

“Recognition and Hegel’s tripartite taxonomy of the forms of ‘spirit’”

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Around the turn of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Dilthey, in his reflections on the nature of history as a “*Geisteswissenschaft*”—a science of “spirit” as opposed to “nature”—appealed “to Hegel’s notion of “spirit” (*Geist*). Attempting to extract Hegel’s concept from what he considered the unsupportable metaphysical system within which it had been developed, Dilthey, a neo-Kantian, gave it a broadly epistemological significance by correlating it with a distinct type of “understanding” (*Verstehen*) that was foreign to the *Naturwissenschaften*, concerned as they were with explanation (*Erklären*) of phenomena in terms of laws of nature. Moreover, the paradigm of such an anti-naturalistic approach to history was not Hegel’s philosophical approach to history, but the strongly empiricist practice of the romantic “historical school”, found paradigmatically in the work of Leopold von Ranke.

From the Diltheian perspective, spiritual or cultural sciences such as history examined societies at the level of the *cultural specificity* of their practices and institutions. While human cultures were instantiated in the material lives of the societies that bore them, humanistic understanding was not be reduced to the sorts of explanation that ultimately applied to the physical world. Cultural life was, rather, to be regarded as relating to its natural infrastructure in ways that seem broadly similar to those explored more recently in terms of the normative or “rule-following” approach commonly associated with the work of the later Wittgenstein. Thus, while a human action *qua* physical event—in an oft-repeated example, the raising of an individual’s right arm in response to some stimulus—may be potentially explainable in the way that applies to any other natural event, the same event described as a conscious and intentional *action*—that of *voting* for a particular motion in a meeting—invokes other non-physically reducible considerations. To take this case, it is impossible to say *what voting is*, without referring to the operations of culturally variable institutions and practices concerned with collective decision making.

As John Searle had pointed out, for actions like voting, a physical event X will only “count as” an instance of an intentional action Y if there exist the relevant background institutions which can be thought of as “systems of constitutive rules ... of the form ‘X counts as Y in context C’”.¹ Stressing the normative or “rule-following” patterns manifested and their non-reducibility to *mere* nomologically regularity invokes a distinction that might be likened to Kant’s distinction between acting “in accordance with laws,” and acting “*in accordance with the representation of laws*”.² Thus an unimpeded body falls in accordance with Newton’s laws, but in

¹ John Searle, *Speech Acts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 51.

² Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, intro. Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 24.

driving on the left-hand side of the road in Australia, I *follow* the rules of the traffic code. However, Kant's position on rule-following here is commonly taken as rationalistic and over-intellectualised as can be brought out by considering verbal behaviour, a type of behaviour thought of as paradigmatically rule-following. As Wilfrid Sellars had claimed in the 1950s, the idea that learning a language consists of learning "to obey the rules for the use of its expressions" is subject to the problem of circularity. To learn to use a formalized rule of the kind "use expression *k* in such and such a circumstance" seems to presuppose already *having* a language within which such rules could be formulated; but if to learn a particular language one already needed to know some metalanguage, the question arises of how one came to learn *it*?³

The solution to this problem is typically seen to lie in an appeal to the fundamentally *social* nature of the "rules" in question. To be a rule-following agent is to have been inducted into *communal* rule-following practices. Thus, to hold oneself to a rule presupposes that one *already* belongs to a community of rule-following agents *by* whom one's transgressions are likely to be corrected. Such rules will fundamentally be unspecified and unreflected-upon conventions—more like the "unwritten" rules concerning, say, how close one stands to a stranger when asking directions, than those set out in explicit legislation as in the traffic code. It is here that Hegel, in his appeal to the primacy of belonging to forms of communal "*Sittlichkeit*" informed by the structures of objective spirit, has looked promising.

Such generally "rule-following" considerations, which seem to align broadly with Diltheyan ideas of the epistemological non-reducibility of social understanding to naturalistic explanation, have been widely discussed within the philosophy of the social sciences for at least four decades, but explicit considerations of the related Hegelian theme of "recognition" has been more recent. The notions seem conceptually linked, however, as the "counts as" relation at the heart of rule-following behaviour seems to presuppose agents capable of *recognizing* some event (the raising of an arm) as counting as an instance of some culturally specific act (casting a vote). Indeed Hegel had made such acts of "recognition" or "acknowledgement" [*Anerkennung*] the very stuff out of which "objective spirit" was constituted, thereby heading off any worryingly immaterialist conception of spirit itself. However, when the role of Hegel's conception of recognition in the realm of the "spiritual" is pursued, its difference to Dilthey's account becomes clear. Hegel's conception of the role of recognition in spirit is geared to his *tri-partite* classification of "spirit" into its "subjective", "objective", and, crucially, "*absolute*" forms, but this classification is incompatible with Dilthey's attempt to extract the concept of objective spirit from the "metaphysical" framework of Hegel's "absolute spirit", and to make it appropriate for empirical use. Hence for Dilthey "what Hegel distinguished from objective mind

³ Wilfrid Sellars, "Inference and Meaning," in Sellars, *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed and intro, J. F. Sicha (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1980), p. 284. Essentially the same problem is often discussed in relation to Wittgenstein's criticism of the idea of a "private language".

[Geist] as absolute mind, namely art, religion and philosophy also falls under this same concept”.⁴

Dilthey’s rejection of Hegel’s metaphysics had been made in the spirit of the generally *Kantian* features of his philosophy: first, the rejection of Hegel’s pre-critical metaphysics; and next, his intention to secure a distinct epistemology for the human sciences. However, it may be the link between “recognition” and absolute spirit that shows that Hegel’s metaphysics was not of the pre-Kantian “dogmatic” variety that Dilthey wanted to resist. Indeed, looking at Hegel’s conception of absolute spirit from the point of view of his recognitive account of spirit can show how “absolute spirit”—often taken simply as a synonym for “God”—might actually be not so troubling an ontological notion as is commonly assumed. Or so I shall suggest in this essay.

1. Recognition, Hermeneutics and Hegel’s Metaphysics

Hegel’s idea of “recognition” is probably most familiar from the well-known discussion of the “master–slave dialectic” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. First, it is clear that in Hegel’s parable the micro-society made up of a single master and a single slave is meant as a model of a primitive form of political existence *qua* “spiritual” rather than “natural” existence. Thus, the two participants occupy conceptually linked statuses with crude but clearly defined “rights” and “obligations”: in short, the master has the right to demand of slave whatever he wants, the slave has the duty to oblige. Hegel’s anti-naturalism becomes clear in its contrast to Aristotle’s analysis of slavery. For Aristotle, the slave is fundamentally a slave by nature,⁵ while for Hegel to be a slave is to accept a normative social role that gains its identity only in relation to its opposite. In Hegelian terminology, the identities of slave and master exist “in themselves” only because each only exists “for another”. That is, these statuses are conceptually “mediated” such that the social identities are interlinked in just the way that *the concepts* themselves are: one cannot *be* a master without *having* a slave, nor be a slave without a having master.

As mentioned above, the existence of such roles will be dependent on the capacity of those who bear them to recognize what physical item is to count as an instance of some culturally defined identity: a slave will need to be able to recognize a particular individual *as* his master, to recognize the expressions of his will, and so on. But “recognition” here will also have an ontological and not merely an epistemological dimension, and it will be crucial for the distinction of social from merely natural ontology. Refusing any “slave by nature” account, the very fact of having such a status will be dependent on the existence of practices within which the slave is *recognized*, both by another (the master) and himself, *as* a slave. Thus, this dimension

⁴ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 194.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1998), 1254 b 15–20.

of recognition would appear to be essential to any account of the irreducibility of the “institutional facts” of objective mind to the “brute facts” of nature,⁶ and so implicit in Dilthey’s project for an epistemology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. But it is Hegel’s stress on the phenomenon of the “mutuality” or “reciprocity” of the recognition existing at the heart of the social relation must be problematic for a more Diltheyan conception of “objective spirit”, since Hegel appeals to such an essence in his account of what renders the institution of slavery *contradictory*, with such contradictions working to undermine this finite shape of spirit. It is just *this* mechanism that is at the heart of Hegel’s teleological conception of human history as a process in which such “contradictions” are progressively eliminated or somehow resolved, but the romantic historiographical tradition to which Dilthey was trying to give epistemological support rejected any whiff of any such historical teleology.

The Rankean mode of history writing held to a type of nominalistic and relativistic conception of historically different forms of social life, historians immersing themselves in the archive and bracketing any *normative* notions about, say, the constitutive rights and duties of social and individual life that they brought from their *own* community. Thus the “*verstehende*” approach of these disciplines was meant to secure the liberation of such knowledge from any culturally specific normative constraints of the investigator’s *own* world-view in a way parallel to that in which the natural sciences had separated from, say, the normative framework of religion. Dilthey made this anti-metaphysical and empirical attitude explicit: “Today we can no longer retain the presuppositions on which Hegel based this concept [of objective mind]. He constructed communities from the universal, rational will. Today we must start from the reality of life ... Hegel constructed metaphysically; we analyse the given”.⁷

It is usually said that for Hegel, an object or situation is contradictory if its *actual* state contradicts its *essential* nature. Thus, in the case of the recognitive relation existing between the master and the slave, the explicit *non-reciprocity* of the relationship at the overt level contradicts what Hegel takes to be the essential *reciprocity* of the recognitive relationship. Moreover, the contradictoriness of the form of recognition that emerges in the discussion of “self-consciousness” in chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is only the latest of a series of contradictory phenomena that have appeared up to that point, as the “shapes of consciousness” charted in the first three chapters—“sense-certainty”, “perception” and “the understanding”—had all been shown to be contradictory. Indeed, this is a general ontological feature of the world for Hegel: as he puts it in the *Science of Logic*, “*everything is inherently contradictory*”.⁸

⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, “On Brute Facts”, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume III* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981). See also, John Searle, *Speech Acts*, pp. 50-53.

⁷ Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, p. 194.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), p. 439.

Resolution of contradiction is a central feature of the passage between the shapes of consciousness with which the *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins. In each of these shapes, consciousness is seen to be governed by a particular conception of the nature of reality—an ontological conception linked to some privileged epistemological attitude. Hegel crucially relies on the *normative* status of knowing: a conscious being that grasps its own mental contents *as* epistemically relevant must have some *criterion* in relation to which purported instances of knowledge can be assessed. In following the “experience” of any such shape, however, we witness the development of a contradiction between that shape’s criterion and its object as experienced, a contradiction that is resolved only when that shape is replaced with a new one.

Hegel’s series terminates in “the understanding [der Verstand]”, a shape that takes as most real some *unperceived* and *posited* “force” that it regards as responsible for the law-like behaviour of the contents of its experience.⁹ Consciousness now responds to the realization that what was previously thought to be passively “given” is actually an active posit with the idea that such an object must be *its creation*, and so it comes to regard *itself* as “the truth” of its object.¹⁰ This new cognitive state is thus properly understood as a form of *self-consciousness*, that is *productive* of its object, and this is the starting point of Chapter 4, “The Truth of Self-Certainty”, the chapter within which Hegel first introduces the notion of recognition.

In this chapter the focus is now on the same internal contradictions faced by a *practically conceived self-consciousness* that takes its “object” to be really *that which it wills or desires*. The failure of this desiring model of self-consciousness leads to a shape in which the only stable “mediating” object capable of maintaining independence in the relation is *another self-consciousness*. The first model of this *intersubjectively* construed conception of self-consciousness is the relation between master and slave. As with earlier shapes of consciousness, *we readers* (the “phenomenological we”) are meant to see aspects of the shapes of self-consciousness that are not apparent to the protagonists themselves. We can see that by its very nature recognition is a *reciprocal* affair, but this of course is not immediately apparent to those existing within the relation. It becomes apparent, however, from the experience that unfolds *within* this form of life, and it is the slave who comes to learn this lesson in virtue of the fact that he can recognize *his own activity* in those transformations in the material world that he brings about while in the master’s service.

Hegel’s discussion of the essential natures to which objects are meant to somehow live up recalls Aristotle’s normative idea of essences and the teleological dimension

⁹ This is not Dilthey’s “*Verstehen*” and is, in fact, cognitively closer to his “*Erklären*”.

¹⁰ “The *necessary advance* from the previous shapes of consciousness for which their truth was a Thing, an ‘other’ than themselves, expresses just this, that not only is consciousness of a thing possible only for a self-consciousness, but that self-consciousness alone is the truth of those shapes.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §164

of their realization, or perhaps its medieval Christianized variant in which a being's normative essence is conceived as originating in its creator's divine will. But a stress on the Aristotelian shape of Hegel's thought on these and other matters should not obscure the genuinely *Kantian* dimension to Hegel's approach.¹¹ As in Kant's account of the basic normative operations of the mind, Hegel thinks of cognitive norms as immanent to the mind's own operations, or to "thought" itself, but he rejects the individualism of Kant's approach, and thinks of these norms as fundamentally *socially* based and historical evolving by a process within which norms which, at a certain stage of development are *implicit* to social practices, are made progressively *explicit*. This development is rational because the contradictions plaguing any specific stage are removed with the transition to the next.

Hegel, of course, commonly describes this development of thought in religious terms as a process in which spirit itself, God, becomes progressively *self-conscious*. It must be remembered, however, that again like Kant, Hegel takes religious language non-literally, and sees it as a metaphorical form of representation of what can be better expressed in philosophy *conceptually*.¹² And if this continuity between Hegel and Kant at the level of *theology* is added to the continuity of their "idealist" critiques of traditional metaphysics,¹³ we can start to see how the worries that Dilthey shared with others about Hegel's metaphysically constructivist approach might dissolve. Such readings of Hegel, like the more epistemologically "Diltheian" ones, typically draw on parallels between Hegel's concept of spirit and Wittgensteinian considerations of rule-following, but in ways that draw analogies around the theme of the self-correcting proclivities of socially embodied reasoning. One version of this reading of Hegel is that found in the approach of Robert Brandom.¹⁴

Focussing on the more rationalistic account of language-games found in Wilfrid Sellars, Brandom stresses the centrality of the language-games of the making of

¹¹ As Allegra de Laurentiis points out, Hegel's approach is a "modern, critical version of Scholastic realism". Allegra de Laurentiis, "Absolute Knowing", in Kenneth R. Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2009), p. 246.

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, one-volume edition, The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 144–161.

¹³ The main proponents of the post-Kantian reading of Hegel I have in mind are Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard. See, for example, Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ For the inferentialist semantics that form the background to Brandom's reading of Hegel see Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). For the application of the approach to Hegel, see his *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

assertions and the asking for and giving of *reasons*. Like Hegel in the opening chapters of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Sellars had been critical of any philosophical attempts to find some ultimate criteria for knowledge in something empirically “given”, and had rather based reason in thought’s capacity for self-correction. Developing Sellars’s ideas, Brandom relates the idea of the normative structure of the language-games of giving and asking for reasons to the Hegelian conception of recognition. For Brandom and Sellars, the human world is irreducibly normative, but such a notion is ultimately compatible with naturalism. Norms cannot be understood as transcending human practices as if they issued from some God: they are immanent to social practices and not part of the way the world is “anyway”, independent of our existence as beings who collectively hold themselves to those norms. But neither can the norms simply be reduced to purposeful human inventions, like the traffic code, as this already implies the normative use of language for their formulation. Moreover, the practice of asking for and giving reasons means that implicit rules within practices can be made explicit and thereby rationally reflected upon. Just as an interlocutor is able to question the justification of an assertion which leads to the giving of a reason, so too can types of reason-giving practice be brought into question, leading to attempts to make the bindingness of reasons explicit in logical theory. In Brandom’s account, this process of the “making explicit” the otherwise implicit norms of thought is just what characterizes the history of philosophy itself, and is what Hegel means by the raising of spirit to “self-consciousness”.

It is apparent that the contexts in which the intersubjective process of recognition gains a foothold in Brandom is not so much in the practices of everyday life traditionally thought of as constituting “objective spirit”, but rather the highly mediated contexts of the asking for and giving of reasons in theoretical language-games such as philosophy itself, just what Hegel thinks of as “absolute spirit”. Hegel does not often talk explicitly *about* philosophy itself as a realm of public self-reflective culture, but it becomes apparent in his discussion of the forms of self-consciousness in Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology* immediately after the segment on the master and slave in which he discusses the distinctly *philosophical* and *religious* forms of self-consciousness, “stoicism” and “scepticism” on the one hand, and “the unhappy consciousness” on the other. This in fact leads into further treatments in the *Phenomenology* in which the *recognitive* structure of “absolute spirit” comes into focus.

2. Philosophy and Religion as Culture and Self-Cultivation

The place of Stoicism in the development of philosophy in the ancient world is particularly significant for Hegel. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel is far more appreciative of the “speculative” approach of Plato and Aristotle than of any later periods of Greek philosophy, nevertheless he complains about both Plato and Aristotle in a way that echoes Kant’s complaint about Aristotle’s unsystematic

approach to the categories.¹⁵ The approaches of both, he says, “are not in the form of a system” and “the nature of the speculative has not been explicitly brought to consciousness as the notion . . . not set forth as the universal, from which the particular was developed”.¹⁶ Thus at the end of classical period of ancient philosophy the need remained for “the whole extent of what is known [to] appear as one organization of the notion”, and this need was addressed in the “second period” of ancient philosophy comprising the approaches of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Skepticism. However, in this period the speculative character of the thought of the first period was lost, the new approaches being marked by the formalistic “understanding”.¹⁷ This is reflected in how the philosophies of the second period all focused, in some way, on the issue of a principle or “criterion” for judgment. For Stoicism, this criterion was to be found in pure thinking itself, and the Stoic believed that by conforming to it the thinking subject could raise him or herself “into this abstract independence” and attain the freedom of the *sage*.¹⁸

In Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Stoicism is treated as a form of self-consciousness in which the polarities of dependence and independence that were separated in the slave and his master are brought into a single self-consciousness, “an I which has the otherness within itself”.¹⁹ Moreover, while the cognitive lives of master and slave were articulated by concepts that were “pictured or figuratively conceived”,²⁰ in Stoicism self-consciousness “is aware of itself as essential being, a being which *thinks* or is free self-consciousness”. Thus the Stoic “holds something to be essentially important, or true and good only in so far as it *thinks* it to be such”.²¹ And while the slave had achieved freedom by working on and transforming objects of the external world, the Stoic has withdrawn interest from this world and works upon and transforms his or her own *self*, thus initiating an approach to philosophy as “*Bildung*” or, as we might say, culture and self-cultivation.²²

With this stance, then, the Stoic, embodies at the level of individual *intention* the very project of philosophy that is enacted in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the elevation of consciousness to the realm of pure thought or *science*. While Stoicism had first appeared in Greece, its renunciation of the immediate concerns of external reality had given it an independence from the polis that had allowed it to be

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A81/B107.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 volumes, trans. E. S. Haldane, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), vol 2, p. 229.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 232.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 234. Hegel discusses the Stoic’s appeal to the criterion of the cataleptic impression (*phantasia kataleptiki*) at p. 250.

¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §199.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, §197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, §198.

²² Recently this aspect of Greco-Roman philosophy has been stressed by Pierre Hadot. See for example , *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. and intro. Arnold I Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

transplanted to Rome: “As a universal form of the World-Spirit, Stoicism could only appear on the scene in a time of universal fear and bondage, but also a time of a universal culture [*einer allgemeinen Bildung*] which had raised the shaping of character [*das Bilden*] to the level of thought”.²³ This relocatability of some cultural products will be essential for the domains of absolute spirit, showing the problems of the historicist approach which sees them as merely expressing the essence of the particular societies from which they arose.²⁴

But while *we* can see an organic link between the individualism of Stoicism and the type of atomised society in which it bloomed, the Stoic misunderstands this as independence from social and political life *per se*, indeed, as an indifference to the existence of others *as such*. “This consciousness accordingly has a negative attitude towards the lord and bondsman relationship. ... its aim is to be free and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence ... into the simple essentiality of thought”.²⁵ However, while *the Stoic* may not grasp his or her dependence *as a thinker* on the recognition of others, this surely should not be lost on *we readers* who have seen the recognitive basis of self-consciousness displayed earlier in Chapter 4. This is confirmed later in the text when, in the context of a discussion of spirit, Hegel refers back to the analysis of Stoic self-consciousness linking it to “legal status”.

Towards the end of the first section of Chapter 6, “Spirit”, headed “The True Spirit. The Ethical Order [*Sittlichkeit*]”, Hegel discusses the emergence within Rome of “legal status [*Rechtzustand*]” or “personality”, the conception of the individual as a bearer of abstract rights, and he connects this notion to the earlier discussion of Stoicism.

Personality, then, has stepped out of the life of the ethical substance. It is the independence of consciousness, and independence which has *actual* validity. The non-actual thought of it which came from renouncing the *actual* world appeared earlier as the *Stoical* self-consciousness. Just as this proceeded from lordship and bondage, as the immediate existence of self-consciousness, so personality has proceeded from the immediate life of Spirit, which is the universal dominating will of all, and equally their service of obedience. What was for Stoicism only the *abstraction* of an *intrinsic* reality is now an *actual* world. Stoicism is nothing else

²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §199, translation modified. Cf., “the Stoic philosophy was particularly at home in the Roman world”. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol 2, p. 278.

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, second revised edition, trans Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1989)) offers a type of Hegelian criticism of the historicist project that stresses the textual alienability of linguistic products. Gadamer’s relation to Hegel is far too complex to broach here, other than saying that, despite his Hegelianism, and seemingly influenced by Heidegger, he accepts much of the traditional pre-Kantian interpretation of Hegel’s metaphysics that is being criticised here.

²⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §199.

but the consciousness which reduces to its abstract form the principle of legal status, an independence that lacks the life of Spirit.²⁶

We are surely meant to take this link between legal status and Stoicism seriously. Legal status is here examined in the context of the spirit of a particular type of society: that of Rome. Earlier in this chapter Hegel had discussed the *immediate* nature of Greek “*Sittlichkeit*” suggesting that there any individual gained their identity from the complex of cognitively supported particular roles that articulated life in the polis. *Qua* occupant of legal status, however, an individual is no longer so recognized as a specific member of the community but simply as an abstract bearer of rights. The connection to the theme of recognition is all too apparent here, as the concept had originated with Fichte’s theorization of legal status.²⁷ The claim that “Stoicism is nothing else but the consciousness which reduces to its abstract form the principle of legal status”, I suggest, can be taken as implying two things. First, that the relevant “rights” that are constitutive for the identity of the Stoic consist not of property in the external world but something more abstract: as the Stoic identifies himself as *thinker*, his “property”, we might say, consist his own *thoughts*. Next, although the Stoic takes this to be an individual affair, the fact that the “form” of this relation between the Stoic and his thoughts is that found in legal right implies that the Stoic’s status *as a thinker* must be dependent on the *recognition* of other thinkers.

We in fact encounter just this idea in the context of modern epistemology when the justification of belief is discussed in terms of the notion of epistemic “entitlement”, a notion central to Robert Brandom’s account of the pragmatics of the rational “language games” found in philosophy. An interlocutor, in challenging the assertion of a speaker and in demanding its justification, is thus asking after the grounds that would “entitle” the speaker to the claim to which the speaker has committed him or herself in the assertion. That Hegel has something like this cognitive basis of epistemic entitlement in mind in discussing the Stoics is further suggested by his thematization in the opposition between Stoicism and Skepticism over the issue of the criterion itself—a dialectic that results in the collapse of this “second period” of ancient philosophy. The Stoic, who believes that *thought* is the way at getting at what is true but encounters the opposing view of the Skeptic, who rejects the idea of “a ‘criterion of truth as such’”, and only accepts a criterion for plausibility.²⁸

²⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §479.

²⁷ J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Effectively this is the way that Hegel would later theorize abstract property rights in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

²⁸ In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel expands this dialectic to include the Epicurean. We have already seen from the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology* that the Stoic’s attempt to specify the “cataleptic impression” as a criterion for certain knowledge must surely fail. For a helpful account of the role of the problem of the criterion in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* see Kenneth R. Westphal,

The Stoic thinks of the philosophical cultivation of the self as an individual affair, but this is only because it is an activity grounded in a type of public culture that gives expression to the type of individualistically conceived personal identity found in Rome but not easily available in Greece. Hegel captures the difference by saying that the *Sittlichkeit* that was found in immediate form in Greek society has undergone “alienation [*Entfremdung*]”. While all forms of society are, in their non-reducibility to nature, in some sense “constructed [*gebildet*]”, in the Roman world “spirit constructs for itself [*bildet sich*] not merely a world, a world that is double, divided and self-opposed”.²⁹ The most obvious way in which this “divided and self-opposed” character of the objective spirit of Roman society will be expressed is in the other-worldly nature of the Christianity that was to gain a grip there. But there is another more general sense in which the Roman world exhibits this doubling of its elements, and this is directly connected with the Stoic theme of self-cultivation.

The Stoic attempts to construct or form himself [*bildet sich*] into a pure thinker, thereby totally transcending the determinations of his given, natural self. But the type of self-alienation after which the Stoic strives is, as Hegel comments later in a different context, only completely achievable in *language*. “Language ... alone expresses the ‘I’. The ‘I’ is this particular ‘I’—but equally the *universal* ‘I’; its manifesting is also at once this externalisation and vanishing of *this* particular ‘I’, and as a result the ‘I’ remains in its universality”.³⁰ The Stoic is not exempt from recognitive intersubjective relations, they are just less visible. The project of self-cultivation relies on cultural resources that provide the tools with which this project can be undertaken—tools belonging to the realm of “culture” such as philosophical and other forms of literature which flourished in the period in question. In the later discussion of language Hegel notes that “in the world of ethical order [*Sittlichkeit*], in *law* and *command*, and in the actual world, in *counsel* only, language has the essence for its content; but here it has for its content the form itself, the form which language itself is, and is authoritative as *language*”.³¹ What Hegel seems to mean with the first part of this sentence is that as it functions within immediate social interactions, language gives a form to a content that is given to it *from* the world of social interaction itself. Explicit expressions of “law” and “command”, for example, receive their *authority* from the normative status of the person who utters the words. But in a society in which spirit is itself self-alienated, language *too* becomes alienated from the practices otherwise informing it in the sense that linguistic texts can seemingly maintain their authority in isolation from the original speaker.

Recently Pierre Hadot has pointed to just this form of alienable written text functioning within Stoic practices of self-cultivation in commenting upon the ancient

“Hegel’s Phenomenological Method and Analysis of Consciousness” in Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*.

²⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §486.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §508.

³¹ *Ibid.*

literary form of *hypomnemata*. Epictetus encouraged “lovers of wisdom” to write down, re-read and mediate upon their thoughts,³² the point of this activity being to “liberate oneself from one’s individuality” by one’s being able later to hold one’s behaviour to such thoughts in subjectively tumultuous times.³³ As Hadot points out, “when one formulates one’s personal acts in writing, one is taken up by the machinery of reason, logic and universality”. While the thoughts so set down were “usually the dogmas of the school’s founding members”, it is clear that the authority of those written thoughts did not *derive* from those founders, but derived from the fact that they were taken as having achieved the objectivity of the Stoic criterion. In Hegel’s words, they were authoritative “as *language*”.

On Hegel’s account, the very conditions that had allowed a public philosophical culture to flourish in the Greco-Roman world had also effectively prevented it from developing: Stoicism, like the linked notion of “legal status”, was restricted by an ultimately empty formalism that had its basis in the political structure of the Roman world in which power had come to be invested in a single individual. While a creation of the Roman world, the idea of legal status was to remain there largely empty because it lacked a practical form of life within which the ascription of such a status could play a significant and organic role. Much later, a form of *Sittlichkeit*, “civil society”, would develop around the emerging *modern* economy, but in Rome any “content” which could fill such rights “belong[ed] to an autonomous power ... which [was] arbitrary and capricious”—the emperor himself.³⁴ We might relate this to the bare formalism of the Stoic’s conceptions of reason and truth that had led to an inability to reply to the equally formal *sceptical* challenge; uncoupled from the powers involved in *transforming the world* in work, that is, the context of the development of the slave’s cognitive powers, the Stoics’ determination of the criterion of rationality could only remain abstract and formal. This abstraction and formality even affected the Stoic conception of the sage: “The wise man is specially skilful in dialectic we are told by the Stoics, for all things, both physical and ethical, are perceived through a knowledge of logic. But thus they have ascribed this perception to a subject, *without stating who this wise man is.*”³⁵ The Christians, of course, had no trouble in saying who *their* equivalent to the “wise man” was.

³² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 195.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³⁴ Thus in the ancient world “consciousness of right, therefore, in regards to its actual validity, experiences this rather as the loss of its reality and its complete inessentiality”. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §480, translation modified.

³⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol 2, p. 256 (italics added). Earlier, Hegel attributes this criticism of not saying who the wise man is to Cicero (p. 251). Significantly, Kant, in “The Ideal of Pure Reason” in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, gives the Stoic sage as an example of such an “ideal” which “serves as the *original image* for the thoroughgoing determination of the copy” against which we can compare and judge ourselves. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A569/B597. As Hegel finds the Stoic’s non-speculative restriction to the understanding in Kant as well, Cicero’s criticism might be taken as applying to Kant’s moral philosophy as well.

For Hegel Greco-Roman philosophy and early Christianity were in a complex relation. Hegel stresses the importance of the philosophical culture that allowed the church fathers to “elaborat[e] the Christian religion in thinking knowledge ... We know that the Fathers were men of great philosophical culture, and that they introduced Philosophy, and more especially Neo-Platonic philosophy, into the Church; in this way they worked out a Christian system by which the first mode in which Christianity was manifested in the world was supplemented, for system was not present in this first manifestation”.³⁶ Hegel rarely mentions Augustine, but the Bishop of Hippo surely provides a particularly good model for the “unhappy consciousness” who succeeds Stoic and Skeptical self-consciousnesses in chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³⁷ And this former teacher of rhetoric and reader of the Neoplatonists and Cicero was surely the type of *cultivated* church father that Hegel has in mind. Augustine, according to a recent biographer, “lived much of his life sunk in an ocean of books, books he made and books that made him and books that made the world for him”.³⁸

The church fathers are important for Hegel because they introduced *philosophy* into a faith-based religion, and *a religion* into late Greek philosophy, and doing so transformed the structure of *both*. With respect to the relation of religion to philosophy, Hegel, as we have seen effectively follows Kant: while the medium of philosophy is conceptual, the religious mode of representation is a fundamentally metaphorical or allegorical *picture language* (*Vorstellungen*), in which an “inner meaning” is attributed to a content given in images or sensory intuition. In the case of Christianity, such an allegorical meaning was assigned to the facts of the life of a particular human being, Jesus. When we say “that God has begotten a son”, says Hegel, “we know quite well that this is only an image”.³⁹

In the anthropomorphic “artistic” religions of Greece, the gods had been depicted with human form in statues, and then in specifically *linguistic* products such as epics and tragic dramas, but an internal dialectic of the tragic form eventually converted it into the effectively *secular* art form of comedy.⁴⁰ In the *Lectures on the History of*

³⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol 3, p. 11.

³⁷ That Augustine is the model for “unhappy consciousness” is posited by Henry Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 2 vols, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), vol. 1, p. 395, and Stephen Crites, *Dialectic and Gospel in the Development of Hegel's Thinking* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. 294.

³⁸ James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 120.

³⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, one-volume edition, The Lectures of 1827*, p. 146.

⁴⁰ Moreover, the specifically religious “picture-language” elements had begun to be forced out of the tragedies by the demands of the philosophers. “The expulsion of such shadowy, insubstantial picture-thoughts which was demanded by the philosophers of antiquity thus already beings in [Greek] tragedy in general.” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §741. Comedy is thus the religious analogue to

Philosophy Hegel comments that Greek religion had been both “too much” and “too little” anthropomorphic: “too much, because immediate qualities, forms, actions, are taken up into the divine; too little, because man is not divine as man, but only as a far-away form and not as ‘this’, and subjective man”.⁴¹ But in trinitarian Christianity God was not simply depicted in human form, he was regarded to be *this* particular man, Jesus, the “son of God”. It was the triune structure that Christian myth gave to the absolute that made it continuous with the Neo-platonic phase of Greek philosophy that Hegel describes as having succeeded skepticism. Neo-platonism had further developed the idea from Stoic physics of a world-pervading spirit or “*nous*” by making it concrete *and* by giving it a trinary “hypostatic” differentiation, as in Plotinus’ hypostasies of “the One”, “*nous*”, and “*psyche*”. However, “in spite of their profound and true speculation, the Neo-Platonists still had not proved their doctrine that the Trinity is the truth, for there is lacking to it the form of inward necessity”.⁴² This was only to be achieved in Christianity: “To [the Neoplatonists] spirit is thus not individual spirit; and this deficiency is made good through Christianity, in which spirit is found as actual, present spirit, immediately existent in the world here and now, and the absolute spirit is known in the immediate presence as man”.⁴³ Of course, this deficiency was made good only in the mode of a *religious* “picturing” representation, but the church fathers had also created a *philosophical* religion, and Christianity was destined to be pulled into the classic dialectic between faith and knowledge—*Vorstellungen* and concept—that would come to a head in the Enlightenment. While in the revealed religion of early Christianity spirit had “attained its true *shape*”, there “the shape itself and the picture-thought [were] still the unvanquished aspect from which Spirit must pass over into the Notion”.⁴⁴

All in all, we can see from Hegel’s discussion of the passage from ancient philosophy and religion to the philosophical religion of the church fathers that “Absolute Spirit” is, like other dimensions of spirit, fundamentally recognitive in its nature. In the anthropomorphic “artistic religion” [*künstliche Religion*] of the Greeks, the shape of spirit was depicted in the form of a self “through the creative activity of consciousness whereby this [consciousness] beholds in its object its act or the self”.⁴⁵ This anthropomorphic form given to the representation of spirit was extended in Christianity with the idea of Jesus as the son of God, but understood in a way that maintained the ontological split between the realm of “the father” and that of his “son”. For Hegel, the clue to the reconciliation of norm and actuality was to be found in the “third person”—the “Holy Spirit”—representing the spirit of the religious community itself. The actual historical figure of Jesus could only *be* the “son of God” in virtue of the fact that he was *recognized* by the members of this community as so

philosophical scepticism: “What this self-consciousness beholds is that whatever the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it—in its thinking, its existence, and its action—and is at its mercy.” §747. See also §753.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol 3, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, vol 3, pp. 1-2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §683.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

being in the way that they held their behaviour to this model. Jesus thus lived on (“arose from the dead”) within the scripturally encoded collective memory of the religious community—continued to exist within its literary culture, we might say—as an exemplification of the highest life.

Thus the complex symbolic structure of Christianity, *qua* type of collective artwork, presents within the form of *Vorstellungen* a truth pertaining to spirit in both subjective and objective forms. Spirit *is* self-alienating, in a way demonstrated both at the individual level with the process of self-cultivation, and the level of culture itself when concrete social norms are made explicit in symbolic productions allowing their further criticism and change. The self-alienation that God “the father” must undergo *to be* God symbolises this, as does the self-sacrifice of his “son”.⁴⁶ For Hegel this would be a truth about spirit lost in Dilthey’s bi-partite taxonomy.

3. The Role of Religion in Absolute Spirit

Revisionist attempts to interpret Hegel as a post-Kantian, together with a fully *recognitive* interpretation of absolute spirit may help to defuse the sorts of concerns raised by Dilthey, but even if we take Hegel’s personifications of absolute spirit as instances of essentially metaphorical expressions, we still might ask what his continued use of such metaphors commit him to. Why does Hegel insist on giving religion the status it has rather than, like other secular thinkers of the Enlightenment, reducing it to “superstition”.⁴⁷ In this concluding section I want to broach the issue of what might be at stake in the status that Hegel gives to religion in its opposition to the Enlightenment’s mere “understanding”.

Hegel constantly brings the charge of the abstract formalism that he had located in the Stoics of the Greco-Roman world against Kant’s transcendental idealism: both reduce the speculative reason of Plato and Aristotle to “the understanding”. One manifestation of this restriction concerns Kant’s refusal to extend theoretical knowledge to the traditional objects of “special metaphysics”, the world considered as a whole, the soul, and God, and while such criticisms are typically taken as signalling Hegel’s *pre*-critical position, they need not be so read. Kant’s “critique” of metaphysics is usually interpreted as committing him to a type of metaphysical scepticism, but while Kant himself often expresses himself in this way, at other times he talks of “metaphysics” as an achievable science. Thus, in the “Preface” to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he describes metaphysics as “the only one of all the sciences that may promise that little but unified effort ... will complete it Nothing here can escape us, because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself

⁴⁶ I am indebted here to conversations with Paolo Diego Bubbio who has stressed to me the centrality of the figure of “sacrifice” in Hegel’s systematic thought.

⁴⁷ For his part Brandom is clear about those parts of the historical Hegel that can be discarded as mere inessential accumulations reflecting historically contingent circumstances—a policy that might indeed be extended to the role Hegel gives to religion.

cannot be hidden, but is brought to light by reason itself as soon as reason's common principle has been discovered".⁴⁸ Kant is not contradicting himself here, but simply reinterpreting the project of metaphysics itself. The proper objects of *critical* metaphysics are not "things in themselves" knowable by an *infinite* reason but hidden from our own; rather they are constructions of a reason of which *we* are capable. We might say, following Brandom, they are expressions of norms *made explicit* in the course of philosophising such that they can be criticised and improved upon.

Hegel develops this side of Kant and criticises his more metaphysically sceptical side which he associates with Kant's ensnarement in the limitations of the understanding.⁴⁹ Given Kant's new understanding of metaphysics, he asks why we *cannot* know the objects of special metaphysics? We have already seen Hegel's response to Kant's warning about how metaphysical thought becomes ensnared in antinomies and contradictions: from the speculative point of view the objects of special metaphysics *are* contradictory. Hegel clearly sees his own version of speculative philosophy as correcting problems within the stance of Kant's formalist "understanding", but he also typically appeals to religion, despite the limitations of its picture-language, as addressing and overcoming these same shortcomings. We can see his reasons for this if we return to the problems facing the Stoic, and comparing them with a modern version of the same configuration of self-consciousness.

The internalisation of the opposition between master and slave is clearly reflected in the Stoic practice of the writing of *hypomnemata* as is brought out in Pierre Hadot's comments on the *Meditations* of the Stoic, Marcus Aurelius. For Marcus, he notes, the writer's ego is "situated at the level of Reason, exhorting the soul". That is, in composing his texts Marcus writes from the position of rational thought with the text meant as a device for holding his future behaviour to reason's dictates. Hadot's comparison of Marcus' *Meditations* with the *Soliloquies* of Augustine is instructive here. In contrast to Marcus, says Hadot, "Augustine's ego takes the place of the soul listening to Reason".⁵⁰ Such a reluctance to speak from the position of reason itself is typical of the "unhappy consciousness", who locates reason in a transcendent source, God, and adopts rather the Christian's stance of "*belief* [Glauben]". As we have seen, for Hegel the unhappy consciousness's stance of belief initially overcomes the problem of the abstraction and formalism of Stoicism, at least in relation to giving a content to the life of the "good" man, but it later falls prey to the renewed demands of reason in the Enlightenment.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Axx.

⁴⁹ Elsewhere I have differentiated these interpretations of the project as "weak" and "strong" variants of transcendental idealism. See Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 2009), chs. 3 & 4.

⁵⁰ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. M. Chase (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 33. Thus in the *Soliloquies*, Augustine reports a "voice" speaking to him while reflectively examining his thoughts: "was it I who was speaking, or someone, either outside me or within me, I do not know". Quoted in *ibid.*

The Stoic's problem of *simultaneously* being its own master and slave reappears at the end of Chapter 6 of the *Phenomenology* in Hegel's discussion of "the beautiful soul" who is *certain* of the purity of his own motivations and who dismisses other's interpretations of his actions as misunderstandings or the result of evil intentions. That is, the beautiful soul is a form of self-consciousness who still must learn that spirit is instantiated *not* in individuals *per se*, who can only ever be finite *self-contradictory* instantiations of it, but in historically developing networks of recognitively linked individuals. The beautiful soul thus has to face the "hard-hearted judge" who can break the immediacy of the beautiful soul's convictions, however the hard-hearted judge in judging from the position of reason faces the same problem faced by the beautiful soul. The judge must therefore acknowledge and confess to his own finitude and seek forgiveness from the subject being judged. *Mutual* confession and forgiveness is therefore the only relation that solves the problem. Here Hegel comments that the reconciling word is "the *objectively* existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself *qua* universal essence, in its opposite ... a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit".⁵¹ The "reconciling *Yea*, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical *existence*" is in fact God's self-manifestation "in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge".⁵²

For Hegel, religions give expression to the unity of a community on which individuals depend for their identities, a truth that holds even for individuals considered as beings capable of reason and so capable of transcending the picture-thinking of religion. But picture-thinking *still shapes* "the understanding" considered as a form of self-consciousness, in that the thinking subject grasps him- or herself as an atomistically independent being separable from the culture from which they came. We might think of this as the last gasp of a self-deifying form of *quasi-religious* self-consciousness, and one, moreover, that reappears in the form of self-consciousness of Dilthey and the historical school. The "historical consciousness" at which the romantic historian aims is conceived as a type of "Gods-eye view" from which the array of possible human cognitive forms can be surveyed *without* that consciousness identifying with any one of them, and the *relativism* implicit in such a view looks like another version of the Scepticism to which the Stoic fell prey. The philosophical truth contained within the succeeding trinitarian Christianity was that the *God* of this God's-eye view was a *false* God, and Hegel's speculative philosophy was an attempt to give this truth a properly philosophical expression. The current revival of interest in Hegel could suggest that many find this problem of the abstract understanding still with us today.

⁵¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §670.

⁵² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §671.