An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Existenz

Volume 15, No 1, Spring 2020 ISSN 1932-1066

Hegel, Brandom, and Semantic Descent

Comments on *A Spirit of Trust* by Robert B. Brandom (Harvard, 2019)

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Abstract: In *A Spirit of Trust*, Robert Brandom claims that the central problem of G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is specifying the conditions under which ordinary concepts have conceptual content. This reading depends on an interpretative strategy that he calls semantic descent, a strategy that involves treating specifically philosophical concepts as expressing key features of the way one uses ordinary concepts. In this essay, I look at three alternative accounts of the relationship between ordinary and philosophical concepts in Hegel.

Keywords: German Idealism; conceptual content; concepts; inferentialism; holism.

In his *Autobiography*, Mark Twain talks about what it was like to improvise stories to his daughters in their home in Hartford. You have to think that Twain was well-suited for this particular parental duty, yet he complains about a burdensome constraint that was imposed on his story-telling by his children: every tale had to incorporate each of the pictures and knick-knacks that were on the mantel in the library, and always in the exact same order, beginning with the portrait of the cat on the left and ending with the watercolor of the girl on the far right. Anyone offering a new interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* faces a similarly challenging task. Given the longstanding interpretive debates surrounding the book, there is always room for a new reading, but any such reading faces a major constraint: it has to touch on every major chapter and in the right order. It must show how consciousness (whatever that is) leads to self-consciousness (whatever that may be), and so forth, until humans reach their predetermined destination, the arrival of spirit's self-knowledge.

One of the most impressive things about Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust* is that it manages to offer a reading of the Phenomenology that honors this constraint despite starting with an entirely unprecedented claim about what the whole book is about.[1] True, he skips a few topics (such as *Observing Reason*) and he does not quite make it to the end (falling short of *Religion* and *Absolute Knowing*), but no one can fail to admire how much of the *Phenomenology* Brandom was capable of digesting, putting into the service of what is, by all appearances, an entirely new problematic, a semantic question about the conditions for the possibility of conceptual content.[2] Once it is shown that this is the problem Hegel was addressing, the reader is off to the races. Brandom shows, in a

[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] Brandom's justification for these omissions is given on *ST* 1, 583.

tour de force, that one can plausibly read the entire *Phenomenology* as a chain of transcendental arguments (that such content presupposes x, which presupposes y, and so on) that leads to a striking conclusion, that once all is comprehended that is required for conceptual content to be determinate, one will see the need to adopt new recognitive relations to each other, thus ushering in a new postmodern age.

Brandom suggests his focus on the semantic content of ordinary concepts is mainly a matter of emphasizing something other readers did not attend to, something orthogonal to traditional interests. But this significantly undersells Brandom's originality, or so I will argue here. Brandom is not just bringing out something underdeveloped in other accounts, he is overturning the previous understanding of how Hegel's project relates to the semantics of ordinary concepts. By showing how this account relates to some alternative accounts of the same issue in Hegel, I hope to both bring out what is most revolutionary, or paradigm-shifting in Brandom's account, and also to reveal some of the exegetical and philosophical costs that might attend this attempted revolution, thus putting some pressure on him to justify his heterodoxy.

But first we should get a better idea of how Brandom understands the central issue. He fully recognizes that the traditional way to read Hegel is to focus on Hegel's derivation of specifically speculative, logical, or philosophical concepts such as consciousness, self-consciousness, and agency (*ST* 103). This focus is natural, as Hegel himself spends most of his time discussing and developing these concepts. In contrast, Brandom argues that the function of these philosophical concepts is to express key features of the way one uses ordinary empirical and practical concepts such as blue, stick, or straight. If the right way to understand Hegel's distinctive philosophical concepts is by reading them as metaconcepts, that is, as concepts one needs to explain how thinking occurs with ordinary concepts, then it is plausible to think that the best way to understand these metaconcepts is by keeping one's eyes on their implications for ordinary concept use, which is what Brandom attempts to do in his reading.[3]

Brandom calls this interpretative strategy "semantic descent."[4] Every time he encounters a high-level philosophical concept in Hegel's writing, he reads it as a notion meant to express or describe how ordinary, lower-level concepts work—and he does this even if the surrounding passage gives little or no hint of this reading.[5] The eventual payoff from this strategy is that it allows one to see how Hegel fully anticipated Brandom's own pragmatic inferentialism regarding concepts. Ordinary concepts are not to be understood as having content on their own, a content which would then explain the use one makes of them in judgments and inferences (as a traditional representationalist might claim). Instead, the reader is told that such concepts get their content from the inferences that are made with them, which themselves depend on certain practices, and so forth.

The idea of approaching high-level philosophical concepts in terms of their implications for ground-floor ordinary concepts has the real merit of making Hegel's claims more tractable, more intelligible, and (not least) more relevant to contemporary philosophical discussions. This last bit is important to emphasize because I think it is the source of a lot of the excitement that Brandom's reading of Hegel has generated. Insofar as contemporary philosophers of language are concerned with concepts at all, they are almost exclusively concerned with what Brandom calls ordinary concepts. The characteristically Kantian and post-Kantian concern with the systematic deduction of a full set of pure, philosophical concepts has, until now, had little or no resonance in these conversations,

[3] To add to the complexity of his position, Brandom thinks that Hegel had meta-metaconcepts (namely *Verstand* and *Vernunft*) which he uses to characterize the different structure of Kant's own metaconcepts and also his own metaconcepts (*ST* 6). This enabled Hegel to talk about different ways of understanding the relation between ordinary concepts and metaconcepts.

[4] Brandom attempts to justify his strategy by offering a careful and detailed re-reading of the Introduction of the *Phenomenology*, which—he grants—gives every indication of being exclusively concerned with metaconcepts, and not at all relevant to the question of the determinacy of ordinary concepts (*ST* 20). The surprising feasibility of such a reading is supposed to serve as the primary evidence for the power and viability of semantic descent.

[5] As one might expect, this feels more natural at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel uses simple examples such as that of a cube of sugar, and more strained later in the book, where Hegel appears to be talking about things very far removed from ordinary concepts: for example, the role of Aristophanic comedy in the dissolution of Greek religion. But this is the kind of problem any interpretation that insists on the unity of the *Phenomenology* is likely to have.

and can seem like an exotic relic from the philosophical dark ages. But on Brandom's reading, Hegel is not only addressing the same phenomena the contemporary philosopher is interested in, namely ordinary concepts; Brandom also has a radical innovative view of how ordinary concepts get their semantic content, one that might move contemporary philosophy of language forward in significant ways.

So, can Brandom convince the reader that Hegel's philosophical concepts can be read as metaconcepts, as concepts that serve to express the way ordinary concepts function? Is this how Hegel himself understands the relation between philosophical concepts and ordinary empirical concepts? The issue is, alas, hard to decide on purely textual grounds. Hegel does not say much about ordinary concepts, neither in the *Phenomenology* nor elsewhere. When he does speak of them, he usually insists that they are defective in some way; he says that compared to the concept, ordinary representations are abstract and finite and hence untrue (*unwahr*). Is this a sign, as a Brandomian might argue, that Hegel rejects representationalist views of conceptual content and is on the way to mounting a defense of some sophisticated form of pragmatic inferentialism? Without jumping to this conclusion, I shall first consider three alternative ways of understanding the relation between ordinary and philosophical concepts that one can find in the history of the reception of Hegel's philosophy.

On the most traditional interpretation of Hegel, the one that goes back at least to Kuno Fischer, ordinary concepts presuppose philosophical concepts not because the latter express how the former function, but because no thought is possible at all without pure concepts. (The opposite dependence does not hold on traditional view, since pure thinking is possible without ordinary concepts: hence Hegel's *The Science of Logic* as the "science of pure thinking"). When Hegel says the proposition "this leaf is green" presupposes the philosophical concepts of "being" and "singularity," he is not denying that ordinary concepts such as "leaf" or "green" might very well be partially derived by abstraction from individuals, as on classical representationalist views, he is only insisting that the content of empirical concepts also implicitly includes concepts whose origin cannot be empirical in this broad sense. Ordinary empirical concepts are untrue not because they only acquire content in certain practices, as on Brandom's account, but because they depend on other pure philosophical concepts for their determinacy (and hence depend of the inter-related set of these concepts: the concept). On this traditional reading, Hegel has radical and exciting things to say about philosophical concepts but mostly uninteresting and commonplace things to say about ordinary concepts (he thinks they get the empirical portion of their content from abstraction, comparison, and so on—the old Lockean go-tos).

The British Idealists gave a different answer to the question of the relation of ordinary and philosophical concepts, a view that brings them in one respect closer to Brandom. For the British Idealists, as well as for Brandom, ordinary concepts—"red-haired" is G. H. Bradley's famous example—are only mistakenly understood as mere abstract universals or representations, such that you could understand the concept without knowing its applications. On Bradley's view, this means that if we truly understood what it is to be red-haired, we would also have knowledge of every red-haired person. This is, of course, a different kind of complaint about abstract universals than Brandom's: the problem is not that abstract universals lack all content when considered apart from their use, but that their content is false in the sense of being misleadingly incomplete, falling short of what it is that they are trying to comprehend.[6] But though the complaints are different, they lead in the same broad direction: to some kind of holism about ordinary concepts, a claim that one cannot fully understand an empirical concept without understanding basically everything. By contrast, on the traditional reading, Hegel is only a holist about philosophical concepts, having little to say about ordinary concepts except that they depend on philosophical concepts for their determinacy.

A final, putatively more Wittgensteinian view about the relation between ordinary and philosophical concepts in Hegel can be found in the writings of

[6] It is not entirely clear to me, nor I think, is it clear from their writings, whether Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet are committed to the view that there are only really concrete universals (abstract universals as a limit case), or the view that concrete universals are a type of universal which is superior to and can be contrasted with the abstract universal. For a classical treatment of this problem, see Norman Kemp Smith, "The Nature of Universals (I)" Mind 36/142 (April 1927), 137-57. That Hegel, at least, was only committed to the latter view is persuasively argued for by Robert Stern "Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15/1 (January 2007), 115-153.

J. N. Findlay, an important forerunner of contemporary non-metaphysical interpreters of Hegel. For Findlay, ordinary concepts are perfectly fine on their own, as ways of characterizing ordinary objects, but they give rise to questions that they cannot answer on their own, particularly when it comes to adequately characterizing what we are doing when we make ordinary judgments. On Findlay's view, Hegel's philosophy involves not semantic descent, but semantic ascent—passing from an object-language to a novel term in meta-language that one needs to make sense of what is being done in the object-language.[7] For example, Findlay thinks the transition from "this" and "now" to the notion of a universal at the beginning of the Phenomenology, is meant to offer us a way of characterizing what one is doing when applying "this" and "now," which is wielding universals. The similarity with Brandom's account is that both view Hegel's philosophy as oriented toward ordinary conceptual use and as offering a superior understanding of how ordinary concepts work. The difference is that, unlike Brandom, Findlay does not think there is any problem about the content of ordinary concepts. The problem for Findlay (if one wants to call it a problem) is that any use of concepts necessitates an ascent to higher concepts to adequately characterize those first-order concepts. That first-order concepts have content in their ordinary applications is never in question; in fact, it is taken for granted. Findlay's statement that Hegel finds no contradiction in ordinary arithmetical computation thus stands in striking contrast to Brandom's claim that Hegel anticipated Saul Kripke's understanding of the rule-following paradox, which infamously finds a problem present even in ordinary computation.

So, these are my three contrast cases. Partly due to the sheer novelty of his guiding assumption of the *Phenomenology* as concerning the semantics of ordinary concepts, Brandom has developed his interpretation largely on his own; he has not yet engaged with any of these alternative interpretive possibilities in any great detail. I am inviting him to do so here.

Nevertheless, I also hope that I brought out what is most unique about Brandom's reading from the point of view of the reception history of Hegel's *Phenomenology*—namely, his focus upon the source of semantic content—and given the audience here some sense of what the interpretive and philosophical alternatives to his reading might be. My own view, which I hesitate to mention since I cannot say much to justify it here, is that the great vulnerability of Brandom's interpretation of Hegel qua interpretation is not that it asserts something about Hegel that we can clearly show Hegel did not believe, but that it puts an enormous amount of emphasis on a topic, the relation of philosophical concepts to ordinary ones, about which Hegel never said that much about (at least not in those words). Brandom's reading of the *Phenomenology* thus requires an exegetical leap of faith. As any leap of faith, it is impossible to fully justify it in advance; it can only be assessed by its fruits, by what insights it opens up.

[7] J. N. Findley, "The Contemporary Relevance of Hegel (1959)," in *Language, Mind, and Value*, New York, NY: Humanities Press 1963, pp. 217-231. So far as I know, Findlay himself does not use the Quinean term "semantic ascent," but it has been applied to him by others before me: for example, Francesco Berto, "Hegel's Dialectics as a Semantic Theory," *European Journal of Philosophy* 15/1 (April 2007), 19-39.