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In the Spirit of Hegel?

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This long-awaited tome by Robert Brandom on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a demanding book, in various ways. First, it is very long. Second, it is hard to follow without some previous acquaintance with Brandom's own distinctive philosophical views, with which his reading of Hegel is intertwined. Third, it is a book about the *Phenomenology*, which is always a daunting challenge. To be fair to Brandom, however he has tried to mitigate the demands made on the reader, by writing in a fairly readable style; by signposting his central claims pretty clearly; and by doing his best to make Hegel as accessible as he can – although as with the *Phenomenology* itself, engaging with this book is still not a task to be taken on lightly.

The book may also frustrate readers in other ways, particularly those who come to Hegel from a more traditional direction, and with a certain training in the history of ideas. Brandom calls his book a “rational reconstruction”, which can sometimes be an excuse for the benefits of theft over honest toil, in allowing the interpreter to impose their own pet theories on the author concerned. Brandom is frank in admitting that some will find his approach objectionable, particularly the way in which he is willing to put Hegel into dialogue with figures like Frege, Wittgenstein and Davidson, while others who were central for Hegel himself, such as Plato and Aristotle, hardly get a mention, and Hölderlin, Fichte and Schelling get none at all; amongst Hegel's predecessors and contemporaries, Kant alone is given the weight usually accorded to him in such works, while Spinoza is given a limited role. Brandom also avoids engaging with the vast majority of the secondary literature on the *Phenomenology*, though certain key contemporary figures are mentioned briefly in the text – mainly Robert Pippin and John McDowell – while others get a name check in the afterword in which Brandom recounts the intellectual journey that led him to Hegel, and

mentions those who helped him along the way. This does not mean that Brandom does not try to tackle various well-known cruxes in reading the text – he clearly does, but without telling the reader much about the interpretative disputes that lie behind them, or explicitly engaging with other options. More generally, while (as we shall see), Brandom locates Hegel's project within the swirling forces of intellectual history and western culture, this is at a high level of abstraction, with none of the contextualization that is now common in reading Hegel – for example, the French Revolution doesn't make it into the index, and there is nothing here about Hegel's earlier thinking, or his relation to Romanticism.

What we get, then, is a Hegel that Brandom sees as a kindred spirit to himself, who is prescient in feeling Brandom's own post-Wittgensteinian, post-Fregean concerns concerning language, rule-following, pragmatism and much else. We are told at several points that Hegel deserves credit for anticipating key claims made over 100 or more years after him, and for having the potential to contribute to current debates. Of course, Brandom does not deny that Hegel can be read in other ways, and for other purposes – but he does claim that his "rational reconstruction" is one equally viable option. One might thus think of the book as the philosophical equivalent of *Apocalypse Now*: that is, as a work whose epic process of gestation was in danger of leaving it unfinished, resulting in a much-anticipated final product which can be a draining experience for its audience, bewildering at times, but operating on a grand style and with a distinctive directorial voice which will leave many open-mouthed at the sheer ambition of it all, but also perhaps a bit puzzled about how the final product relates to the text which is said to have inspired it.

Given this backdrop, I will now attempt with some hesitancy to summarize the main claims of the book, before offering some critical remarks. These claims are encapsulated in this scary looking sentence which comes about half-way through the book: "Absolute idealism, I want to say, is what you get when you add conceptual idealism to objective idealism and bimodal hylopomorphic conceptual realism" (p.374). Two of these terms – "absolute idealism" and "objective idealism" – will be familiar to Hegelians, though of course neither is straightforward to understand; the other two – "conceptual idealism" and "conceptual realism" – are not used by Hegel himself, though the latter has been used elsewhere in the literature on Hegel. What Brandom is in effect saying here is that Hegel's ultimate position, which can be characterised as a form of absolute idealism, is constituted out of the other three, where Brandom starts with conceptual realism, then adds objective

idealism, and then adds conceptual idealism on top. He also broadly maps this progression onto the contents of Hegel's *Phenomenology* itself (p.373), with the "Consciousness" chapter corresponding to conceptual realism, the "Self-Consciousness" chapter corresponding to objective idealism, and "Reason" corresponding to conceptual idealism, where it is then all brought together in the "Spirit" chapter, at which point for Brandom the real work of Hegel's text is done – leaving the "Religion" chapter as an optional extra, merely saying in a non-conceptual form what has already been said, while the "Absolute Knowing" chapter just sums things up (see p.583). (I will discuss below whether this treatment of the "Religion" chapter is adequate.) To understand Brandom's reading of Hegel as an absolute idealist, therefore, we need to understand what he means by these other three terms, starting with "conceptual realism", and what it means to characterise this as "bimodally isomorphic".

In calling Hegel a "bimodally isomorphic conceptual realist", Brandom roughly means that both the world itself and the structure of our thinking are made what they are by various material incompatibilities and compatibilities within them, where it is through these incompatibilities and compatibilities that facts on the one hand and thoughts on the other get to have content. Brandom takes this to be what Hegel learned from Spinoza and his dictum that "all determination requires negation". At the level of the world, these interconnections consist in alethic modal relations of necessitation or noncompossibility that facts stand in to one another, as one fact gives rise to another or excludes it (e.g. being copper and being an electrical conductor on the one hand, or being a triangle and being a square on the other), while at the level of thoughts, these interconnections consist in deontic modal relations, whereby having one thought requires a thinker to reject another thought, or to adopt it – though because a thinker may not in fact do either of these things, these modal connections are normative not descriptive, while the modal connections between facts are descriptive and not normative. Given the Spinozistic parallelism between the structure of the world and thought in these respects ("The order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas", as Spinoza puts it), Brandom argues that we can see why Hegel holds that there is no gap in principle between thought and world, while the structure the world has does not come from the structure of thought, but exists prior to the concepts we use. This therefore makes the position a kind of realism which uses the isomorphism between thought and world to put the latter within the bounds

of the conceptual (to use a McDowellian phrase to which Brandom refers¹) rather than outside it.

Turning now to objective idealism, this is the view that for a thinker to grasp a concept used by them in thought, in their thinking they must follow the normative relations between that concept and other concepts, of the sort outlined above. Thus, as Brandom puts it, while there could *be* the kind of alethic modal incompatibilities of facts independently of anyone abiding by the deontic modal incompatibilities, no thinking subject could *understand* the former or think about them without following the latter (cf. p.212), which makes this understanding dependent on the subject and thus ideal in this sense.

But now, if our understanding of a certain concept depends on the norms we follow in using it, how can we be confident that the norms we are following enable us to grasp the concept in the right way, which will allow us to achieve the kind of isomorphism with the modal structures of the world that correctly understanding that world requires? If my grasp of a concept comes from the rules I follow in using it, how do I know the rules I am following are the right ones?

One answer to this might be a kind of normative realism: the rules themselves are laid down for us in such a way that if we grasp them correctly, we will grasp the concepts we need. Brandom argues, however, that this is the kind of pre-modern view of normativity that Rousseau, Kant and others have shown we must reject, as incompatible with our autonomy as agents for whom what is normative is what we impose on *ourselves*. On the other hand, the difficulty with this modern view is that it may seem to exacerbate the problem, as it can seem there is nothing to constrain our normative practices: to use a paraphrase of Wittgenstein of which Brandom is fond, how do we avoid it being the case that whatever seems right to us is right, which would seem to render talk of “right” and “wrong” meaningless?

This is where the third and final piece of Brandom’s conception of Hegelian absolute idealism is brought into play: namely conceptual idealism. Brandom presents it as leading us between the Scylla and Charybdis outlined above, by presenting normativity neither as stemming from the structure of things, but nor as arising from the individual agent, but as

¹ Cf. McDowell (1994: Lecture 2).

coming into being through a community which is structured through reciprocal recognition, which imposes normative constraints on the ways concepts are to be used by its members.

Nonetheless, we might ask: if the norms governing our concepts are laid down by this community, how can we be assured that the practice in which we are embedded has developed those norms and concepts in a way that gets us any closer to achieving knowledge of the world around us? This is where Brandom introduces the culminating move in his book, which is that we are entitled to trust in the progressive nature of this process, as it is only by fitting into this progressive story that changes in our norms can be justified and the authority of those determining those norms can be made legitimate, just as a judge who creates a new precedent through their legal judgement can only do so legitimately if that judgement fits into a progressive narrative from what has gone before. At the same time, this process involves a trust in the forgiveness of those who come after us, that they will understand our norms in the light of their improved norms as precedents for their own; the thoughts made possible by our norms are therefore not simply left outside the process of inquiry, but form part of it, in a way that can reassure us that while we might not be at the end of inquiry, we are not being left behind by it – which as fallible creatures, is the only assurance we should seek or need. Brandom thus adds a Whiggish conception of history to his account of our sociality in what may seem to be a recognizably Hegelian manner.

Given this tripartite structure to Brandom's conceptual of absolute idealism – conceptual realism, objective idealism, conceptual idealism – it therefore perhaps makes sense if I marshal my critical remarks around each of these steps, taken in order, where my primary focus will be interpretative: how far does Brandom's project do justice to Hegel's own?

Broadly speaking, I am sympathetic to Brandom's reading of Hegel as a conceptual realist, and indeed have applied that terminology to him myself.² My concern, however, is that Brandom conceives Hegel's position too narrowly, by putting too much weight on what Brandom sees as Spinoza's influence, particularly the role given to the dictum that "all determination is negation". Apart from the complication that Spinoza seems not to have meant by it what Brandom takes it to mean,³ a more significant worry is that Brandom

² Cf. Stern (2009: 67-76).

³ See Stern (2016a).

treats it as the sole model on which reality on the one hand and our thoughts on the other are structured. He thus writes that determinate negation “articulates the sense in which anything (thoughts, facts, properties, conceptual contents) can be *determinate*: by strongly contrasting with, precluding, excluding, other determinates” (p.80). Now, Brandom is certainly right that this idea is important to Hegel, particularly in overturning a monistic metaphysics that has no place for such differentiation, which Hegel therefore argues becomes empty. It thus plays an important role in the move from sense-certainty to perception in the *Phenomenology*, and from pure being to determinate being in the *Logic*. However, Brandom seems to think that Hegel’s account of what gives structure to the world and our thought stops there, with this kind of “strongly contrastive” account of what gives rise to determination on both sides. But what this misses out, is the way in which the relations at both levels become more complex and less contrastive, as Hegel moves from the structures of being to essence to the concept, by the end of which he is talking of the relations as being that of development (*Entwicklung*), as each element evolves out of the other, rather than contrasting with it – for example, freedom does not merely contrast with necessity, but also to some extent incorporates it.

My second set of comments relate to Brandom’s discussion of objective idealism, which he sees as arising out of a radicalisation of the conception of autonomy which he thinks was decisively introduced into philosophy by Rousseau and then taken up by Kant, namely that autonomy consists in binding oneself to the law. Unlike many commentators, Brandom rightly sees that this does not commit Rousseau and Kant to making the law itself into something that is self-legislated, as to bind oneself is to be constrained by rules that one imposes on oneself, but not to create those rules.⁴ However, Brandom precisely treats this as a limitation on the Rousseau/Kant view, which only takes the form of the law as coming from us (namely its bindingness) but not its content (that to which we are bound). He argues that Hegel saw this limitation, in a way that led him to develop his own more radical view, which treats us as not just binding ourselves to the norms, but also as the source of those norms themselves. As Brandom puts it elsewhere: “[Hegel’s] idea was that the content of norms, no less than their force, is the product of our activity. And he offered

⁴ Though Brandom is not discussing it in this context, as his focus is on conceptual norms, I have argued elsewhere that this is a mistake in relation to Kant’s view of moral norms and thus the moral law: see Stern (2012: 7-40).

a *social* account of how it is that, if we determine the content of the norms, we can still intelligibly be bound by them”.⁵

However, as Stephen Houlgate has pointed out previously,⁶ it seems implausible to attribute this radical picture to Hegel, at least when it comes to the fundamental concepts he discusses in his *Logic*, where he seems to argue (in ways that resemble Kant’s approach) that as rational beings there are ways in which these categories must be employed if intelligible thought is to be possible at all, where it is from this that norms governing the use of these categories emerge: for example, in judging that something is an individual, one is required to judge that it falls under a certain kind, as thought of a bare individual or of an individual as a bundle of properties turns out to be incoherent and ultimately empty. I thus think that Houlgate is right to say: “As far as logical categories are concerned, therefore, it is not the case – *pace* Brandom – that for Hegel ‘transcendental constitution’ is nothing but ‘social institution’”.⁷

Brandom clearly thinks, however, that something was driving Hegel in this more radical direction, despite this evidence from the *Logic* to the contrary. One central reason he gives is that unless Hegel “brings the normative down to earth by explaining discursive norms as the products of social practices” (p.12), then the result will be various Kantian dualisms, such as those between the transcendental and the empirical, and the noumenal and phenomenal self. Brandom is rather vague about what he has in mind here, and while this worry may certainly be raised against Kant’s conception of moral norms, it is not clear it would apply to the Hegelian conception outlined above, where the “oughts” in question are closer to proper functioning oughts, which is itself a conception of the normative Hegel seems happy to endorse in his *Logic*, based on how well things realise their “determination [*Bestimmung*] and purpose”.⁸ Moreover, Hegel himself appears to think the pressure for

⁵ Testa (2003: 565). Cf. also Brandom (2019: 11-12 and 493): “Much more radically, Hegel also thinks that the modern rise of subjectivity culminates in the realization that not only the force, but also the contents of conceptual norms are dependent upon the attitudes and activities of the individuals who apply them in judgment and action. This is the idea that our discursive activity does not consist either in simply applying conceptual norms that are somehow given to us, or in distinct and separable activities of first instituting or establishing those norms, and then applying them. Rather, our discursive practices of judging and acting intentionally must be seen as both the application and the institution of determinately contentful conceptual norms”.

⁶ Houlgate (2007).

⁷ Houlgate (2007: 149); cf. Brandom (2019: 12).

⁸ Cf. Hegel (1991: §§178–9, 255–6). For further discussion, see Stern (2016b) and Stern (2017).

this dualism comes not from the way in which Kant treats the norm's content as independent of us, but from Kant's conception of the *bindingness* of these norms, so from their force and not their content, as it is this that sets up the noumenal self as an authority that commands the phenomenal self in a dualistic manner.⁹ It is thus this structure that he tries to do away with, by claiming that once we grasp them properly, we need not feel constrained by such norms at all. Thus, while Brandom is right that in one sense Hegel radicalizes the Rousseau/Kant picture of autonomy, he arguably does so not by treating us as responsible for what we are bound to as well as its bindingness, but by treating autonomy as being free of any binding force at all, even one that is self-imposed (where here, I would suggest, Luther's Pauline conception of the Christian as beyond the law is a key influence).

My final remarks concern the last element in Brandom's conception of absolute idealism, which is his discussion of confession and forgiveness in the Spirit chapter. As noted above, Brandom treats this as the concluding part of the *Phenomenology*, taking the Religion chapter which follows as merely trying to show that "the insights we have achieved philosophically, by the end of the *Spirit* chapter, can be seen to be those that religion, too, seeks to express – albeit not conceptually, but in the form of sensuous immediacy" (p.583). I wish to briefly suggest that Brandom underestimates the significance of the Religion chapter because he has a rather distorted understanding of Hegel's account of confession and forgiveness – though ironically, the different reading I propose might show how the Religion chapter could be read as required to make Brandom's story work, and so should be given a more substantive place in his reading of the *Phenomenology*.

Hegel's discussion of confession and forgiveness is an important part of the text, as it is here that a kind of mutual recognition seems to be achieved, when the judging consciousness to which the wicked consciousness has confessed has its "hard heart" broken, and each comes to view the other in the same light, acknowledging that "I am as you are", as Brandom puts it. On his account, this means that the judge turns from harsh critic to generous interpreter of the one who has confessed, while anticipating such generous interpretation of their deeds in turn, thus fitting us into the kind of positive

⁹ Hegel (1971: 244): "To complete subjection under the law of an alien Lord, Jesus opposed not a particular subjection under a law of one's own, the self-coercion of Kantian virtue, but virtues without lordship and without submission, i.e. virtues as modifications of love." For further discussion, see Stern (2012: 103–47).

progressive story which Brandom thinks is at the heart of Hegel's conception of history. (I was reminded here of Davidson's principle of charity, though that is not explicitly mentioned by Brandom.)

There is, however, another way to read the way Hegel treats the relation between the wicked consciousness and the judge, which has the advantage of making better sense of his transition to the Religion chapter, but also in a way that might be congenial to aspects of Brandom's approach. On this alternative account, the key thing that the judge recognises when his heart breaks, and he sees that he is a fellow sinner like the wicked consciousness, is that *as* a fellow sinner he is no longer in a position to blame the wicked consciousness, but equally because he has now lost his position as judge, he cannot offer him forgiveness from the point of view of any authority either, as all such authority between sinful human beings has been lost. As this is the outcome, and as full forgiveness would seem to involve forgiveness from an authority, it is then no accident that Hegel now makes the transition into a chapter on Religion, in pointing to a higher source of authority that lies beyond us, albeit one that itself "appears in [our] midst",¹⁰ by also appearing to us in human form and thus as a sinner like ourselves, who can thereby take on our sins, while assuring us that we will find forgiveness in an authority which also loves us. However, to reach this conception of religion and the place in it of a divine yet human figure requires some conceptual development, which it is the job of the Religion chapter to provide. And in doing so, it accomplishes a task which Brandom might be expected to view approvingly and sympathetically, and which may therefore even have formed the basis for a further chapter of his book: namely how to bring "down to earth" the authority that it seems only a divine being can claim, once our sinfulness and hence lack of authority is recognized through our confession of that sinfulness to one another.

I have therefore questioned some aspects of Brandom's reading of Hegel. Of course, I could be wrong in my reading, as these issues are complex. But even if I am right, how much need this matter to Brandom? After all, he wants to take certain issues that are central to the Wittgensteinian and pragmatist tradition in which he works, such as the problem of rule following, and use some ideas that he finds in Hegel to address them, such as reciprocal recognition. Brandom might reasonably suggest that the key question is

¹⁰ Hegel (2018: 389, §671).

whether these such ideas turn out to be genuinely helpful to his project, not whether they are true to Hegel's as such. To properly address this issue, we would need to consider whether Brandom's approach *as such* achieves its goals – but unfortunately there is no space to do that here. But if this is the test of Brandom's "rational reconstruction" of Hegel, this is where the debate needs to go.

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