

Hegel's Dialectical Art

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Abstract

Most contemporary accounts of naturalism specify, as one of its necessary conditions, a community within which agents can take themselves to be adequately answerable for and responsible to the norms of autonomous practical reason. But what would it mean to succeed in giving an account of naturalism, absent such social conditions? What does it mean to think about naturalism from a position of relative alienation? My contention is that this incongruity between philosophy and the form of life sustaining it is already present within Hegel's thought, and that it should prompt us to reconsider the meaning that philosophy itself has for him. Philosophical science—along with a proper understanding of naturalism—is, on the one hand, a historical achievement for him, one that only becomes possible within modern practices and institutions. But he also views modernity's forms of subjectivity as fragmented, incomplete, and alienated, on the other. In order to understand how he reconciles the theoretical possibilities with the practical limitations of modernity, I argue that we need to attend to two features of Hegel's philosophical account. First, that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (and Hegel's systematic thought generally) has been patterned after a specifically aesthetic mode of intelligibility. Second, that Hegel's philosophy is intended to effect a transformation on its readers, analogous to the transformation that works of art are supposed to effect on their audiences (as understood by Schiller, Schelling, and other post-Kantian thinkers).

Keywords: Naturalism, Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Aesthetics, Recognition, *Sensus Communis*.

*Is the situation so uncommon, then, in which
philosophy forbids one to philosophize?
(Lichtenberg)*

1. Introduction: Naturalism in Progress

John McDowell (1996: 93-94) observes that “modern philosophy has taken itself to be called on to bridge dualistic gulfs, between subject and object, thought and world [...] what is debatable is how we ought to respond to the deeper dualism”. At stake in the question of naturalism, in other words—of the possibility of communication between nature and freedom as aspects of self-conscious life—is

not only the question itself, but the tacit demands that we place on the very asking of it. What task do we take ourselves to be called on to perform, when we ask for a philosophical account of this relation? In one sense, the answer is obvious (and the question churlish): to clarify the truth of the matter. One of the most striking features of this particular question, however, is its continuing urgency in the face of a longstanding and lopsided consensus about it. The *bête noir* of an outsize region of post-Kantian and then post-Wittgensteinian philosophy has remained unchanging: dualism (whether putatively Cartesian or Kantian), some version of the Myth of the Given, eliminativism, or heteronomy—the threat that something about how the world empirically is should impinge on our own knowing of it and acting within it as we freely ought. The holy grail of such accounts has remained, by contrast, an account of the embodied reality of normative life—one that explains how it is that the difference between freedom and nature is irreducible, while also accounting for our double status as naturally bodied creatures and as freely minded agents in such a way that the two statuses enable, rather than constrain, our capacity to lead our own lives. One might say that post-Kantian philosophy just *is* a variety of local elaborations of what is basically global consensus on these issues.

To what purpose does the question continue to be asked, then? What remains to be seen? I do not say that agreement at such a terribly high altitude is the most interesting feature of such accounts—running, as they do, the gamut from Königsberg to Pittsburgh—nor that empiricism has no defenders left standing (far from), nor that agreement about large areas of inquiry is a reason to discontinue them. It is only on the basis of provisional agreement about desiderata that there can be meaningful discussion at all. But it has also been a steady feature of the most influential such accounts to point out that the resolution of the question of our embodied freedom is not merely theoretical—a puzzle that could be figured out once and for all on paper—but one that involves us necessarily in a social undertaking. I cannot know my nature free from a position of first-personal privilege, anterior to and separate from my circumstances, but only as a participant in a form of life that sustains the knowing of it. I must be able to be committed to and held responsible for that knowledge. My knowledge of myself as a freely embodied agent is, in this sense, a practical achievement within and through my expressive “mindedness” with others.¹

Just *how* to describe the bearing of such mindedness on the very possibility of normative agency is the subject of a well-known controversy between McDowell and Robert Pippin. But even for McDowell—arguing against Pippin’s thicker view of agency as a status constituted by communal acknowledgment²—“the idea of conceptual capacities makes sense only in the context of a communal practice” (McDowell 2009a: 178). McDowell’s defense of second-nature debouches in appeals to *Bildung* and tradition as formal conditions for being responsible to reason: “When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of

¹ I am borrowing Lear’s (1998: 290-97) well-known phrase. Cf. Brandom’s (2009: 4) remark that “Because the space of reasons is a *normative* space, it is a *social* space”.

² Cf. “Hegel considers the distinct normative status of human subjects (as persons, agents) not as a reflection of some substantive or metaphysical nature, but as a social achievement of a kind and so as bound up with an inevitable and distinct form of social conflict” (Pippin 2011a: 75).

the space of reasons” (McDowell 1996: 82). As in Aristotle, questions of conceptual capacity entail questions of practical reason, and questions of practical reason (Pippin would insist) turn out to entail questions of world-history.

McDowell's strategy in the face of this conclusion is to insist on the fact that our demand that philosophy “solve” the question of naturalism is misplaced—the problem lies in our interpretation of the question as a problem in search of a doctrinal or constructive solution.³ But a different corollary one might draw from this insight—one that, I think, we do not usually take seriously enough—is that in some sense we cannot settle the question absent the right form of communal recognition. So long as our forms of practical reason are vitiating by the assumption that there is a fundamental caesura between freedom and nature, then the question of their relation must continue to come to mind, and the answer must remain a matter for wishful thinking. It may well be, in other words, that the *bête noir* cannot be killed off for good not because we don't have the right philosophical silver bullet, but because its power radiates from assumptions embedded in our most ordinary customs, activities, and attitudes (say: in the institutional status we accord to all manner of quantitative reasoning, in the thin forms of communal recognition available to mass societies, in our technological, political, and economic forms of alienation, and so on). The most significant obstacle to settling a second-natural, or neo-Aristotelian, or emergentist, or transformative, or top-down/bottom-up understanding of our conceptual capacities is, in this sense, not exclusively and perhaps not even primarily a theoretical one, since it may be that our very forms of practice cannot sustain such an account (or at any rate permanently destabilize it).⁴

My question here is therefore not about naturalism's best version but about the meta-philosophical role that we ask it to perform—what we expect such a mediation to “do” for us. So far from being part of a Critical Theoretical despair about the incapacity of the world to meet our demands for it, the issue already has this cast within Hegel's thought. On the one hand, he evidently thinks that we cannot fully address the question of naturalism without rightly situating ourselves within a teleological account of historical norms: that, in sum, our freedom is only realized within a specific form of (modern) communal answerability for it, and, in this sense, that the reconciliation of freedom and nature cannot be a matter for philosophy alone. On the other hand, he also thinks that philosophy is where this reconciliation happens—that naturalism in some sense takes place in and through our knowing of it. His position is neither quietist nor revolutionary. To explain the middle position he occupies in this regard, I present two related theses here: that Hegel's account of the embodied mediation of norms stems directly from the fruition of his conception of aesthetics as a paradigm for

³ This is how he glosses Wittgenstein's quietism; see McDowell 1996: 93, and McDowell 2009b.

⁴ In addition to McDowell's defense of “second nature” (the best-known version of which is found in *Mind and World*), I am referring to Thompson's (2008) neo-Aristotelian account connecting practical dispositions to social practices, Eldridge's (2014) account of Hegel's naturalism as “emergentist”, Boyle's (2016) “transformative” view of reason, and Ikäheimo's (2014: 36) view of top-down/bottom-up naturalism in the *Encyclopedia*. My thesis here echoes well-known arguments that have stressed the dependence of moral philosophy on its underlying forms of life (cf. Anscombe 1958, Williams 1996 and MacIntyre 2007). The relation between the specific question philosophical naturalism and our forms of life has not received the same scrutiny.

intelligibility, and that Hegel sees this analogy to aesthetics as responding to the problem I've noted, namely, the mismatch between a philosophical account and the form of communal life that could sustain it. In other words, that Hegel's solution to the problem of the incomplete forms of modern recognition is to show that philosophy can transform the difference between what we are and what we know. Hegel's naturalism undertakes to reveal the truth of the ordinary by transfiguring it as a work of art was supposed to do.

2. Aesthetics and Idealism

Let me begin, then, by saying something about the sense in which I take Hegel's view of conceptual mediation to be an aesthetic one. To briefly retread some well-worn ground: the half-century of philosophical activity we designate 'German Idealism' might be described as an attempt to square the Kantian circle. It is as if Kant's distinctions of intuition and concept, sensibility and understanding, practical and theoretical reason—along with his tantalizing description of his critical labor as a "propaedeutic" (A11/B25)—were taken as a momentous provocation, to which Reinhold, Fichte, Hölderlin, Novalis, Schelling, Schiller, and Hegel replied by developing accounts of what the whole beyond such oppositions might be. It is immensely telling how quickly each of these figures lay aside the fact that dualism was a deliberate, rather than unintended, feature of Kant's position. It was fundamental to his compatibilism, after all, to secure moral freedom's autonomy against empirical necessity. But this defensive sequestration of worlds seemed to elicit a further reconciliation, and Kant himself turned his attention in his third *Critique* to phenomena that, even if empirically available, are also evocative of or resonant with our moral vocation.

It makes sense, in connection with this reconciliation, that aesthetics in particular should have come to be of keen interest. Under the influence of Hume and Hutcheson—in whom the notion of philosophical judgment was initially fused with the notion of taste—and Baumgarten—who coined the term 'aesthetics'—Kant's *Critique of Judgment* marks out aesthetics as a distinct form of intelligibility. Works of art have no translation into words; they express a significance that is neither fully assessable by nor reducible to some discursive content separable from their material expression. Their sensible form animates their conceptual content in such a way as to be able to present us with concrete manifestations of purpose, though it is a "purposiveness without a purpose" (KU §15)—an intimation of freedom for our senses. They are one-of-a-kind for this reason—an achievement that rhymes with our own sense of being ends-in-ourselves within the empirical world. And so even as Kant has a stake in stopping short of saying that sensible purposiveness can in any way *ratify* his moral theory, he is nonetheless interested in aesthetics as a sort of sensible "expression of moral ideas" (KU §17)⁵ one that is (in a qualified way) congruent with our moral aims.

While for Kant this congruence is still bracketed as problematic and subordinate to the status of natural teleology, to his immediate successors aesthetics looked like far the most promising paradigm for thinking about agency and the relation between thinking and being generally—the best way for integrating Kant's dualisms into a form of living freedom. This is manifestly the case in

⁵ This phrase is, admittedly, restricted to representations of the human body.

Schiller's and Schelling's writings from the decade following the publication of the third *Critique*. Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, along with his *Kallias Letters* and other writings from the period, explore ways in which beauty can help us harmonize our moral vocation with our natural inclinations, and in so doing surmount the threat of mechanical, empirical, positivistic reductions of human freedom; while Schelling's 1800 *System* places aesthetic experience and its articulation at the summit of the possibilities of freedom's purposive manifestations. "The objective world is simply the original, as yet unconscious, poetry of the spirit; the universal organon of philosophy—and the keystone of its entire arch—is the philosophy of art" (SW III.349/STI 12).⁶ Art exhibits the ground of the inner harmony between subjective and objective, by bringing the former into concrete manifestation. The book ends with Schelling prophesying the absorption of philosophy and science into a new type of mythology, within which form and content will be entirely adequate to each other (SW III.624-34/STI 229-36). This reiterates the quasi-millenarian claims made by the so-called *Oldest Surviving Program of German Idealism*—variously attributed to Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling—which concludes by pronouncing that "truth and goodness are only siblings in beauty" and that a new rational mythology is needed to make philosophy widely compelling (CRGA 186-87).

In Hegel's case, this line of aesthetic thinking is more tangled. In some of his early theological writings, beauty still figures as the signature of embodied autonomy, as it does in Schiller and Schelling. In the 1798 *Spirit of Christianity* essay, for instance, Hegel writes that "the need to unite subject with object, to unite feeling, and feeling's demand for objects, with the intellect, to unite them in something beautiful, in a god, by means of imagination, is the supreme need of the human spirit and the urge to religion" (ETW 289). Jesus is himself presented there as a beautiful soul (ETW 285), whose central message is formulated as the overcoming of differences through love: "in love man has found himself again in other" (ETW 278). Hegel dropped love as the focal point of his thinking in the early 1800's,⁷ but in the first years of the nineteenth century, he nonetheless continued to identify his own conception of philosophical intelligibility with that of the expressive intelligibility of the *Critique of Judgment* in particular. In his 1801 *Differenzschrift* and 1802 *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel still follows Schelling in presenting art as the sensuous equivalent to philosophy—art exemplifies the task of transforming the divisions of the understanding into concrete unity, so that "both art and speculation are in their essence divine service—both are a living intuition of the absolute life and hence a being at one with it" (GW 4.76/DFS 172; cf. LFA 101).

In Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology*, however, the beautiful as such no longer bears the conceptual weight that it had in his earlier writings; art is now specified as a form of religion, and so as one rung within a much more ambitious ladder of concepts.⁸ I want nonetheless to claim that this undertaking is continuous with the aestheticism that dominated the first wave of post-Kantians. By

⁶ See Dahlstrom 1991: 249-54.

⁷ I've elaborated this in Barba-Kay 2016.

⁸ Art, religion, and philosophy—the triad comprising Absolute Spirit—are run together in the 1805-6 *Philosophy of Spirit* and in chapters 7-8 of the 1807 *Phenomenology*. Hegel did not fully develop the differences between the three tiers until sometime after the 1817 *Encyclopedia*.

this I don't mean that Hegel is the author of lovely prose (a thesis scarcely credible), or that the *Phenomenology* should not be regarded as a work of *echt* philosophy. What I mean is that this work (like all of Hegel's subsequent, systematic writing) relies on a paradigm of apodictic necessity that is borrowed from aesthetics; that is, that Hegel's conception of his dialectical method rests in crucial respects on its analogy to organic and therefore artistic form, and that, furthermore, its aesthetic features can help us to identify the kinds of expectations underlying the role that the argument itself is expected to perform for us. The book as a whole functions as a work of art is meant to for other post-Kantian thinkers: Hegelian philosophy is to take the place of art as the vehicle of the recognition by which we are reconciled to our time in reason and to reason in our time.⁹

3. *Phenomenology* as a Work of Art

The *Phenomenology* is a "science of the experience of consciousness", as the alternative title has it. This science is *sui generis* not only in that it consists in its own justification, but in that it is a narrative of telling failures. Each "shape" of consciousness is sequentially tasked with adapting to the inadequacies of its predecessor, while motivating through its own specific defeat the formulation of the issue that it hands off to its successor. The plot begins with straightforward ostensive judgments—"now is night", "I am this"—which, unable to explain how they ostend, are shown to entail richer and richer forms of knowing that point to the "absolute" form of knowing with which Hegel concludes. As Hegel insists elsewhere, it is not that every reader must literally reenact each stage in order to achieve the ending; it is that each position is determinately contained within the subsequent one (as we might say that the concept of crime is logically contained within the concept of willing, in that our willing rightly must always take place against the backdrop possibility of trespass—even if someone in particular happened never to have committed a crime).¹⁰ The ensemble of such necessary mistakes that make up the book must in this way elucidate, underlie, and constitute the structure of our freedom realized. The procedure as a whole therefore relies on at least three programmatic commitments, all three of which in combination suggest that the argument has an aesthetic character, that in some sense it functions as a work of art: expressivism, teleology, and culmination. I'll touch on each of these in order.

First, Hegel's conception of each stage of the narrative is expressive. I mean this in the sense clarified by Charles Taylor (2010) that the meaning of each of the figures Hegel examines is neither merely propositional, nor inferential, nor

⁹ Cf. GW 9.38/PS §52. Some form of this thesis—that there is an important affinity between Hegel's conception of aesthetics and his conception of philosophy—would perhaps be hard to miss. For versions of it, see Desmond 1991, Pippin 2011b, Förster 2012 and Taylor 1977. What I am arguing is that we should take seriously the "meta-philosophical" consequences of what this means about how Hegel envisioned the bearing of his system on its readers.

¹⁰ "This conception of derangement as a *necessarily* emerging form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that *every* mind, *every* soul, must go through this stage of extreme disruption. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because *crime* is considered in the *Philosophy of Right* as a *necessary* appearance of the human will, therefore the commission of crime is supposed to be made inevitable for *every* individual" (E3 §408z). See also (E1 §86z).

available to it through an *ex ante* introspective view that could be finally adequate to its whole content; rather, while each begins by identifying itself with some philosophical commitment, it is only through working through that commitment that it is confronted by its implications and inadequacies. Concepts have lives of their own, in this sense. Without the condition of actualization, Hegel's "figures" would not be properly narrative—they would be picturesque examples, but not really exemplary of the developmental activity that Hegel wants to describe in opposition to the apriorism he associates with Kant's first two *Critiques*, or to the self-indulgent, vatic ineffability he associates with Schelling's appeals to Romantic intuition. Our forms of self-understanding, that is, acquire *essential* content through their enactment and realization; or, as Hegel puts it, "we learn by experience [*die Meinung erfährt*] that we meant something other than we meant to mean" (GW 9.44/PS §63). It is the possibility of noticing and responding to this mismatch that in turn makes transformations in our self-conception possible—what Hegel calls the "criterion" (*Maßstab*) of knowledge (GW 9.59/PS §§83-84).¹¹

A general commitment to expressivism may evidently have some connection to aesthetics without being closely identified with it—it is not so in Aristotle's case, for instance,¹² even if for most modern expressivists the affinity has been irresistible (as it was for Herder, Nietzsche, or Dewey). When it comes to the *Phenomenology*, however, it is not simply that Hegel has borrowed conceptual resources that he happened to find in the *Critique of Judgment* to his analysis of agency. It is that each shape of consciousness is at once particular while bearing essential universal purport for the larger narrative. In other words, it is not just that *some* content is expressed by the actuality of each shape, but that the content is *exemplary* of a larger whole that is entirely and inescapably at stake within it.¹³ It is precisely this investing of concrete instance with universal significance that allows each of Hegel's stages to be consequential to the narrative, since each is essential to Spirit's coming to know itself in us—every shape of consciousness bears, for the space of its turn, the full weight of the whole: "every moment, as it gains concrete form and a shape of its own, displays itself in the universal individual" (GW 9.24/PS §28). Hegel explicitly reaches for an aesthetic description of these stages, referring to them as *Gestalten* and tableaux: "a slow-moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images [*eine Gallerie von Bildern*]" that penetrates the whole wealth of all Spiritual substance (GW 9.433/PS §808).¹⁴ It is this saturated expressivism—the fact that what is of universal moment is utterly ex-

¹¹ Cf. Pippin's comment that "in Hegel's view in the relevant sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, actually to have an intention is to struggle to express that intention in a public and publicly contestable deed, subject to great temporal fluidity and to appropriations and interpretations by others that can greatly alter one's own sense of what one is about" (Pippin 2011b: 117).

¹² Aristotle compares acts of moral virtue to works of art ("so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything"), but immediately qualifies this by adding that moral virtue is "more exact and better than any art" (Aristotle 2009: 1106b7-15).

¹³ One might say that they are exemplary of "sensible rational ideas", as Kant puts it in *KU*: §49.

¹⁴ Cf. GW 9.56/PS §78.

pressed into each of its instances, the presence of the whole in the part—that is more specifically aesthetic.¹⁵

Second, Hegel's view of the demonstrative necessity that connects each of the stages is aesthetic in that it is appropriated from natural teleology. This logical organicism is perhaps most lavishly in view in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, where he compares the unfolding truth of his narrative to the way a bud issues into a blossom that issues into a fruit, refers several times to the “inner-life and self-movement” of the process, and speaks of his account as a speculative “rhythm” that makes sense of the relation between subjects and predicates (GW 9.10, 37, 43-44/PS §§2, 51, 61, respectively). Such vitalistic characterizations of reason are not novel—they are everywhere in Schelling, and have older roots in Herder, Hooker, and Pascal—but their specific application encapsulates one of Hegel's defining insights: that the history of freedom can be read as a series of developing moments belonging the same activity, rather than as an alternation of competing views to be endorsed or discarded seriatim. In contrast to the various kinds of epistemological formalism he criticizes in the Preface, that is, his project is to gather the collective logic of all shapes of sense-making into the unified, purposive form of activity he calls Spirit. Eckart Förster has shown that Hegel came to this notion by studying Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*. Goethe shows there that the plant is a self-differentiating whole whose parts are coordinated functions of a single process: Hegel came to see this as the right analogy for the working out of human freedom through time.¹⁶

In that it appeals to some kind of analogy between artifice and organism, Hegel's *Phenomenology* would already be, again, “artistic” in a weak sense. But here too I mean something more specific. Beyond allowing him to make the Aristotelian point that intelligibility is activity and that its different instances may be organized into parts of a larger whole, the analogy to organism affords Hegel a sense of implacable deductive necessity. If Aristotle ranks plants, animals, and human beings as lower and higher, for instance, he never claims to be able to deduce them from each other, nor is it clear that he thought of himself as having a system in the modern sense. But Hegel's anti-foundationalist holism (in the *Phenomenology* and *Encyclopedia*) cannot *but* make up a complete, deductive, ordered system. He evidently does not view Spirit's purposive activity as mechanically necessary or theologically pre-ordained, yet he does think that the stages he

¹⁵ The visibility of the whole within the part—the notions of analogy and archetype, in sum—is one of the most familiar motifs in Romantic thinking about art and nature, in Germany and elsewhere (as in Blake's “To see the world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wildflower”). For its classic expression, cf. Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* (esp. 76-78 in Goethe 1989), and this passage from his 1798 poem (also called “The Metamorphosis of Plants”): “All the shapes are akin and none is quite like the other;/ So to a secret law surely that chorus must point,/ To a sacred enigma” (Goethe 2016: 27). There is an echo of this thinking in Hegel's epistolary comment that “I saw the Emperor—this world-soul—riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it” (quoted in Pinkard 2000: 228). The *Phenomenology*, I am arguing, offers us a relay of just such “concentrated” figures.

¹⁶ See Förster 2012: 297-301; cf. Goethe's comment that “In the end, the phenomena must form a series, or rather, overlap; thus they give the scientist a picture of some organization by which the inner life of the phenomena become manifest as a whole” (Goethe 2010: 984).

describes are the essential aspects of Spirit's activity, that they are rightly arranged within the teleologically arranged sequence within which he identifies them, and that their expression within this order is constitutive of what they are.¹⁷ If this is not the necessity of a mathematical proof, it is necessity in the sense that any self-impelling organic process exhibits. And it is because narrative necessity obtains in this sense that Hegel occasionally invokes the notion that "we", readers and Hegelians, can be its spectators: "since what consciousness examines is its own self, all that is left for us to do is simply to look on [*nur das reine Zusehen bleibt*]" (GW 9.59/PS §85). History supplants nature as the decisive framework of human experience that it had been from Thales to Kant: Hegel puts a period to that trajectory by transforming history itself into a quasi-natural unfolding that presses on to its own actualization.

Even so, neither expressivism nor teleology would of itself justify the claim that the *Phenomenology* is an aesthetic work. The third consideration that still needs adding is that of Hegel's conception of the goal: a form of knowledge that incorporates and harmonizes all the previous chapters of the narrative, thereby overcoming, absolving, and consummating all failures at interpreting the relation between self and other, thinking and being. Whatever "absolute knowing" means exactly, it is not omniscience: it is not knowledge of every particular. It is, furthermore, a kind of knowing that can fully take place only within philosophy itself—Hegel consistently argues that it can only be partially intimated within politics, art, or religion.¹⁸ But such knowing is nonetheless "absolute" in that it can identify all the conceptual links of the world in their necessary order of concatenation, and that this comprehension is such that it in some sense thereby changes the meaning of the whole it comprehends: once Spirit understands what it is about and what it has been *at all along*, it fulfills its purpose of coming to know itself in all otherness, of redeeming the reason of the world as what is unconditionally true. Spirit's self-knowledge replaces the role that love had played in Hegel's earlier writings.

This can be made to sound somewhat less outlandish when we hear it as an echo of another Aristotelian position, that to know the world completes it, that the cosmos's purpose is to come to know itself, and that in this sense all being strives, after its own manner and *sub specie aeternitatis*, to participate in the life of the mind. Hegel concludes the *Encyclopedia* with a quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to this effect (E3 §577). But the differences here again suggest that Hegel's notion of what philosophy can achieve is fundamentally an aesthetic one. First, because Hegel is committed to the fundamental univocity and commensurability of the logical "content" that emerges from each dialectical transition. Even where Aristotle ranks different species, he does not insist on the point that lower kinds are fundamentally commensurable with higher, that they are reducible to some common content. The theoretical life may be higher than the practical one for him, but the practical domain's integrity is not simply an ersatz version of theoretical content. No such *aporia* presents itself to Hegel, for whom each dialectical sublation carries over the same content as its lower version, but

¹⁷ See esp. GW 9.366-67, 428-29/PS §§681, 801. Cf. "Hegel has taken a decisive step beyond Goethe: not only is it impossible to grasp the idea that philosophy strives to comprehend (the absolute) prior to the conclusion of the complete series of its realization; in fact *it is not what it is* until the end of that series" (Förster 2012: 300).

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., LFA 99-100.

in a higher key. Thus, for instance: philosophy realizes the *same* purport that is only sensuously intimated in art and religion.¹⁹ But, finally, the achievement of absolute knowing is identified with the culmination of historical time for Hegel, as of course it is not for Aristotle. This confounds the distinction between art and history, as it had been previously understood. Aristotle's observation that poetry is higher than history because the former is better at identifying universals whereas the latter is mired in contingency no longer holds for Hegel's narrative system, which is an apotheosis of both into a new kind of science of history. The final position, the way we are now, is not simply where things stand so far, but the justification of time and its fulfillment, inasmuch as this means a resolution and incorporation of every previous stage. There is a total identification of form to content in the finale that is not only expressive, and not only organically deduced, but wholly necessary and necessarily whole—a work that in some sense puts an end to all such work: a showstopper.

Recent scholarship on Hegel has tended to underplay this aspect of his position, rather stressing its provisional, proleptic, and corrigible character.²⁰ To have suggested that anything, let alone history or philosophy, ended in 1807 seems (rightly) premature to us, and I agree that we should distinguish the abiding value of Hegel's position from some of his more stupendous claims.²¹ But we would also miss a crucial aspect of Hegel's position, were we to overlook the fact that its ambition evidently extends beyond the correctness of its propositional content—that it lays extraordinary claim not only to actualize or awaken consciousness to the latent significance of the whole, but to our recognition of it, Hegel's system, as the essential vehicle of that awakening. Just what this means is not yet clear; certainly it is not our way of regarding the work of ordinary scholarship. What I mean to say so far is that Hegel's insistence on the perfection of the result—on the notion that the final position is an expressive, developmental, autonomous whole in which form and content are fully harmonized with each other, and which in this way supplies us with a means for transformative recognition of ourselves—is rightly called aesthetic, and that this bears on how we are to recognize the *Phenomenology's* bearing on us, its readers.

4. The Burden of Philosophy

I have argued so far that these three general features of Hegel's *Phenomenology*—its saturated expressivism, its teleological necessity, and its culminating harmony—render it if not a work of art, then at any rate into a work of philosophy formally patterned after what had been for Kant a specifically aesthetic mode of intelligibility. This is not to say that Hegel ever went so far as to conflate aesthetics with philosophy, as some of his contemporaries did. The *Phenomenology* itself states that “beauty hates the understanding” for asking it to perform what it

¹⁹ Cf., e.g., GW 9.364-65, 368, 420-21/PS §§678, 683, 787.

²⁰ See, e.g., Pinkard 2012, Pippin 2014, and Dale 2014 for such accounts in three heterogeneous domains.

²¹ In other words, even as scholars continue to deny that Hegel has a strong end of history thesis, it is a position that readers cannot but continue to attribute to him, because it follows from his underlying principle that Spirit *cannot stop short* of achieving the total identification of being and thinking, that such an identification is properly located in modernity. For discussion of this question, see Dale 2014, Brooks 2007: 157, and Pinkard 2017: 140-68.

cannot (GW 9.27/PS §32), and throughout the 1820's he continued to describe art as a distinct practice, subordinate to philosophy. And Hegel is well known for the thesis that this practice has now ended for us, that it no longer sustains our deepest spiritual needs (LFA 10-11, 102-103).

Even in the *Lectures on Fine Art*, however, Hegel reiterates the claim that philosophy only grasps its own essence precisely along with the essence of art and nature—an explicit concession of the weight that the *Critique of Judgment* carried for him (LFA 56).²² The discovery of philosophical science is also the discovery of the science of art, he says, because both have a common way of unifying conceptual oppositions into teleological activity: both are concerned with the mediated “life” of concepts.²³ It is in this sense that I think that by attending to the kind of work that the *Phenomenology* is—to its character as an organic deduction of a single, concrete, culminating activity—it is plausible to regard it as a philosophical work of art that answers to the modern demand for certainty by showing, as he says, “that now is the time for philosophy to be raised to the status of a science”, replacing the “love of knowing” for “actual knowing” (GW 9.11/PS §5). The work undertakes not only a true demonstration, but a reorientation of our impulse toward knowledge as such: our erotic restlessness is put to rest.²⁴

I note in passing that it was these very features of Hegel's account of mediation that were associated with his philosophical hubris by the Left Hegelians in the generation after him. The sense that Hegel represented a philosophical dead end stemmed in part from the fact that his system could not be contested or extended in ordinary ways (since every possible distinction is supposed to be always already sublated within it), and so had to be repudiated wholesale. Its very perfection threatened to leave “us” out: the system's totality explained away our own existing, historical subjectivity. And this charge against Hegel's system was early on formulated as a problem of confounding philosophy with art. Thus Feuerbach writes, in his 1839 *Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, that “Hegel is the most accomplished philosophical artist, and his presentations, at least in part, are *unsurpassed models of scientific art sense* [...] The Hegelian philosophy is thus the culminating point of all speculative-systematic philosophy” (Feuerbach 2012: 68). Similar accusations may be readily found in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.²⁵

But setting his reception aside, it will be more helpful to ask how Hegel himself conceived of the relationship between his system and the form of life that grounds it. If it is relatively uncontroversial to point out that Hegel's thought is “aesthetic” in the sense that it elaborates a notion of mediation that is in opposition to the scientific formalism of the Enlightenment, the question of what this means for the role that Hegel's thought takes itself to be called on to perform (to return to McDowell's phrase) has not been adequately addressed.

²² Cf. LFA: 63.

²³ For the connection between this theme in the *Phenomenology* and in the 1820's *Lectures on Fine Art*, see Pippin 2011b: 104-108.

²⁴ For a telling contrast to Kant, cf. A 850/878: “we will always return to metaphysics as to a beloved from whom we have been estranged”.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Kierkegaard (1992: 347); Nietzsche (1997a: §190) and (1997b: 104): “such a point of view [i.e. the Hegelian one] has set history [...] in place of the other spiritual powers, art and religion, as the sole sovereign power”.

What is the relation between this aesthetic dimension and its supposed function vis-à-vis *us*? Does Hegel understand his project as the explicitation or reiteration of norms already tacitly obtaining within modernity (as the Owl of Minerva comment suggests)? Or does he regard his own project as making some transformative difference to their full realization? What, in sum, is philosophical mediation *for*, in his view, and how is this purpose connected to its aesthetic character? Two further issues become salient in this connection: Hegel's view of the historical character of his position and his view of the task of philosophy as such. Either one of these is matter for a much longer study, but let me outline some lines of thinking on each in turn.

Hegel's thought is conspicuous, as I've said, for tethering itself to a particular historical situation. Philosophy cannot culminate in science before Spirit has worked out all the practical and conceptual conditions entailed by it; the "end" of history and the "end" of philosophy (however stipulated) are indivisible for this reason. As he put it in 1806: "This is the standpoint of the present time, and for now it is the last in the series of the forms of spirit [*geistigen Gestaltungen*].—With this the history of philosophy is *concluded*" (*Werke* 20: 479).²⁶ One may put more or less pressure on that "for now". But while Hegel balks at anything like prediction, he sees modernity as making a decisive, qualitative difference that he is in a position to articulate, and so his project is predicated on spelling out now what has already been realized in practice. Had it been articulated by any pre-modern thinker, in other words, the same position would not have been *true* (would not have been an expression of its actuality). The philosophical culmination of the *Phenomenology*—its sublation of the meaning of time itself²⁷—is accordingly presented as evincing or completing the moment's historical significance:

Ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past [...] The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world (GW 9.14-15/PS §11).

And while in the 1820's Hegel was no longer so euphoric about the thoroughness of the historical conversion taking place,²⁸ he never detached his own position from the fact that modernity represents a decisive shift in key to a higher historical register, a key that he takes himself to discover and codify, such that the most flagrant statements he made about the end of history date from that period.²⁹

It would be much easier to shrug this off as a version of C-major Whiggish triumphalism, however, if there were not an additional, minor key present in Hegel's writings from the 1790's on: an insistence about the crises facing modern institutions. One may be so easily distracted by the heady tenor of the *Phe-*

²⁶ See note in Förster 2012: 301.

²⁷ See GW 9.428-29/PS §801.

²⁸ On this subject, see esp. Pinkard 2012: 173-96. My essay owes much to Pinkard's description, though he does not press what I'm calling the aesthetic character of Hegel's position.

²⁹ E.g. "Europe is essentially [*schlechthin*] the end of history" (*Werke* 12: 134).

nomenology, for instance, that one may miss the fact that Hegel describes his historical moment as one of decline, in which the traditional meanings of things have lost their grip on ordinary agents: "Spirit has lost not only its essential life; it is also conscious of this loss and of the finitude of its own content" (GW 9.12/PS §7).³⁰ Our spiritual situation is as impoverished as that of "a wanderer in the desert craving for a mere mouthful of water" (GW 9.13/PS §8). Later, in chapter 5, Hegel says that the narrative he has chosen is one of declension rather than ascent, because it more appropriate: "in our times that form of these moments is more familiar in which they appear after consciousness has lost its ethical life, and in the search for it, repeats those forms" (GW 9.197/PS §357). It is (also) the worst of times.

If these descriptions of crisis in the *Phenomenology* are to be identified with the collapse of the *ancien régime* in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the sense of crisis is even more pronounced in the *Philosophy of Right*, which, over ten years later, criticizes modern negative view of the free will, the atomism and contractarianism that dominates liberal thinking about the state, and the excesses of Romantic subjectivity. Philosophy has fallen into a "shameful decline" Hegel says; its bent toward merely subjective ends leads to the destruction of ethics and of the laws of the state (GW 14,1.6, 12/PR 10, 18, respectively). A remark in the *Encyclopedia* adds that "the sickness of our time, which has arrived at the point of despair, is the assumption that cognition is only subjective" (E1 §22z). Hegel is, admittedly, responding to a different political reality here, one no longer pervaded by Napoleonic optimism. But there is nonetheless a striking and persistent gap between Hegel's stake in philosophical modernity—his view that the modern state alone offers the conditions for the realization of human freedom, and that he is only articulating the rationality of the actual—and his observations on modernity, as he finds it. The fact remains that Hegel never uncoupled these two systematically dissonant principles: the historical dependence of his position, and the incomplete or inadequate character of modern subjectivity. He did not, in sum, view his position either as one that could be out of sync with its time, nor as one that was a mere explicitation of modernity as he found it. His position stems from modernity, but he finds modernity, in and of itself, not quite as it could or should be.

This raises the second issue I noted above, about Hegel's view of the meaning of philosophy within its historical context: if modernity is, practically speaking, incomplete, then what is philosophy for? What is its status with respect to the not-quite-yet realization of the form of life that nonetheless makes it possible? It is at least clear that Hegel regarded philosophy as having some role to perform within this realization, some *potentially* public function. In contrast to Fichte, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche who often write under the presumption of public incomprehension, Hegel writes that "the intelligible form of science is the way open and equally accessible to everyone [...] what is intelligible is what is already familiar and common to science and the unscientific consciousness alike" (GW 9.15-16/PS §13). And: "the individual has the right to demand that Science provide him with the ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within himself" (GW 9.22-23/PS §26). At no point in Hegel's career is philosophy presented as esoteric in principle. So much so that around the time of the *Phenomenology's* appearance, he reiterated, in a letter to Niethammer, that

³⁰ Cf. GW 9.14-5/PS §11.

it was the world-historical role of German philosophy to complete in thought what the French Revolution had accomplished in practice.³¹

But what is it that philosophy can be said to “accomplish” for him exactly? The darker strain of analysis I’ve noted culminates in a passage from the 1820’s *Lectures on Fine Art*, in which he says that the harsh opposition between inner freedom and the necessity of external nature have, in fact, been driven to sharpest contradiction in modern culture:

Spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in man which makes him an amphibious animal because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another. The result is that now consciousness wanders about in this contradiction, and, driven from one side to the other, cannot find satisfaction for itself in either the one or the other [...] it becomes the task of philosophy to supersede the oppositions [...] Philosophy affords a reflective insight into the essence of the opposition only in so far as it shows how truth is just the dissolving of opposition and, at that, not in the sense, as may be supposed, that the opposition and its two sides do not exist at all, but that they exist reconciled (LFA 54-55).

This ‘amphibious’ view of agency seems on the face of it far from the seamless, second-natural view we might have expected or desired from him.³² In a sense, it reverses the priority between practical agency and philosophy, by suggesting that it is only in philosophy that we are able to make sense of our own amphibious status as creatures natural and free. Philosophy performs the task of showing us the unity underlying a practical conflict, but the insight is one that cannot as such take place in practice, cannot be actualized within a world that must remain at harsh odds with itself. We may be Hegelian naturalists in theory, in other words, even as we must remain Kantian dualists in practice.

The passage nonetheless agrees with the *Phenomenology* on the point that our understanding of modern agency is not just a mirror explicitation of circumstances on the ground, as it were, but one that transforms our very view of those circumstances, by freeing them from their contingency and transposing them into the terms of absolute knowledge. In these passages, philosophy exceeds or surpasses the possibilities of what is possible or even implicit within our not-quite-yet form of life, such that what is asunder in practice may be reconciled only in theory. In that this reconciliation can only take place in philosophy, it is a position that was castigated as conformist by Hegel’s revolutionary disciples. But in that the reconciliation effects, in being thought, a transformative recognition of the very aspect of the world, the position is not the therapy of quietism either—it proposes not an escape from practice into theory, after all, but the raising to a higher power in theory of what remains latent within practice. I would suggest that the meaning of Hegel’s position for us crucially depends on what I’ve called the aesthetic character of his thought: Hegel does not mean his system simply to acknowledge the otherwise practically realized freedom of mod-

³¹ See *Briefe*, vol. II, #233. The notion is likewise implicit in the architecture of the *Phenomenology* itself, with “Absolute Freedom and Terror” giving way to “Morality” within chapter 6.

³² One might add that Hegel makes clear that he does not regard an amphibian as an admirable thing to be—referring to them in the *Encyclopedia* as repulsive and “imperfect products of nature” (E2: §368z.).

ern life, but in some sense to bring it into being through a transformation of consciousness, that is, through the shared acknowledgment that Hegel's thought is our form of unity. If Hegel's thought is akin to a work of art, in other words, it is not simply a work of art that is meant to express the canons of taste of a pre-existing community; rather it aims to actively convoke that very community by giving it an image in which it can recognize itself, to bring into being something that is at once implicit in modern consciousness but not yet fully present to us prior to our awareness of it.

In order to motivate this suggestion, I'd like to return to the *Critique of Judgment* for a moment. Aesthetic or "reflective" judgments interest Kant, as I've said, as embodied intimation of freedom.³³ But they also interest him as a proxy for intersubjectivity. It is within his treatment of aesthetic judgment that Kant comes closest to addressing the distinctive character of intersubjectivity, since he openly entertains the social dimension of such judgments as constitutive to their intelligibility. Aesthetic taste is presented as a *sensus communis*.³⁴ It is a shared power of appealing to the collective judgment of human reason in general. Two essential yardsticks of aesthetic judgments are therefore their universal communicability, and our right to demand (in principle) everyone's agreement with our view that such and such is beautiful (KU §§8: 32):

By "*sensus communis*" [...] must be understood the idea of a **communal** sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else's way of representing in thought, in order **as it were** to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole [...] Now this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else [*man ... sich in die Stelle jedes anderen versetzt*], merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judging (KU §40).

Kant does not say much about the social conditions underlying this power of abstraction, nor about the relation between the universality of judgments of taste and the specific practices and objects on which we exercise them. Standards of beauty are not, after all, universal without qualification—they are not even the same throughout Western Europe, as Kant knew. But this ambiguity as to "the merely possible judgment of others" is nonetheless a fruitful one. Some of Kant's comments suggest that as a condition for this *sensus communis* we should understand the unstated presence of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism—aesthetic judgment would be an expression of the fact that we already been disciplined into a certain way of seeing things with others.³⁵ Art makes explicit the cultural norms that already inform our vision, in this sense. But Kant's emphasis in other passages suggests a more ambitious, constitutive role for the *sensus communis*—not simply as the reiteration of shared European sensibility, but as the project of calling into being what is shareable *par excellence*, the solicitation of a human communion that is not yet realized but that is nonetheless internal to beauty's "should".³⁶ From this angle, art summons us to see what we could be

³³ See esp. KU §59.

³⁴ For the history of this phrase, see Gadamer 2003: 19-30.

³⁵ E.g. KU §§14: 40, 83.

³⁶ See esp. KU §§8: 9, 18, 19, 41.

by showing us what we've been all along—it has, in this sense, the performative function of being the means through which we come to recognize ourselves in common, “as if from an original contract dictated by humanity itself” (KU §41).

It is this performative role for aesthetics that was most interesting to Schiller in the 1790's; beauty functions for him in the *Letters* as the activity conforming a community's ethical harmony; it both expresses and constitutes a community's ethical transparency to itself in practice. The same may be said of Schelling, of the young Hegel, and of the author of the *Oldest Program*, whose project of a “new rational mythology” had a transformative, rather than simply imitative, notion of beauty. What I'm suggesting is that Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his system as a whole should be seen as aspiring to perform this kind of function. If it is a sort of aesthetic artifact, and if it can be said to be out of sync with the historical advent to which it nonetheless insists on closely tethering itself, then it is because his project should be understood neither as reiterating the norms and attitudes of modern life, nor as misidentifying them, but as aiming to summon us to a shared a vision of ourselves that could itself bear the weight of constituting our modern wholeness.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel notes that modern education differs from that of ancient times in that “the individual [now] finds the abstract form ready-made [...] the task nowadays consists [...] in freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity so as to give actuality to the universal, and impart to it spiritual life” (GW 9.28/PS §33). Not only does the notion of bringing “life” to the universal have a clear aesthetic resonance—it stems from Kant's description of the “quickenning” (*Belebung*) of sense that takes place in reflective judgment³⁷—the suggestion is that the ambition of Hegelian science is neither to recapitulate the world nor to change it: the aim of science is the “recognition” of what is already the case in some sense, but which is transformed in our self-conception of it. Modernity has the same character for him in many descriptions: it is not a situation of seamless harmony, but rather one in positive need of harmonization. In the “end of art” passage from the *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel notes that such a harmonizing cannot be done by art any longer, and that this magnifies our need for philosophy—both for “knowing philosophically what art is” and for meeting the demands that our spiritual culture places on us. Philosophy in this way takes the place of art as the practice through which we recognize ourselves in otherness: more than just conciliating us to (or allowing us to cope with) our position *faute de mieux*, it is what restores our nature whole.

5. Becoming Who We Are

I think that we are sometimes misled by the useful textbook fiction that Plato, Aquinas, Hegel, and Wittgenstein could be said to understand themselves as providing the same kinds of answers to the same kinds of questions.³⁸ The difference is most jarring, say, when Plato ends a dialogue with a myth, or when Aristotle gets started by canvassing popular opinions, or when Aquinas offers us arguments for God's existence that are not presumed to be independent from faith. It is not that these moments are inscrutable to us, it is rather that we find

³⁷ Cf., e.g., KU §§12: 43, 49.

³⁸ For two (very different) elaborations of this thesis, see Hadot 1995 (esp. 101-109), and MacIntyre 1991.

thinkers working within a terrain in which bearings must be taken differently from ours. One way to describe this strangeness is the changing relation that philosophy has to its communal context, the question of who, in each case, the author is reasoning with and for, and, given the shape of “our” shared commitments, what kinds of investigations are understood to be available for measured progress. But another way of understanding this relation would be to note that in each case philosophy takes itself to be called on to discharge different sorts of functions with respect to its form of life, functions that—like the changing roles of the fine arts—are themselves historically variable.

The roles most familiar to us now are perhaps revolutionary activism, therapeutic quietism, and scientific (or scholarly) research. Hegel's position should interest us all the more because it conforms to none of these patterns, in fact: he offers us a completion of history that cannot take place within history alone, a means to effect the transformative recognition that Romantic art was expected to play by some of his contemporaries. To instance Novalis' formulation, to “romanticize” means “to give a higher significance to the commonplace, an appearance of mystery to the ordinary, the dignity of the unknown to the familiar, the semblance of infinity to the finite” (quoted in Martini 1977: 319).³⁹ Hegel's conception of his project is in line with this transfiguration of the ordinary by revealing its deepest rational grounds; it at once attends to the recurrence of the alienation to which it is addressed and, in acknowledging the fundamental difference between modernity and its self-conception, aims to heal the gap by providing us with an invocation of a wholeness in which we may acknowledge ourselves already whole. It is not revolutionary because this transformation is not institutional, but nor it is quietist because it supplies us with the means of recognizing the unity that remains latent within our riven forms of practice.

This characterization doubtless raises a larger crowd of questions than it answers—about the scope of this “we”, about whether it finally amounts to a form of obfuscatory escapism, and about the very feasibility of recognizing ourselves as whole in absolute thought. Unlike the *amor fati* of thinkers ancient and modern, however—a position solitary in its encounter with eternity—Hegel's position accounts for the necessary persistence of the questions that we continue to address in common. We are permanently encumbered by the question of naturalism, because it is not the kind of question that could be set to rest in theory or in practice alone: our amphibious form of life is such as not to be a given, such as to remain in question, and so it cannot but continue to elicit questions about its own (and our own) status and unity. These questions still speak to us, in this sense, because we are continually forced to try to realize what it would mean to say “we” and to mean it. Inasmuch as “we may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection” (LFA 103), Hegel still becomes us.

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³⁹ Cf. (again) with E1 §22 and LFA 99-100.

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