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Hegel's Expressive Metaphysics of Agency

Humboldt—FAGI *Reason* Lecture II

Agency, Intention, and the Expressive Determination of Content

I. Introduction

In my previous lecture I characterized one challenge for phenomenal self-consciousness in *Reason* as being able to hold together both the idea that things done are *mine*, exercises of my subjective authority, for which I am responsible, and the idea that things done are objective happenings. Moving up a level, we see this as one of two structural aspects of agency. For besides the *disparity* that action essentially involves, between the *purpose* with which it was performed, which is up to the agent, and its *consequences*, which are not, there is also the *unity* that action involves. Hegel construes this hylomorphically, as a single *content*, which is translated from the form of something implicit in the practical commitment of the agent to the form of something explicit in an objective deed. I suggested that we could think of Hegel's resolution of these challenges to begin with in Davidsonian terms. The disparity is a matter of two different sorts of specification of a single event. It is a *doing* because it has specifications under which it is *intentional* (that is, endorsed by the attitudes of the agent). But that very same event has *consequential* specifications, which, according to Davidson's "accordion principle" are to be understood as specifications of the very same event. The intentional specifications, Hegel's "*Vorsatz*", characterize what Hegel calls the action as "*Handlung*" and the consequential specifications characterize what Hegel calls the action as "*Tat*." For Hegel, these correspond to two different social normative perspectives. The individual agent is authoritative concerning the intentional specifications that make something a doing at all, and the community, which attributes responsibility for the doing, is authoritative about specifications of the doings in terms of its on-going consequences (its being an alerting of the burglar, a killing, the burning down of a building, the saving of the city...). I want here to address the crucial *historical* dimension of the articulation of the content of intentional doings, which pairs with this underlying *social* dimension of the normative articulation of that content.

We can think about the unity that action involves in terms of the *success* of the individual agent in translating her purpose into the objective doing as available to everyone. On a natural way of rendering these claims, the relations between the aspects of unity and difference that the concept of action involves has it that the question of whether those aspects are realized is to be answered differently for each particular performance. That is to say that the relation between the aspects is understood as **local, contingent, and disjunctive**. It is *local* in that the assessment of success or failure is made for *each* action, one by one. It exhibits identity of (content of) purpose and achievement in case it succeeds, and difference of (content of) purpose and achievement in case it fails. The *possibility* of disparity and the *ideal* of identity of content between purpose and achievement are universal, but those features are each *actualized* only in some actions. It is *contingent* whether any particular action succeeds or fails—for instance, whether, as I intended, the ball goes through the hoop. And the two aspects are *disjunctively* related (indeed, related by *exclusive* disjunction) because for any given action *either* the action succeeds, and so exhibits identity of content of purpose and content of achievement, *or* it fails, and so exhibits their disparity. I called this sort of account an “LCD” view of the identity-in-difference that structures the concept of action. The LCD account is so commonsensical that it can be hard so much as to conceive of an alternative to it. But I claimed it is not a view of this shape that Hegel is expressing.

Instead, I claimed that in most general terms Hegel’s view of the identity-in-difference that structures the concept of action is rather **global, necessary, and conjunctive**. Assessment of success or failure in the ordinary sense—what I’ll tendentiously call “vulgar” success or failure—is, if not completely irrelevant to understanding the unity and disparity that action involves¹, at any rate something that comes into the story only much later. According to a GNC account, *every* action (‘globally’), *as* an action (‘necessarily’) *both* (‘conjunctively’) simply translates something inner or implicit into something outer or explicit, hence exhibiting the unity of action and the identity of content in two different forms, *and*

¹ The word ‘Erfolg’ (success) occurs only three times in the *Phenomenology*, never in connection with the theory of action, and of its six occurrences in the *Rechtsphilosophie*, only one is an action-theoretic use (in a comment on a comment on the crucial §118), appearing under the heading “Dramatic Interest”.

necessarily involves an actual disparity between purpose and achievement (“the distinction that action involves”). On this view, *if* exhibiting the identity of content between purpose and achievement that is the unity of action is in some sense *succeeding*, and exhibiting a disparity between them is in some sense *failing*, then in order to understand the GNC approach to the identity-through-disparity of action we must appreciate a sense in which *every* action succeeds and another in which *every* action fails, regardless of its success or failure in the vulgar sense. And we must come to see these as two sides of one coin: as reciprocally sense-dependent concepts playing essential roles in the concept of intentional action.

Distinguishing these two sorts of models raises a number of questions. To begin with, how can we make sense of a model of agency of the GNC sort? What philosophical advantages might motivate adopting an account with the GNC structure rather than one with the LCD structure? What reason there is to think that Hegel actually is recommending a GNC-type account? How are we to understand vulgar success and failure if we construe agency in the GNC way? In particular, in what sense do even actions that succeed in the ordinary sense deserve to count as exhibiting the disparity that action involves? It clearly won’t do to say that even though the content of what was intended and the content of what was achieved *actually* coincided, nonetheless they *might*, had things gone differently, have diverged. For even an LCD account says that. And in what sense do even actions that fail in the ordinary sense deserve to count as exhibiting the unity of content that action involves? Again, it clearly won’t do to say that even though the content of what was intended and the content of what was achieved *actually* diverged, nonetheless it is their identity that was *aimed* at. For even an LCD account says that.

These questions are what I want to address here. The key to the first three—the large philosophical and interpretive questions—is I think contained in the observation that LCD accounts take for granted a notion of *determinate content*, which can be exhibited indifferently by intentions and the performances to which they give rise. Thus I can intend to put the ball through the hoop (intend that I put the ball through the hoop), and I can put the ball through the hoop. The notion of assessments of vulgar *success* and *failure*, in terms of which both the *unity* and the *disparity* of intention and accomplishment are defined in LCD approaches, depends on the possibility of identifying and individuating the *contents* of intentions and achievements

antecedently to the processes by which they are related in intentional action seeking to *actualize* those intentions in the form of achievements. But Hegel's overall claim is that that notion of *determinate* conceptual contents is ultimately intelligible only in terms of the *process* of *determining* such contents—making them *more* determinate—by seeking the objective fulfillment of subjective practical commitments.²

If we are to understand the sense in which subjective commitments and the objective states of affairs they are fallibly responsible to or authoritative over are determinately contentful, we must understand how the processes and practices that are the exercise of intentional agency are intelligible *both* as

- i. the mere expression, revelation, and translation from subjective to objective form of already fully determinate contents,
- and*
- ii. simultaneously as the means by which initially *less* determinate contents *become more* determinate: the process of *determining* conceptual contents.

The former perspective is that of the *unity* of action and the *identity* of contents realized in it (on an account of the GNC type, in *every* action, whether it succeeds or fails in the ordinary sense), and the latter is that of the *disparity* of action and the *difference* between the content subjectively intended and the content objectively achieved (in *every* action, whether it succeeds or fails in the ordinary sense). The difference between an approach that presupposes a notion of determinate content without deploying the resources to make intelligible its nature, origin, or accessibility to finite knowers and agents, on the one hand, and one that concerns itself precisely with explaining determinateness of conceptual content in terms of the processes and practices by which such contents arise, develop, and are deployed by knowers and agents, on the other hand is just the difference between the standpoint of *Verstand* and that of *Vernunft*, as those Hegelian metametaconcepts have been brought into view here. It is in the treatment of agency that Hegel explains the process by which conceptual *norms* become (are revealed as) *determinate*. In

² In the second chapter of his pathbreaking book *Hegel* [ref.], Charles Taylor insightfully contrasts Hegel's expressive account of the making explicit of what is implicit with Aristotle's account of the actualization of potentials. He emphasizes that for Hegel, the implicit potential that is expressed is not understood as antecedently determinate. It only becomes determinate in the course of the process of expressing or actualizing it. That is the process I will be discussing here.

particular, it is here that we see how the *social* and *historical* articulation of the “cycle of action” interact to define a new notion of determinateness, conceived according to the metaconcepts of *Vernunft*.

II. The Identity of Content of Deed and Intention

The difference between the LCD and GNC understandings of the relations between the unity and the disparity that the concept of action involve turns on two different senses in which an action can succeed. An action is successful in the ordinary, non-philosophical sense just in case the purpose for the sake of which it was performed and in virtue of which the performance is *intentional* (and so a doing at all) ends up as one of the *consequential* specifications of that doing. The sense of success that Hegel is articulating depends on determining the content of the doing. Success consists in a functional role in the process by which the *Handlung* becomes the *Tat*, and the *Vorsatz* develops into the *Absicht*.

In the *Reason* chapter Hegel enriches the conception of *Erfahrung* as the experience of error, which he introduced in the *Introduction*. Here we consider the “cycle” of cognition and action: a Test-Operate-Test-Exit (TOTE) “cycle” of cognition and action that develops content through the experience of practical failure as well as cognitive error.³ By contrast to Davidson, for Hegel the paradigmatic examples of doings are not punctiform events such as switch-flippings and jumpings, but extended processes such as building a house, writing a book, or passing a law. Such processes have a substantial internal historical-developmental structure.

To begin with, the microstructure of any action process reveals a distinctive sort of evolution. Any prior intention that is successfully fulfilled must progress to a demonstratively specifiable performance: “I will raise my arm in one minute,” “I will raise my arm in 30 seconds,” “I raise my arm *now*.” But at this point in the process, the general description can also be replaced by a demonstrative specification: “I do *this* now.” The realization of any particular sub-goal (one ‘unit’ of the extended action for which the intention serves as a norm) must include an evolution of intentional specifications from the less definite to the more definite, from

³ [ref.] quote.

more general descriptions to completely particular demonstrative specifications. I start off with reasons leading me to endorse the purpose of making it true that $\phi(t)$, say that the north wall has a doorway in it. But to carry through the intention that governs the process of achieving that end, I must eventually reach a phase in which I intend to do *this, here, now*—say, nail *this* board between *these two here, now*. I cannot *merely* make true the further determinable, abstract, general description that expressed the content of my original commitment, without doing so *by* making true a fully determinate, concrete, demonstrative specification.

We can recall from the discussion of the *Sense Certainty* chapter that an essential feature of observational or perceptual processes was seen to be the transition from unrepeatable *demonstrative* specifications (“Night now,” “Tree here,”) to repeatable, hence potentially inferentially significant, expressions (“Night then,” “Tree there,”). The link between them was *anaphoric*: a matter of picking up the demonstratives by using pronouns having them as antecedents. (Though ‘then’ and ‘there’ *also* have demonstrative uses, it is their anaphoric uses that matter for ‘recollecting’ other demonstrative uses so as to make them subsequently available—in general, after re-demonstration is no longer possible—for use as premises in inferences.) This was the first sort of *recollection* (*Erinnerung*—cf. [PG 808]) mentioned in the body of the *Phenomenology*. The anaphoric link is a matter of the acknowledged *authority* of the antecedent over the content of the anaphoric dependent, the pronoun’s *responsibility* to its antecedent for what it expresses.

This historical, normative, inferential structure linking unrepeatable demonstrative tokenings and repeatable anaphorically dependent tokenings on the cognitive or *theoretical* side of a subject’s activity provides conceptual raw materials that are helpful also for thinking about the maturation of a prior general purpose into a later concrete doing on the *practical* side of a subject’s activity. In this case, what matters is the sense in which an earlier description of what is to be done can be thought of as inheriting some of its content from the later demonstrative specification of what it is done, on which it is understood to be anaphorically dependent. To begin with, in the case of successful actions, the demonstratively specifiable performance that fulfills the purpose or intention can be thought of as what was aimed at all along: “I meant to do *that*,” or “*That* is what I intended to do.”

By way of analogy, consider how one might think of the phenomenon of *speaker's reference* in terms of demonstratives and anaphora. And this phenomenon on the theoretical side of cognition is mirrored on the practical side of agency. The distinction between the success and failure of an action, in the ordinary sense, is underwritten by looking at the *semantic* reference of the descriptions that I would acknowledge as expressions of my purpose. This is the *dictum* that I am trying to make true, the *de dicto* specification of my purpose. And if that same description does *not* occur in the *consequential* characterizations of the deed that encompasses my doing, then I have failed. But there is another sense, in which I whatever I *actually* did determines the content of my intention, under the actual circumstances in which I acted. Under the actual circumstances, having the purpose I did amounted to intending to do *that*—whatever I actually achieved. Intending to turn on the light by flipping the switch *was* under the actual circumstances in which I intended it, though unbeknownst to me, intending *of* a particular burglar-alerting that I do *that*. Compare: my claiming that the man in the corner drinking champagne is an economist was, in the actual circumstances, though unbeknownst to me, claiming *of* a man drinking gingerale that he is an economist.

We can distinguish between what I *meant* and what I *said*. But in fact we are talking about two ways of specifying the content of one saying. I said *that* the man in the corner drinking champagne is an economist. But I said *of* the one drinking gingerale that *he* was an economist. One of the lessons of *Sense Certainty* is that I cannot *merely* or *immediately* mean one or the other of them. I can do that only with conceptual mediation, by having some other inferentially articulated and significant specification available. And we can see in this case that the distinction between what I said and what I was talking about—in the sense of what my words semantically referred to and what they speaker-referred to—arises only from a third person point of view. I cannot myself at the time of utterance separate my speaker-reference from my semantic reference. That requires adopting the perspective of someone else, someone who has different information than I do, someone who can *attribute* a different responsibility to me than that I acknowledge, by linking my utterance anaphorically to other possible utterances of mine. But, from that third person point of view, there are *two* ways to assess the commitment I have made, the responsibility I have undertaken by my claim.

And this phenomenon on the theoretical side of cognition is mirrored on the practical side of agency. The distinction between the success and failure of an action, in the ordinary sense, is underwritten by looking at the *semantic* reference of the descriptions that I would acknowledge as expressions of my purpose. This is the *dictum* that I am trying to make true, the *de dicto* specification of my purpose. And if that same description does *not* occur in the *consequential* characterizations of the deed that encompasses my doing, then I have failed. But there is another sense, in which I whatever I *actually* did determines the content of my intention, under the actual circumstances in which I acted. Under the actual circumstances, having the purpose I did amounted to intending to do *that*—whatever I actually achieved. Intending to turn on the light by flipping the switch *was* under the actual circumstances in which I intended it, though unbeknownst to me, intending *of* a particular burglar-alerting that I do *that*. Compare: my claiming that the man in the corner drinking champagne is an economist *was*, in the actual circumstances, though unbeknownst to me, claiming *of* a man drinking gingerale that he is an economist. (Of course, we could also say that, unbeknownst to me, I claimed *of* a man who is not an economist that he is an economist, just as we could say that I intended *of* doing something that would not turn on the light—namely flipping the unbeknownst-to-me-broken switch—to turn on the light by doing that.) A failed action is one where the initial purpose only, as it were, speaker-referred to what I go on to do, but does not semantically refer to it.

In this sense, the content of the responsibility I have undertaken in the form of my intention is inherited from the actual deed. Here the thought is that it is the very same intention that matures from being describable in the most general terms, “turning on the light by flipping the switch” to being specifiable in the most immediate demonstrative terms “doing *this now*.” From this point of view—not available to the agent *ab initio*—the final demonstrative picks out what we were all along referring to. Prospectively, the agent can only pick it out by descriptions that may or may not semantically refer to it. But retrospectively we can tell what the actual content of the intention was, given the possibly unknown circumstances in which it was to be actualized. Responsibility in this sense is attributed by discerning a kind of forward anaphora: where the expression uttered earlier in a discourse inherits its content from an antecedent uttered only later in the discourse.

The content of the action can be specified either *de dicto* ('that'), in terms of the purpose that authorized it, or *de re* ('of'), in terms of what was thereby in fact authorized. Understanding the concept of action requires understanding actions as unities that necessarily involve this distinction of perspective, and understanding those perspectives as perspectives on one content. The content of the intention, in Hegel's use of 'Absicht', is the *content* of the action. The purpose and the accomplished deed are then two perspectives on that content, two *forms* that content can take. This is the agentive correlate of the cognitive hylomorphism that appeared already in Hegel's *Introduction*.

III. Further Structure of the Expressive Process by which the Intention Develops Into the Deed

The intention that, as a norm, governs the process of achieving an end can be thought of as a universal content discernible in all phases of that process, from implicit initial subjective endorsing of the end to its explicit objective achievement. One way in which such an intention can develop so as to culminate in the successful actualization of its purpose is as the gradual, sequential realization of a tree-structured plan, in which various means are envisaged as sufficient for the achievement of (say) sub-sub-goals, collections of those as sufficient for the achievement of sub-goals, and the sub-goals as sufficient to achieve the endorsed end. If the plan is a good one, and nothing goes wrong, then all the various sub-sub-goals will be achieved, and by their means, in sequence, the sub-goals, and so in the final phase, the ultimate aim.

This is not the only way an initial plan can lead to a successful conclusion, however. For the fact that under the actual, initially incompletely known, circumstances some sub-goal is not achievable (or not achievable within the limits of time and other resources allotted by the plan), or that realizing all the sub-sub-goals thought to be sufficient to accomplish some sub-goal turned out not to do the trick, need not be fatal to the success of the overall enterprise—need not lead to failure to fulfill the intention or achieve the ultimate end. Failure to achieve a sub-goal need not be fatal to the whole enterprise. For the internal details of the plan may be adjusted,

depending on how things turn out in actuality, so as to find another path to the same ultimate goal.

Just as failure to achieve a sub-goal need not be sufficient for failure to achieve the goal to which it is plan-related as a means, so success in achieving a sub-goal need not be sufficient for success in achieving the goal to which it is plan-related as a means. Here we see a substantial transformation and development of the conception of *Erfahrung*, from the experience of error to what Hegel talks about as “the cycle of action” in which individuality “exhibits itself simply and solely as the unity of the world as *given* and the world it has *made*” [PG 308]. Fulfilling a complex intention is a cyclical process of intervention according to a plan aimed at a goal, observation of the results of the intervention, adjustment of the plan, further intervention, further observation of its results, and so on. It has the dynamic structure of a Test-Operate-Test-Exit (TOTE) loop. This is the form of processes by which necessity is incorporated into contingent actuality, that is, an endorsed end is actualized (“the world it has *made*”). It is also through processes with this structure that contingency is incorporated in necessity, in that the norm (plan) governing the process changes in response to actual circumstances and achievements (“the world as *given*”). If we compare the plans operative at different times during such a process, they are liable to be different. This is the “character of action as a transition and a movement.”[PG308]

Each of these purposes and plans—some subordinate to or nested in others, some adopted at different times during the process of realizing others—provides a context within which we can assess the *functional* success or failure of a the project of achieving a sub-goal. Hegel says that, in contrast to the purpose or end, the “particular aspect which gives the action its subjective value and interest for me,” when the local, particular purpose is put into a larger context:

the immediate character of an action in its further content is reduced to a means.

In so far as such an end is a finite one, it may in turn be reduced to a means to some further intention, and so on in an infinite progression.[*Philosophy of Right* §122]

Each larger, or newly adopted goal provides a new context with respect to which the instrumental contribution, and so the functional success or failure, of each prior achievement can be assessed. These assessments are essentially retrospective, as indeed are assessments of

ordinary success or failure at achieving the most local purpose. But because there is no end in principle to the progression to larger or later purposes, it is never too late for a new context to arise within which a previously failed (in the vulgar or the functional-instrumental sense) project can count as successfully contributing to the realization of a plan.

Even the abandonment of previously endorsed end—perhaps as a result of persistent failure to achieve it—can, when later suitably recontexted, come to have the significance merely of a change of plan for achieving a larger or later purpose. The development of an intention by the alteration of a plan involves *sacrificing* some commitments—to the rejected plan, perhaps to some of the sub-goals it endorsed—and thereby *identifying* with others. We saw that the process by which self-conscious individual selves constitute themselves (in a recognitive community) is a process of relinquishing or altering, in general sacrificing some commitments in favor of other, incompatible ones, which one thereby counts as identifying with. We are now in a position to see that intentional action is a process that has just this *self*-constituting structure. The process of carrying through an intention is a process of *self determination* or *self-constitution*: making oneself into a (more) determinately contentful self by identifying with some commitments and rejecting others. That is why “what the subject *is*, *is the series of its actions*,”⁴ “individuality is the cycle of its action,”⁵ and “an individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action.”⁶ The very same process that is the exercise of intentional agency is at the same time the expression of self-conscious individuality. “[T]he essential nature of the work... is to be a self-expression of... individuality.”⁷

IV. Self-expression and self-determination as overarching goals, always achieved

One place to start is with the observation that once agency is understood as necessarily being the expression of self-conscious individuality, that the individual self-consciousness express itself by working to fulfill its practical commitments can itself be thought of as a kind of

⁴ *Philosophy of Right* §124.

⁵ *Phenomenology* §308.

⁶ *Phenomenology* §401.

⁷ *Phenomenology* §403.

overarching end or purpose, to which one is implicitly committed simply by exercising intentional agency.

The activity of individuality, all that it does, is in its own self an End...the present, real existence of the process of individuality.⁸

Individuality in its setting-forth or expression is, in relation to action, the End in and for itself.⁹ The important point is that if we think of *this* as an overarching aim, to which whatever one does is instrumentally subordinate, then it has the distinctive feature that in realizing *this* goal the agent “encounters no resistance from the actual world.” For from this point of view, self consciousness is

reality in the form of an individuality that directly expresses itself, an individuality which no longer encounters resistance from an actual world, and whose aim and object are only this expressing of itself. [PG §359].

For *expressing self-conscious individuality* is not something one can try to do and fail. It is part of the concept of agency that *whatever* one does *is* the explicit expression of what the individual agent implicitly is. From the point of view of *Verstand's* focus on the vulgar, *finite* conception of success and failure, actuality shows up in the form of stubborn recalcitrance: opacity to knowledge of contingent consequences and resistance to the realization of determinate purposes. The distinction that action involves is to the fore. By contrast, from the perspective afforded by treating the expression of individual self-consciousness in its work and deeds as a purpose with respect to which the instrumental contribution of determinate purposes can be assessed, actuality shows up as a *transparent medium* of self-expression.

The element in which individuality sets forth its shape has the significance solely of putting on the shape of individuality; it is the daylight in which consciousness wants to display itself. [PG §396.]

From this point of view, then, objective actuality just is the medium of self-expression. In practical agency, expression is actualization. What one is implicitly *for* oneself becomes explicit as something actual, something with a nature *in* itself, available in that form *for* others, as well as for oneself in this new form.

⁸ *Phenomenology* §393.

⁹ *Phenomenology* §394. See also §419, which talks about the “positive meaning” of “the originally determinate nature of the individual” as “being in itself the element and purpose of its activity.”

To see our authority as agents as *opposed, resisted, frustrated* by recalcitrant actuality is to commit to a model of *pure independence* (Mastery): authority is not real unless it is *total*. We need to make the move from *independence* to *freedom* (*Verstand* to *Vernunft*), to understanding *genuine* authority as *always* and *necessarily* coming with correlative *responsibility*, for only so can it be *determinately contentful*. This is the structure of authority and responsibility of reciprocal recognition, here articulated both socially and historically.

One way of thinking about what the Master gets wrong is that he is still working with a one-sorted notion of normativity, not a two-sorted one. (Correct/incorrect, appropriate/inappropriate really are one-sorted normative categories.) Talk of “independence/dependence” connives at this. For these can seem like exclusive alternatives: either something is independent or it is dependent. It cannot be both (at least not in the same regard). That is understanding independence as pure independence, as unmixed with any coordinate dependence. But if we think of independence as authority, and dependence as responsibility, corresponding to a two-sorted categorization of normative statuses, then we make room for the possibility that authority always comes with a correlative responsibility—not just in the sense that if X has authority over Y, Y has responsibility to X, for that is the one-sorted, Master’s conception, and independence and dependence could be understood to stand in this relation one-sortedly (compare active/passive)—in the sense that if X is authoritative, X is also always responsible, and if Y is responsible, Y is also always authoritative. My Hegel takes that sort of reciprocity to be essential to determinate contentfulness.

This is a normative articulation of determinate contentfulness of a sort that applies in the first instance to sentence-like things. It should be compared and contrasted with that concerning the normative relations between representings and representeds. I claim Kant first conceived things this way. But it is possible that he had a one-sorted normative conception of representational relations: Representeds determine the correctness of representings. Then it would be part of Hegel’s innovative development of that normative conception of representation to construe it in two-sorted normative terms of the representing exercising *authority* over representeds, representeds being *responsible* to representeds.

Explicitly expressing in the medium of actuality what an individual self-consciousness implicitly is is not just one more determinate purpose, which an agent might or might not endorse, at the same level as writing a phenomenology of Spirit, building a house, or putting on a dinner party. It is clearly a second-order phenomenon, in this way like the ‘purpose’ of accomplishing one’s purposes. That one, too, is one that any intentional agent could be said implicitly to endorse, though unlike self-expression, it is not one that is guaranteed to be satisfied. Both are really ways of talking about the structure of agency as such, rather than something peculiar to any particular exercise of it.

But is there any *point* to thinking of self-expression as self-actualization as itself an end, especially given its immunity to failed attempts to realize it? Why isn’t it just a misleading *façon de parler*? The point for Hegel seems to be the way of thinking about the objective realm of how things actually, concretely, contingently are, in themselves that he sees this expressive idiom opening up: as the artist’s raw materials, the medium, the theatre of self-expression and self-realization. Explicating this idiom of expression through actualization by the exercise of intentional agency is to complete the three-stage metaconceptual progression in ways of conceiving how things stand between the subjective idiom of certainty and the objective idiom of truth. This is conceptual idealism.

Explicating this idiom of expression through actualization by the exercise of intentional agency is to complete the three-stage metaconceptual progression in ways of conceiving how things stand between the subjective idiom of certainty and the objective idiom of truth. It comprises these successive claims:

- *Conceptual realism*: the ontological homogeneity of content between what things are *in* themselves and what they are *for* consciousness. Both are conceptually structured, that is, articulated by incompatibilities and consequences (mediation and determinate exclusive negation). (Notice that since conceptual content can take these two different forms, things are not by this thesis identified with ideas.)
- *Objective idealism*: the reciprocal sense-dependence of the concepts by which we characterize objective relations of incompatibility and consequence, on the one hand, and subjective processes of resolving incompatibilities and drawing inferences, on the other. (Notice

that since sense-dependence does not entail reference-dependence, the objective world is not taken to depend for its existence, for instance, causally, on the existence of processes of thinking.)

- *Conceptual idealism*: the constellation of objective, conceptually articulating relations and subjective, conceptually articulating processes should be understood in the first instance in terms of the *process* that is the cycle of intentional action (perception-thought-action-perception), and only derivatively in terms of the relations induced by that process.

V. Hegelian vs. Fregean Understandings of Sense and Reference

According to the claim I have been calling “conceptual idealism”, the second-order *relations* between what things objectively are *in* themselves and the experiential *processes* in which they show up as something *for* consciousness are to be understood in the first instance in terms of those subject-constitutive empirical-practical processes: *Erfahrung*, now understood as the cycle of action-and-cognition. This thesis is the assertion of an *asymmetric* explanatory priority of subjective processes over objective relations, downstream from (added to, built on top of) the *symmetric* reciprocal sense-dependence relations discussed under the heading of “objective idealism”. The relations between what things are for consciousness and what they are in themselves are the relations between *phenomena* and *noumena*, *appearance* and *reality*, as Hegel construes them.

Frege’s notions of sense and reference are his theoretical renderings of two semantic dimensions that are familiar already from our ordinary, presystematic ways of talking and thinking about our talking and thinking. For we distinguish *what* we are saying or thinking from what we are talking or thinking *about*. Talk of *phenomena*, the way things *appear* to us, what they are *for* us, is talk about the kind of understanding of them we exhibit by applying concepts to them in judgment and action. In broadly Fregean terms, what we grasp that presents objects and their relations to us (makes them something *for* us) is *senses*. In virtue of grasping those senses, having Fregean thoughts, we come to stand in *referential* relations to the objects and relations that are thereby presented to us. The *referents* determined by and presented to us by those senses are the objective things and relations our thoughts and (so) judgments are *about*. To say that the referents are what we are talking and thinking about, what we are acting on, is to say that it is those things and their relations that set standards for the normative assessment of the

truth of our judgments, the material *correctness* of our inferences, and the *success* of our actions. Just so, how things are *in* themselves (noumena, reality) determines how they *ought* to be *for* consciousness (phenomena, appearance). A suitable mapping of Hegel's semantic vocabulary onto a more contemporary neo-Fregean one will enable us to see Hegel as offering a novel, interesting, and potentially valuable account of the relations between the concepts sense and reference.

For Frege, words *express* senses, which is what we in the first instance *understand*. The senses of declarative sentences are thoughts: things that can be assessed as true or false. By expressing a sense, words *represent* referents: the things one is thereby talking or thinking *about*. The senses *semantically* fix or determine the referents. In virtue of that semantic relation, senses have the *cognitive* significance of being *modes of presentation* of their referents. They are accordingly *representings* of those *represented*s.

Of course, Hegel's understanding of what corresponds to the Fregean notion of sense is in crucial ways quite different from Frege's. To begin with, Hegel is a *holist* about the conceptual contents we grasp in thought and express in speech and action. As we have seen, for Hegel conceptual contents are identified and individuated by their place in a network articulated by relations of material incompatibility and (so) material inference (determinate negation and mediation). Grasp of them consists in the capacity to move around in that network according to those relations, acknowledging their normative force in the experiential process of resolving incompatible commitments, both practical and cognitive, extracting inferential consequences of both sorts, and elaborating, pursuing, and adjusting plans in the cycle of action and judgment. The conceptual contents of judgments and intentions (cf. "What the deed is can be said of it."), ways things can be *for* consciousness, are not intelligible one by one or in a static snapshot—apart from their roles in such relational networks and processes of practically acknowledging error and failure. By contrast, however it might be with Frege himself, many contemporary neo-Fregean theories are thoroughly atomistic about senses.

Another significant difference is that Frege discusses senses exclusively in the context of *theoretical* or *cognitive* activity: paradigmatically, judging. However, as we have seen in this

chapter, Hegel is at least equally interested in the relations between how things are *for* consciousness and how they are *in* themselves that are instituted by *practical* activity. In that case, what the deed is *for* the agent (the analogue of sense) is a matter of the agent's *acknowledging* of responsibility by endorsement of *purposes* in virtue of which the deed has specifications under which it is *intentional*. And what the deed is *in* itself (the analogue of referent) is a matter of potential audiences *attributing* of responsibility for the deed subsequently specifiable in *consequential* terms. That the very same deed can be picked out both in terms of what it is *for* the agent and what it is *for* others, both *prospectively* in intention and *retrospectively* in consequences—that these two senses can pick out the same referent—is the basis of the identity-in-difference that is the process of experience, which in the *Reason* chapter becomes visible as having the structure of a cycle of action-and-cognition. The fact that some consequential specification can be at once an aspect of what the deed is *in* itself *and* what it is *for* others—indeed, *for* the agent herself—points to another important and distinctive feature of Hegel's construal.

Another axial divergence between Fregean and Hegelian construals of sense and reference concerns their categorial heterogeneity or homogeneity. For Frege, senses and referents are different *kinds* of things. Senses are not like the crystals, carrots, and cats (and complex numbers and truth values) that make up the world we talk about. Thoughts and other expression-senses occupy a distinct “realm of sense”, a third world of directly graspable or intelligible items to be identified neither with subjective ideas nor with objective occupants of the actual (causal) or logical orders. We are not told a lot about what sort of thing senses are—though they evidently can stand in inferential and incompatibility relations with each other. But Frege is explicit that they are ontologically *sui generis* and that their realm is (largely) disjoint from the realm of reference.¹⁰

For Hegel, though, the way things are *for* consciousness can be just the same as the way they are *in* themselves. Noumena are a kind of phenomena. They are categorially *homogeneous*: the same kind of thing. For the basic tenet of Hegel's conceptual realism is that

¹⁰ Only ‘largely’ because on his account, the customary senses of expressions become their referents, when the expressions occur in the context of indirect discourse.

both are *conceptually* articulated, that is, stand in relations of material incompatibility and material inference. Hegel warns us in the *Introduction* against construing the subjective realm of certainty and the objective realm of truth in ways that excavate an ultimately unbridgeable gulf between them—one that would, in Fregean terms, make unintelligible how senses could be cognitive modes of presentation of objects to subjects and could semantically determine what representeds they are representings of. His first move is to come up with a notion of conceptual articulation that applies equally to the world we act in and on and know about, on the one hand, and to our thoughts about it, on the other. Both sorts of thing are accordingly the sort of thing that are in the right shape to be grasped or understood—not *immediately*, but the mediation is a matter of material inferential and incompatibility relations to other graspables of just the same sort: the holist point.

A further significant point of difference between Hegel's and Frege's versions of the sense/reference distinction—besides the issue of semantic holism vs. atomism concerning senses, inclusion vs. exclusion of the practical role of senses in intentional agency, and the categorial homogeneity vs. heterogeneity of senses and referents, with its consequences for how one can think about what grasp of senses consists in—concerns the *determinateness* of senses. Fregean senses are required to determine classes of referents whose boundaries are *sharp*, *fixed*, and *complete*. To say they are *sharp* is to say that it is impossible for any possible object to fall *partially* in the class determined by the sense, or both to fall in it and to fall outside it (noncontradiction). To say that the referents are *fixed* is to say that the boundaries of the class of referents determined by the sense do not change. (Which sense a given sign expresses may change, if the use of the sign changes, but the senses themselves do not change.) To say that the boundaries of the class of referents is *complete* is to say that the sense determines a *partition* of the possible candidates: *every* particular is classified by the sense either as falling under the concept it determines, or as not falling under it (excluded middle). This is Fregean determinateness, or determinateness in the Fregean sense.

VI. Retrospective and Prospective Perspectives on the Development of Conceptual Contents

In taking it that acknowledging the *incompatibility* of one's commitments obliges one to *change* them, one is taking how things are *for* one to answer to a standard of how they are *in* themselves. That *is* taking them to be *about* something, to be appearances of a reality, phenomena presenting some noumena, senses presenting referents, in short, ways things are *for* a subject, rather than *merely* states *of* a subject. This is the shape of a story about *referential purport* in general: what it is for a conceptual content (a sense) so much as to seem to be, or be put forward as, to function practically for the subject as being, *about* or *representing* how things objectively are.

So what one must *do* in order thereby to be taking it that one is talking or thinking *about* something is to perform a *Erinnerung* of the development of one's views. For constructing that sort of expressively progressive genealogy is exhibiting the sequential experiential transformations of what things are for one as governed, guided, and controlled by how things all along were in themselves. Distinguishing in this way between expressively progressive transformations and those alterations in how one applies those very same concepts that were not expressively progressive is treating *all* the prior applications of those concepts as subject to assessment according to the normative standard set by how things have been revealed (so far) really to be: the actual objective facts and intentions, and the material incompatibilities and consequential relations that really articulated their properties and relations. This *is* treating them all as appearances of that one reality, all phenomena presenting one noumenal situation. That is to say that performing such an *Erinnerung* is treating all the senses as *cognitively presenting* the referent, in that they actually *produce* it as the culmination of the reconstructed trajectory through the actual course of development. And those same senses *semantically determine* the referent in that they are exhibited as having been all along imperfect and incomplete *expressions* of it, in the sense that that referent, the way things are in themselves, sets the norm that distinguishes expressively progressive from expressively retrogressive experiential steps: the difference between more and less revelatory appearances.

On this Hegelian account, the link between sense and reference is in the first instance an *expressive* one: the senses express the reference, making (some aspects of) it explicit. It is a relation established *retrospectively*, by turning a past into a history, an expressive genealogy. And it is in terms of this retrospectively discerned expressive relation that the *representational* dimension of concept use is explained. Expressive genealogies reconstruct experiential processes into traditions.

So it is the retrospectively discerned reconstruction of a *rational*, in the sense of expressively progressive, tradition that ties together senses and referent. Where for Frege it was a truth *relation* (making true) that connects them, for Hegel it is this truth *process* (progressively expressing more truly) that secures the cognitive and semantic relations between senses and their referents. This structure is what supports the *asymmetric* sense-dependence relation asserted by the thesis of conceptual idealism.

We must reconstrue the concept determinate, so as to think of it in the first instance as a feature of the whole process of *determining* conceptual contents, and only derivatively of the snapshot stages of that process, rather than the other way around. We must distinguish determinate_{Verstand} from determinate_{Vernunft}. The metaconcept of concepts that are determinate_{Verstand} is the idea of a universal that settles, for every particular, whether or not the particular falls under the universal, independently of any consideration of the process of *determining* the boundaries of that universal. This is the Kantian-Fregean idea that Hegel thinks is incoherent. There are no determinate_{Verstand} concepts that really (never mind finally or fully) articulate the world. There *are* determinate_{Vernunft} ones that do so, finally and fully. They are the very concepts we are deploying now. But they articulate the world only via the *process* of refining them—a process that in principle has no end point. It is the *process* that is the truth. Thinking that it must have an endpoint, on pain of leaving an unconceptualizable residue is looking for determinateness_{Verstand}. Determinate_{Verstand} is what you get if you take *one* of the perspectives—the retrospective, Whiggish one, and understand the relation between the whole process, *including* the prospective shift to a *new* Whiggish story, on the model of how things look from *within* just one of those stories. This is one-sidedly mistaking one *aspect* of the process, one perspective on it, for the whole thing. The only way to ask whether one *concept-*

slice is correct or not is to ask about whether the *content* of the concept it is a temporal slice of is correct or not. That is to ask about the whole unfolding (becoming-more-explicit) *process*.

VII. Intentional Agency as a Model for the Development of Senses

The home language game of Frege's distinction between sense and reference is empirical, cognitive, or theoretical discourse. But by the time we have reached the discussion of *Reason*, we know that the process Hegel calls 'Erfahrung' in general has the structure of a Test-Operate-Test-Exit cycle of action *and* cognition. In the cognitive phases of such a cycle what is revealed by an expressively progressive process of transformation of what it is *for* consciousness is what the world is *in* itself. But there are also the practical phases, in which what is revealed by an expressively progressive process of transformation of what it is for consciousness is what the *self* is.

In fact, the model for the retrospective discernment of the implicit unity of a course of experience—the development of what things are for consciousness in the direction of what they are in themselves—is to be found on the practical side of intentional action. While the initially endorsed purpose, in virtue of which a process counts as intentional (and hence an action, something done) at all, embodies a *de dicto* specification of the intention (and hence at least in a speaker's referring way, the deed), it is only retrospectively, from the point of view of the accomplished deed that a *de re* specification of that intention is available. (Of course, further consequential specifications of the deed, and hence *de re* specifications of the intention, never cease to become available, as the causal consequences of what is done ripple outward—a point whose significance in this context will be considered below.) We are to understand the way the *referent* attributed by a retrospective recollection (*Erinnerung*, *Wiederholung*) of a course of experience on the cognitive side furnishes a standard for the normative assessment of the variously revised and transformed senses that are thereby taken to express it, in terms of how the *intention* attributed by a retrospective *Erinnerung* of an extended action process from the point of the deed accomplished furnishes a standard for the normative assessment of the variously revised

and transformed plans that are thereby taken to express it. The reason one can only tell the intention from the deed is that the intention is primarily manifested in the whole evolving plan, and only secondarily in any individual time-slice of it. Thus it is only retrospectively available. Intentions in this sense are the guiding norms on the practical side that we are to use as the model of *facts* which guide the development of concepts on the theoretical side.

Experience necessarily involves *reflection* on one's concepts and commitments—an active taking of responsibility for them and exercise of authority over them, identifying with some by sacrificing others. Those choices and endorsements, normative identifications and sacrifices, are phases of the ongoing experiential process by which on the one hand self-conscious individual *selves* are determined, and on the other the subjective constellation of concepts-and-commitments, how things are for the subject, is further determined by incorporating aspects of how things are in themselves. This is why “the individual human being *is* what the *deed is*,” and why “Individuality is what *its* world is, the world that is its *own*. Individuality is itself the cycle of its action in what has exhibited itself as an actual world.”¹¹

The model for this on the side of practical agency is the way the *de re* specification of the content of an intention (a kind of sense) changes when a new consequence occurs, so that new consequential descriptions become available. Retrospectively, we learn something about what we in fact intended. So we can see that very intention as being further *expressed*. Prospectively, since the consequence is not foreseeable (it hadn't happened yet), this same process appears as further *determination* of it. The prior sense or intention appears indeterminate in the snapshot Fregean sense, since it has not yet been settled whether *that* consequential description is a specification of *it*. Thus what appears from a retrospective point of view as *change* of Fregeanly determinate but not wholly correct senses—one giving rise to another with each experiential episode—from the prospective point of view shows up as the filling-in of an intention or sense, as the process of action develops. One can see that various consequential descriptions might or might not contingently turn out to be true of what one is doing. One can see that applications of concepts to novel particulars *could* turn out to

¹¹ *Phenomenology* §322 and §308.

be either appropriate or inappropriate. Determination and expression are two ways of looking at one kind of process; they are prospective and retrospective perspectives, respectively.

Telling the right kind of retrospective story is giving the process of development that issues in the final sense (and so determines the referent) the shape of a *plan*. Doing that also involves making choices among alternatives, and formulating a plan to secure a result. The purpose is to pick out of the actual developmental trajectory of appearances elements structured in what could be called an “*expressive plan*”. This is a *de re* specification of an *intention* retrospectively discernible from the *achievement* of the currently endorsed sense. Only revision moves get included in it that contribute to the goal—that can be seen retrospectively to have been *functionally successful* in realizing the purpose, achieving the goal. The sub-goals of an expressive plan are expressively progressive revisions: ones whose resulting sense is a move in the direction of the referent-sense that retrospectively serves as the normative standard for assessing the expressive success of all the senses that arose earlier in the process.

It is entirely compatible with being a functional *expressive success* in this sense that a revision move be a *local failure* in the vulgar or ordinary sense, in that it immediately led to a further incompatibility, just as in ordinary cases of intentional agency, vulgar success or failure to achieve an immediate purpose does not settle the question of functional success or failure in contributing to the execution of a plan aimed at a larger or more distant purpose.

And in any case, *every* revision will be found *eventually* to occasion a further experience of incompatibility, requiring a further revision. Stability of conception is for Hegel at best a temporary achievement, one that is in principle not just fragile but doomed to disruption. The movement of experience is what incorporates concrete particularity into the content of universals, what gives matter-of-factual contingency the form of normative necessity, what mediates immediacy. *All* the particular, contingent immediacy of things has *never* been and will never be *already* expressed or expressible in a constellation of determinate concepts-and-commitments.

This fact about the permanent *prospective* empirical-practical inadequacy of any set of conceptual commitments means that each currently endorsed constellation that provides the reality standard for extracting an expressive genealogy from what then show up as its antecedent appearances will itself eventually be unmasked as an appearance of some other reality—perhaps only somewhat different, but in some cases significantly and substantially so.

But in fact, doing the *prospective* work of coming up with a new revision and doing the *retrospective* work of coming up with a new recollection that exhibits it as the culmination of an expressively progressive process in which what was implicit is made gradually but cumulatively more explicit are two ways of describing *one* task. The second phase of each experiential episode can then be thought in two essential, and essentially complementary ways, from two different points of view.

- Regarded prospectively, from the point of view of practical deliberation, the subject/agent is obliged by the acknowledgment of commitments standing in relations of incompatibility to do something to the concepts-and-commitments he has inherited, to alter them so as to remove the incompatibility. In a broad sense, this is further determining the contents of those concepts-and-commitments by incorporating into how things are for one the empirical-practical information that is provided by the fact that applying the conceptual norms one currently endorses has led to contradicting oneself. That constellation of concepts-and-commitments must then, according to its own implicit norms, be revised, refashioned, *remade*. It is a criterion of adequacy on succeeding at this practical task that one can tell a retrospective story about how, if things are as the revised constellation of concepts-and-commitments takes them to be in themselves, one found that out by a privileged sub-sequence of the actual experiential episodes one underwent.
- Regarded retrospectively, from the point of view of assessment of the experiential transformation, that remaking must be exhibited as the culmination of a process by which what was all along implicit in the concepts one endorsed and the commitments one undertook in applying them becomes gradually more explicit. That is, one must exhibit the result of one's revision as *finding out* how things all along already were in themselves, what one was really talking and thinking *about*, what one was referring to

by deploying the earlier, variously defective senses, the reality that was all along appearing, though in some aspects incompletely or incorrectly.

The *disparity* of the *senses* (appearances, phenomena, ways things are *for* consciousness) that is manifest prospectively in the need to revise yet again the contents-and-commitments one currently endorses, and the *unity* of *referents* (reality, noumena, ways things are *in* themselves) that is manifest retrospectively in their gradual emergence into explicitness as revealed by an expressive genealogy of the contents-and-commitments one currently endorses, are two sides of one coin, each intelligible only in a context that contains the other. Thus the sense in which many alternatives are *prospectively* open to the subject-agent of experience in the second phase of an experiential episode is just that many different revisions could be *retrospectively* rationalized by different expressive genealogies. Hence there are many different referents those senses could be taken to determine semantically and present cognitively. On the other hand, the actual applications of concepts that lead to experiential choices of revision—*identification* with some features of a constellation of concepts-and-commitments through *sacrifice* of others—provide the raw materials that must be selected and arranged into expressively progressive, rationally reconstructed traditions vindicating the current conceptual constellation *as* the reference both semantically determined and cognitively presented by all the senses from which the expressively privileged trajectory is drawn.

The process by which what Hegel calls “the Concept” develops, as constellations of conceptual contents-and-commitments are found wanting and replaced or revised—which is the same process by which individual self-consciousnesses develop—must be thought of as both a process of ever greater *determination* of conceptual contents and of ever greater *expression* of them. Regarded *prospectively*, the conceptual contents are being *made more determinate*, as features of how things really are in themselves are incorporated into how they are for consciousness by crucial experiential episodes. Regarded *retrospectively*, the conceptual contents are being gradually but inexorably (with retrospective necessity) revealed and expressed: what was all along implicit made more and more explicit.

The key to the Hegelian semantic vision is that talk of the process of sequentially and progressively *determining* (making more determinate) disparate senses, and talk of the process of

sequentially and progressively *expressing* (making more explicit) referents are two ways of talking about the *same* process.

End