

HEGEL, LITERATURE AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

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INTRODUCTION

The present book takes as its aim the uncovering of a certain *narrative shape* to Hegel's philosophy of agency. Its concern, however, is not with the (unlikely) task of discussing "Hegel as literature," but rather with the sort of narrative Hegel thought required by his *philosophical* interests – in this narrow compass, the interest of an adequate philosophy of human agency.

For Hegel, the question of narrativity and agency loomed largest in writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*PhG*), a riddlingly allusive work whose far-from-obvious narrative structure has, by turns, been characterized as that of a tragedy, a comedy, and (perhaps most frequently) a *Bildungsroman*. What will be of interest here, however, is not a reading that construes the *PhG* as a whole in terms of a single such genre, or even the development of Hegel's own theory of genres, but rather the question of how literary forms may be crucial to the philosophical project concerning agency that Hegel begins to work out in the *PhG*.

The Hegelian argument that will be considered here is, briefly, that literature, in its various forms, gives a *privileged access to action*; that *tragedy*, *comedy*, and *the romantic novel* represent a sequence of essential categories for our self-understanding as modern agents; and that these literary modes open up most particularly for Hegel issues of what I will call the *retrospectivity* and *theatricality* of action and of the possibility for an action's *forgiveness*. Such claims about the importance of literature to Hegel's concept of agency in the *PhG* may immediately raise for some the usual suspicions about Hegel's alleged ambitions to a "grand narrative" of history and human endeavor. Yet the study of Hegel, and particularly that of the *PhG*, has recently been reinvigorated in a way that may allow the approach to agency that emerges within it to avoid some of these familiar objections.

1. Hegel and Post-Kantian Philosophy

The reinvigoration of which I speak turns in large part on understanding Hegel's project as an engagement with the implications of an essentially *post-Kantian* philosophical situation, rather than (as many of those who see the "grand narrative" in Hegel's strategy would have it) as some regression into precritical modes of thinking. One way of considering this post-Kantian situation may be glimpsed in John McDowell's notion that Kant's legacy lies in the attempt to supersede a "familiar predicament" of a "typical form of modern philosophy": the problem of the "Myth of the Given" – as McDowell describes it, the tendency to appeal to something "outside the space of concepts" that is "simply received in experience."¹ The difficulty this notion presents is that we cannot expect that an extraconceptual Given – something *outside* the "space of reasons" – could provide us with the *reasons* or warrants that we need for empirical judgments, since relations like implication hold only *within* the "space of reasons." Kant's achievement for getting beyond this myth is, McDowell holds, to see that intuition is not a "bare getting of an extraconceptual Given," but a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. Receptivity, in other words, "does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation" between receptivity and spontaneity.²

To Hegel and the immediate post-Kantian generation of which he was a part, Kant's philosophical approach both opened up the possibility of getting beyond the difficulty associated with the aspiration for the Given and created, as they saw it, some fresh obstacles to the pursuit of a reconstrued epistemology.³ The epistemological project that Hegel pursues in response to Kant is one that I will characterize in the following

1. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6, 110.
2. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9.
3. McDowell's claim that "the way to correct what is unsatisfactory in Kant's thinking about the supersensible" is "rather to embrace the Hegelian image in which the conceptual is unbounded on the outside" (*Mind and World*, 83) is examined further in Sally Sedgwick, "McDowell's Hegelianism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 5:1 (1997): 21–38, and Robert Stern, "Going Beyond the Kantian Philosophy: On McDowell's Hegelian Critique of Kant," *European Journal of Philosophy* 7:2 (August 1999): 247–269. See also Graham Bird, "McDowell's Kant: *Mind and World*," *Philosophy* 71 (1996): 219–243; Michael Friedman, "Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*," *Philosophical Review* 105:4 (1996): 427–67; Alan Thomas, "Kant, McDowell and the Theory of Consciousness," *European Journal of Philosophy* 5:3 (1997): 283–305; and Henry Allison, "We Can Act Only Under the Idea of Freedom," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 71:2 (November 1997): 39–50.

chapters as a “corrigibilist” one. Philosophy no longer sees itself as being on a search for an “incorrigible” or indubitable Given, but instead responds to the traditional query of the skeptic in a new way: not by a direct “refutation,” but by taking up what Hegel comes to call a “thoroughgoing” or “self-consummating” skepticism – the weighing of all knowledge claims, including the claim of Hegel’s system itself, as claims that must count *as appearances*, and the examination of what contradictions may be involved just on the terms of those claims themselves.⁴

The employment of such a strategy with respect to skepticism has been well characterized in terms of a general philosophical move from a Cartesian concern with “certainty” to a Kantian concern with “necessity” – a move, that is, from a concern with the hold that we can have on a particular claim to a concern with the hold that various claims may have on us.⁵ Thus the *PhG* construes its project with respect to skeptical doubt as a “highway of despair” – the examination of what certain claims involve just on their own terms and whether, in the light of experience, such claims would necessarily need to be revised in order to be justifiable.

Such a general epistemological project would seem to have consequences for the traditional problems raised in the philosophy of *agency*, as well. Who an agent is and what he takes himself to be doing in his actions are questions that might be construed differently, if in our account of action we can also not rely on a Given.

2. A New View of Agency

How might the post-Kantian concern with getting beyond the separability of conceptual and receptive elements in our experience have a bearing on our understanding of action?⁶ I want to sketch here briefly

4. See especially the discussion of skepticism in Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s “Phenomenology”: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On how Hegel’s epistemological project with respect to skepticism meant a more serious engagement for him with *ancient*, as opposed to modern, skepticism, see Michael Forster, *Hegel and Skepticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

5. Variations on this formulation may be found in Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), and Pinkard, *Hegel’s “Phenomenology”: The Sociality of Reason*, 5–6.

6. McDowell sees the matter in terms of a direct analogy to the famous Kantian claim that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”: when it

three large considerations of agency that I claim follow from Hegel's attempt to wrestle with this question and that will be the focus of my subsequent discussion in this book.

To begin with, we might contrast the view that I will be sketching as Hegel's with a voluntarist picture of action, on which the construal of responsibility ordinarily considers separately two items: an agent's prior intention (or "will") and the deed that causally resulted or was put into play, as it were, by the agent. On a "corrigibilist" view of agency, by contrast, an agent's intention, or his understanding of the norm on which he acts, is something that is not artificially separable from the entirety of the action itself. The corrigibilist is thus concerned with a facet of our ordinary experience of agency that the voluntarist is unable to give a sufficient account of: an agent's experience that what she understands herself to *intend* may, for example, change in the course of the action or may be adequately understood only when the action has been completed and seen in its full context.

A corrigibilist approach to agency might be characterized, first of all, then, as an inherently *retrospective* one. Retrospectivity has been of philosophical interest particularly in cases of moral luck, where justification cannot appeal to the isolation of single moral motives, but must take into account as well what observers (and even the agent herself at a later time) would say actually happened in an action. The Hegelian concern with retrospectivity in justification goes much more deeply than the problems raised by cases of moral luck, however. Hegel holds, as I will explore particularly in Chapter 2, a kind of pragmatist view of intentions and norms as defined by their actualization or *use*, and a full account of what those intentions or norms are must remain open to what they involve in practice.⁷

comes to actions, we should consider similarly that "intentions without overt activity are idle, and movements of limbs without concepts are mere happenings, not expressions of agency" (McDowell, *Mind and World*, 89–90).

7. The account of agency that I am attributing to Hegel here bears some affinities with that adumbrated by Robert Brandom in his recent book *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Beginning with the pragmatist claim that it is the *use* of concepts that determines their content, Brandom develops an account of agency that has resonances with each of the three points I outline in this section as essential for Hegel's project of agency in the *PhG*: he takes up the separability issue with the claim that "what is implicit may depend on the possibility of making it explicit" (*Articulating Reasons*, 8–9); rejects, as I would claim that Hegel does, a "Humean" notion of practical reasoning on which *desires* and preferences are assumed to be "intrinsically motivating" (30–31); and finally defends a "rationalist expressivism" (32–35) that requires the sort of recognitive structures defended here.

It is not only the assessment of actions and their justifiability that requires a consideration of the public space in which they are regarded, however. If justification cannot refer to incorrigibly known intentions, it would seem also that desire cannot be regarded as a motivating force in the sense of causing action merely because an agent happens to *have* a given desire. An agent's ability to assure himself that his desire to act is really "his" would seem to require instead some account of desire formation that shows how desires are embedded in a pattern of *norms* or social moves.

But if, for the corrigibilist, accounting for the justification and motivation of action involves such inherently retrospective and social elements, a voluntarist or causalist might reasonably ask here just how it is that an agent can be said to assure himself that *he* is "in" his action so as to have any coherent sense of practical identity at all. Such an agent could have no prospective certainty about the justification of his actions or immediate certainty about his desires such as the causalist/voluntarist view claims to offer. Having put aside the causal account of agency in favor of a more holistic one that does not separate intention and deed, the corrigibilist would need, it would seem, to look to a larger way in which individuals may be "in" their actions – more particularly, to the way in which an action might be *expressive* or revealing of an agent. The expressivity that would be involved on such an account, given the retrospective and social concerns we have seen, could not, of course, be understood as the immediate utterance of an inward "given" or nature; it must itself rather be part of an oscillation of the sort that we have seen between impersonal and personal sides of agency: my view of the norm I am applying in action must be correlated with what that norm turned out to involve in practice; my sense of how I understand myself to be motivated must stand in some relation to what other agents would say is behind actions of such a type.

In such an ongoing dialectic of expressivity, what is "mine" in action would inherently involve certain publicizable or shareable modes of expression that open the action to the *interpretation* of others, and impersonal candidates for judgment of action would involve conflicts just insofar as an agent attempting to act on them would be unable to understand her actions, according to those standards, as her own. The notion of practical identity to emerge from this ongoing process of negotiation and interpretation would thus not represent a natural or given form of identity, but would, rather, be a sort of *recognitive achievement*.

These implications of a corrigibilist approach to agency are important

elements of the account I will give of Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: I will take them up in terms of the *retrospectivity* of accounting for justification and motivation; the socially mediated character or *theatricality* of the context of those accounts; and the construal of practical identity as a recognitive achievement, which is most fully acknowledged in the important Hegelian notion of *forgiveness*. Taken together, these three moments already suggest something about how that enterprise may have a narrative shape – a narrative that becomes more explicit to itself in a retrospective way, that involves a continuing effort to revise the accounts agents can give of justification or motivation, and that recognitively acknowledges how an agent's identity has been expressed through just such a process of revision.

3. Narrativity, Normativity, and Hegel's Appeal to Literature

Such a picture may also begin to suggest the use that an account of agency like Hegel's might make of *literary* narrative. Unlike some contemporary philosophical appropriations of literary works, Hegel's appeal to literature is not grounded simply in a general philosophical concern that the ethical "shape" or moral salience of certain situations may require a novelistic or dramatic "sight" for particulars. Nor is it merely a matter of employing a rhetorical strategy that "engages" or "implicates" a reader in a succession of such particular situations. From what we have seen about the structure of Hegel's argument, the question about narrative that leads him to literature would seem, rather, to be something like this: how to present the expressive connection of an agent to his action in a way that captures the move from a set of considerations that are at first only implicit for an agent until he acts; and that then considers the agent's successive reflections about what was socially embedded in the implicit norms on which he acted and the essentially recognitive character of his identity within that set of norms.

In the *PhG*, this question about capturing the peculiar kind of agentive expressivity I have just sketched comes to the fore in an explicit way in the famous "Spirit" chapter. "Spirit" is, most generally considered, the realm of normativity: it is the place in Hegel's project where agency moves from being understood in terms of putatively impersonal or universal "reasons" to a construal of how agents act on norms embodied in particular forms of social life in which they participate. Thus the shapes of consciousness in Hegel's narrative at this point start to involve a more explicitly historical and cultural context. The questions about how

Hegel is effecting the transition at this point in his narrative are many and complicated: how exactly the new historical and cultural elements enter the narrative, why the move is made from an apparently contemporary concern with the Kantian and post-Kantian moral world at the end of the preceding chapter on “Reason” to the world of ancient Greek “ethical life.”

Among the most pressing questions that arise for a reader about the moves Hegel makes here is why a series of famous literary figures seems suddenly to be involved in Hegel’s account. Why, for example, does Hegel turn for his sketch of the initial “ethical order” in “Spirit” to Sophocles’ *Antigone*? And why are the succeeding moments of “culture” and “conscience” so informed by Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* and the novelistic figure of the beautiful soul?

Unpacking the answer to these questions will allow us to see more broadly how the issue of agency and narrative expressivity I have described plays out in Hegel’s text. The famous appropriations of *Antigone*, *Rameau*, and the beautiful soul in the “Spirit” chapter are, as many readers know, only part of Hegel’s appropriation of various narrative forms.

In fact, Hegel seems in writing the *PhG* to have drawn on an impressive diversity of narrative sources – from contemporary accounts of atrocities during the French Revolution, to newspaper reviews of current novels and historical monographs on ancient slavery. What makes the *literary* sources of narrative so distinctive within his project is that Hegel conceives that the literary genres in their development tell a story that is essential to the purpose of the *PhG*. What can be seen in the emergence of the literary genres of tragedy, comedy, and the romantic novel is an emerging truth about human agency.⁸ Tragedy, particularly

8. One of the questions that will be examined in the following chapters is how Hegel’s use of the genres in this narrative of agency in the *PhG* compares to his later “official” genre theory in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Central to Hegel’s account of the beauty of art or the ideal in the *Aesthetics* is in fact a notion of action or *Handlung* (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], 217–244). What makes drama the highest of the arts is that it places *acting* human beings before an audience (although it is the actors’ *speech*, not their gestures, that is the prime expression of that action). The *Aesthetics* tells the further story of the essential *pastness* of that highest embodiment of the truth about human action in ancient Greek drama – a point at which the *PhG* account both corresponds and differs (see Chapter 4 of this volume).

There are numerous studies that bear on the question of the role that the genres play in the *PhG*. A helpful work on Hegel’s later theory of the dramatic genres, as it is developed in the lectures on aesthetics, has recently been published by Mark Roche (*Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel* [Albany: State University of New York

ancient Greek tragedy in its presentation of fate, opens up the retrospective experience of agency; comedy is seen to involve a self-reflectiveness about the socially mediated or theatrical character of agency – a dropping of the tragic mask of “givenness,” as it were; and the romantic novel of the beautiful soul, in its concern with resolving the paradoxes of conscience, articulates a notion of recognitive practical identity that is most fully achieved in certain novelistic moments of forgiveness.⁹

While the clearest moments of Hegel’s presentation of tragic retrospectivity, comic theatricality and novelistic forgiveness are in the three famous literary appropriations of the “Spirit” chapter, the literary influence on Hegel’s presentation of agency in the *PhG* is wider than that. In Chapter 1, I begin with the puzzle of literature’s sudden “eruption” in the *PhG*: the striking fact that, after the Preface, the book’s first half alludes often to philosophical and religious works, but rarely to literary works until a burst of quotations and appropriations at a crucial juncture in the middle of the “Reason” chapter. Hegel’s narrative argument about agency, as I show in the first chapter, requires him to make use of the progression of literary forms I have mentioned not only in the “Spirit” chapter itself but also for initially setting the stage for Spirit’s arrival (hence the unexplained eruption of the literary in the middle of the “Reason” chapter that precedes “Spirit”) and for giving an account of why literature was so used (hence a cryptic account of the literary genres in the “Religion” chapter that follows).

Examining these correlations in Hegel’s famous literary borrowings in the *PhG* not only will give a useful point of access to Hegel’s own understanding of agency – and to why a term like “Spirit” is required for an adequate explanatory account of it – but also may provide a better understanding of the Hegelian side of certain disputes in contemporary

Press, 1998]); see also discussion of the issue in H. S. Harris’s commentary to the *PhG*, *Hegel’s Ladder*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), vol. I: *The Pilgrimage of Reason*; vol. II: *The Odyssey of Spirit*; especially I, 18; I, 29, n. 91; II, 581–3; II, 647–8.

9. Hegel’s treatment of conscience and the beautiful soul represents a *recapitulatory* moment that explicitly looks at how the previous two moments of retrospectivity and theatricality can be taken into account in a modern notion of agency and the self. For an examination of how Hegel’s account of this last moment represents an “analytic of significant action,” see J. M. Bernstein, “Conscience and Transgression: The Persistence of Misrecognition,” *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 29 (Spring/Summer 1994): 55–70. In many ways, the moments I outline here represent a reading-back into the “Spirit” chapter as a whole of the recapitulatory “analytic” of action that Bernstein’s insightful article first suggested to me: the five considerations of agency that he discusses there are (as I hope will become clear in the following sections) all either explicitly or implicitly taken up in my account of retrospectivity, theatricality, and forgiveness.

philosophy of literature, particularly with respect to the claims of Romantic irony against the Hegelian “system.” For among the many underexplored elements of the *PhG*’s claim that the Science of Spirit it heralds must also “make its appearance” is the evident attempt on its part to enter the significant literary *agon* of the day. The moments we have been discussing, in fact, might be said to represent Hegel’s contributions to three such competitions: the first, perhaps with an eye to his Tübingen roommates Hölderlin and Schelling, about how the Greeks and in particular their tragic heroes present an alternative path for modernity; second, perhaps with an eye to Goethe, a translation of a work of cosmopolitan French wit that allows for reflection on the relation between French and German aspects of modernity; and third, certainly with an eye to the inhabitants of the literary circle at Jena – and here most particularly Friedrich Schlegel – an attempt to understand what kind of sociality is implicit in the claims of Romantic individualism and whether Romanticism can produce a genre (as Schlegel appears to have claimed about the novel) that can reach beyond the categories of literary genre entirely.

The account that follows will thus involve close readings of Hegel’s famous literary borrowings in the *PhG*, but with an eye to how they help Hegel open up the question of agency in the context of his larger philosophical project. Oddly enough, even among those who have been most interested in the literary quality of Hegel’s narrative, there has not been a thorough study of Hegel’s actual appropriation of literary works.¹⁰ As is well known, part of the need for such a recovery is due to Hegel himself, who complained that the whole of the *PhG* is “such an interlacing of cross-references back and forth” that the reader may not be able always to see the structural parallels he intends.¹¹ This project will thus be concerned with re-capturing some of Hegel’s intended “interlacings.” But, more to the point, as I will claim in the first chapter, Hegel’s overall philosophical aims in the *PhG* have only recently been opened up in a way that shows the important lines along which the book may be read as a narrative unity.

In setting out Hegel’s argument, I have had it in mind chiefly to make a contribution to understanding the philosophical project of the *PhG* and why that project requires Hegel’s appropriation of literary works

10. A recent exception is Gustav-H. H. Falke, whose *Begriffne Geschichte* (Berlin: Lukas, 1996) is particularly helpful for its examination of the *PhG*’s use of Romantic sources.

11. Hegel, *Letters*, 80.

and forms as it does. Examining Hegel's project with respect to literature in the *PhG* is the primary concern of Chapter 1, which places my argument in the context of recent scholarly debate about the interpretation of the *PhG*. But I have also had a more general reader in mind: a reader who may be interested primarily in how certain literary modes may open up facets of our experience as modern agents, quite apart from any specific Hegelian argument concerning them. Thus the considerations of tragedy and moral luck (Chapter 2), theatricality and self-knowledge (Chapter 3), and the relation of irony and practical identity (Chapter 4) all concern issues that, I hope, will have a resonance for contemporary readers that goes beyond an interpretation of the project of the *PhG*.¹² How much our account, as contemporaries, of such issues in modern agency might owe to Hegel is a question I address in the conclusion (Chapter 5), which examines Hegel's own later post-*Phenomenology* treatment of freedom and the will in his lectures on the philosophy of right.

12. On the issue of moral luck, see the now-classic essays by Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–39, and Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24–38. The issue of theatricality in agency has been of particular interest to recent interpreters of Adam Smith and Rousseau: see Charles Griswold's *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63–70, and Jean Starobinski's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 93–96. On the question of irony and practical identity, see the recent exchange between Raymond Geuss and Christine Korsgaard published in her *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192–3.