

Reason, Genealogy, and the Hermeneutics of Magnanimity

I. A Metanarrative: from Disenchantment to Disillusionment

Hegel said: “To him who looks on the world rationally, the world looks rationally back.”¹ More than half a century later, Nietzsche said “When you stare long into the abyss, the abyss stares back into you.”² The sentiments expressed in these paired gnomic aphorisms mark the endpoints of a critical arc of nineteenth century philosophical thought. Hegel’s sunny homily epitomizes the optimism of his version of the Enlightenment rationalism characteristic of the previous century. Nietzsche’s darker remark foreshadows the pessimism of a distinctive kind of nihilism, rooted in reductive naturalism, which the events of the following century would make both familiar and fitting. Each of these successive nineteenth century currents of thought, one looking back to what had already been understood and one pointing ahead to what had yet to be dealt with, comes with a rationalizing narrative of progress: the first, of disenchantment *by* reason, the second of disillusionment *with* reason.

It was always essential to the self-understanding of Enlightenment that it see itself as the advent of something genuinely new. It defined itself by the contrast between the light of reason it sought, developed, and celebrated, and the darkness from which Enlightenment arose, and by which it was still surrounded and would always be threatened: the shadows of superstition, prejudice, and dogmatism cast by arbitrary despotic power sedimented in the merely traditional institutions with which those habits of thought connived and in which they thrived.

The fundamental conceptual innovation of the time was not the focus on reason by itself. Philosophy, whose avatar is Socrates, had perennially championed reason. What is wholly new in Enlightenment philosophy is rather its identification of reason with *freedom*. “Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” the Christian tradition, in the person of John, already taught. The further insight characteristic of Enlightenment is identifying that transformative emancipatory power with *reason* in its *critical* function. The *only* authority it admits as legitimate and legitimating is the authority of the better reason—that peculiar normative force, compelling only to the rational, that had so fascinated and puzzled the Greeks. And the Enlightenment acknowledges no higher judge competent to assess the merits of competing reasons than the “natural light” with which the capacities of each individual reasoning subject equip it. That is why Kant says “*Sapere aude!*” (“Dare to understand”)—that is the motto of

¹ Introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, published separately as *Reason in History*, tr. R.S. Hartman 1953, p. 13.

² From *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146.

enlightenment,” in his essay identifying enlightenment as “man’s release from his self-imposed tutelage.”³ The advent of an age in which individuals accept no authority transcending their own capacity critically to assess reasons is for Kant, speaking here for the whole Enlightenment, nothing less than humanity’s coming to maturity. This emancipation (literally: in Roman law, the process by which children are set free from the *patria potestas*) is to be effected by wholesale replacement of the traditional model of authority, which understands it exclusively in terms of the obedience owed by a subordinate to a superior (metaphysically requiring an underlying metaphysical normatively determinative *scala naturae*: the Great Chain of Being), by a model that understands authority exclusively in terms of the force of impersonal reasons, assessable by all. Reason, for Kant, can accordingly be identified as freedom in the form of *autonomy*. The authority of the superior-in-power is abolished. Authority resides only in one’s own acknowledgement of reasons, which are reasons for all alike.

All the great philosophers in the period from Descartes to Kant were theorists of Enlightenment. Hegel, though, is the first to take the advent of modernity—for him, the most important thing that has happened in human history—as his explicit topic. Further, he is the first to appreciate it not just as an intellectual phenomenon, namely Enlightenment. He was the first to conceptualize the economic, political, and social transformations as all of a piece with the intellectual ones. He understood the transition from traditional to modern life, as Foucault puts it, as including “elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations.”⁴ For Hegel, reason shows itself as having the form of a vast metanarrative, rationally reconstructing the emergence of modernity in all its multifarious aspects. That narrative is progressive and triumphalist. It is the emergence of reason as sovereign both in individual subjective self-consciousnesses and in the social institutions that they shape and that shape them. It is also, and essentially, as Hegel says, the “history of the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” Here two strands of the Enlightenment come together: faith in the sovereignty of reason, and the narrative of the emerging *self-conscious realization* of that sovereignty, which is the emancipatory power of reason.⁵ Freedom takes concrete form only in the practical (including institutional) appreciation of the *rational* nature of genuine authority: the idea that reasons alone are normatively authoritative. This is reason’s *disenchantment* of the subordination model of authority, in favor of the model of autonomy as consisting in acting for *reasons*.

³ “What is Enlightenment?”.

⁴ “What is Enlightenment ?” (“Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?”), in Rabinow (P.), éd., *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50.

⁵ “But even though man, who in himself is rational, does not at first seem to have got further on since he became rational for himself—what is implicit having merely retained itself—the difference is quite enormous: no new content has been produced, and yet this form of being for self makes all the difference. The whole variation in the development of the world in history is founded on this difference. This alone explains how since all mankind is naturally rational, and freedom is the hypothesis on which this reason rests, slavery yet has been, and in part still is, maintained by many peoples, and men have remained contented under it.” Hegel’s Introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* E.S Haldane and Frances H. Simson, trans. [Humanities Press, 1974], p. 21.

This intoxicating identification of freedom and reason is the beating heart of German Idealism. In it, ideas that in retrospect could be seen to have been all along implicit in Enlightenment rationalism come to fully explicit theoretical self-consciousness. It is in just such a context, Hegel thinks, that countercurrents of thought become visible as also having been all along implicit in that same tradition. In this case, a crucial trajectory of nineteenth century thought expresses the revenge of Enlightenment *naturalism* on Enlightenment *rationalism*. The form that revenge took is *genealogy*. Genealogies directly challenge the very idea of the normative force of the better reason, which lies at the core of the Enlightenment rationalist successor to the traditional subordination model of authority.

The principal practitioners of the genre I am calling “genealogy” were the great unmaskers of the nineteenth century: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. (Closer to our own time, we might add Foucault.) What they unmasked were the pretensions of reason. Kant had rigorously enforced the distinction between reasons and causes, criticizing Locke for producing “a mere physiology of the understanding,” rather than a proper epistemology, by running together issues of justification and causation. We must separate, he insisted, the *quid juris*, the question of right, from the *quid facti*, the question of fact. The first is a matter of the *evidence* for our beliefs, the second of their matter-of-factual *origins*.

When the great genealogists dug down in the areas of discourse they addressed, they found causes underlying the reasons. Their enterprises can be rendered in relatively moderate terms: what they diagnosed were “systematic distortions in the structures of communication,” as Habermas puts it.⁶ For Marx, the distorting causes were economic classes (functional roles with respect to the relations of production). For Nietzsche, they were expressions of the will to power. For Freud they were such things as lingering echoes of a child’s role in the Family Romance. On the moderate understanding of genealogy, those causal factors shape the reasoning of those subject to them, operating behind their backs, so that their own thoughts and actions cannot be transparent to them. This way of thinking about things leaves open the possibility of emancipatory critical discourses, which would make explicit those distorting causal factors, so breaking the hold they have on reasoners and moving them towards the ideal of rational self-transparency.

I will be concerned here, though, with a more radical challenge genealogy can be seen to make to the Enlightenment’s idea of reason. For one can take it that what the genealogists dug down to is not just causes *distorting* our reasons, but causes *masquerading as* reasons. When what we fondly believe to be reasons are unmasked, all that remains is blind causal processes. Those processes have taken on the guise of reasons, but in fact yield nothing more than rationalizations. Genealogy in its most radical form seeks to dispel the *illusion* of reason.

⁶ In Jeremy J. Shapiro (trans.) *Knowledge and Human Interests* [Beacon Press, 1972].

As I shall use the term, genealogical explanations concern the relations between the act or state of *believing* and the content that is *believed*. A genealogy explains the advent of a belief, in the sense of a believing, an attitude, in terms of contingencies of its etiology, appealing exclusively to facts that are *not* evidence, that do *not* provide reasons or justifications, for the truth of what is believed. In this sense, when it occurs to the young person that he is a Baptist because his parents and everyone they know are Baptists, and that had he been born into a different community he would have with equal conviction held Muslim or Buddhist beliefs, that is a genealogical realization. As is evident already in this mundane example, the availability of a genealogical explanation for a constellation of beliefs can have the effect of undercutting its credentials as something to which one is *rationally* entitled. The genealogy asserts counterfactual or subjunctive conditionals linking the possession of certain beliefs (attitudes of believing) to contingent events whose occurrence does not provide evidence for what is believed. If the believer had not had a bourgeois upbringing, were not driven by resentment, or had not had that childhood trauma, she would not have the beliefs about the justice of labor markets, Christian ethics, or conspiracy theories that she does. None of those events, upon which, the genealogist asserts, the holding of the beliefs in question are counterfactually dependent, provide evidence for what is believed.

For the particular vocabularies they address, all of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud offer natural histories of the advent of beliefs (believings) couched in those vocabularies—ones to which the rational credentials of the beliefs (what is believed) are irrelevant. Natural, causal processes of belief-formation are put in place of rational ones. To him who looks on the world reductively, the world looks reductively back. This movement of thought, too, comes with its native metanarrative. Replacing *theological* necessity with *rational* necessity as the fundamental explanatory category is *disenchantment* of the world. Replacing *rational* necessity with *natural* necessity is *disillusionment*. From the genealogical point of view, the Enlightenment apotheosis of reason just substituted one ultimately supernatural self-delusion for another.

The Enlightenment was right to be impressed by the rise of the new science, to see it as requiring a thorough-going transformation of our understanding of our relations to our world. But from the genealogical point of view, it was insufficiently radical. It naturalized, and so disenchanting the world—but it did not disenchant us. The Enlightenment conception of the individual knowers and agents who brought about and were in turn transformed by the convulsions of modernity retains a spark of divinity, in the form of the faculty of reason. The genealogical movement of thought teaches by contrast that the subjects, and their relations to the objects they know about and act on, no less than those objects themselves, must be thoroughly naturalized.

But what about the normative “force of the better reason”? Is it, too, just an illusion arising from the play of natural forces? Or can it somehow be understood in terms of them? Can we really understand the natural science that is the source of genealogies of our believings itself entirely in naturalistic terms? Must we? In its most radical form, the genealogical thought is that *if* we can understand the etiology of our believings (and preferings, intendings, and so on) in terms of causes that do not provide reasons for them, *then* talk of reasons is shown to be out of place: not only superfluous, but actively misleading. The metanarrative of genealogy as unmasking illusions of reason depends on the disjunction “causes or reasons” being exclusive, its forcing a choice on us. Genealogy turns Kant’s distinction back on itself. It becomes a snake, poisoning itself by biting its own tail.

II. Global Reductive Genealogies and Semantic Naiveté

Marx and Freud offer *local* genealogies. That is, they offer genealogical analyses only of a specific range of discursive practices, the use of only some vocabularies—the vocabulary of political economy (with ripples through the cultural “superstructure”, to be sure), or the vocabulary one uses to explicate and make intelligible one’s psychological motivations. Though Nietzsche’s most detailed stories are of this local kind, he also points the way to the possibility of a more global genealogical lesson: that a suitably thoroughgoing reductive naturalism might undercut the rational credentials not just of some parochial region of our belief, but of the whole realm. The very idea of reason as efficacious in our lives would be called in question by globalizing the genealogical enterprise to extend it to *all* discourse. This challenge would come to be expressed explicitly in various forms in the twentieth century, but the neo-Kantian Windelband could already find it implicit in the aspirations of his nineteenth century historicist opponents.⁷ It is this broader idea that I want to consider.

Globalized genealogical arguments take a common form. They present causal etiologies of states and events of believing, thought of as episodes in the natural world, as rendering superfluous and irrelevant appeal to reasons that normatively entitle believers to the contents believed. The thought is that *all* the explanatory work can be done by causes, with no work left to be done by reasons. As a second, subsidiary, task, one then explains the motives for which and the structures by which believers and theorists conceal, from themselves and from others, the underlying causal processes of belief acquisition under an obscuring veil of what then show up as mere rationalizations. All the great genealogists of the nineteenth century particularly relished offering such metagenealogies. That is how they unmask our conception of ourselves as *rational* animals as nothing more than an illusion that puffs up and comforts animals with the sort of natural needs and interests we have. Our need for that swaddling illusion reveals us to be in

⁷ This story is recounted by Frederick Beiser in his chapter on Windelband in *The German Historicist Tradition* [Oxford University Press, 2012].

essence not, as we are pleased to think, autonomous *rational* animals, but merely needy, insecure, *rationalizing* animals.

At this level of generality, the genealogical challenge to reason has the form of a naturalistic reductionism about the essentially normative “force of the better reason.” I think it is illuminating to compare this global challenge with the more focused version Gilbert Harman addresses to specifically *moral* normativity.⁸ He argues that the best explanation, indeed, a complete explanation, of why people have the moral normative *attitudes* they do—why they treat some acts as morally right and others as morally wrong—need appeal only to other normative *attitudes* (of their own, and of others). It need *not* appeal to norms or values in the form of facts about what *is* actually morally right or wrong. He contrasts this situation with that concerning our attitudes towards electrons, the best explanation of which, he takes it, must include reference to facts about electrons and our interactions with them. He concludes that we do not in the end have reason to believe in the existence of moral norms or values, as we do for the existence of electrons.

A global version of this argument, addressed to the norms of reason rather than of morality, would contend that a complete explanation for people taking or treating some claims as reasons for others need appeal only to their attitudes of *taking* or *treating* some claims as reasons for others, not to any facts about what really *is* a reason for what. Propositional attitudes, paradigmatically beliefs, would be treated just as features of the natural history of creatures like us, and hence as explicable entirely in terms of other such features, in this case, further attitudes. For our purposes, it won’t matter much just what form the envisaged explanation takes, so long as it is naturalistic and does not appeal to irreducible normative facts about rational, evidential, or justificatory relations among the contents of the attitudes.

I think there is a structural defect that afflicts global reductive genealogical stories of this kind. They depend on what I will call “semantic naiveté.” Semantic naiveté consists in taking for granted the conceptual *contents* of the attitudes whose rational relations to one another one wants to dissolve genealogically. If the attitudes in question are not thought of as propositionally contentful, then the issue of *rational* normative relations between them, of some of them as providing good reasons entitling or committing one to others, does not even arise—as it does not for whirlpools, thunderstorms, supernovae, and other natural occurrences into whose causal antecedents we might inquire. The question I see as posing a counterchallenge to genealogical challenges to the very idea of reason is whether and how one is to understand the contentfulness of beliefs apart from their situation in a normative space of reasons.

The overall point is that epistemological claims, including skeptical ones, have semantic presuppositions. I am going to argue that the soft underbelly of genealogical skepticism about

⁸ Gilbert Harman *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* [Oxford University Press, 1977].

reason is its implicit commitment to a naïve semantics. When we look at things more closely, we will see that the underlying issue concerns the relations between contingencies governing attitudes—what applications of concepts are taken or treated as correct according to the prevailing reasons—and norms to which those attitudes are subject. Observations about the former provide the basis for the genealogical challenge to the intelligibility of the latter. The particular form of semantic naiveté I will identify as crucial to this debate turns out to be an assumption about the relations between semantic attitudes and semantic norms that is common both to Enlightenment rationalism and to the genealogical challenges to it. The thinker who diagnoses this shared presupposition, contests it, and offers a constructive alternative is Hegel—whom I will argue both anticipates and responds creatively to the genealogical currents of thought he inspired and in many ways made possible.

III. Discursive Norms and Attitudes and the Threat of a Norm/Fact Dualism

I have described global genealogical challenges to our understanding of ourselves as rational both as rooted in Kant's distinction between reasons and causes and as expressing the revenge of that distinction on itself. This is of course a very crude formulation. To refine it, we need to fill in some of the Kantian background. Kant brought about a revolution in our understanding of the mind by recognizing the essentially *normative* character of the discursive. In a decisive break with the Cartesian tradition, he distinguishes judgments and intentional actions from the responses of nondiscursive creatures not *ontologically*, by their supposed involvement with an ultimately spooky kind of mental substance, but *deontologically*, as things their subjects are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. What we believe and what we do express *commitments* of ours. They are exercises of a kind of *authority* characteristic of discursive creatures. Responsibility, commitment, authority—these are all *normative statuses*. Concepts, which articulate discursive acts of judging and intentionally doing, Kant says, are *rules*. They are rules that determine *what* we have made ourselves responsible for, *what* we have committed ourselves to, *what* we have invested our authority in. Appreciating the rulishness of the mind is Kant's normative turn.

Practically, what we are responsible for and committed to *doing* in investing our authority in how things are or are to be, Kant thinks, is having *reasons* for those commitments. What concepts are rules for doing is reasoning. It is the concepts articulating the contents of our judgments and intentions that determine what count as reasons for and against thinking or acting that way: what would *entitle* us to do so or *justify* us in taking on commitments with those conceptual contents. As discursive creatures, we live and move and have our being in a *normative* space of *reasons*.

After Descartes, the challenge was to find a place for mental stuff in a natural world of physical stuff. After Kant, the challenge became finding a place for norms in a natural world of facts. Descartes has been roundly criticized for his dualism of minds and bodies. The danger is

that the result of Kant's revolutionary insight into the normativity of intentionality would be to replace that dualism with a dualism of norm and nature. (Indeed, that is arguably the rock on which nineteenth-century German neo-Kantianism foundered.⁹) I take it that a *distinction* becomes a *dualism* when it is drawn in terms that make the relations between the distinguished items unintelligible. I will argue that the collision between the possibility of global genealogies and understanding ourselves as rational depends on a set of assumptions (which can be gathered together under the rubric "semantic naiveté") that would turn Kant's distinction into a dualism, but that those assumptions are optional, and indeed incorrect. I will argue further that Hegel—intense and insightful reader of Kant that he was—already understood all this and offered a constructive alternative that can provide a way forward for us in thinking about these issues today.

Kant's normative turn expressed an insight in discursive *pragmatics*: our understanding of what we are *doing* in judging and acting intentionally. He also moved beyond the Cartesian tradition he inherited in seeing that its characteristic *epistemological* concerns raised a more fundamental *semantic* question. His idea here was that if we properly understood what it is for our thoughts to be representations in the sense of so much as *purporting* to represent something (to "have objective validity," in his jargon, the successor concept to Descartes' "tanquam rem"—being as if of things), the epistemological skeptical question of what reason we have to think that they ever *correctly* represent something would be revealed on semantic grounds to be ill-posed (his "Refutation of Idealism"). Hegel saw, however, that as penetrating as these archaeological semantic excavations were, Kant failed to appreciate and address a crucial *semantic* question raised by his original normative pragmatic idea. Kant correctly saw judging and acting intentionally as exercises of authority that come with correlative responsibilities: commitments to having reasons for and acknowledging consequences of those undertakings. He understood concepts as functions of judgment, in the sense of rules that determine what would count as a reason for applying those concepts in judgment, and what the further consequences of doing so are. In a strict sense, all Kantian rational creatures can do is apply concepts, in judging and acting. So those discursive activities presuppose the availability of the concepts they deploy. But that presupposition raises in turn the question faced by Kant's rationalist hero Leibniz: where do those concepts come from? (The two thinkers are together in rejecting responses in terms of abstraction, which are characteristic of empiricism.) Once the discursive enterprise is up and running, new concepts can be formed downstream from applications of old ones (e.g. by "judgments of reflection"). But what is the origin of the concepts that make empirical and practical discursive activity possible in the first place?

Hegel reads Kant as having a two-stage story: transcendental activity is the source of the conceptual norms that then govern empirical discursive activity. The empirical self accordingly

⁹ Fred Beiser argues for this claim in "Normativity in Neo-Kantianism: Its Rise and Fall" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2009): 9-27.

always already finds itself with a stock of determinate concepts. The (transcendental) processes by which discursive norms are *instituted* are sharply distinguished from the (empirical) processes in which those discursive norms are *applied*. In the twentieth century, Rudolf Carnap (in this regard, as in others, showing the effects of his neo-Kantian antecedents) provides an index example of this Kantian two-stage semantic-epistemic explanatory strategy. In his version, the two stages correspond to beginning by fixing *meanings* and only then fixing *beliefs*. The first, semantic, stage is selecting a *language*. The second, epistemic, stage is selecting a *theory*: a set of sentences, couched in that language, that are taken to be true. His student Quine objected to Carnap that while this two-stage procedure makes perfect sense for formal or artificial languages, it makes no sense for natural languages. All speakers do is *use* the language—Kant would say, to make judgments. That use must somehow determine both what their expressions mean and which sentences they take to be true. In the vocabulary I used to talk about Kant, the use of language to express judgments must be understood as effecting *both* the institution of conceptual norms *and* their application.

Two-stage stories about the division of labor between semantics and epistemology—that is, about the relations between conceptual contents and their application in judgment—are committed to *semantic purity*. This is the view that the contents concepts possess are not at all affected by the use of those concepts in making judgments: believing a particular subset of the universe of believables. That is the point of having a first, semantogenic stage at which contents are determined, conceptual norms instituted, before the application of the concepts in taking things to be thus-and-so—to be as represented by some already contentful representings, and not others. Commitment to semantic purity is commitment to the possibility of pursuing semantics independently of commitment to how things actually are. The thought is that epistemic commitments are not to contaminate semantic ones. Semantic commitments are necessary conditions only for the *expression* of epistemic ones. On this picture, two independent elements combine to make epistemic commitments (true claims): semantic commitments (picking a language, concepts), and how the world is. The second element is irrelevant to the first. (In recent years, we have come to doubt this picture on the basis of arguments, by Putnam, Burge, and Davidson, among others, for what has come to be called "semantic externalism".)

Semantic purity is not an unintelligible idea. It makes sense in the context of stipulating associations of semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions for an artificial language, by a theorist working in a semantically more powerful metalanguage. Semantic *naïveté* results when one believes that semantic *purity* is intelligible for an *autonomous* intentional stratum: for natural languages, or for thought in general. Quine objects to the semantic naïveté of commitment to the possibility of pure semantics—and in this regard makes common cause with the later Wittgenstein. Both thinkers take it that all there is to confer content on our expressions is the way those expressions are used: paradigmatically, in making claims and forming beliefs, that is, in committing ourselves to how things are. Two-stage theories about the division of semantic and epistemological labor for natural languages and the thoughts they express, they think, are

bound to invoke semantic stories about the first stage that make the notion of conceptual content ultimately magical. They are committed to semantic purity. So, when applied to natural languages and thought, they are semantically naïve. This is exactly Hegel's complaint about Kant: he was uncharacteristically, but culpably, uncritical about the source and nature of determinate conceptual contents. In this regard, Hegel is to Kant as Quine is to Carnap. And like Quine and Wittgenstein, Hegel offers an ultimately pragmatist account of how using a natural language can be intelligible as both instituting and applying conceptual norms.

This line of thought bears directly on the issue we are considering. For global genealogical reductive explaining away of norms in favor of attitudes presumes that it is intelligible for the contents of propositional attitudes to stay in place after normative reason-relations among their judgeable contents are relinquished. Otherwise what is being explained genealogically can no longer be understood as *believings*—as attitudes of taking things to be (representing them as) thus-and-so. If our attitudes were not genuinely conceptually contentful, then we would not even be *purporting* to represent things as being thus-and-so; things would not even *seem* to us to be thus-and-so. If disillusionment about the reality of norms of reasoning entails *semantic nihilism*, then it is self-defeating: the genealogists claims would entail that her own claims are senseless. (Here we might compare the argument that if we were brains-in-vats, then nothing could give our thoughts the content either that we are brains-in-vats, or that we are *not* brains-in-vats—or indeed, any propositional contents at all.) I think in fact there is a good inferentialist argument to the conclusion that no account according to which discursive practitioners never actually are rationally entitled to their claims, justified in holding them, have real evidence for them (all normative statuses) can ultimately make sense of their normative attitudes having semantic content. But I am not going to rehearse such an argument here.

The point I want to make is that taking the contents of propositional attitudes in general to be independent of the government of those attitudes by norms concerning what is genuinely a reason for what presupposes a semantically naïve two-stage account of the division of semantic and epistemological labor. For it requires that the contents of propositional attitudes have already somehow been fixed in advance and independently of the rough-and-tumble of assessing evidence and deciding what to believe. The semantic challenge for the globalized Harmanian genealogist is accordingly to say how we are to understand the contents of the attitudes in favor of which genuine norms have been eliminated. The corresponding challenge for a one-stage account is to explain how institution of genuine conceptual norms is compatible with the possibility of genealogical explanation of acts of applying such norms. Hegel understands this challenge, and offers an intricate and sophisticated story about the relations between the institution and the application of conceptual norms, including the relations between discursive normative statuses and discursive normative attitudes, that is aimed precisely at meeting that challenge. In the rest of this essay, I want to present the outlines of that story, as I understand it.

IV. From *Verstand* to *Vernunft*

One way into Hegel's constructive alternative to the semantic naivete of two-stage theories of the division of semantic and epistemic labor is through his conception of the determinateness of conceptual norms. What semantic purity claims conceptual contents are pure *of* is contamination by the *epistemic*, that is, by *knowledge* claims, *judgments* as to how things *actually* are. The semantics of concepts (universals) is supposed not to depend at all upon epistemic commitments, that is, on judgments. (A prominent avatar of commitment to semantic purity in our own time is Jerry Fodor, who insists that running together semantic and epistemic issues—as he sees Davidson and Dummett, as doing, for instance—is the methodological Great Bad that must be overcome if semantics is to move forward.) Hegel's slogan for the conceptual sea-change he sees as necessary (and sufficient) for appreciating the interdependence of semantic and epistemic commitments is that we must move from understanding the conceptual in terms of static categories of *Verstand* to understanding it in terms of dynamic categories of *Vernunft* (adapting Kant's terminology to his own uses).

Kantian concepts are determinate in the *Verstand* sense in that the rational relations of consequence and incompatibility between concepts (universals), which identify and individuate them, are taken to be fully settled in advance of any application of those universals to particulars in judgment. Kant envisaged an asymmetric structure of capacities, in which a faculty of *spontaneity* (activity) is the source of universals, which are applied to the particulars supplied by a faculty of *receptivity* (passivity). In developing his successor *Vernunft* conception, Hegel takes over from Kant his insight into the normative character of concept-use, and radicalizes it by construing the relations between universals and particulars itself in normative terms of authority and responsibility (his "independence" and "dependence"). Hegel takes his cue from the fact that, transposed into the normative key, the relations of authority and responsibility between universals and particulars are reciprocal and symmetric. Kant's system masks that underlying symmetry by an artificial, asymmetric division of semantic and epistemic labor. Spontaneous exercises of the *semantic* authority of the understanding (*Verstand*) over universals are independent of and prior to exercises of the *epistemic* authority of particulars (in the form of the manifold of intuition delivered by receptivity) which determine the *correctness* of applications of universals to those particulars in judgment. This overarching asymmetric structure is a manifestation of Kant's understanding of the freedom of reason in terms of *autonomy* (pure independence).

According to Hegel's symmetric normative construal of the relations of authority and responsibility between universals and particulars, the application of one concept (universal) obliges one to apply others to that particular (according to relations of rational *consequence* that articulate (partially determine) the content of the concept=universal) and precludes one from being entitled to apply others to that particular (according to relations of rational *incompatibility*

that articulate (partially determine) the content of the concept=universal). This is the authority of universals over particulars, the responsibility of particulars to universals. (Kant understood this as a semantic matter.) There is a corresponding relation of authority of particulars over universal. For it can happen that one applies a concept (universal) to a particular and the particular does not cooperate in also exhibiting the universals that are its consequence, or in also exhibiting universals that are incompatible with the original one. This Hegel construes as the particular exercising authority over the universal: telling it, as it were, that it cannot have the consequence-and-incompatibility relations that it originally came with, that is, that a different universal is required. (Kant understood this as an epistemic matter.) For Hegel, none of these reciprocal relations of authority and responsibility between universals and particulars should be understood as purely semantic nor as purely epistemic. The clean division of semantic and epistemic labor is an artifact of semantically naïve two-stage accounts. Our judgments shape our concepts no less than our concepts shape our judgments.

Hegel understands *determinateness* (Bestimmtheit) in terms of what he calls “*individuality*” (Einzelheit). Individuality, in turn, is a matter of the characterization of a *particular* by a *universal*, which is something that has the form of a *fact* or a *judgment* (in the sense of judgeable content, which, when true, is a fact). As Kant emphasized, concepts shape and articulate judgments. Hegel adds the idea that judgment is the process by which concepts are determined. The essence of Hegel’s *Vernunft* conception is an account of the structure of the dynamic *process* in which the whole constellation of concepts-and-judgments (what Hegel calls “the Concept”) develops by the exercise of the reciprocal authority of universals over particulars and particulars over universals. Judging, the application of universals to particulars, is the development of *individuals*: at once the semantic shaping and determining of universals and the epistemic discovery of which universals apply to particulars.

Kant’s pure independence model of semantic authority as untrammled by corresponding responsibility leaves it unclear what room there remains for epistemic constraint. Why cannot the boundaries (implications and incompatibilities) of the universal that has been applied simply be redrawn to accommodate any looming recalcitrance (in the mode of the preadolescent, who, falling off a bicycle, says “I meant to do that”)? More deeply, what counts as *changing* the content of the concept (universal)? What holds fixed, in advance, the commitments one undertakes by applying it, if its content is wholly up to the “spontaneous” activity of the subject? The Kantian division of semantic and epistemic labor seems unable to exclude the possibility that “whatever seems right to me is right”—in which case the issue of correctness does not get a grip (as Wittgenstein puts the point). There is nothing in the picture to confer *determinate* contents on concepts, nor to hold them in place *as* them determinate.

What is needed, Hegel thinks, is to replace Kant’s *individualistic* model (driven by his understanding of freedom as autonomy) with a *social* one. What Kant tried to accomplish within

the boundaries of a single knowing subject by the division of semantic and epistemic labor should rather be done by a genuinely *social* division of labor. Concepts for Hegel are not to be found between the ears of individual knowers, but in the public *language* they speak.¹⁰ (As Hilary Putnam would later put the point, “Meanings ain’t in the head.”) This transposition of the issue into a social, linguistic key makes it clear how in judging, whose paradigm now becomes asserting, I can bind myself by norms provided by the concepts I apply to particulars. It is wholly up to me whether I assert that the coin is copper—rather than manganese, say. But it then *not* up to me what else I have committed myself to by claiming that, and what would entitle me to that commitment. The metallurgical experts my community charges with the care and feeding of the concept copper will *hold* me responsible for having committed myself to the coin’s melting at 1084° C., and to have precluded myself from claiming that it is an electrical insulator. Whether I *know* about these implications is neither here nor there. They are features of the move I have made in my language-game. It is my participation in that game that permits me also to *think*, quietly to myself, *that* the coin is copper—a thought that inherits its shared content from claimables whose sense the community fixes.

On this model, the *authority* of an individual speaker (what Kant construed as *autonomy* and Hegel as a moment of *independence*) is balanced by a reciprocal *responsibility* (a moment of *dependence*). And the content I have freely committed myself *to* and made myself responsible *for* is held in place as *determinate* by my fellow speakers, whom I have authorized to hold me responsible *for* it. (That is *their* “moment of independence”.) What I am responsible for is what I *said*, not what I might later claim to have *meant*. (The sense in which I can privately mean something other than what I say is intelligible in principle only against the semantic background of what is publically sayable.)

What Heidegger called “the dignity and spiritual greatness of German Idealism” is founded on Kant’s reconstrual of self-conscious *selfhood* as consisting in *freedom*, in the sense of the *authority* to *commit* oneself determinately, the capacity to *bind* oneself by conceptual *norms*, norms that are *rational* in the sense that they articulate what is a *reason* for a judgment or an action with that content. Hegel sees that self-consciousness in this normative sense is an essentially *social* achievement. The authority to *make* oneself responsible (for what one thinks or what one does) makes sense only in a context in which one can be *held* responsible. That requires *two* loci of authority and responsibility. Normative statuses, such as authority and responsibility, and the selves that are the subjects of such statuses, Hegel teaches, are instituted by reciprocal recognition: that is, by individuals practically taking or treating one another *as* authoritative and (so) responsible. Those I recognize, in this normative sense of authorizing to hold me responsible, form a recognitive community. In telling language, Hegel says that self-conscious *individual* selves (normative subjects) are instituted only when *particular* organisms

¹⁰ “Language,” Hegel says “is the Dasein of Geist” [the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [A.W. Miller, (trans.), Oxford University Press] paragraph 652], that is, it is the actual existence of the normative, and hence of the discursive.

come to stand in recognitive relations to one another (a matter of their practical normative attitudes), and so to be characterized by the *universal* that is the recognitive community.

As I read him, at the center of Hegel's thought is the idea that there is a structural—he says “*logical*”—relation between particularity, universality, and the individuality that consists in a particular being characterized by a universal, that has as species all of

- the *semantic* relations between particulars in the sense of singular terms and the universals in the sense of predicates that characterize them in *judgments*,
- the *ontological* relations between particulars in the sense of objects and the universals in the sense of properties that characterize them in *facts*, and
- the *social-normative* relations between particulars in the sense of human organisms and the universals in the sense of their recognitive communities, in virtue of which they become self-conscious individual selves in virtue of being members of those normative communities.

Accordingly, I take it that the cardinal standard for assessing a reading of Hegel is how it understands and assesses this assimilation.¹¹ In my reading, the social recognitive species is the key one, in terms of which the other two are to be understood. This is controversial, and I will not here expound either my understanding or my assessment of the value of this central move of Hegel's.

V. The Normative Structure of Tradition and Reason's March through History

Besides developing Kant's normative insight along the *social* dimension, Hegel develops it along a *historical* dimension. What binds them together is Hegel's idea that determinateness on the side of the *content* of conceptual norms (the topic of semantics) is intelligible in principle only in the context of a thoroughgoing *reciprocity* of authority and responsibility on the side of the practical *force* or *significance* of those norms (the topic of pragmatics, in a broad sense). The metaconcept of *Vernunft* is a view about the *process of determining* conceptual contents, and the kind of determinateness that results. This process has the normative structure distinctive of a *tradition*. Hegel's two-dimensional approach could be denominated “Confucian”, insofar as his social/historical dimensions line up with the fraternal/filial synchronic and diachronic familial dimensions on which that tradition focuses its account of determinate obligation and normative status.

Understanding genealogical analyses as undercutting the claims of reason (the rational bindingness of conceptual norms) depends on assessing the rationality of discursive practice solely on the basis of the extent to which applications of concepts, whose contents are construed as always already fully determinate, are responsive exclusively to evidential concerns. Responsiveness of concept-application to any factors that are contingent relative to the conceptual norms already in force—the phenomenon genealogical diagnoses highlight—is

¹¹ Given the centrality I assign to this move of Hegel's, it is surprising to me how few interpreters so much as discuss it. Clearly someone is missing something crucial. A sensible reader will accordingly take suitably seriously the possibility that it is me. I do.

accordingly identified as irrationality. But the idea that assessments of rationality are appropriately addressed only to the application of already fully determinate concepts is the product of a blinkered semantic naiveté. It ignores the fact that the very same discursive practice that is from one point of view the *application* of conceptual norms is from another point of view the *institution* of those norms and the *determination* of their contents. Only when discursive practice is viewed whole does its rationality emerge. If the semantogenic process by which conceptual contents are determined and developed is ignored, the distinctive way in which reason informs and infuses discursive practice remains invisible.

For Hegel, the principal task of reason—in his preferred sense of *Vernunft*, rather than *Verstand*—is, as he says, to “give contingency the form of necessity.” Following Kant, by ‘necessary’ he means “according to a rule.” That is, reason’s job is to put the sort of material contingencies the genealogist points out into *normative* shape. From Hegel’s point of view, then, far from *undercutting* reason, the possibility of genealogical explanation just underlines the *need* for this particular function of reason, and the crucial job it does.

How can we understand the process whereby concepts acquire and develop their determinate content as putting contingencies of their application into normative shape? Hegel’s idea is that a distinctive kind of *retrospective rational reconstruction* of prior applications of a concept is necessary and sufficient to exhibit those applications as conferring a determinate content on the concept. (This is what in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* he calls ‘Erinnerung.’) One brings order to the motley welter that is the discursive practice one inherits by discriminating within it a privileged trajectory that is *expressively progressive*, in the sense of making gradually explicit norms that then show up as having been all along implicit. Doing that is turning a *past* into a *history*.

The best model I know of the kind of rational activity that determines conceptual contents by making or finding the right kind of history for them is the *jurisprudential* one institutionalized and codified in *case law*. Its purest, paradigmatic form takes place in what in the Anglo-American legal world is called “common law.” For in that realm, by contrast to statute law, judges are not guided in their decisions as to whether to apply or to withhold application of a concept (such as strict liability) by explicit statutes, propounded and given the force of law by legislatures—statutes that *say* what is and is not licit according to the norm they institute. In lieu of norms explicit as such principles, judges at common law must decide cases with novel facts on the basis only of norms they discern as implicit in the tradition of already-decided cases.

The governing authority to which common law judges are responsible is provided by precedent. The judge’s job is not only to decide the present case, but also to provide a *rationale* for the decision, by providing a distinctive kind of narrative justifying it as correct. Such a narrative selects some prior decisions as precedential, in the sense of being not only relevant and

correct, but as having revealed some hitherto hidden aspect or contour of the norm developing in the tradition defined by those precedents. The legal concepts and the principles explicating them that are given expression in rationales for deciding novel cases are often characterized as “judge-made law.” This description is apt, because there is nothing more to give content to this kind of law than the decisions judges have rendered and the retrospective rational reconstructions of traditions defined by precedent that the judges offer to justify those decisions.

Rational, rationalizing processes of this sort are responsible to the contents of the conceptual norms they apply, and they exercise authority over the development of those conceptual contents. They are processes of *determining* conceptual contents both in the sense of *finding out* what they are, manifested in the essentially retrospective rationales judges supply for their decisions, and in the sense of *making* those contents what they are, manifested in the essentially prospective shifting and sharpening of the norms each new interpretation proposes. These hermeneutic practices give contingency the normative form of necessity, and by incorporating those contingencies infuse determinate content into the developing norms. It is of the essence of the kind of rationality distinctive of this sort of concept-determining process to be articulated by these complementary perspectives: retrospective determining-as-finding and prospective determining-as-making, *responsibility to* the tradition one inherits and *authority over* the tradition one bequeaths. Looking backward along the privileged trajectory of precedents selected by the narrative rationalizing any particular decision, one sees only unbroken expressive progress: the gradual emergence into the explicit light of day of a governing norm that appears as all along implicit in earlier decisions. Looking forward at how legal concepts and principles evolve by being applied in concrete cases, the discontinuities between these narratives shows up, as sequential judges revise their predecessors’ judgments as to which earlier applications should be treated as precedential, and how. T.S. Eliot describes this aspect of Hegelian *Vernunft* at work in a different corner of the culture:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.¹²

The normative structure of tradition epitomized in the development of the concepts of common law is a diachronic version of reciprocal recognition. Each judge recognizes the authority of earlier judges and petitions for recognition from those to come. All exercises of discursive interpretive authority come with commensurate responsibilities, administered by those whom one petitions for recognition of that authority—who are in turn responsible for their assessments, which can be overturned on the authority of still future judges. I think this is a

¹² In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” [ref.]

model (stylized, to be sure) for how Hegel thinks the contents of *all* ground-level empirical and practical concepts develop and are determined—how conceptual norms are instituted as they are being applied.

VI. From Semantic Naiveté to Hermeneutic Magnanimity

Considering genealogical counterfactuals about what the norms would have been had various non-evidential factors differed reveals a judicial process shot through with contingencies—as, for instance, where the order in which two cases happened to be adjudicated evidently affects the content of the law that results. The normatively contingent character of any particular decision to apply or not to apply a particular concept is manifested in the fact that one always *can* explain any particular decision *genealogically*—in terms of “what the judge had for breakfast,” in the derisive slogan of jurisprudential theory. That is to explain it in terms that do not appeal to the content of the norm whose applicability is in question—to explain it instead for instance in terms of the intellectual fashions or public passions of the day, or by features of the judge’s training, temperament, or political convictions. But to conclude that the possibility of such an explanation means that no norm is therefore instituted, that the norms discerned as implicit in the tradition inherited cannot *rationally* justify one decision rather than another in a novel case, is to insist stubbornly and one-sidedly on occupying only one of the perspectives that are in fact—Hegel insists, and jurisprudential practice demonstrates—two sides of one coin. It is precisely to refuse to see *Vernunft* whole. It is to embrace the semantic naiveté that ignores the essential role rationally incorporating those contingencies plays in conferring determinate content on (determining the content of) always evolving conceptual norms.

Hegel points to the generality of the lesson he wants us to learn from his *Vernunft* model of the practice of reason in a remarkable passage epitomized in an aphorism expressing his twist on a slogan of his day:

“No man is a hero to his valet;

not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet—is a valet....”¹³

The passage continues, explaining that the reason is that the valet’s

...dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies. Thus, for the judging consciousness, there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the moral valet towards the agent.

What Hegel calls the “universal aspect of the action” is its normative dimension. The hero is a hero insofar as he acts according to the norms that articulate his duty. The valet views what the hero does genealogically, in resolutely nonnormative, reductive terms, and so

¹³ PG [665].

...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.

Here Hegel, writing in 1806, before the advent of the great unmaskers of the dawning nineteenth century, acknowledges that *every* application of a norm is in principle liable to a naturalistic, genealogical explanation. It *can* be seen, indeed seen correctly (as far as that vision reaches), from the point of view of its particularity, its normative contingency. But that valet's-eye genealogical view is one-sided, it fails to see the whole of the doing. For the valet fails to see that a norm can *also* be active, that the particular contingent motives he sees (what the hero had for breakfast) can be given the form of normative necessity, can be incorporated in a narrative that exhibits them as in conformity to duty, as correctly performed according to the governing norms.

Hegel's whole metaphysical, metaconceptual apparatus is couched in the logical language of 'particularity', 'universality', and 'individuality'. Individuals are particulars as characterized by universals. Particularity and universality are to be understood as abstract aspects of concrete individuality, intelligible as determinate only in their interaction. This is not the place for me to embark on a disquisition on how I think we should understand this idiom. It suffices for present purposes to say that what stands behind Hegel's deployment of these logical categories is the story about the Janus-faced *vernünftig* process of giving contingency the form of necessity, for which I have suggested the paradigm of the adjudication of cases at common law. The use of the logical vocabulary in characterizing the failings of the one who plays the moral valet to a hero of duty marks the extreme generality of the phenomenon Hegel is addressing, and of the conclusion he wants us to draw.

Hegel calls the genealogical valet's attitude 'Niederträchtigkeit': literally, something like a striving for the low, an impulse to debase. His term for the practical attitude of giving contingency the normative form of necessity is 'Edelmütigkeit': magnanimity. It is a form of norm-instituting recognition—the final form he discusses in the *Spirit* chapter of the *Phenomenology*—and hence a form of self-consciousness. Its retrospective recognitive aspect he calls 'forgiveness' Its prospective recognitive aspect he calls 'confession.' What one forgives is the normative contingencies that infect prior applications of concepts. One forgives them not wholesale, by a grand gesture, but by the hard retail work of constructing an expressively progressive historical narrative in which they play precedential roles as making explicit aspects of the developing conceptual content that are now revealed as hitherto having been implicit. The slogan of this generous hermeneutic recognitive attitude is Tennyson's:

Yet I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns.¹⁴

Concrete magnanimous hermeneutic forgiveness is *finding* such a “purpose”—that is, a norm—to which the concept-application being forgiven can be seen to contribute, widening the thoughts of man. Hegel calls this “making what happens into something *done*.” What the magnanimous interpreter confesses is the contingent inadequacy of each particular such forgiving rational reconstruction. One confesses that one is unable to find a narrative in which *every* contingency is given the normative status of a precedential expression of the underlying developing conceptual norm. One petitions one’s successors for forgiveness of that contingent failure of one’s own efforts at forgiveness. The edelmütig rational, rationalizing process in which conceptual norms are instituted by diachronic magnanimous reciprocal recognition is a structure of *trust*: trust that one’s trespasses will be forgiven as one forgives those who have trespassed.

So Hegel foresaw the genealogical challenge to rational normativity that would arise from a reductive naturalism and would result in a small-minded, niederträchtig valet’s hermeneutics of suspicion. The inspiring hermeneutics of magnanimity and trust he recommends instead is not based on fine feeling or pious sentiment. Instead he argues that the only construal on which reason and meaning are threatened by the possibility of genealogy is a narrow, one-sided conception that is mistaken because semantically naïve. In its place he puts a more capacious conception of *Vernunft* as comprising not only the norm-governed application of concepts but the process and practice by which their content is determined. At its core is the magnanimous hermeneutics that shapes genealogical contingency into a normative, rational form.

End

[8505 words in large type.]

¹⁴ “Locksley Hall” (1835) line 137.