

**Hegel's Expressive Metaphysics of Agency**  
Humboldt—FAGI *Reason* Lecture III

**Heroism and Magnanimity:  
The Post-Modern Form of Self-Conscious Agency**

Hegel thinks that the most important event in human history—the single biggest thing that ever happened to us—is the extended transition from long-standing traditional forms of life to distinctively modern ones.

He introduces and develops an original conception of the subject of this great sea-change: what he calls “*Geist*,” Spirit. *Geist* is us, knowers and doers, and all of our thinkings, sayings, doings, practices, and institutions, and all of their products.

The principle defining traditional *sittlich* forms of *Geist* is commitment to the *norm-governedness* or *status-dependence of normative attitudes*.

The contrasting core modern insight is the idea of the *attitude-dependence of normative statuses*.

There is a tension between the claim (central to modernity) that normative statuses are instituted by normative attitudes and the claim (central to premodern understanding) that normative statuses provide the standards for assessment of the correctness of attitudes. How can we both make the norms and be genuinely governed by them?

The third, postmodern stage of *Geist* is defined by its reconciliation of these opposed insights.

Our *past* attitudes institute norms that provide the normative standards of assessment for our *current* attitudes. We institute norms that govern our attitudes by engaging in a special kind of process: *recollection* [*Erinnerung*]. Recollection retrospectively rationally reconstructs the prior applications of a concept, picking out an expressively progressive trajectory through them. It is this process that turns a mere *past* into a *history*, something with the edifying narrative structure of a tradition: a past as *comprehended*.

Hegel calls the traditional *sittlich* practical understanding of intentional agency “heroic.” By this he means that agents take responsibility for their doings under all the descriptions true of those doings. On the traditional, heroic conception it is the normative statuses that matter, not the agent’s attitudes. The “ought-to-do”s governing attitudes are just to be read off of the “ought-to-be”s that articulate statuses.

The traditional *heroic* practical conception of agency is also a *tragic* conception. Tragedy is the submission of the heroic agent to *fate*. The idea of *fate* invokes not some sort of determinism or antecedent necessitation of outcome, but just those dark (because unknowable and uncontrollable) forces that engulf and overwhelm what is launched by one’s limited knowledge and intention, transforming it into deeds that reach far beyond those attitudes into unforeseeable culpability. Shouldering the responsibility that fate in this sense brings down upon one who acts is tragic heroism.

By contrast to this tragic practical conception of agency in terms of heroic identification with and submission to one’s fate, the modern conception of agency is distinguished precisely by the idea that agents are genuinely responsible for, and so should be held responsible for, only what they intended to do and knew they were doing. This conception of responsibility as proportioned to intention and knowledge is the application to the practical understanding of intentional agency of the distinctively modern appreciation of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses.

It is the right of the will to recognize as its *action* [Handlung], and to accept *responsibility* for, only those aspects of its *deed* [Tat] which it knew to be presupposed within its end, and which were present in its *purpose* [Vorsatz]—I can be made *accountable* for a deed only if *my will was responsible* for it—the *right of knowledge*. RP§117.

There are “two aspects possessed by the practical consciousness, intention and deed (what is 'meant' or intended by the deed and the deed itself). PG§319.

[T]hough any alteration as such, which is set on foot by the subjects' action, is its deed [Tat], still the subject does not for that reason recognize it as its action [Handlung], but only admits as its own that existence in the deed which lay in its knowledge and will, which was its purpose. Only for that does it hold itself responsible. *Encyclopedia* §504.

The *heroic* self-consciousness (as in ancient tragedies like that of Oedipus) has not yet progressed from its unalloyed simplicity to reflect on the distinction between *deed* [Tat] and *action* [Handlung], between the external event and the purpose and knowledge of the circumstances, or to analyse the consequences minutely, but accepts responsibility for the deed in its entirety. RP§118Z.

Consciousness, therefore, through its experience in which it should have found its truth, has really become a riddle to itself: the consequences of its deed are for it not the deeds themselves. What befalls it is, for it, not the experience of what it is in itself, the transition is not a mere alteration of the form of the same content and essence, presented now as the content and essence, and again as the object or [outwardly] beheld essence of itself. PG§365.

I have been using a particular regimented normative metavocabulary to render the terms Hegel uses to set out the contrast between the categories of *Verstand* and those of *Vernunft*. It translates Hegel's talk of what subjects are *in* themselves and what they are *for* themselves and for others into talk of normative *statuses* and normative *attitudes*. Under the heading of normative statuses, Hegel's talk of *independence* and *dependence* is translated into talk about *authority* and *responsibility*. Under the heading of normative attitudes, his talk of what subjects are *for themselves* and *for others* is translated into talk about *acknowledging* responsibility and *claiming* authority oneself, and *attributing* those statuses to others.

In place of Kant's *individualistic autonomy* model of the institution of normative statuses by normative attitudes Hegel proposes a *social recognition* model. According to that model, normative statuses are instituted by *reciprocal recognition*. To be responsible one must, as Kant already insisted, in the first instance *acknowledge* that responsibility. But one must also be *held* responsible by others, to whom one attributes the authority to adopt such authoritative attitudes. To attribute to someone the authority to hold one responsible, that is, to attribute commitments in a partly constitutive way, is to recognize that other subject. Hegelian recognitive attitudes, like Kantian autonomous attitudes, institute normative statuses. But they do so only when suitably socially complemented. The recognitive authority of individual normative subjects and of their recognitive communities are complementary and reciprocally dependent, that is, responsible to each other as well as authoritative over each other.

The norm-instituting constellation of attitudes is one in which, as Hegel puts it:

Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. **They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.** PhG §184.

No man is a hero to his valet; not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet—is a valet.... PG § 665.

The valet views what the hero does genealogically, in resolutely naturalistic, nonnormative, reductive terms, and so

“...explains [the action] as resulting...from selfish motives. Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity [of the doer].... If the action is accompanied by fame, then it knows this inner aspect to be a desire for fame.....[T]he inner aspect is judged to be an urge to secure his own happiness, even though this were to consist merely in an inner moral conceit, in the enjoyment of being conscious of his own superiority and in the foretaste of a hope of future happiness. No action can escape such judgement, for duty for duty's sake, this pure purpose, is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity.”

The Kammerdiener stands for a view that explains all attitudes in terms of other attitudes, without needing to appeal to governing norms that they are attitudes towards and acknowledgments of.

Normative governance of attitudes by norms has two dimensions, deontic and alethic. First, the norms (normative statuses) serve as *standards for assessment of the correctness of attitudes*. Second, the attitudes must be *subjunctively sensitive* to the normative statuses they acknowledge and attribute. This is to say that the norms are efficacious, in that *if* the content of the norm being acknowledged or attributed *were* (or *had been*) different, the attitude *would be* different.

Unlike the Kammerdiener allegory, the allegory of the hard-hearted judge is extended to provide a path forward to a proper understanding of the status-dependence of normative attitudes. Hegel presents the structural transition from modern to post-modern conceptions of agency in the form of a parable, a narrative recounting sequential stages in the relationship between an “evil consciousness” [PG 661] and a “hard-hearted judge” [PG 669-70]: evil [PG 661-62], judgment [PG 662-66], confession [PG 666], refusal of reciprocal confession [PG 667-68], the breaking of the hard heart and confession by the judge [PG 669], forgiveness [PG 669-71], and the achievement of a new kind of community (“The reconciling Yea, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical existence, is the existence of the 'I' which has expanded into a duality.” [PG 671]). This is the final, *vernunftlich*, post-modern form of reciprocal recognition, and so, of normativity and *Geist*, structured by the normativity instituted by that newly self-conscious form of recognition.

The blaming, hard-hearted, Kantian rigorist judge plays the “role of the moral valet” to the penitent agent: The consciousness that judges in this way is itself base, because it divides up the action, producing and holding fast to the disparity of the action with itself. Further, it is hypocrisy, because it passes off such judging, not as another manner of being wicked, but as the correct consciousness of the action, setting itself up in this unreality and conceit of knowing well and better above the deeds it discredits, and wanting its words without deeds to be taken for a superior kind of reality. PG § 666.

The responsibility the assessing consciousness undertakes for what is done is complementary to the responsibility the deliberating consciousness undertakes for its act, rather than identical with it. It has two dimensions: reparative and recollective.

Recollective forgiveness is the key to understanding norm-governedness in general. Taking recollective responsibility for another's doing is practically acknowledging the obligation to tell a certain kind of retrospective story about that doing. That is the responsibility to rationally reconstruct it *as* norm-governed. The forgiving recollector must discern an implicit norm that governs the development of the deed. This is the intention [*Absicht*], which stands to the consequentially extended *Tat* as the agent's initial *Vorsatz* stands to the *Handlung*, which is the narrower action specified only under the descriptions explicitly licensed by the purpose for which it was performed.

The meta-norm that governs recollective performances (and the practical attitudes they express) is that the norm one reconstructively discerns or imputes must normatively govern *all* the consequential specifications of attitudes

downstream of the *Handlung*. That includes the practical-reparative and hermeneutic-recollective attitudes the assessing judge adopts. So the forgiving agent must endorse the norm being attributed as governing the deed—must acknowledge its authority. That is part of taking co-responsibility for it.

Forgiving, on this account, is hard work. It cannot be brought off with a single, sweeping, abstractly general gesture: “I forgive you for what you did.”

Any actual recollective story will involve strains: elements of what is actually done, at *every* stage in the developing process, that *cannot* be smoothly, successfully, or convincingly given such a norm-responsive explanation.

As an edelmütig, forgiving assessor of another’s doing, one *confesses* that it is (also) one’s *own* fault, that one is not good enough at forgiving. And one must *trust* that this failure, too—like the failure of the original, inadequately forgiven doer—will be more successfully forgiven by future assessors (who know more and are better at it). The content of the shared recognitive attitudes with which all parties identify is “*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass before us.*”

It is of the essence of both the reparative ameliorating dimension and the hermeneutic recollecting dimension of the recognitive attitude of forgiveness that they address a performance that expresses a *prior* practical attitude. The doing being forgiven must already be underway. For this reason, the final, *vernunftlich* form of reciprocal recognition as confession and forgiveness is essentially *historical*. The attitude-governing norms it institutes and acknowledges have the rich diachronic recognitive form of *traditions*.

The claim that is crucial for understanding the third age of *Geist* as retaining the progress made by modernity while overcoming its structural alienation is that recognition understood as including the recollective institution of traditions acknowledges both the attitude-dependence of normative statuses and the status-dependence of normative attitudes.

Agency as understood and practiced within the magnanimous recognitive structure of confession and forgiveness combines these two heroic aspects of the pre-modern conception: *sittlich* appreciation of the status-dependence of normative attitudes and acknowledging total responsibility for the deed as consequentially extended beyond the knowledge and control of the agent.

The burdens of tragic subjection to fate are replaced by the tasks of concrete magnanimous forgiveness. Where our normative digestion of immediacy, contingency, and particularity shows its limitations, when (as in each case at some point they must) they outrun our recollective capacity to incorporate them into the mediated, normative conceptual form of universals, that failure of ours is properly acknowledged by confession and trust in the forgiveness of that failure to fulfill our responsibilities, by more capable future recollectors.

“The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes. The self that carries out the action, the form of its act, is only a moment of the whole, and so likewise is the knowledge, that by its judgement determines and establishes the distinction between the individual and universal aspects of the action.” *PG* §669.

The responsibility the individual tragic heroic agent takes on himself is accordingly spread out and shared. The doing of each (in one sense) is now in a real sense the doing of all (in another, recognitively complementary sense). For all share responsibility for each action. The temporally extended, historically structured recognitive community of those who are alike in all confessing the extent of their failure to be norm-governed, acknowledging their responsibility to forgive those failures in others, confessing the extent of their efforts at recollective and reparative forgiveness, and trusting that a way will be found to forgive their failures is one in which each member identifies with all the others, taking co-responsibility for their practical attitudes. It is the “‘I’ that is ‘we’, the ‘we’ that is ‘I’.” *PG* §177.