belief” (Brandom 2019, 79) and as “a *standard* for the assessment of the *correctness* (veridicality) of the bent stick belief” (Brandom 2019, 78). Here, one *takes* the object represented by the straight stick belief as having *authority* over one's representation of it.

Through his conceptual realism, Brandom puts in place a semantic picture that does not rule out as unintelligible knowledge of how things really are. He therefore begins to meet the Genuine Knowledge Condition. Through his account of the error-driven process of experience, he puts in place the process through which subjects come to distinguish between appearances and things-in-themselves and come to understand that the latter have authority over the former. With this, he begins to meet the Rational Constraint Condition. But as we are about to see, experience as a process is both social and temporal. If we are going to fully understand how knowledge is possible and how thought and knowledge can be rationally constrained by the way things are, we need to explore the social and temporal nature of experience. It is to this that we now turn.

2.4 Recognition

In “Consciousness” we learn how it is possible for consciousness to hold itself responsible in a judgment to an objective state of affairs that has authority over it. There are certain unexplained explainers at play here: what it is to make a *commitment* and be *responsible* to something that has *authority*. To explain these notions, we need an account of normativity, which is, Brandom argues,

precisely what is given by the theory of recognition that stands at the center of the chapter “Self-Consciousness.”

Brandom’s account of recognition has three main topics. First, it is an account of the transition from nature to spirit, of the conditions by which desirous animals become spiritual beings who are able to acknowledge and attribute commitments and entitlements. Second, it is an account of mutual recognition, which, Brandom argues, is an allegory for the normative social practice in which subjects, through their normative attitudes of attributing and acknowledging normative statuses of authority and responsibility, mutually confer conceptual contents on their thoughts and intentions. Third, it is an account of nonreciprocal forms of recognition, of mastery and servitude, which is an allegory for normative social practices in which normative attitudes are not seen as answering to normative statuses. I take these in order.

Brandom asks, how can certain creatures make “the initial transition from being merely a living organism, belonging to the realm of nature, to being a denizen of the normative realm of Spirit” (Brandom 2019, 238)? With the resources found in *Making it Explicit*, this question can only be answered in a dualistic way. For in that text, Brandom posits that there are two kinds of beings: *sentient* beings, who merely exercise reliable differential dispositions in response to stimuli, and *sapient* beings, who are additionally able to make norm-governed moves in the space of reasons. In *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom introduces an intermediate kind of being, living nonrational animals. In having desires and acting on them, nonrational animals do not merely exercise dispositions in response to stimuli; rather, they *practically classify* something as something by taking or treating it as being of a certain kind. For instance, *hunger* prompts a creature into a certain activity, *eating*, in which they take or treat a certain something as having the significance of *food*. Brandom calls this the “triadic structure of orectic awareness”: things show up *for* the animal as having the significance of food only in light of their desire-driven activity.

This triadic structure introduces into the relation between animal and world *instrumental norms* of success, as now an action can be evaluated by the animal in terms of whether it successfully satisfies their desire or not. Animals therefore undergo a primitive error-driven learning process in which they are able to distinguish between “what things are for *it* (the practical significance it practically assigned to them) and what things are *in themselves* (the practical significance they actually have, as assessed by the satisfaction of the desire)” (Brandom 2019, 677). The question is: how does it come about that a creature like this can come to have commitments – beliefs and intentions – that are governed by norms whose validity is based not in the success or failure of their desire-motivated actions, but in the

correctness or incorrectness of moves made in an intersubjective discursive practice? How can they enter the normative realm?

The first answer that Brandom gives is that the winner of Hegel's famous struggle for life and death, the eventual master, bootstraps their way into the spiritual realm through their willingness to identify with a commitment, even at the expense of life. Here, "a living being *makes* itself more than merely a desiring animal simply by *taking* itself to be more, in its practical willingness to risk its animal existence" (Brandom 2019, 329). Like the Samurai that is willing to commit ritual suicide in light of the code of Bushido, subjects here show themselves to be able to distance themselves from the motivational force of their desires and inclinations on behalf of something ideal: a value, norm, or commitment. It is this, Brandom suggests, that accounts for the transition from nature to spirit:

By being willing to risk one's life for something, one makes it the case that the life one risks is *not an essential* element of the self one is thereby constituting, while that for which one risks it is. What mattered for the transition from *Natur* to *Geist* were the cases where one was willing to risk one's natural life for . . . a *commitment*, something *normative*: a normative status or attitude. This is risking something concrete and actual for something abstract and ideal. (Brandom 2019, 328)

But it is difficult to understand how risk and potential sacrifice on behalf of a norm can bring normativity *into being*. Willingness to risk and sacrifice for a commitment assumes that one already has a commitment, for example to the code of Bushido, for which one sacrifices. This bootstrapping account assumes what it must demonstrate.

But we can find another solution in Brandom, which he most clearly outlines in a response to Honneth.³⁴ Brandom argues that desires have implicit in them "a second-order desire: the desire that things should be *in* themselves just what they are *for* the desirer. That is the desire that one's desires be satisfied, just because they *are* one's desires" (Brandom 2019, 330). But if each participant in the struggle desires that things-in-themselves be what they are for-it, then they *also* desire that things as they are for-it are how things are in themselves. In other words, they don't just desire to *take* themselves as a taker, they desire that the thing they take to be a taker (i.e., themselves) *is* a taker. "Being a taker for oneself analytically involves a desire to be a taker in oneself" (Brandom 2022, 742). But the status of being a taker in-onself, really being a taker, is not self-ratifying, not something one can bring into being through one's self-directed attitudes. This is because from the first-person point of view, there is no

³⁴ See Honneth 2021 and Brandom 2022.

difference between taking oneself to be a taker in itself and taking oneself to be a taker for oneself. For the difference between *appearing* to be a taker and *really* being a taker to be in play requires that there are others who have the authority to ratify that we are a taker in ourselves rather than just for ourselves.

According to this account, being for oneself a taker (which is orectic ur-self-consciousness) necessarily involves desiring to be in oneself a taker (in virtue of the analytic, second-order feature of desire). So having another's takings in this regard (what one is for another) be partly authoritative about what one is in oneself entails desiring to be for the other what one is for oneself. That is, taking oneself to be a taker (self-recognition) essentially involves the desire to be recognized by those one recognizes. (Brandom 2022, 742)

The desire to relate to oneself as a taker in-oneseff includes the desire to be recognized as having that status by another agent. But for this agent to have the authority necessary to confer that status upon us, we must recognize them as having that authority. It follows that one's "recognition-desire can be satisfied only by achieving reciprocal recognition" (Brandom 2019, 250). Here we have "the first stirrings of normativity" (Brandom 2022, 242), for the standard of correctness that determines whether the desire for recognition is satisfied is not instrumental – not based in the fulfillment of a creature's object-directed desires – but social, based in whether self and other display attitudes that have the right reciprocal structure.

This leads us to our second topic, the structure of mutual recognition. Like Pippin, Brandom argues that we can best understand Hegel's account of mutual recognition through a modification of Kant's notion of autonomy. In Brandom's idiom, autonomy is "the idea that rational beings can *make* themselves responsible (institute a normative status) just by *taking* themselves to be responsible (adopting an attitude)" (Brandom 2019, 269). On this conception, rational beings have *immediately* status-instituting attitudes. For Kant, having the authority to make myself responsible to a norm owes nothing to others, to their attributions to me as having this authority. The Kantian subject therefore displays what Brandom calls "pure independence" (Brandom 2019, 272). But this pure independence is not based in their orectic attitudes but in their given status as a rational being, a being who has dignity. This status is owed respect by others, and in this sense, there is a social dimension to Kant's picture. But this social dimension, Hegel argues, is not robust enough to constitute genuine authority. Here is where recognition comes in:

On the Hegelian line, recognition – the cognitive attitude of *attributing* the authority distinctive of autonomy . . . is an essential component required to institute that very authority. These are the thoughts that lead from the Kantian

model of *individual* autonomous normative subjects as *immediately* instituting their determinate responsibilities by their attitudes of acknowledging them, to the Hegelian model of the *social* institution of normative statuses by attitudes of normative subjects that must be *mediated* by each other's suitably complementary attitudes of acknowledgement and attribution. (Brandom 2019, 280–281).

Kantian subjects, just in virtue of their nature as rational beings, “can, in a certain sense, lift themselves up by their own bootstraps,” meaning that they can, through their own attitudes, immediately “actualize normative statuses that are merely virtual” (Brandom 2019, 282). But for Hegel this is impossible because there is no way to determine whether this actualization is correct or not. If whatever I take to be authoritative has authority, then there is no way for this taking to be incorrect, and therefore no way for it to be correct. For Hegel, therefore, the authority to institute normative statuses is not merely a fact about us, based in our dignity, but is social, comes about

when and only when the recognizing subject is recognized (as a recognizing subject) by another recognizing subject whom the first subject recognizes in turn. They do not individually lift themselves up into the normative status of having recognitive authority by the bootstraps of their own recognitive attitudes (attributions of authority). But the recognitive unity they form when their recognition is mutual *does* lift the attitudes of *both*; it does promote their statuses (recognitive authority) that are merely virtual as the objects of their attitudes up to the level of actual normative statuses. The recognitive statuses are not immediately instituted by recognitive attitudes. But they are instituted by suitably socially complemented recognitive attitudes. (Brandom 2019, 282–283)

This is a kind of bootstrapping account insofar as to *be* a free subject that has authority and responsibility, there must be others who take or treat this subject as authoritative and responsible, and for these others to have attitudes that can actualize normative statuses, they must themselves be taken or treated as having the authority to institute these statuses and the responsibility to do so. While on this picture normative statuses are instituted by attitudes, the attitudes at play are no longer those of immediately constitutive, purely independent, subjects. Rather, a subject's attitudes can actualize statuses only because they are socially complemented as part of a mutually recognitive structure. This is a critical result for Brandom's pragmatic-semantic theory because it is only in light of the social actualization of normative statuses that we are able to distinguish between what a subject's commitments and entitlements really are given the intersubjective layout of the space of reasons, and what they take their commitments and entitlements to be. We now have on the

table, in the normative realm of thought, the distinction between in itself and for itself that we credited to animals in the realm of desire.

But while we can in theory grasp what is necessary for mutual recognition, nonreciprocal recognition – mastery and servitude – has been the norm through history. Here we are led to our third topic. For Brandom, the notions of master and servant stand both for social positions in a hierarchy structured by relations of authority and responsibility, and for the different semantic roles that attitudes can play in an intersubjective discursive practice. Looked at from the first point of view, master and servant result from the struggle for life and death. The struggle is not about resources, but rather about whose orectic takings are to be *sovereign*. Before entering relations of recognition, both participants practically take themselves to be *immediately constitutive takers*, beings whose orectic attitudes *make objects* have the significance they do merely through their *taking* them to have it, without any complementary attitudes on the part of any others. When one of the participants backs down from the struggle by recognizing the authority of the other's takings, the winner of the struggle, the master, concludes not only that they constitute themselves as the essentially self-conscious beings they are, but that they “institute statuses all by themselves, regardless of the existence of any complementary attitudes on the part of others” (Brandom 2019, 315). Like the Kantian subject, they have “pure independence . . . authority without any correlative responsibility” (Brandom 2019, 314).

The servitude of the servant allows the master “to realize his self-conception and be in himself what he is for himself, namely, a constitutive taker” (Brandom 2019, 339). His taking of the servant as an object who makes over other objects in such a way that they become suitable for the master's consumption thereby makes the servant an object, not only for the master but for the servant as well. “For himself, he is what he is for the Master, an object” (Brandom 2019, 340). But both the master and the servant are wrong about what they are. This is what they learn through the famous dialectic of mastery and servitude, where their positions famously undergo ironic reversal, from authoritative and independent to responsible and dependent, and vice-versa. On the one hand, it becomes apparent that the master's self-conception as an immediately constitutive taker depends upon the servant's recognition of them as having this status. The “Master is the Master only insofar as he is recognized *as* the Master by the Servant” (Brandom 2019, 340).³⁵ On the other hand, it becomes apparent that it is the servant, and not the master, who is the constitutive taker, for it is their taking of the master as a master that *makes* them a master. While not an

³⁵ Brandom gives a very illuminating account of the psychology at play in this relationship at Brandom 2019, 341–343.

immediately constitutive taker, the servant is a “practically constituting consciousness” (Brandom 2019, 245), that is, one who, in light of their conceptual development, makes over the world through formative activity, through work.

Brandom, predictably, also reads these reversals in semantic terms. Brandom argues that the master’s understanding of themselves as purely independent “corresponds on the recognitive side of self-consciousness to a form of cognitive consciousness that takes whatever *seems* right to it to *be* right” (Brandom 2019, 349).³⁶ The master, in taking their attitudes to have authority without any corresponding responsibility, holds that their attitudes are not subject to normative assessment by statuses. But if attitudes are not subject to assessment by normative statuses, then they fail to have determinate content at all. What we, the reader-theorist, learn through the reversal of the master’s position is that the content of our commitments are, because attitudes are subject to assessment by statuses put in place by the recognitive attitudes of the community, not up to us.

The metaphysical irony afflicting Mastery shows that even self-constitutive identification, whether existential or not, turns out indirectly to depend on recognition by others, because the *content* of the commitment one identifies with is not entirely up to the one identifying with it. One is not in general committed to exactly whatever one *takes* oneself to be committed to. The distinction between status (what one normatively is in oneself) and attitude (what one normatively is for oneself) is recognitively constituted by the whole community, because it is that community that administers the determinate conceptual contents of those statuses and attitudes. (Brandom 2019, 350)

While it is up to the individual to determine what commitments they make – their force – the content of their commitments is not similarly up to them. For if I choose to make a move in a discursive social practice, “I have bound myself by a set of norms; I have committed myself to things independently of whether I realize what I have committed myself to. In this sense, the normative status that I have taken on outruns my normative attitudes. What I am actually committed to need not coincide with what I take myself to be committed to” (Brandom 2019, 516).

Brandom reads the ironic reversal of the servant’s position, which only begins in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, as leading Hegel to a consideration “of the practical dimension of self-consciousness represented by work. This is ‘reason as purposive action’ addressed in the subsequent *Reason* chapter” (Brandom 2019, 347). Through the dialectical reversal of the servant’s position we, the reader-theorist, come to realize that thought and

³⁶ Brandom’s account of recognition and misrecognition could be seen as variations on Wittgenstein’s thought that in a private language “whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’” (Wittgenstein 2001, § 258).

action have determinate conceptual contents conferred on them not only because they take part in diachronic social-recognitive relations but also in temporally extended processes of practical experience and recollection. As we shall see, these processes are the motor of spirit's self-making, and which is the true subject of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

2.5 Recollection

Let us briefly review where we are in the argument. In "Consciousness" we learned about the objective alethic modal relations that articulate the conceptual structure of the world, while in "Self-Consciousness" we learned about the normative deontic relations that make the thought and judgment of self-conscious subjects possible. While objective modal relations of incompatibility and consequence would exist even if there were no self-conscious subjects to cognize them, and so are *reference-independent* of the subjective processes of experience, in another way these relations and processes are reciprocally dependent upon one another. For in moving from "Consciousness" to "Self-Consciousness" we, the reader-theorist, "have learned that to understand the conceptual structure of the *objective* world that is empirically *known*, we must understand the experiential processes and conceptual practices of the *knowing subjects*" (Brandom 2019, 366). In other words, we have learned that the meta-concepts that articulate the alethic modal relations that comprise the objective world are only *intelligible* through a grasp of the meta-concepts that articulate the deontic normative relations that structure thought and experience, and vice versa. Brandom calls this thesis Objective Idealism. There is here a single reciprocally *sense-dependent* complex of (meta)-concepts, the two sides of which articulate the intelligibility of thought and world.

But, Brandom asks, how should we understand this subject-object complex, as subject-like or as object-like? His answer, following Hegel, is that the whole complex is subject-like, that "substance is in truth subject" (see Hegel 2018 § 18). Brandom's name for the resulting position is Conceptual Idealism.³⁷ Conceptual Idealism is the claim that the sense-dependent relations between subjective and objective concepts "must be understood in terms of the *processes* that institute those relations . . . These are the very processes of practical experience through the exercise of intentional agency – now understood as 'thick' in the sense of incorporating their objective correlates – that constitute self-conscious selves" (Brandom 2019, 369). Subjects institute this single complex through their *doings*. Because this is so, the chapter on "Reason," often thought to be a transitional

³⁷ Brandom argues that "Absolute Idealism is what you get when you add conceptual idealism to objective idealism and bimodal hylomorphic conceptual realism" (Brandom 2019, 374).

chapter, is for Brandom “the heart of the *Phenomenology* because it is of the essence of the idealism on offer there to model cognition on intentional agency. The link between them is recollective rationality” (Brandom 2019, 371). But what does it mean to say that intentional agency is the model for cognition, and how does this relate to recollective rationality?

Here is a way of answering these questions. In light of the account of action and agency given in “Reason,” Brandom posits that experience is a temporally extended perceptual-motor ideational learning process in which agents, through their doings (their judgments and actions), apply concepts in novel circumstances, fall into error, detect and acknowledge incompatibilities, and then – through undertaking their task responsibilities to criticize, amplify, and justify – repair their commitments by revising or sacrificing incompatible commitments, leading to a new synthetic unity of one’s commitments going forward.³⁸ Because Brandom takes it the *institution* of meaning and the *application* of senses or contents in a context are not distinct but reciprocally dependent steps, this “experiential process – the cycle of action and cognition” is the process “of *determining* conceptual contents. It is the process by which one sense is found to be implicitly defective by its own standards, and is replaced by another” (Brandom 2019, 430).

But why think that the synthetic unity brought about by this process is better than a prior one? Why think that the contents or senses conferred on our commitments through this process actually capture the way things are, rather than merely how they are for us? Brandom’s answer points to a third phase of the process of experience, which he calls the recollective phase.

The final, recollective phase of experience requires the subject to engage in a particular kind of rational reconstruction of the course of experience that led up to the commitments resulting from the reparative phase. Recollection *rationalizes* a course of experience by retrospectively redescribing it so as to exhibit it as *expressively progressive*. The result of the reparative phase is a new commitment to how things really are, how they are in themselves. (Brandom 2019, 370)

To successfully repair one’s commitments, one can’t simply rejig them, one “must *explain* and *justify* the changes made” (Brandom 2019, 679) by telling a story about how one’s past incorrect commitments led to one’s current commitments, and how this path has progressively revealed how things in fact are. Here one is “rationally reconstructing the sequence of one’s previous

³⁸ Here, one can’t help but be reminded of Dewey’s account of experience. See Brandom 2011 and Levine 2019.

views of what one now takes to be the same topic so as to exhibit it as a process of *learning*, of gradual *discovery* of how things actually are” (Brandom 2019, 680). This rational reconstruction is Whiggish insofar as it shows how what was implicit in our prior commitments gradually became explicit in our current commitments, and how this movement was rational and necessary.³⁹ This necessity here is not prospective, such that things could not have turned out otherwise, but retrospective and expressive: if these steps “had *not* happened, some aspect of what the story claims was all along implicit would not have become explicit” (Brandom 2019, 438).

But recollection is not merely epistemological, for this “distinctive sort of expressive *epistemic* vindication is baked deep into Hegel’s *semantic* account of representation” (Brandom 2019, 437). It is, because without recollection we would not be able to entertain determinate conceptual contents about determinate objects. For it is rationally recollecting a history of concept applications that we *institute* the very distinction between phenomena and noumena: what things are for consciousness and what they are in themselves, appearance and reality, senses and references.

[W]hat establishes the relation between sense and reference is treating one’s *current* commitments as setting a normative standard that now governs (and implicitly already all along did govern) one’s *previous* commitments. What one must *do* in order thereby to be taking it in practice that one is *taking* our thinking about some way things are *in* themselves is to perform a recollection [Erinnerung] of the experiential process that yielded that result . . . That is one in which the way things are *in* themselves – as one currently takes that to be – is presented as having been all along *implicit* in each of the way things were *for* oneself, with each included transformation in response to the acknowledgement of incompatible commitments getting one closer to the actual conceptual contents. One treats one’s currently endorsed conceptions and commitments as presenting the reality behind prior appearances, as having been such a guiding, governing, and controlling norm of how things showed up *for* consciousness. (Brandom 2019, 437)

If we did not, through performing a recollection, take or treat our current commitment as grasping the reality behind the appearances that we once took to be reality, there would not be a distinction between appearance and reality.

With this distinction in place, we are able to see the process of experience as both making this reality and discovering it. While from the prospective point of view “the process of experience is one of progressively determining conceptual

³⁹ For discussion and criticism of this Whiggish conception of rational recollection, see DeVries 2021.

contents in the sense of *making* those contents more determinate, by applying them or withholding their application in novel circumstances” (Brandom 2019, 17), from the retrospective point of view this same process “is one of determining conceptual contents in the sense of progressively *finding out* more about the boundaries of concepts that show up as having implicitly all along already been fully determinate” (Brandom 2019, 17).

Brandom’s example of an experiential process in which contents are simultaneously made and discovered is the common law. On the one hand, “common law is judge-made law: there is nothing to it except the tradition of actual applications of its concepts to concrete cases” (Brandom 2019, 449). These applications are based on choices about relevant precedents and about which facts of the case are salient. Through their doings, the judge *determines* legal concepts. But this making is also a retrospective finding because:

the only *justification* that the judge can give for the novel application of the old concepts is that doing so is making explicit commitments that were already implicit in the prior, precedential (that is, content explicating) applications. It is producing a suitable or recollective reconstruction of the tradition of applying a concept that exhibits a candidate conceptual revision as *rational*, that provides a rationale for it. (Brandom 2019, 450)

In applying a concept to new facts, a judge alters, however minimally, the content of the concept going forward. But through the recollective reconstruction of the history of this concept, they demonstrate that this change is necessitated by what was implicit in prior applications. Their ruling, in being supported by a rational recollection, progressively unearths the exclusions and entailments implicit in the concept all along. These exclusions and entailments limn the way things have always already been in themselves.

The introduction of the concept of recollection is the largest innovation of *A Spirit of Trust* vis-à-vis Brandom’s earlier work. He introduces the concept, I think, because he realizes that a diachronic account of recognition in which normative statuses are instituted by “socially complemented” attitudes could plausibly be seen as leading to a consensus theory of content and truth, according to which the content of concepts and “objective truth becomes just whatever all community members agree on” (Brandom 2019, 306). But if the institution of normative statuses by attitudes is part of an ongoing historical process of recollection, then a community’s application of concepts is not internally self-authorizing but is *responsible* to prior normative statuses for their correct future application.

According to the historical side of the story, the present community is responsible to further stages of the community for properly administering

norms instituted by the actual attitudes adopted by the tradition it inherits, from which derives the only authority it's concept applications (both doxastic and practical) can claim, and to which it is ultimately responsible. At no stage in its development is any community immune to these Janus-faced retrospective and prospective responsibilities and authority. (Brandom 2019, 306–307)

Truth is neither what, in a backward-looking way, a community takes to be true, nor is it, in a forward-looking way, a goal that a community in its experience asymptotically approaches (see Brandom 2019, 307, 694). Contents and their potential truth must not be “understood,” as they are by these theories, “as properties, states, or relations that can be instantiated at a single time, but as structural features of enduring experiential processes.” Indeed, for Brandom, this change in perspective marks the all-important “shift between the static modern metaconceptual structure Hegel calls ‘*Verstand*’ and the dynamic successor metaconceptual structure he calls ‘*Vernunft*’” (Brandom 2019, 693).

For Kant, the chief representative of *Verstand*, conceptual contents and their truth are determinate and ready-made. What we have to do is simply discover the sharp and determinate boundaries of the contents of the concepts that we use, as well as the way that these contents map onto and represent the independent world. For Hegel, in contrast, conceptually articulate contents are both made and discovered through prospective-recollective experiential processes, and truth is the “Bacchanalian revel” (see Hegel 2018, § 47) in which phenomena, though continually “unmasked as erroneous” in experience, are nonetheless, through recollection, found to be “an appearance of a noumenal reality (what things are in themselves) . . . visible as having been all along implicit in it, gradually but inexorably emerging into greater explicitness” (Brandom 2019, 695). In endorsing *Vernunft*, Brandom thereby endorses a dynamic process-oriented meta-conceptual framework that is able to explain both how reality is not given but taken in experience, and how thought, as one moment of an experiential process, is able to be rationally constrained by a noumenal reality that has existed independently of this process all along.

2.6 Recollection as Recognition: Confession, Forgiveness, and Trust

In the final chapter of *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom argues that Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness, given in the [final section](#) of “Spirit,” “Conscience, the Beautiful Soul, Evil, and its Forgiveness,” is an account of recollection as a historical form of recognition. “This discussion is” for Brandom “the culmination of the substantive development of the whole book” (Brandom 2019, 583). It too is allegorical. While one might think that Hegel is

giving a secularized account of how, through confession and forgiveness, individuals and communities heal the moral harms that inevitably come about due to human action, it is actually an account of how concept applications in a tradition inevitably go wrong and how others in that tradition have the responsibility to respond to these applications by developing recollective reconstructive stories in which they come out right, as expressively progressive.

The recognitive situation at the beginning of Hegel's drama of confession and forgiveness is comprised of (1) an acting consciousness who deliberates first personally about what to believe or do, and who, in acknowledging a cognitive or practical commitment, undertakes responsibility for it, and (2) an assessing or judging consciousness who tracks what the acting consciousness *ought* to believe or do given the commitments they have both acknowledged and concomitantly undertaken, and who has the authority to hold them accountable. The acting consciousness is a version of the modern shape that Hegel calls Conscience. Conscience is a modern form of Mastery, an "alienated attempt to replace norms by attitudes" (Brandom 2019, 586), because it holds that what one *takes* to be one's duty *is* one's duty. The only question is whether one acts conscientiously: whether one acts in accord with one's current conception of duty or not. The judging consciousness, in contrast, rejects the acting consciousness's claim to authority by positing a *disparity* between what the acting consciousness takes to be its duty and duty itself, between the beliefs and intentions that they acknowledge and those that they *ought* to acknowledge.

In positing this disparity, the judging consciousness takes a *Niederträchtigkeit* or mean-spirited attitude to the acting consciousness. They take the position of the valet to that of the hero and undertake a "hermeneutic of suspicion" in which they posit that the actions of the acting consciousness stem from particular motives rather than from duty. Their actions are *evil* insofar as they are brought about by particular and selfish motives rather than duty, and they are *hypocritical* insofar as they claim to act from duty, but in fact do not. Here, the judge gives descriptions of the acting consciousness "in terms of attitudes rather than norms, inclinations rather than obligations, causes rather than reasons" (Brandom 2019, 589). Because the judge takes it that their descriptions are authoritative – are the norms by which to hold the acting consciousness accountable regardless of what the acting consciousness thinks – the judge takes the posture of pure independence, of Mastery.

In the next act of this drama, the acting consciousness *confesses* their evil and hypocrisy, "confesses that his apparent respect for the norms (universals) is a guise for the pursuit of (particular) ends" (Brandom 2019, 590). Here, the confessor takes a mean-spirited attitude toward himself, and so sees himself *through the other*. In adopting the standard of assessment of the judging

consciousness, acting consciousness takes a “step toward the achievement of mutual recognition” (Brandom 2019, 593), for the “same standards are brought to bear by the agent as by the assessor” (Brandom 2019, 593–594). But in taking this attitude toward themselves, the acting consciousness is alienated from itself, “unintelligible to itself as a creature and creator of norms, hence as a knower and agent at all” (Brandom 2019, 590).

At this point, acting consciousness expects the judging consciousness to confess itself. They have this expectation because if the judging consciousness is to act in accord with the universality embedded in their judgments of duty, they must interpret themselves in the same way that they interpret others. To not do so is to make an exception for oneself, which is to act out of one’s particularity. To maintain universality, the judging consciousness should therefore confess that their judgments are not simply the “correct applications of universals, whose determinate content necessitates those applications” (Brandom 2019, 594), but themselves the product of their “embodied subjectivity: the residual effects of the contingent trajectory of . . . training and experience, collateral attitudes, inclinations, concerns, and emphasis of attention” (Brandom 2019, 593). But the judge remains hard-hearted by maintaining two different interpretive stances, a mean-spirited one for the acting consciousness and a magnanimous one for themselves.

In the next act of the drama, the judge’s hard heart breaks and they confess that their judgments too are based in contingent and particular reasons. In confessing this, the judge paradoxically *sacrifices* their particularity and identifies themselves with a universal structure: the symmetrical recognitive unity that comes about through reciprocal confession. But while this is a form of mutual recognition, it is a severely deficient one, because if all we have are agents who are mean-spiritedly and “even-handedly playing the moral valet to each other” (Brandom 2019, 595), if all we have are agents who take each other to act for no other reason than their naturalistically based inclinations and interests, then we have instituted an alienated structure of recognition in which there are no norms upon the basis of which to judge whether an action is evil or not. We would be back to a view in which whatever individuals orrectically take to be right *is* right, and so one in which the confession of evil, the confession that one does not act from duty, does not make sense. To overcome this alienated structure we need forgiveness, which is the last act of the drama.

In forgiveness, one takes a magnanimous (*edelmütig*) recognitive stance toward a confessed evil. One does not interpret it as just due to particularity, rather, one “practically acknowledges the complementary contribution of particularity and universality to individuality” (Brandom 2019, 598). In other words, one acknowledges that the actions of the one being forgiven are not

just the product of attitudes, but of attitudes that have been *mediated* by universality, that is, attitudes whose contents answer to normative statuses developed in a normative social practice. For me to forgive you, I can't see the action for which you confess as simply determined by naturalistically understood attitudes (desires and inclinations) that act through you, for then I would not forgive you but simply treat you like an object. Forgiveness depends on my recognition of you as having acted in a free, norm-governed way, and your confession depends upon the possibility of being forgiven by me through a free act.

The action that needs forgiveness takes place in the past, even if its consequences continue to ramify in the present and future. In forgiving this action, one, in a certain kind of way, changes the past. It is, as Hegel says, the healing of the wounds of spirit which “leave no scars behind” (Hegel 2018, 669). But what must the forgiver *do* in order to count as having healed a wound?

I think the answer is that forgiveness is a kind of recollection. What one must do in order to forgive the confessor for what is confessed is to offer a rational reconstruction of a tradition in which the concept application (theoretically in judgment or practically in intention) in question belongs, in which it figures as an expressively progressive episode. Telling such a story is a substantive undertaking, one that the magnanimous (*edelmütig*) would-be forgiving assessor may well not be able to accomplish. (Brandom 2019, 601)

The drama of confession and forgiveness is therefore an allegory for developing a hermeneutically magnanimous retrospective reconstruction of a tradition of concept application, whether in belief or action.⁴⁰ Consider, once again, the common law judge. For them to confess is for them to admit that their judicial decisions, which are an application of concepts, can be explained by contingent features of their particularity, by subjective attitudes that are the result of what they had for breakfast, or more broadly, their training, temperament, political views, and so on. For a later judge to forgive an earlier judge is for them to universalize this particularity, “to give contingency the form of necessity” (Brandom 2019, 610), by incorporating “the decision that was the subject of confession into a retrospective rational reconstruction of the tradition of applying the concept in question, as having *precedential* significance” (Brandom 2019, 602).

Or take Aristotle's claim that a hand detached from a human body is no longer a hand. The concept of “hand” at play in this claim is incorrect, for Aristotle's concept does not include as part of its content the correct collateral commitment that hands are controlled by the brain. This error depends upon contingent

⁴⁰ See Gazit 2022 for more on this.

features of Aristotle's intellectual context as well as the particular nature of his intellectual formation. What a hand was for him is not what we now know a hand is in itself. This disparity is what the *niederträchtig* judge gets right and what a concept user needs to confess. It is the wound that needs to be healed through forgiveness, which in this case is a recollective story that exhibits Aristotle

as succeeding in making claims and forming intentions concerning their hands (securing a reference, a noumenon showing up in the phenomena as they grasp them), but also show that in doing so they were doing things that furthered the cause of our finding out more about what hands really are, something that expressively developed our conception of hands, something that moved that subjective conception in the direction of the objective concept (a matter of what really follows from what and what is really incompatible with what). (Brandom 2019, 605–606)

But this recollective-reconstructive story is never final. Every repair and recollective reconstruction of a constellation of commitments “is temporary” and “fated to be disrupted by the eruption of anomalies” (Brandom 2019, 688). As such, the forgiver themselves also needs to confess that their “recollective reconstrual of the concepts involved inevitably fails to exhibit every use as correct and expressively progressive. We confess that though our generous, forgiving recollective recognitive spirit is willing, our flesh is weak. We have not fully healed the wounds of the spirit” (Brandom 2019, 620). The forgiver must therefore petition the one they forgave to forgive *them* by developing a recollective reconstruction of their performances. The forgiver must prospectively *trust* that the forgiven, who they now acknowledge has the authority to forgive them, will grasp their obligation to forgive, trust that they too will try to “find ways of forgiving that disparity, finding/forging a unity of referent behind the disparity of sense, healing the wound. So trust is an acknowledgment of dependence on others for recognition in the form of forgiveness” (Brandom 2019, 621).

For Brandom, trust and forgiveness are “reciprocal practical attitudes” that “produce a community with a symmetrical *edelmütig* recognitive structure” (Brandom 2019, 621). We each take each other to have the authority and responsibility to forgive each other through providing a magnanimous recollection of each other's confessed evils. While in giving this recollection we demonstrate how an application of concepts by the other went wrong, we also heal that wound by showing how their changing subjective conceptions moved them in the direction of capturing the objective concept implicit in them. “Confession, forgiveness, and trust are what we must *do*, recognitively, in order to *find* objective, determinately contentful conceptual norms being applied

cognitively in judgment and practically in action” (Brandom 2019, 628). In being magnanimous with respect to each other, we therefore do not institute a recognitive structure in which normative statuses just answer to attitudes, rather, we institute one in which attitudes also answer for their correctness to objective normative statuses, statuses that articulate what really follows from and is incompatible with what, rather than what an individual or even a community takes to follow from and be incompatible with what.

2.7 Edifying Semantics: From Modernity to Postmodernity

In part three of *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom, in light of the metaphysics of normativity developed above, develops a large-scale historical narrative about the history of Geist. Geist, to put it simply, “comprises all our normative doings, and everything they make possible: all the norms and recognitive attitudes and their subjects (“subjective Geist”), the practices they engage in in the communities and institutions they produce (“objective Geist”). *Geist* is us described in a normative vocabulary” (Brandom 2019, 641). Subjective Geist is intrinsically historical because subjects are essentially self-conscious, which means that what they are in themselves “essentially depends on what they are *for* themselves” (Brandom 2019, 642), on their self-conception. Because this self-conception can change, spiritual beings “enjoy the possibility of a distinctive kind of *self-transformation*: *making* themselves be different by *taking* themselves to be different” (Brandom 2019, 235). Spiritual beings therefore have *histories* rather than *natures*; or their nature is to be historical. Objective Geist is also historical because practices and institutions are brought about through the doings of these beings, which externalize aspects of their self-conception. Because this is so, Geist can undergo large-scale historical transformations.

The transformation that Hegel focuses on, which is the only thing that “has ever really happened to Geist – is its structural transformation from a tradition to a modern form” (Brandom 2019, 469). From the point of view of a metaphysics of normativity, we can understand this transition as going from “appreciation of the status-dependence of normative attitudes to appreciation of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses” (Brandom 2019, 645). For the premodern world, norms are “objective in much the same sense that the natural world is objective. Normative statuses, paradigmatically the authority of the superior to command and the responsibility of the subordinate to obey, are a feature of how things simply are” (Brandom 2019, 644). The moderns, in contrast, take it that there were no normative statuses in the world “before we starting practically taking or treating each other *as* authoritative or responsible (superior and subordinate).” Norms are the “subjective product of our activities and attitudes”

(Brandom 2019, 644). No one is *inherently* a master or a servant because there are no objective norms that determine our self-conceptions and social roles. The norms that govern these are a product of human self-making. It is this discovery, that “we are self-made creatures,” that the “norms that make us the *geistig* beings we are, are our own products,” that is, for Hegel, the defining “core of modernity” (Brandom 2019, 644).

This transformation is both progressive and regressive. It is progressive because “[s]omething important about what *Geist* always was implicitly or in itself becomes explicit for it with modern self-consciousness. Normative statuses really are attitude dependent . . . In failing to understand that, traditional *Geist* was opaque to itself in ways that modern *Geist* is not” (Brandom 2019, 646). But as we saw earlier, modern subjects overinterpret this genuine insight. For they take it that justice can be done to the “essential contribution of the actual activities and subjective attitudes of individuals to the institution of normative statuses – their authority over what they are responsible for – only if those individuals are conceived of as wholly *independent*: as fully and solely authoritative, as *constitutively* authoritative” (Brandom 2019, 622). Modern subjects, in short, take themselves to be masters who have authority not only over the force of a norm, over whether one is committed to it or not, but also over its content.

But with this transformation in self-conception, something “crucial and important was lost. [Hegel’s] term for what traditional communities had that modern ones do not is ‘*Sittlichkeit*’” (Brandom 2019, 471–472). We can think of *Sittlichkeit* in terms of the bindingness of norms on our attitudes. Traditional *Geist* takes it that norms bind us, whether or not we take them to bind us, because they express the way things are. Because this is so, ancient subjects are able to *immediately identify* with the norm-governed practices and social roles that comprise their ethical life. Modern subjects, in contrast, cannot so identify, and are accordingly *alienated* from the norms, practices, and social roles that constitute their form of life. While they in fact participate in a discursive practice in which their attitudes depend on statuses, which is structurally necessary for the conferral at all of determinate conceptual content, they – in taking such statuses to be merely the projection of their own individual attitudes – are not aware of this very fact. “Alienation is having one’s explicitly acknowledged commitments be incompatible with this implicit structural commitment of consciousness and agency” (Brandom 2019, 615). In other words, modern subjects are alienated not only because they can’t find themselves in the norms that govern ethical life, but also because in not finding themselves there, they misunderstand the ground of their own lives.

Hegel's goal in the *Phenomenology*, according to Brandom, is to develop a metaphysics of normativity that "overcomes the one-sidedness that both the traditional and modern forms of *Geist* exhibit," so as to "usher in a new, self-conscious *sittlich* structure of *Geist* – a third phase in human history. This is what I call 'the age of trust,' after the final form of reciprocal recognition that structures it" (Brandom 2019, 647). While traditional *Geist* is wrong about the reason *why* normative statuses transcend attitudes (they are not metaphysically objective), it is right that they do so. While modern *Geist* is wrong that subjects, in being independent, have constitutive authority over both the force and content of norms, they are right that statuses are instituted by attitudes – which they do not know are socially and historically complemented recognitive attitudes. In this third postmodern phase of history, we would grasp that "the dependance relations between normative attitudes and normative statuses are reciprocal." We would grasp that each "exercises a distinctive kind of authority over the other, and each is accordingly responsible to the other in a distinctive way" (Brandom 2019, 646).

Through the *Phenomenology*, we, the reader-theorist, become aware that the normative configuration of authority and responsibility at play in the magnanimous recognitive structure of confession and forgiveness provides "the transcendental conditions of the intelligibility of determinately contentful attitudes, of thinking, believing, meaning, or intending anything." We acquire "semantic self-consciousness" about the fact that this "recognitive structure is the background for cognition and action, the context in which alone they can be made sense of" (Brandom 2019, 615). Brandom argues that once we acknowledge this configuration, become semantically self-conscious about it, we also become able to "explicitly acknowledge practical commitments concerning how we ought to treat one another that we will see as having been implicit in our discursive activity all along" (Brandom 2019, 637). This is why Brandom calls his semantics *edifying*: semantic self-consciousness leads to an account of what we must *do* to bring our social practices and self-conceptions into alignment with the normative order found in the recognitive practices in which we already participate.⁴¹ While the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk, its distinctive call also prepares us for the next day. To not heed this call, to not alter what we do, would be to fall into a kind of *pragmatic contradiction* (Brandom 2019, 617), where what we are for ourselves is not in accord with what we are in ourselves. The move to a postmodern age of trust happens when we bring about social practices that are in accord with the semantic self-consciousness that we developed in

⁴¹ See Bernstein 2020 for how this overcomes the "positivism" found in MIE by Pippin 2009.

reading the *Phenomenology* – and so bring what we are in ourselves into alignment with what we are for ourselves.

How then should the actions and practices of the postmodern age of trust be arranged? Brandom answers this question through giving an account of agency that avoids the mistakes of the one-sided accounts found in the ancient and modern world. While ancient accounts of agency find the agent responsible for all the consequences of their actions, whether intended or not, modern accounts restrict responsibility solely to that which is intended. In “*Geist* with the recognitive structure of trust,” in contrast, “responsibility for the deed is shared between the agent whose practical attitudes initiate the doing and the members of her recognitive community, who take it as their own by committing themselves to reflectively forgiving it” (Brandom 2019, 755).

On the one hand, “the attitudes of individual agents . . . are the source of actualizing any norm, adopting any normative status” (Brandom 2019, 627). The attitudes of an individual actor are necessary for intentional action because without them there would be a mere *happening* rather than a *doing*. But an individual actor’s attitudes do not by themselves settle the *content* of the normative status that he actually adopts. “[W]hat the agent has done – the content of the status entered into – is not understood as restricted by what is explicit in those attitudes” (Brandom 2019, 627). The content of the status entered into rather depends on both acknowledgements and attributions, on both first-personal intentional descriptions and the consequential description of the recognitive community. Because consequential descriptions of the unforeseen and unintended consequences of an action can only be given retrospectively (as consequences ramify and expand through time), the individual actor himself can only know what they have intentionally done, the commitment they have actually undertaken, only after the fact.⁴² It is because agents in general cannot know what they do in acting without the help of others, which is what they confess, that the recognitive community has a responsibility to forgive them.

Because in the conferral of content there is a “division of normative labor in which agent and recognitive community play complementary roles,” Brandom puts forward the strong thesis that a deed is “not done by the agent alone, but . . . also done in a different, although equally constitutive sense by the agent’s community. All are responsible for the doings of each, and each for the doings of all” (Brandom 2019, 734).⁴³ Here we have the Musketeer’s slogan “One for all and all for one,” which Brandom reads as a paraphrase of Hegel’s notion that spirit is the “I that is We and the We that is I.” But Brandom does not wish to

⁴² For more on this, see Levine 2023.

⁴³ For criticism of this notion of responsibility, see Pippin 2021 and Levine 2023.

posit a strict identity between “I” and “We,” but, rather, a speculative identity. Though the community does the action, it does it in a different way that the individual actor does, and though the community is responsible for the action, its responsibility is not the same as that of the individual who deliberates and acts.

The community’s responsibility for the deed of one of its members takes two principal forms, reparative and recollective. First, agents have a responsibility to ameliorate and repair the unfolding consequences of others’ actions so that they come out right. “Recognizing an agent as one of us is practically treating what she did as part of what we all are doing. Adopting that attitude is acknowledging the responsibility to make what was already done come out right, as a constraint on what we have reason to do now” (Brandom 2019, 736). But what standard or norm do we have to judge what it is for consequences to come out right? “The standard for such normative assessments of consequences is set” Brandom argues “by the other, recollective dimension of forgiveness” (Brandom 2019, 743). This form of forgiveness involves developing a rational retrospective reconstruction of the action and its consequences so as to vindicate or justify it as expressively progressive. Here we find reasons for what has happened and “turn a past into an intelligible history” (Brandom 2019, 736). This gives contingency the normative shape of necessity by transforming the action from one whose consequences unfold contingently into one that is retrospectively seen as the unfolding into explicitness of a norm that governed it all along. This norm is rational because those recollecting it can endorse it on their own behalf. It is this norm, which integrates the action into a larger scheme of social action (a tradition) that can be endorsed by all, that provides the standard for the reparative stage of forgiveness.

The reparative responsibility to ameliorate the consequences of the doing being forgiven must be understood in terms of recollection. The aim is to make the whole that results from one’s current action, thought of as a contribution to a tradition, *more fully and successfully recollectable* than that tradition would otherwise be. (Brandom 2019, 743)

In the age of trust, each agent in a community retrospectively forgives others for their transgressions and prospectively trusts that others will forgive them theirs. Forgiveness and trust pertain to the normative space of reasons, a matter of rational recollection and content determination, and to the normative space of practices, a matter of amelioration. It concerns not only what we must think, but also what we must do. And what we must do is take responsibility for each other’s actions and trust that others will take responsibility for ours.

3 Identity and Difference

3.1 Introduction

I have argued that both McDowell and Brandom see the idealism outlined in the *Phenomenology* as a response to this framing question: how can one give an account of thought that avoids the myth of the given, yet which is able to make sense of its objectivity? But while they agree that the *Phenomenology* responds to this question, they strongly disagree about the shape that this response ought to take. In this section, I highlight different facets of their interpretive disagreement and come back, in light of them, to the question of whether McDowell and Brandom are part of a single philosophical school.

Let me begin by giving an overview of their central disagreement. McDowell reads the *Phenomenology* as responding to the framing question in a way that is fundamentally continuous with Kant's theoretical program. He reads the central chapter of the text, "Self-Consciousness," as concerning the question of how it is possible for an individual subject to unify concepts and intuitions, pure apperceptive self-consciousness and living empirical consciousness. While one side of the subject is the master – related to itself independently of any relation to the world – the other side is the servant, which is dependent on the world for its activity. The dialectic of mastery and servitude is an allegorical representation of our working through this divide within oneself, so that one can become self-conscious about how one is both independent of and dependent on the world. While sociality is important for Hegel's story about the emergence of self-consciousness, it, according to McDowell, emerges as a topic in "Reason" and comes into its own in "Spirit" rather than in "Self-Consciousness." As we saw in his debate with Pippin, McDowell takes it that being initiated into social relations of recognition and acquiring a second nature is necessary to become the kind of being – that is, a spiritual being – who is able to rationally respond to the layout of the space of reasons. But once this initiation is complete, one's response to this layout is a response to something that one has had one's eyes opened to, not something that one continues to make with others through taking part in social–historical cognitive relations. Because this is so, we know that the world that we rationally respond to, while knowable, is independent of our knowing.

Brandom, in contrast, thinks that the *Phenomenology* responds to the framing question by constructing a complex pragmatic-semantic theory, which outlines the conditions that are necessary for the concepts applied in our thought and action to have determinate content. While Brandom recognizes that relations of recognition are practical relations, having to do with the authority and responsibility that some agents have vis-à-vis the actions and social roles of others, he

holds that these relations are on a more fundamental level semantic, having to do with the conferral of content. In holding that the account of recognition given in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* has a theoretical function, Brandom finds himself in agreement with McDowell (even if they posit different theoretical functions). He also agrees with McDowell that Hegel's response to the framing question is continuous with Kant's theoretical legacy, specifically Hegel's adoption of Kant's rejection of early modern representationalism and development of a normative view of judgment, his naturalization, in his account of experience, of Kant's doctrine of the transcendental unity of apperception, and his view of recognition as a socialized version of Kantian autonomy.

But contrary to McDowell, Brandom holds that recognition is an inter- rather than intrapersonal relation. Mastery and servitude are not representations within an individual of pure self-consciousness and empirical consciousness, but rather of the normative statuses of authority and responsibility that are instituted by our social-recognitive attitudes of attributing and acknowledging commitments. Furthermore, we find in Brandom a thesis nowhere contemplated in McDowell, namely that attitudes can institute normative statues that answer to how things are in themselves, rather than how things are for us, only if they participate in a historical structure of recognition in which we confess and forgive each other by rationally recollecting an application of concepts as expressively progressive. Without this, objective thought, thought about how things are in themselves, would not be possible.

3.2 The Movement of the *Phenomenology*

I now want to discuss two other major disagreements between McDowell and Brandom, namely, their respective accounts of the movement of the *Phenomenology*, as well as their accounts of its terminus, absolute knowing.

For McDowell the *Phenomenology* outlines the path by which natural consciousness moves between one-sided shapes of consciousness, which are affectively laced conceptual understandings of self and world, worldviews that are prereflectively taken to be true. Hegel calls this a path of despair rather than just a skeptical path because exchanging one shape for another is not merely exchanging one set of beliefs for another. It involves a far more thoroughgoing transformation, a "reversal of consciousness" (Hegel 2018, § 87). It involves a reversal rather than a mere modification because natural consciousness moves from one shape to another through a dialectical process that it performs *on itself*, in which it tests its knowledge of an object posited as true and finds itself wanting. This failure leads to a new object and a new way of knowing, of intentionally relating to this object. This movement is what Hegel calls

experience. The “*dialectical* movement which consciousness practices in its own self (as well as in its knowing and in its object), *insofar as, for consciousness, the new, true object arises* out of this movement, is properly what is called *experience*” (Hegel 2018, § 86).

A shape of consciousness tests itself because the standard by which it evaluates its knowledge of an object is internal to the shape itself. To make sense of this, McDowell points to Hegel’s regimentation of consciousness.

There is within consciousness one item *for an* other, or consciousness as such has within itself the determinateness of the moment of knowing; at the same time, the other is to consciousness not only *for it*, but also external to this relation, or *in itself*: the moment of truth. Therefore, in what consciousness declares within itself to be the *in itself*, or the *true*, we have the standard which consciousness itself sets up to measure its knowing. (Hegel 2018, § 84)

Consciousness has a conception of its relation of knowledge to an object (what is for-it), and it has a conception of what the known object is outside of this relation (what is in-itself). For McDowell, both of these moments are *internal to consciousness*, as “the in itself side of his distinction is how consciousness *conceives* the being in itself of its object, not what the object actually is; so that, as he emphasizes, the standard by which a shape of consciousness tests itself is internal to its self-understanding” (McDowell 2020, 52). Because the object as it is in itself – which is what consciousness posits as the true – is internal to consciousness, consciousness can engage in a process by which it evaluates whether its knowing of the object, which is what the object is for it, is actually sufficient to know the object.

For instance, in the dialectic of sensuous-certainty, consciousness examines whether it can immediately apprehend (the moment of knowing) an immediate object, a singular “this” (the moment of truth). Through the passage of time, consciousness realizes that the “this” to which it is now related is not the “this” to which it was just related, even though it is still related to “this.” This gives it a sense that its object involves both identity (each “this” is a “this”) and difference (temporally each “this” is a different “this”), and so this object is not immediate and singular but mediated by sense-universals. Sensuous-certainty now realizes that its object and the concepts that it uses to know this object are different from what it thought they were. This new object, the thing with many properties, now stands as the standard for its knowing, which is now not apprehension but perception. Here we have moved from one shape of consciousness to another, from sensuous-certainty to perception.

The movement between shapes is necessary because it is brought about not from the outside but by a failure of a shape to live up to its own standard.

Because the standard is its own, when a shape is shown to be appearance rather than truth, it is not negated full stop, but *determinately* negated. This negation, as Hegel puts it, is not the skeptical one that “sees in the result always only *pure nothing*” but one that sees that “nothing is determinately the nothing of *that from which it results*” (Hegel 2018, § 79). It is because negation is determinate negation that Hegel’s “account of how a successor shape emerges from the failure of its predecessor reveals a *necessity* in the transitions from one shape to the next. The negating of the previous shape determines what comes on the scene to replace the shape that is negated” (McDowell 2020, 53). Because the movement between shapes is systematic and necessary, the path to science, to absolute knowing, is already science: the “science of the *experience of consciousness*” (Hegel 2018, § 88).

For Brandom, in contrast, the movement between shapes is not immanent to experience, but is rather a movement in the meta-concepts that articulate the pragmatic-semantic theory that gives us a systematic account of the capacities necessary for first-order agents to think, act, and experience. In light of the strategy of semantic descent, this movement is *explained* by changes in the theory’s account of the ability of first-order agents to make ground-level empirical and practical claims. For example, sensuous-certainty models sensory awareness on what is expressed by the “use of feature-placing expressions containing demonstratives and indexicals.” What the reader-theorist finds out through the dialectic of sensuous-certainty is that for these expressions to have determinate content they “must fall under sense-repeatables (universals) that stand in relation of incompatibility and inferential consequences” (Brandom 2022, 747). But here sensuous-certainty has not *tested itself* as to whether it is able to apprehend an immediate “this.” Rather, the theorist has descended and found out that the content of first-order noninferential knowledge cannot be explained in terms of feature-placing expression. In light of this, they, from “the bottom up” (Brandom 2022, 746), change their meta-level model, from sensuous-certainty to perception.

Each of these metaconceptions of empirical consciousness is explained in terms of the sort of ground-level judgments it acknowledges and treats as paradigms of empirical cognition. In each case, what is discovered is that the practice of making ground-level judgments applying ground level empirical predicates of the kind taken as paradigmatic presupposes other practical capacities that are not accounted for in the model to which one is, at the metalevel, committed to understanding their use. Making explicit those background, framework commitments that are implicit in the use that is taken as paradigmatic is what drives us from one model at the metalevel to another. (Brandom 2022, 747)

The movement between sensuous-certainty and perception is expressively progressive, not in the sense that natural consciousness comes to learn something about *itself*, but in the sense that we, the reader-theorist, come to better understand how to explain the practical capacities that make a ground-level agent's judgments and actions possible. *We* make explicit what is implicit *for them* in their ground-level experience. While we are motivated to make the transitions between shapes to better understand what is necessary for ground-level experience, the transitions are not themselves necessary, as they are not propelled by a determinate negation that flows from an immanent failure in the shape itself.

According to McDowell, there are two problems with Brandom's account. First, his account of experience is not Hegel's.

Experience in Hegel's sense is not a process of integrating new commitments into a constellation of old ones, if necessary by discarding an old one as erroneous. Experience is reflection in which a shape of consciousness learns that its objects being for it cannot be made out to constitute its knowing an object with the being in itself that figures in its conception of itself. What a shape experiences is not error in its commitments, but incoherence in its self-understanding. (McDowell 2020, 52).

That Brandom's notion of experience is not Hegel's is shown by his explanation of the "new, true object" that arises out of the movement of experience. Recall Brandom's example of the experience of the stick that appears bent in water. Brandom thinks that when we go from having a bent stick belief to a straight stick belief the "new true object" is "the bent stick revealed *as* erroneous . . . The representation is 'true,' not in the sense of representing how things really are, but in the sense that what it is now to consciousness is what *it* really is: a mere appearance" (Brandom 2019, 91–92). But, McDowell argues, this is a tortuous reading of the "new true object," which is the object posited as true by a shape of consciousness: the singular "this," the thing with many properties, and so on. While each posited object is negated, unmasked as not equivalent to the way things really are, they are not shown to be *mere* appearances, as each object expresses an element of the object that must be preserved in any full account. Put simply, Brandom thinks, incorrectly, that for Hegel experience is an *empirical* movement from one discrete constellation of commitment to another, rather than a movement between nonempirical shapes or worldviews that are internally contradictory.

Second, McDowell argues that there are not two levels in the *Phenomenology*, a ground level of empirical and practical experience and a semantic meta-level that makes explicit the capacities necessary for

experience. Rather, there is “only one level” (McDowell 2020, 54), in which natural consciousness, through testing itself, progresses toward genuine knowing. It is true that we, the reader, learn the lessons of the dialectical process that natural consciousness performs on itself, which natural consciousness continually forgets. Absolute knowing can only be *our* knowing, because only “at the end will there be a consciousness that can recall the stages by which the progression led to it” (McDowell 2018, 39). But the reader, who for Brandom is also the theorist who develops the pragmatic-semantic theory, has nothing to do with *bringing about* the transitions found in the *Phenomenology*. If they did, it would be hard to explain the immanent systematicity of the progression outlined by the *Phenomenology*, and so hard to explain its scientific character.

3.3 Absolute Knowing

The second disagreement I want to touch upon concerns McDowell’s and Brandom’s respective accounts of absolute knowing. I begin with McDowell.

McDowell argues that the *Phenomenology* more or less executes the program that it announced in the “Introduction,” namely, to leave modern epistemology behind by overcoming the dichotomy between mind and world, thought and what is thought about. McDowell’s view is therefore consistent with the orthodox interpretation of the *Phenomenology* as a prolegomena to the *Science of Logic*, where this dichotomy no longer plays any role. McDowell recognizes that the *Phenomenology* goes beyond the original program announced in the “Introduction,” insofar as it was envisioned by Hegel to only cover the “Science of the Experience of Consciousness,” which likely only included “Consciousness,” “Self-Consciousness,” and “Reason.” When, in writing the book, Hegel realized that his true topic was the science of the experience of spirit, he added “Spirit,” “Religion,” and “Absolute Knowing,” and in the process went beyond the strict program enunciated in the “Introduction.” But, McDowell argues, a phenomenology of spirit, an account in which spirit comes to know what it is in itself, is in fact consistent with this program:

Consciousness will reach its goal, a shape in which its object’s being for it conforms to its conception of its object’s being in itself, when it achieves a full understanding of itself as spirit. Seen from this angle, the shapes of consciousness are progressively improving attempts at a self-understanding for spirit. So the progress can be described as the science of how spirit makes its appearance: the phenomenology of spirit. (McDowell 2018, 39).

In achieving this self-understanding, we come to know that knowing requires that we know ourselves as spirit, and to know ourselves as spirit requires knowing that what spirit knows and acts upon is the independent world. This

dual-facing knowing is absolute knowing. As we saw in section two, absolute knowing is for McDowell a platitude. While in taking the path of despair we come to self-consciously know about knowing, what is known in this knowing is something we implicitly knew all along: namely, that for a spiritually self-conscious being there is a speculative identity between knowing and known, subject and object, mind and world. This self-conscious knowing does not bring about this speculative identity; rather, it unearths it, brings it into the light.

For Brandom, in contrast, our self-conscious knowing does not merely unearth what is already known to be the case; it also makes it the case. Absolute knowing is knowing that knowing is both *made* and *discovered*. Absolute knowing is achieved when, through reading the *Phenomenology*, the reader-theorist – who now grasps themselves as equivalent to spirit – recollects that the speculative metaconcepts that articulate the pragmatic-semantic theory, the use of which makes thinking and acting possible, have been “implicit all along” (Brandom 2019, 721). In other words, when we make the pragmatic-semantic theory that is implicitly used explicit in what is said, and discover that it has been operative in our performances all along, we break “through the confines of alienated modernity” and arrive at the “form of self-consciousness Hegel calls ‘Absolute Knowing’” (Brandom 2019, 581). In this form of knowing,

finding and making show up as two sides of one coin, two aspects of one process, whose two phases – experience and its recollection, lived forward and comprehended backward, the inhalation and exhalation that sustains the life of Spirit – are each both makings and findings . . . Absolute Knowing is comprehending, in *vernünftig* form, the way in which these aspects mutually presuppose, support, complement, and complete one another. (Brandom 2019, 581–582)

While experience and its recollection are never-ending, our comprehending of the pragmatic-semantic theory that details the interlocking conditions that make perception, thought, and action possible is absolute, not something that we can go beyond.

3.4 Conclusion

In light of what I have said so far, is it correct to say that McDowell and Brandom belong to the same philosophical school? In the “Introduction,” I outlined four criteria that we might use to answer this question: they share a methodology, have similar substantive positions, are working out the same basic insight, and they self-consciously stand in the same tradition. Let me briefly go through these.

Clearly, McDowell and Brandom do not share a methodology. As we have seen, while McDowell endorses a therapeutic approach, Brandom endorses a maximally constructive one. But not only is Brandom's approach constructive; it is practical. Grasping the pragmatic-semantic theory that articulates absolute knowing is not for the sake of understanding a platitude that has always been, but rather for the sake of guiding a transformative practice that aims to bring about a postmodern social world that has never been.

We have also seen that McDowell and Brandom do not share many substantive philosophical positions. For McDowell, experience is a matter of actualizing conceptual capacities within receptivity while for Brandom it is a matter of unifying commitments through time; for McDowell recognition is an intrapersonal relation while for Brandom it is interpersonal; for McDowell spirit is the form of unity of the rational animal, while for Brandom it comprises all of our socially and historically constituted normative doings; for McDowell autonomy is actualized when one self-consciously responds to reasons, while for Brandom autonomy is the socially instituted authority to bind oneself by a law (or normative status) whose content is constituted through socially and historically complemented attitudes.

But despite these significant differences, I think it is correct to say that McDowell and Brandom belong to the same philosophical school. They both self-consciously stand in the same tradition of thought, one that begins with Kant and finds its culmination in Hegel via a detour through (a left-wing) Sellars, and they stand in this tradition because they take it to be working out a basic insight: namely, that the critique of the myth of the given does not lead to an idealism that cannot vindicate the objectivity of thought and knowledge, but rather to an idealism – which is Hegel's – that, for the first time in modernity, makes such a vindication possible.

References

- Abath, A. and Sanguinetti, F., eds. (2018). *McDowell and Hegel*. Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Allison, H. (1997). We Can Act Only under the Idea of Freedom. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 71 (2), 39–50.
- Bird, G. (1996). McDowell's Kant: "Mind and World." *Philosophy*, 71 (276), 219–243.
- Bouché, G. ed. (2020). *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*. London: Routledge Press.
- Boyle, M. (2012). Essentially Rational Animals. In G. Abel and J. Conant, eds., *Rethinking Epistemology*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 395–428.
- Boyle, M. (2016). Additive Theories of Rationality: A Critique. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (3), 527–555.
- Brandom, R. (1994). *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (1996). Perception and Rational Constraint: McDowell's *Mind and World*, *Philosophical Issues*, 7, 241–259.
- Brandom, R. (2002). *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2008). *Between Saying and Doing: Toward an Analytical Pragmatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2009). *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2011). *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2015). *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2019). *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. (2022). Replies to Honneth, McDowell, Pippin, and Stern. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 103 (3), 741–760.
- Bernstein, J. (2020). Is Brandom a Positivist? Notes on Alienation, Trust, Confession, and Forgiveness. In G. Bouché, ed., *Reading Brandom: on A Spirit of Trust*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 123–139.
- Bristow, B. (2005). Bildung and the Critique of Modern Skepticism in McDowell and Hegel. *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus*, 3, 179–207.

- Conant, J. (2016). Why Kant is not a Kantian. *Philosophical Topics*, 44 (1), 75–125.
- DeVries, W. (2017). Hegelian Spirits in Sellarsian Bottles. *Philosophical Studies*, 174 (7), pp. 1643–1654.
- DeVries, W. (2021). Brandom and a Spirit of Trust. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 29 (2), 236–250.
- Gazit, Y. (2022). Forgiveness as an Approach to the History of Philosophy. *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy*, 3 (1), 147–169.
- Giladi, P. and Sachs, C., eds. (2019). Hegel and Sellars: A Special Issue of the International Journal of Philosophical Studies. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 27 (3), 359–473.
- Halbig, C. (2008). Varieties of Nature in Hegel and McDowell. In J. Lindgaard, ed., *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 72–91.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2007). *Philosophy of Mind*. ed. M. Inwood, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. T. Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Honneth, A. (2021). Demoralizing Recognition: Comments on R. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 103 (3), 714–721.
- Houlgate, S. (2009–10). McDowell, Hegel, and the Phenomenology of Spirit. *The Owl of Minerva*, 41 (1/2), 13–26.
- Houlgate, S. (2020). Review of *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Notre Dame Philosophy Review, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/a-spirit-of-trust-a-reading-of-hegels-phenomenology/> (Accessed July 10, 2024).
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed., and trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kern, A. (2022). Self-Consciousness and the Idea of *Bildung*: Hegel's Radicalization of Kant. In M. Boyle and E. Mylonaki, eds., *Reason in Nature: New Essays on Themes from John McDowell*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 285–308.
- Lance, M. (2009). Placing in a Space of Norms: Neo-Sellarsian Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century. In C. Misak, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 403–429.

- Levine, S. (2015). McDowell, Hegel, and Habits. *Hegel Bulletin*, 36 (2), 184–201.
- Levine, S. (2019). *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine, S. (2023). Brandom on Hegel and the Retrospective Determination of Intention. *Hegel Bulletin*, 44 (3), 446–471.
- Löffler, R. (2017). *Brandom (Key Contemporary Thinkers)*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Maher, C. (2012). *The Pittsburgh School*. London: Routledge Press.
- McDowell, J. (1996). *Mind and World*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. (1996a). Response to Perception and Rational Constraint. *Philosophical Issues*, 7, 290–300.
- McDowell, J. (1998). *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. (2002). Response to Pippin. In N. Smith, ed., *Reading McDowell*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 274–277.
- McDowell, J. (2002a). Knowledge and the Internal Revisited. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 64 (1), 97–105.
- McDowell, J. (2007). Hegel and the Myth of the Given. In W. Welsch and K. Vieweg, eds., *Das Interesse des Denk ens – Hegel aus heutiger Sicht*. Paderborn: Brill/Fink, pp. 74–88.
- McDowell, J. (2008). Response to Halbig. In J. Lindgaard, ed., *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 219–225.
- McDowell, J. (2009). *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, J. (2009–10). Response to Stephen Houlgate. *The Owl of Minerva*, 41 (1/2), 27–38.
- McDowell, J. (2009–10a). Response to Stephen Houlgate’s Response. *The Owl of Minerva*, 41 (1/2), 53–60.
- McDowell, J. (2010). Autonomy and Its Burdens. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 17, 4–15.
- McDowell, J. (2017). Why Does it Matter to Hegel that Geist has a History? In R. Zuckert and J Kreines, eds., *Hegel on Philosophy in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 15–32.
- McDowell, J. (2018). What Is the *Phenomenology* About? In F. Sanguinetti and A. Abath, eds., *McDowell and Hegel*. Berlin: Springer Verlag, pp. 29–40.

- McDowell, J. (2020). Brandom on the *Introduction* to the *Phenomenology*. In G. Bouché, ed., *Reading Brandom: on A Spirit of Trust*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 41–55.
- O'Shea, J. (2021). What Is the Myth of the Given? *Synthese*, 199, 10543–10567.
- Pinkard, T. (2018). McDowell's Hegel: Quietism versus the Dialectic. *Revista Eletrônica Estudos Hegelianos*, 15 (25), 18–38.
- Pippin, R. (1989). *Hegel's Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pippin, R. (2002). Leaving Nature Behind: or Two Cheers for "Subjectivism." In N. Smith, ed., *Reading McDowell*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 58–75.
- Pippin, R. (2006). Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology. In K. Deligorgi, ed., *Hegel: New Directions*. Chesham: Acumen, pp. 125–142.
- Pippin, R. (2007). Brandom's Hegel. In E. Hammer, ed., *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 153–180.
- Pippin, R. (2008). *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pippin, R. (2018). Reason in Action: A Response to McDowell on Hegel. In F. Sanguinetti and A. J. Abath, eds., *McDowell and Hegel*. Berlin: Springer Verlag, pp. 211–227.
- Pippin, R. (2021). All for One and One for All: Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust*. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 103 (3), 728–733.
- Redding, P. (2007). *Analytical Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rödl, S. (2007). *Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sedgwick, S. (2000). Hegel, McDowell, and Recent Defenses of Kant. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 31 (3), 229–247.
- Sachs, C. (2019). A Conceptual Genealogy of the Pittsburgh School: Between Kant and Hegel. In L. Becker and I. Thomson, eds., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy 1945–2015*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 664–676.
- Sellars, W. (1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sellars, W. (1991). *Science, Perception and Reality*. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- Sellars, W. (1968). *Science and Metaphysics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stern, R. (1999). Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy: On McDowell's Hegelian Critique of Kant. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (2), 247–269.

- Stern, R. (2007). Freedom, Self-Legislation, and Morality in Kant and Hegel: Constructivist vs Realist Accounts. In E. Hammer, ed., *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge Press, pp. 245–266.
- Suther, J. (2025). The Desire for Desire: Hegel’s Constitutive Model of Rationality in Chapter IV. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (3), 989–1006.
- Thompson, M. (2022). Forms of Nature: “First,” “Second,” “Living,” “Rational,” and “Phronetic.” In M. Boyle and E. Mylonaki, eds., *Reason in Nature: New Essays on Themes from John McDowell*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 40–79.
- Wanderer, J. (2008). *Robert Brandom*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Wanderer, J. and Levine, S. (2013). Review of *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy* by Chauncey Maher. Notre Dame Philosophical Review, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-pittsburgh-school-of-philosophy-sellars-mcdowell-brandom/> (Accessed June 10, 2024).
- Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Acknowledgment

I want to thank Jeremy Wanderer, as well as two anonymous referees, for comments on the whole manuscript. Owing to them, the manuscript is much stronger than it otherwise would have been. I also want to thank members of two different reading groups dedicated to *A Spirit of Trust*, the first comprised by Bill DeVries, Yael Gazit, Ronald Loffler, Elisa Magri, Mark Okrent, Joe Rouse, Carl Sachs, Sally Sedgwick, Allen Speight, Preston Stovall and Jeremy Wanderer; the second by Matthew Abbot, Greg Bartels, Conall Cash, Gene Flenady, Martin Hägglund, Michael Lazarus, Griffin Shoglow-Rubenstein, and Jensen Suther.

The Philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Sebastian Stein

Heidelberg University

Sebastian Stein is a Research Associate at Heidelberg University. He is co-editor of *Hegel's Political Philosophy* (2017), *Hegel and Contemporary Practical Philosophy* (with James Gledhill, 2019) and *Hegel's Encyclopedic System* (2021), and has authored several journal articles and chapters on Aristotle, Kant, post-Kantian idealism and (neo-)naturalism.

Joshua Wretzel

Pennsylvania State University

Joshua Wretzel is Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy at the Pennsylvania State University. He is the co-editor of *Hegel's Encyclopedic System* and *Hegel's Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge). His articles on Hegel and the German philosophical tradition have appeared in multiple edited collections and peer-reviewed journals, including the *European Journal of Philosophy* and *International Journal for Philosophical Studies*.

About the Series

These Elements provide insights into all aspects of Hegel's thought and its relationship to philosophical currents before, during, and after his time. They offer fresh perspectives on well-established topics in Hegel studies, and in some cases use Hegelian categories to define new research programs and to complement existing discussions.

The Philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Elements in the Series

Hegel and Heidegger on Time
Ioannis Trisokkas

Hegel and Colonialism
Daniel James and Franz Knappik

Hegel's Philosophy of Nature
Christian Martin

Hegel's Sublation of Transcendental Idealism
Christian Krijnen

Hegel and Spinoza
James Kreines

Hegel and Republicanism: Non-Domination, Economics, and Political Participation
Christopher Yeomans

Hegel on the Family Form
Andreja Novakovic

Hegel and the Pittsburgh School
Steven Levine

Hegel's Dialectic
Dina Emundts

Hegel, Dewey, Democracy
Terry Pinkard

Hegel and the Pittsburgh School
Steven Levine

A full series listing is available at: www.cambridge.org/EPGH