Truth and its Appearance
A Comment on Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust*

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Abstract: Robert Brandom's interpretation of G. W. F. Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is grounded in the notion of consciousness. This approach contradicts Hegel's claims with regard to the possibility-bound character of his idealist predecessors' consciousness-based philosophies and his commitment to the fundamentality of *Geist*. According to Hegel, only *Geist*'s freedom-based individuality appropriately frames the relationship between universality and particulars and thus between consciousness and world and between different instances of consciousness. Against Brandom's reading, this entails that only the concept of *Geist*—rather than consciousness— is able to explain successful cognition, recognition, and rational political, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical activity.

Keywords: Brandom, Robert; Hegel, Georg W. F.; phenomenology; cognition; recognition; freedom; *Geist*.

Robert Brandom's recent book, *A Spirit of Trust*,[1] impressively proves that an unapologetically independent-minded engagement with G. W. F. Hegel's oftentimes mysterious prose can bear the sweet fruit of living truth.

Instead of arguing over descriptive labels or posing the question whether Hegel's own understanding of his deduction of the categorial forms of consciousness maps seamlessly onto the project of pragmatist semantics, I would like to focus on a complication in Hegel's early work that might have undue impact on Brandom's reading. More precisely, this is the question of the relationship between *Bewußtsein* (consciousness) and *Geist* (commonly translated as either "mind" or "spirit"), or between what Hegel refers to as "appearance" and "the true."[2]

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel remains ambiguous about this relationship, which leads to unfortunate consequences with regard to the status of the work's claims, and its relationship to the argumentation as developed in his later system. However, Brandom seems to take a stance in favor of the priority of consciousness over *Geist* in a manner that places him at odds with some of the central claims of the *Phenomenology* as well as with Hegel's mature writings.

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[1] Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. [Henceforth cited as *ST*]

[2] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. Michael Inwood, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2018, pp. 18, §38; 11, §18). [Henceforth cited as *PS*]

The Perspective of Consciousness

Throughout his book, Brandom grounds his narrative on the theoretical and practical undertakings of particular human beings that are understood as being subjects who possess consciousness (*ST* 14). Whenever Hegel refers to consciousness, is thus taken to refer to such subjects (*PS* 13, §26). They are using language, mutually ascribe norms, display intentions, recognize each other, take epistemic stances, make inferences, recollect historically, and so on. To Brandom, the "metaconcepts" that are deduced in the *Phenomenology* (*ST* 5) too, such as sensory certainty, perception, force and understanding, certainty, reason, art, religion, absolute knowledge, and crucially, *Geist* itself, are categorial forms that exclusively apply to particular subjects with consciousness and to their thoughts and actions. *Geist* thus remains conceptually dependent on consciousness and its subjects' particularities understood in the sense that *Geist* refers to the historical and social context of ontologically prioritized particular subjects. Brandom accordingly states that the objective world does not "owe anything to the thinking activity of any supersubject called 'Geist'" (*ST* 3).

This interpretation relies on several textual and conceptual pointers. After all, Hegel's work is called the "Phenomenology of *Geist*," and not "*Geist* as it is in and for itself," nor is it called the "Philosophy of *Geist*." And as Hegel seems to suggest, the *Phenomenology*'s analysis of *Geist* is provided from the perspective of consciousness; it does not describe how *Geist* is for *Geist*, in the sense that the thinking subject of the *Phenomenology* is not *Geist* as such but a particular, philosophizing subject. Instead, it analyses how *Geist* is in itself or "for us," that is, for particular subjects who have consciousness (*PS* 71, §164).

Hegel's Ontological Account of *Geist* as Truth

A closer look at chapter VI, *Geist*, reveals that Hegel's analysis of consciousness and the development of its categorial forms is in the *Phenomenology* is in effect an analysis of *Geist*, inasmuch as it is *Geist* that appears as consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason (*PS* 18, §38). The particular subject referred to by "consciousness" thus stands in some kind of causal relationship to *Geist* as it is *Geist* that makes itself appear in the form of consciousness (*PS* 18, §38). The *Phenomenology*'s consciousness-related metaconcepts thus trace the categorial forms of

Geist's appearance. Starting with consciousness, each subsequent category is conceptually more complex—or using Hegel's term, "concrete" (*PS* 16, §32)—than the previous one until *Geist*, in and by itself, becomes the object of the work's conceptual enquiry. This categorial evolution may be intellectually witnessed by a philosophical thinker who being subsumed under the category of consciousness comes then to be aware of being a particular instance of the very *Geist* that the work identifies as origin of consciousness. This turns the *Phenomenology* into an auto-analysis of *Geist*: particular, philosophically thinking subjects that represent *Geist*'s appearance comprehend *Geist*'s appearance and simultaneously comprehend *Geist* as it is. To Hegel, *Geist* is thus not a name for the historical and social context of a specific particular consciousness in the manner that Brandom maintains (*ST* 29) as, for him, *Geist* is not consciousness to which social context and history are added. Instead, *Geist* is the self-examining, ontological universal that functions as the immanent cause and condition of the possibility of consciousness (*PS* 17, §33) along with its social and historical worlds. When Hegel deduces *Geist* out of the notion of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, he thus leaves behind Immanuel Kant's and J. G. Fichte's—and from Hegel's view unwarranted yet presupposed—commitment to the fundamentality of consciousness and argues that consciousness always already implies and ontologically relies upon *Geist*.

Since *Geist*'s overarching unity is grounding the entire project of the *Phenomenology* and the relationship between consciousness and its world, it is *Geist* that is ultimately required for an explanation of why mutual recognition occurs, why trust is ever warranted, why recognitive and ascriptive behavior are successful, and why education and self-reconciliation through art, religion, and philosophy succeed. Against Brandom's reading, it is thus the fundamentality of *Geist* that establishes that mutual recognition by particular subjects is not the foundation of a successful ethical and religious community, nor is singular and collective epistemic and aesthetic descriptive and ascriptive behavior ultimately responsible for the successful acquisition of knowledge. Instead, these aspects describe what *Geist* does in its fundamental role as an absolute subject that appears in the form of particular subjects who have consciousness (*PS* 11-2, §§18, 23). In what follows I address Hegel's reasons for preferring *Geist* over consciousness.

Geist's Universality is the Ground of Unity

Hegel argues that if one were to follow Kant and Fichte and were to commit to the fundamental status of consciousness and the alienation that this implies, between world and subject and between subjects, then all cognition, recognition, and other spiritual activity such as reconciliation through art, religion, and philosophy could at best be possible yet it would never be necessary and thus it would be not actual.

This is due to the fact that the prioritized difference between consciousness and world and between consciousnesses that is implied by the category of consciousness undermines the necessary and actual compatibility that is based on *Geist*'s overarching identity: if everyone and everything is first and fundamentally differentiated, the identity invoked by the subsequent claim of the entities' compatibility comes, logically seen, too late. Assuming mutually excluding subjects and a world that is external to them, cognition and recognition can potentially happen yet not necessarily; they are forever postulated but never actual. The assumed differences between subject and world and between subject and subject can be bridged via a subsequent qualification of the differences in terms of an identity-claim. But since the difference is prioritized, the later added identity only entails contingent possibility rather than necessary actuality (*PS* 160, §404).

Hegel accordingly argues that the fundamental commitment to the difference-implying finitude of consciousness and its world undermines the notion of the necessity and actuality of what it is supposed to describe: successful cognition, recognition and rational political, religious and philosophical activity. For example, to Hegel, both Kant's contractualist and Fichte's recognition-based approaches to political normativity rely conceptually on the consensual actions of particular subjects who have consciousness: rational norms are what finite subjects contractually agree on or what is entailed by subjects' practices of recognition. This, however, renders the norms contingent for the notions that they are based on imply contingency: a contract entered into by particular parties could also not be entered into, or once it were entered into, it might be dissolved at any time. Similarly, the notion of mutual recognition among finite subjects implies that recognition might as well not take place or that ongoing recognition can be suspended at any time. The rational parties can and should enter contractual agreements

and can and should recognize each other but this means that they do not necessarily and thus actually do so. To Hegel, relying on contract and recognition in Kant's, Fichte's, and Brandom's manner—just as relying on history— thus entails the contingency of whatever is supposed to be grounded by it and fails to establish its actuality and normativity-bestowing, rational necessity.

To avoid this perceived shortcoming, Hegel grounds his arguments on the unified, "perfect freedom" and thus the self-referentiality of *Geist* (*PS* 76, §177): *Geist*'s actuality-enabling, free self-unity can explain successful cognition and recognition as it is able to conceptualize the identity-based, epistemic compatibility of consciousness and world and of the differing consciousnesses: consciousness and world as well as consciousness and consciousness are always already identified aspects of *Geist*'s overarching universality-based unity, which means that they are unified from the very logical beginning (*PS* 13, §25). As common origin of all particulars, *Geist*'s universality thus ensures the compatibility of the particular elements of its appearance: *Geist*'s particular subjects must cognize the world because the world and consciousness are both aspects of *Geist*, the particular subjects of consciousness must recognize each other because they are all *Geist*. Similarly, rational political, religious and philosophical activity must take place because the universally valid political, religious and scientific contents, institutions and norms of *Geist* are necessarily identical with the structure of the consciousness of the particular subject. Throughout, the difference between subject and world and between recognizing subjects remains part of *Geist*'s unity (*PS* 76, §177), yet since the difference does not undermine *Geist*'s overarching universal unity, it does not undermine the necessity and actuality of cognition, recognition and the other rational practices described in chapter VI of the book.

Geist and the Freedom of Finite Subjects

The notion of *Geist*'s overarching, universality-based unity might remind one of Spinozism and trigger the worry that it undermines the particular subjects' freedom and relative independence. After all, if humans are the appearance of *Geist*, and are therefore dependent on it, *Geist*'s freedom appears to exist at the expense of humans' freedom. Hegel insists in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* (*PS* 12, §21) and also in his later works: in contrast to the necessity of

Spinoza's substance, *Geist*'s freedom is grounded in the concept (*PS* 234, §585) and thus in the unity of the concept's three constitutive moments that Hegel labels "universality," "particularity," and "singularity" (from here "individuality") (*PS* 105, §255).

Unlike substance, the concept-based *Geist* does not prioritize universality's self-identity over particularity's difference at the expense of the latter. Instead, *Geist* speculatively unites universality and particularity: they appertain simultaneously to *Geist*'s individuality so that *Geist* is universal and particular at once. As individuality, *Geist* is one (universal) in being many (particulars) and it is many (particulars) in being one (universal) (*PS* 174, §438). The manifold of *Geist*'s particular self-conscious subjects is thus explicable with reference to *Geist*'s universality. These subjects are *Geist*. And at the same time, the particular subjects are free and self-determining due to their irreducible particularity: *Geist* is them. Hegel frames this in terms of "we" (*Geist*'s particulars) and "I" (*Geist*'s universality):

> With this, we…have before us the concept of *spirit*. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what spirit is, this absolute substance which, in the perfect freedom and independence of its opposition, viz. of diverse self-consciousnesses that are for themselves, is the unity of these self- consciousnesses: *I* that is *We*, and *We* that is *I*. [*PS* 76, §177]

Drawing on the concept, the notion of *Geist* is designed to preserve the particularity of the finite subjects in the face of its own universality and its own universality in the face of their particularity. This entails that *Geist*'s particular subjects are as free as is universal *Geist*, and universal *Geist* is as concrete as are particular subjects.

Unlike in Spinoza's substance or in the *Phenomenology*'s introduction's night of black cows (*PS* 10, §16), the particular subjects and their self-determination are preserved within *Geist*'s individuality.

Seen from this individuality-centered perspective, explaining *Geist* with reference to the prioritized particularity of consciousness-possessing subjects in Brandom's manner will seem reductionist: while Hegel's category of individual *Geist* explains the universal with reference to particulars and at the same time explains the particular with reference to the universal, Brandom's reading seems to allow only for the former, thus undermining the status of universality and its function as origin that grounds necessity and unity of the particulars and is thereby contradicting the actuality of Hegel's notions of *Geist*-grounded knowledge, ethics, religion, art, and philosophy. Nevertheless, despite lacking the absolute status that Brandom seems to confer upon them, Brandom's profound conceptual insights into the workings of consciousness are not wrong by Hegel's own standards and Hegel carried many of them over into his mature writings. Brandom thus brought new life to Hegel's analysis of consciousness as it is provided in the *Phenomenology* and he effectively communicates several categorial insights that Hegel thought of as being the final philosophical word on the matter. Overall, one is hard pressed to find another philosophical book that can rival *A Spirit of Trust* in its capacity to reanimate and advance so much lost philosophical truth in a manner that ideally is suited to and desperately needed by contemporary thought.