

Readings of “Consciousness”: Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Abstract- This paper walks through four different approaches to Hegel's notion of Consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Through taking four different approaches our aim is to explore the multifaceted nature of the phenomenological movement of consciousness. The first part provides an overview of the three chapters of the section on Consciousness, namely Sense-Certainty, Perception and Force and the Understanding, attempting to unearth the implicit logic that undergirds Consciousness' experience. The second part focuses specifically on the shape of Sense-Certainty, providing an analysis of the movement from Sense-Certainty to Perception from a neuroscientific view. Thirdly, we consider an inferentialist reading of the chapters on Consciousness which has been made popular by Robert Brandom. We think that while this view elucidates the connection that Hegel draws between meaning and use, it fails to account for the vital place of immediacy in each of the shapes. Finally, the fourth part suggests that Hegel's notion of Consciousness improves the reading of tragedy he develops in chapters 5 and 7 of the *Phenomenology*. While many critics have noted that Hegel fails to do justice to tragic experience, Consciousness contains an epistemology that develops analogously to the heroes of ancient tragedy. Each approach in this paper comes at Hegel's description of the journey of Consciousness from a different angle, and together they paint a multi-layered picture of a highly important part of Hegel's corpus.

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1 - METHOD OR IMPLICIT LOGIC IN THE SHAPES OF CONSCIOUSNESSES

According to the text's original title, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a “science of the experience of consciousness.”¹ However, what is the model of consciousness that Hegel proposes to describe in the path of Absolute Knowing? It is not the Cartesian identification of thinking and appearance, and neither does it confer with Reinhold's fixed separation of the individual thinker (the subject) and the “object” of which that subject is conscious. Hegel's intention is to surpass the subject-object model. There are other models such as the model of self-knowledge wherein the subject/object are identical; or a type of collective thinking, undertaken by a community in which the

unity of the ‘thinking subject’ is distributed over a plurality of different subjects. All of these models and dimensions of consciousness play a role in Hegel's alternative to the simple subject-object model.

Paul Redding reminds us that “Kant had thought of objects of experience as necessarily having conceptual (as well as spatio-temporal) form, but non-conceptual (‘intuitional’) content” (Redding, 2010-11, p. 19). In contrast, Hegel elaborates a new model of experience of consciousness. The conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience (see Kant) are in Hegel a dialectical movement between consciousness and the object, or immediacy and mediacy. This movement constitutes the content of the object “because of the constitutive contradiction at its centre” (Redding, 2010-11, p. 20).

There are different interpretations of the *Phenomenology's* opening chapters. For example, Kenneth Westphal, in *Hegel's Epistemology: a Philosophical Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2003, takes the contemporary analytical epistemological approach. Henry Harris, in *Hegel's Ladder: the pilgrimage of Reason*, 1997, qualifies “sense-certainty” as pre-philosophical in everyday life. The intention of this paper is not to defend a single interpretation of the chapters on consciousness in the *Phenomenology* but to explore four different readings. The present section is introductory, elucidating the implicit logic that emerges within the shapes of consciousness. The second will provide a neuroscientific perspective; the third will explore the shapes of consciousness with regard to the neo-Hegelians; and the last will illuminate the experience of contradiction with reference to Hegel's theory of tragedy.

To begin, we identify the movement of logic within the shapes of consciousness. There is normative shape working in the back of consciousness in order to supersede the contradiction of subject-object and instantiate the reconciliation of the experience of consciousness. Hegel presents the contradiction that is the implicit logic in the experience of consciousness and by the dialectic movement it becomes the explicit shape of consciousness in the extended way of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. We have in the whole movement of consciousness the logic of contradiction

¹ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Henceforth we use the following abbreviation: Phen

working at the back of phenomenological experience that the *Science of Logic* will make explicit.

Hegel's Logic is different from the common meaning of 'logic'. His Logic is not a formal approach to valid inference but captures the method and the moments and movement of logic. For Hegel, the great problem from classical logic was the immobility of the categories, that is, the non-movement of whole categories. The *Science of Logic* is a network of concepts that are in relationship to each other by the method of the whole in movement. Some of Hegel's interpreters reduce the movement of Hegel's logic as the mechanical method of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. However, the Hegelian dialectical method cannot be reduced to a simple form. It implies a complex structure of movements and logical moments which we will identify as immediacy, mediation, contradiction and (new) immediacy. 1) *Immediacy* is the beginning of the process that affirms or points out the object. Hegel begins his description of consciousness with the immediate identity. 2) *Mediation* is the movement of the negation of the object or the differentiation of identity. The inner opposition of the object implies two moments: (a) the logic of the Understanding that wants to keep the moments of the object separated from each other; (b) the negativity of dialectic which brings the fixed determination of the understanding into contradiction between positive and negative or identity and difference. 3) *Contradiction* is the movement wherein the two moments of the dialectic reach maximum tension. It begins the process of reflexion into each pole of the object and their immobility dissolves. The result is that the positive is included in the negative and the negative is included in the positive, forming one unity of identity and difference in itself. 4) *Immediacy* is the positivity of speculation which "apprehends the unity of the determinations in their opposition, the affirmative that is contained in their dissolution and in their transition" for a new, wider objectivity.² Thus we have a new immediacy.

These four interconnected moments of 'logic' give life to the concept and constitute the *structure of logic according to the dialectical method*. We can identify these moments of the Hegelian method in the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

1.1 The Experience of Consciousness as Sense-certainty (Chapter 1)

1) *Immediacy as "This" and "Meaning"*: We begin with absolutely immediate knowledge. Consciousness is aware of "I" and "This" immediate content. "Consciousness is 'I', nothing more, a pure 'This'; the singular consciousness knows a pure 'This', or the single item" (Phen, § 91).

2) *Mediation*: The immediate "This" of sense-certainty involves two moments – "Now" and "Here".

This is the inconstant opposition between the two moments. There is a dialectical movement between these two moments, because the use of demonstrative words express the universal but cannot express the individual. Thus we have a contradiction within consciousness.

3) *Contradiction*: The object of sense-certainty has this contradiction - language can express the universal, but consciousness cannot express the particular object of sense-certainty. There is a flux of experience wherein the "me" has always different contents. "In this pointing-out, then, we see merely a movement which takes the following course: (1) I point out the "Now", and it is asserted to be the truth. (2) I now assert as the second truth that it *has been*, that it is superseded. (3) But what *has been*, is not" (Phen, § 107). Now is an absolute plurality of Nows and "me"s. We have the object and the subject as the whole structured subject-object situation that is a thing. "Thus it is only sense-certainty as *whole* which stands firm within itself as immediacy and by so doing excludes from itself all the opposition which has hitherto obtained" (Phen, § 103).

4) *Immediacy as "Thing"*: The whole structured subject-object situation is the universal present immediacy. Consciousness becomes aware that language does not grasp the particular. This entails that the truth of sense-certainty becomes a new shape of consciousness, i.e. perception. "When I say: 'a single thing', I am really saying what it is from a wholly universal point of view, for everything is a single thing" (Phen, § 110).

In Chapter 1 of *Phenomenology*, consciousness begins with immediate sense-certainty and enters a dialectical movement of thought. The work of many mediations lead consciousness ultimately to a perceptual stage of cognition.

1.2 – The Experience of Consciousness as Perception (Chapter 2)

1 – *Immediacy as "Thing" and "Deception"*: the object of perception is the Nothing of the This. It "preserves its immediacy and is itself sensuous, but it is a universal immediacy. Being, however, is a universal in virtue of its having mediation or the negative within it; when it *expresses* this in its immediacy it is a *differentiateF2d, determinate property*" (Phen, § 113). This abstract universal medium is called "thinghood" or "pure essence", a simple togetherness of plurality. 2 – *Mediation*: The perception of the Thing has two moments. First, it connects the properties of Thing through the indifferent *Also*. Second, the perception of the Thing is not merely an Also. It is "an indifferent unity, but a *One* as well, a unity which excludes another. The One is the *moment of negation*" (Phen, § 114). Hegel synthesizes these dialectical moments as follows: (a) "an indifferent,

² G. W. F. Hegel. *The Encyclopaedia Logic*. Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze, trans. T.

F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991, § 82.

passive universality, the *Also* of the many properties; (b) negation, equally simply; or the *One*, which excludes opposite properties; and (c) the many *properties* themselves, the relation of the first two moments” (Phen, § 115). The Thing is a One, reflected into itself as doubly differentiated: The Thing is self-identical, the unity of Thing is preserved and at the same time the otherness is preserved outside of the Thing as outside of consciousness (cf. Phen, § 123).

3 – *Contradiction*: By becoming self-identical the Thing is necessarily in opposition to other Things: “the Thing is thereby in opposition to other Things, but is supposed to preserve its independence in this opposition” (Phen, § 125). The object is for itself so far as it is for another. This reflection is posited in a unity with its opposite. “For this reason the universality splits into the extremes of singular individuality and universality, into the One of the properties, and the Also of the ‘free matters’” (Phen, § 129).

4 – *Immediacy as “Appearance and Supersensible World”*: The perceptual understanding is the experience of empty abstractions of individuality and universality, of the essential and the unessential.

The contradictory “Thing” of perception has a complex concept in the experience of consciousness. The opposition collapses this experience and the new shape emerges from the perception as immediate appearance.

1.3 – The Experience of Consciousness as Force and Understanding (Chapter 3)

1 – *Immediacy as “appearance” and the “supersensible world”*: The object of consciousness is now the unconditioned universal that is the negation of the Thing, and is posited as *Force*. Force is a movement with two moments: for itself and for an other, meaning that it is at the same time equally reflected into itself (cf. Phen, § 136).

2 – *Mediation as play of forces*: “Forces, one of which was supposed to be the soliciting, the other the solicited, Force is transformed into the same reciprocal interchange of the determinatenesses” (Phen, § 138). The play of Forces has three moments in the opposition of forces:

(a) Appearance and the first supersensible world: The syllogism of forces has two extremes, the Understanding and the inner world united by “appearance” (cf. Phen, § 143 and § 145).

(b) The realm of Laws is the “absolute flux” as universal difference (cf. § 148): “This difference is expressed in the *law*, which is the stable image of unstable appearance. Consequently, the *supersensible* world is an inert *realm of laws*” (id. § 149). The first law is a static law or a tautological explanation. According to some commentators Hegel is at this point criticizing mathematical physics (cf. §§ 154 – 155).

(c) The second supersensible world is the inverted world: The second law of appearance is “a permanence of impermanence” (id. § 156). The play of Forces is like an experience of electromagnetism (self-

repulsion and self-attraction), meaning that the law is not static but is transition and change. “Force, *splits* into an antithesis [...] and therefore what is repelled is essentially self-attractive” (id. § 156). The second supersensible world is the inverted world that is the transition from the naïve or common sense to the dialectical conception of appearance. In Hegel’s words, “We have to think pure change, or think antithesis within the antithesis itself, or contradiction”, or, to put it differently, we must think “as inner difference, or difference as an *infinity*” (id. § 160).

3 – *Contradiction*: Infinity synthesizes the laws, and all the moments of the world of appearance are taken up into the inner world. Hegel presents the law as infinity. This means several things: (a) “that it is self-identical, but is also in itself *different*”; (b) that “What is thus dirempted, which constitutes the parts thought of as in the *law*, exhibits itself as a stable existence... [is] just as indifferent and without a necessary relation to one another”; but also that (c) “through the Notion of inner *difference*, these unlike and indifferent moments, space and time, etc. are a *difference* which is no *difference*... and its essence is unity. As positive and negative they stimulate each other into activity. The two distinguished moments both subsist; they are *implicit* and are *opposites in themselves*, i.e. each is the opposite of itself; each has its ‘other’ within it and they are only one unity” (id. § 161). Hegel’s concept of infinity is thus organic: “This simple infinity may be called the simple essence of life, the soul of the world, the universal blood, whose omnipresence is neither disturbed nor interrupted by any difference, but rather is itself every difference, as also their supersession” (id. § 162). Ultimately the infinity is “this absolute unrest of pure self-movement” (id. § 163).

4 – *Immediacy as self-consciousness*: The infinity becomes immediately a new consciousness, to wit, *self-consciousness*. Hegel concludes chapter 3 by claiming that “the two extremes [of the syllogism], the one, of the pure inner world, the other, that of the inner being gazing into this pure inner world, have now coincided” and being “posits itself as an inner being containing different moments, but for which equally these moments are immediately *not* different – *self-consciousness*” (id. § 165).

This experience grasps the contradictions as a play of forces. In the chapter, “Force and the Understanding”, Hegel describes the “play of forces” that stand in opposition to each other as the “absolute interchange” of forces. In contrast to perception wherein the world is a static world of things, now the movement of contradiction of the play of forces is stressed, surpassing the principle of identity and the atomistic assumptions into the relation between opposed forces.

The shapes of consciousness animate social formations, constituting the subjective and objective forms of one and the same object. In other words, these shapes of consciousness and forms of life change according to internal problems as well as external

forces, according to a logic which can be discovered by a 'self-construing' or immanent critique.

Houlgate (2004, p. 55) captures this well: "the categories which are discovered in the *Logic* to be immanent in pure thought (and being) are discovered in the *Phenomenology* to be immanent in consciousness, too – namely, as constituting the logical form of the object as it appears and transforms itself in the experience of consciousness itself". Hegel's chapters on consciousness in the *Phenomenology* thus prove to be instrumental to the unique understanding of logic he develops throughout his philosophical project.

2 – MAKING SENSE OF SENSE CERTAINTY'S IMMEDIATE KNOWLEDGE

2.1. Introduction

The reading in this section is made from the basis of cognitive neuroscience and gives a modern interpretation of sense-certainty, the starting point of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* section A 'Consciousness'. Hegel's principle immediacy is sense-certainty. Sense-certainty is described as the richest form of all knowledge, inexhaustibly rich in content and omitting nothing from the object. Knowledge of this sort never comes into conscious awareness. Here it is suggested that sense-certainty while a necessary precursor for consciousness is not itself of consciousness. Instead, it is the transformation of an object of sense-certainty to an object of perception that gives rise to the initial emergence conscious awareness. As a result, sense-certainty might be considered an idealistic form of sense data.

2.1. The Problem of Sense Certainty as a Shape of Conscious Awareness

The first shape of consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* section A is sense-certainty or immediate knowledge itself. Sense-certainty is described as the richest form of knowledge, 'a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found' (Phen. § 91) and the truest form of knowledge, 'for it has not as yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety' (Phen. § 91). One is, and can never, become aware of such knowledge. Firstly, the physical apparatus which detect sensory information are attuned to detect and process a small portion of all the sensory data available from the external world. Secondly, an awareness of *all* knowledge posited by sense-certainty would render humans non-functional. Finally, as Hegel notes, the knowledge within sense-certainty is 'proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest *truth*' (Phen. § 91). Natural selection has shaped consciousness in such a way that we only ever become aware of a very small portion of either our physical or ideal world. Restricting the bounds of our awareness allowing us to remain task focused, yet maintaining sufficient flexibility to face unexpected occurrences.

Sense-certainty is comprised of a dynamic interaction between the wholly receptive yet passive consciousness as 'I', devoid 'of a manifold imagining or thinking' and the object, as a 'Thing', with nothing to signify that it 'has a host of qualities' (Phen. § 91). Stripped bare this early shape of 'consciousness', might be better considered a precursor to what we intuitively take to be consciousness. Occurring within 'this' sense-certainty in the mediation of two moments: the 'Now' or its temporal nature 'e.g. 'Now is Night'' (Phen. § 95) and the 'How' or its spatial presence "'Here' is, e.g., the tree' (Phen. § 98). Contradiction occurs as our attempts to grasp and declare a '*particular*' of sense-certainty instead express a '*universal*'. As Hegel writes, 'language- which has the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant *get into words* at all.' (Phen. § 110).

Hegel suggests that this is because 'the *universal* is the true [content] of sense-certainty' (Phen. § 95). However, just as consciousness is seen to be knowledge in motion, so too is the content of this knowledge. Sense-certainty began with the particular, and as a product of moving through the moments of sense-certainty, shed those qualities identified it as the *particular* and became the *universal*. Consider for example a simplified model of visual object identification (although any modality would work). Although particular instances of an object may present itself, we do not become aware of it as this particular object, nor identify it as such. Identification of an object achieved through activation along the dorsal visual stream and medial temporal lobe. The object of this activation is no longer the *particular*, but instead the *universal*. It is also at this end point that we possess conscious awareness of what was believed to be the object of sense-certainty is instead now the object of perception. As stated by Hegel, 'it is only sense-certainty as *whole* which stands firm within itself as immediacy' (Phen, § 103) i.e. *perception*. Similarly, this occurs when we express an object declaratively as 'when I say: 'a single thing', I am really saying what it is from a wholly universal point of view, for everything is a single thing' (Phen, § 110).

As conscious awareness does not emerge till the shape of *perception* then are how are we able to make sense of the use of reflective judgements regarding the moments and movements within sense-certainty (and *perception* and *understanding* for that matter). The use of terms such as *truth* requires not only a conscious awareness, which is only ever privy to knowledge, but an awareness of one's own conscious awareness as well. Observation and analysis of the shapes of consciousness is a meta-cognitive undertaking requiring the individual who undertakes be in possession of *self-consciousness*, 'the cognition of what consciousness knows in knowing itself' (id. § 165). Sense-certainty and the movement of knowledge away from it, is devoid of conscious awareness. In this movement we begin with the unconscious immediacy of the *particular* and ends with its conscious expression

as a *universal*. This process while dynamic is an automatic product of how our brain and mind is structured and functions.

2.2. Sense Certainty as Mental Sense Data.

Stripped bare sense-certainty is actually not a form of conscious awareness at all but a necessary precursor to its emergence in *perception*. As a result one possible way to conceptualise sense-certainty is as roughly analogous to what empiricists call sense-data. Sense-data refers to information made available by an external object and detected by one of the sensory modalities (i.e., sight, hear, touch, taste, smell). Unfortunately, our sense organs are only able to detect a small portion of the available sense-data. Of the sense data that is detected, we are only able to selectively attend to, process and present for conscious awareness an even smaller portion still. By the stage we are consciously aware, our awareness cannot just for the object alone, but also self, due to the influence of our own cognition. The non-isomorphic relationship between the object as it exists as in the external world and as an object for conscious awareness is referred to as the 'myth of the given'. As Hegel states, 'It is therefore astonishing when, in the face of this experience, it is asserted as universal experience and put forward too, as a philosophic proposition, even as the outcome of Scepticism, that the reality of external things taken as Theses or sense-objects has absolute truth for consciousness' (id. § 109). Simply stated, we can never truly grasp an instance of an object in the physical world due to the impoverished availability of sense-data available and our cognitive interpretation it.

Although not acknowledged the 'myth of the given' cannot be restricted only to an inability to assess and truly grasp and instance of a physical object external to ourselves. The impoverished nature of the sense-data made available is a constraint bought about by the restricted bounds of detection built into our sense organs. Meanwhile, the capacity to selectively attend and process the portion of sense-data that is detectable is due to the structure and function of the human brain. Interestingly, the organization of the sensory organ closely resembles the organization of primary sensory cortices in the human brain. Further, these same brain regions and processes are recruited for internalised mental simulations. This means that the same restrictions and biases that plague our interpretation of physical sense-data will also plague its idealised equivalent in sense-certainty.

To illustrate this point, again consider an object interacting with a simplified model of our visual system. The human retina, receptive to a small portion of possible visual sense-data, detects and feeds forward information of the *particular* object and scene to primary visual cortices. Our attention guides the visual system to select for elaborative processing information coding for the object of interest. The object is identified through activation of the dorsal visual stream and medial temporal lobes. Here exists memory that

appears to allow us to classify objects in our visual percept. This classification, however, renders the object no longer a *particular*, but instead according to its classification, i.e., the *universal*. The mental generation of a visual percept of an object differs only from the act of physically seeing in so far that it is not externally triggered by the reception of *particular* physical sense-data. Instead, a *particular* internal trigger (i.e., some goal directed state) activates the medial temporal lobes which in turn activate visual cortices to generate a visual percept of the *universal* object. Despite these different triggers, the shared underpinnings in the human brain between the external physical object and its mental simulation mean that the same restrictions and concerns that prevented us from truly grasping a physical object in the external world also prevent us from truly grasping its mental equivalent.

2.3. Conclusion

Hegel begins his *Phenomenology of Spirit* section A 'Consciousness' with the principle immediacy of sense-certainty. Sense-certainty omits nothing from the object being appraised making it inexhaustibly rich in content and the richest and truest form of knowledge. Unfortunately, sense-certainty is devoid of conscious awareness making it also the poorest guide to truth. Here it has been suggested that while sense-certainty lacks conscious awareness it acts as a necessary precursor to its emergence in perception. Viewed in this light, sense-certainty could be conceptualised as a form of idealised sense-data. While both cases present the *particular* object, restrictions imposed by the structure and function of the human mind mean that only the *universal* object can made available for consciousness.

3 – INFERENCEALISM AND MOVEMENTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In this section of the paper we will consider a possible reading of Hegel along inferentialist lines that has been put forward by Robert Brandom in recent years. On this reading concepts are to be thought of as "essentially inferentially articulated" (Brandom, 2002, p. 223), and their inferential articulation is to be thought of as determined by their use. This is to say, in Brandom's terms, that Hegel can be read as espousing the following pragmatist thesis: "the use of concepts determines their content, that is, that concepts can have no content apart from that conferred on them by their use." (Ibid, p. 210)

Reading Hegel in this way may at first seem right. Indeed, one of Hegel's central objections to Kant's idealism can be put down to his rejection of the notion of concepts that are, as Sally Sedgwick has put it, "pure", or "pre-given and fixed" (Sedgwick, 2012, p. 11) - concepts that owe nothing to our interactions with others or their use in our interactions with the world for their determinations. However, we will argue, by looking to the "consciousness" chapters of the

Phenomenology, that a reading of Hegel along inferentialist lines cannot make sense of the notion of immediacy, and for this reason it also cannot make sense of the movement of consciousness from one shape to the next, nor the determinations of the concepts within these shapes. It will be our task here to offer an explication of the notion of immediacy that allows us to hold on to what is correct in Brandom's reading of Hegel, whilst avoiding the pitfalls he encounters.

3.1 - Hegel along Inferentialist lines

The lesson of the "Perception" chapter of the Phenomenology, according to Brandom, is that concepts have content due to their being "essentially inferentially articulated." (Brandom, 2002, p. 223) Hegel discusses this inferential articulation, claims Brandom, "under the headings of 'mediation' [Vermittlung] and 'determinate negation.'" (Ibid.) Mediation here means, for Brandom, a concept's ability to figure as the conclusion of one inference and the premise of another. Determinate negation refers to a concept's material incompatibility relations with other concepts - i.e. the relations that determine which concepts one is normatively precluded from applying given the application of the original concept.³ This means that the application of a concept is the taking up of a normative status, which is determined by the inferential articulation of the said concept.

Furthermore, Brandom asserts that Hegel sees the normative status one takes up in applying a concept as always a social status. Which is to say that what a person commits herself to in applying a concept is not wholly determined by what she takes herself to be committed to in applying the concept. Rather, the determination of what she is committed to also involves an element of the commitments others attribute to her, given her application of the concept. In this sense it can be said that although it is up to oneself to apply a concept, it is not up to oneself what the content of that concept is.⁴ As Brandom understands things, the content of a concept "is the product of a process of negotiation involving the reciprocal attitudes, and the reciprocal authority, of those who attribute the commitment and the one who acknowledges it." (Brandom, 2002, p. 221) This process of negotiation, moreover, is what Brandom takes Hegel to mean by 'experience'. And it is through this notion of experience that we are to understand how Hegel can be read as

endorsing the pragmatist thesis that the use of a concept determines its content.

Experience is thus to be understood, on this reading, as a process of negotiation between different types of authority, and where this is exhibited with clarity by Hegel, according to Brandom, is in the conflict between different types of authoritative judgements; namely, *immediate* and *mediate* judgements. Immediate judgements, for Brandom, are those that are "noninferentially elicited" (Ibid. p. 224) (though the concepts applied in the judgement are still inferentially articulated). Mediate judgements, in contrast, are those that result from "inferences from other judgments - that is, from the application of other concepts one has already made." (Ibid. p. 225) In certain cases, says Brandom, one may find oneself with immediate commitments that conflict with one's mediate commitments. "Then one must alter some of one's commitments...This necessity is normative: one is obliged by the incompatibility of one's judgments, by the commitments one has oneself undertaken" (Ibid.).

What is important for our purposes is to note the structure of judgements as they are here understood. Given the content of a concept applied in a judgement is taken to be inferentially articulated in the way Brandom suggests, the judgement must be, as Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla would say, "agent-neutral" (Lance and Kukla, 2010, p. 117). To see what this means we can fashion an example. Say Camille makes the immediate judgement "the paper in front of me is green". Furthermore, say this judgement conflicts with her mediate judgement "the paper in front of me is blue", which follows from other judgements she makes, such as "the light shining on the paper is yellow", "the room is darkened", etc. The immediate judgement and the mediate judgement both represent commitments that must be assessable for correctness according to their socially determined inferential articulation. What does not matter in this story is who the commitments belong to. Camille does not have to see the commitments as essentially belonging to her. A result of Brandom's story is that Camille's judgements can be translated into "the paper in front of the person at position x is green" and "the paper in front of the person at position x is blue", respectively. Moreover, the normative obligation Camille has to alter her commitments, given the conflict, can be translated into a normative obligation for "the person at position x".⁵ In what Brandom takes to be the process of experience, these translated judgements will do the same pragmatic

³ The phrase "material incompatibility relations" is used by Brandom to distinguish (formal) logical incompatibility relations from non-logical (material) incompatibility relations. For an elaboration of what Brandom means by material inferences (and, by extension, material incompatibilities), see (Brandom, 1994, pp. 97-102).

⁴ For example, I can choose to claim that the tree out my window is a pine, but I cannot choose whether I am committed to the tree being a conifer. The latter commitment depends on others taking me to be so committed.

⁵ Much of what has just been said is derived directly from: (Ibid., pp. 117 - 119.)

It is worth noting here that Brandom responds to the Lance and Kukla article in (Brandom, 2010). He believes that a person's seeing certain

commitments as hers is built into the structure of his inferentialist framework through the distinction between attributing and acknowledging commitments. However, the acknowledgement of commitments is an interpretive affair, one is meant to interpret one's own behaviours, one's differential responses, in such a way that they counts as acknowledgements of normative commitments. This leaves one taking on a third-personal perspective in relation to what it is that is regarded as one's acknowledgement of a commitment. So what it is in this story that is meant to explain how any individual comes to see certain judgements, and hence commitments, as her own is not at all obvious.

work as the original untranslated judgements. Indeed, they must if they are going to be assessable for correctness at all.⁶

3.2 – Hegel and the notion of Immediacy

One thing that becomes clear from the outset of reading the “Sense-certainty” chapter of the *Phenomenology* is that Hegel cannot mean the same thing by immediacy that Brandom means. Hegel begins Sense-certainty with a notion of immediacy that refers to knowledge of an object - said to be a pure “This” from which nothing is omitted - simply as it is, as something received and unaltered, as something known through nothing other than itself (*Phen.*, § 90). Such knowledge is what Hegel refers to as *apprehending* the object (*Ibid.*). Brandom, on the other hand, takes immediacy to be a term that always refers to the noninferential application of an inferentially articulated concept. But this quite blatantly fails to capture what is central to Hegel’s notion. For if immediate knowledge always involved the application of inferentially articulated concepts it would be knowledge not of an object as it simply *is*, but rather knowledge of an object through something other than itself, namely an applied concept and the inferential relations to other concepts that determine it. It would thus be knowledge only of an object *altered* by shifting inferential relations. This knowledge would involve what Hegel calls *comprehending* the object, which is opposed to *apprehending* the object, and is thus exactly what immediate knowledge is not meant to be (*Ibid.*).

Now, Hegel does say that immediate knowledge as just described turns out to be the poorest and most abstract form of knowledge. For, in saying of its object that it is a pure “This”, which is meant to omit nothing and capture it in its completeness, nothing more is being said of it than it is (*Ibid.*, § 91). Hence, the question “must be asked: ‘What is the *This*?’” (*Ibid.*, § 95) But knowing anything more of the object requires mediation - knowing it “through something else” (*Ibid.*, § 92), as Hegel says. It is at this point that inferentially articulated concepts begin to play an explicit role in knowledge. We can see this, for instance, when, in attempting to say more of the object than it simply *is*, Hegel takes “the ‘This’ in the two fold shape of its being, as ‘Now’ and as ‘Here’.” (*Ibid.*, § 95) For this to mean anything something must be said of what the “Here” and “Now” are, and this, according to Hegel, requires saying what they are not; i.e. “Now” is neither “Day” nor “Night”, but is rather that which preserves itself through the coming and going of both, it is *not*-Day and *not*-Night (*Ibid.*, § 96). In this way the “This” is known through the “Here” and “Now”, which are known only through the mediating inferential relations to other concepts that determine them. Given this, should we now say that Brandom is correct, that

immediate knowledge always actually, even if not obviously, involves the application of inferentially articulated concepts?

The short answer to this question must be no. For it would mean asserting that the pure “This” was in fact never really meant to be an object for knowledge at all; it would mean claiming that only the “This” mediated by the “Here” and the “Now” was ever really meant to be object for knowledge. And this cannot be right. The pure “This” is certainly, as Hegel would say, superseded by the mediation of the “Here” and “Now”. But it is also *preserved* as that which is *not* the “Here” and “Now”, that which is negated by employing the “Here” and “Now”. For, as we have seen, the “Now” turned out to be neither Day nor Night, “neither This nor That, [but] a *not-This*” (*Ibid.*) that preserves itself with indifference to both. For this reason the “Now”, as well as the “Here”, is a *universal* for Hegel (*Ibid.*). But that which was meant to be the object of knowledge at the beginning of Sense-certainty is specifically singular (*Ibid.* § 91). It is thus what we mean to say, but fail to say, by employing the universals “Now” and “Here”. “[I]t is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*” (*Ibid.*, § 97), but still it is preserved as the object that is meant; it is meant to be an object of knowledge.

As was suggested in the first section of this paper, immediacy is carried over into the two shapes of consciousness that follow Sense-certainty - that is, “Perception” and “The Understanding”. And in neither case is immediacy the noninferential application of inferentially articulated concepts, as Brandom suggests. Rather, it is knowledge that is meant to have as its object something that is and can be known through nothing other than itself; that is, something that is not determined by inferential articulation. In Perception what is meant to be immediate for consciousness is universality itself, which contains negation within it and is thus determinate (*Ibid.*, §§ 113 – 114). This immediacy, however, breaks apart into the two united, but contradictory, mediating moments of “the One of the properties”, (*Ibid.*, § 129) which excludes other properties and is self-related, and the “Also”, which is the indifferent medium of the many properties, or independent “matters” (*Ibid.*, § 115). These moments are both “being-for-self” and “being-for-another” (*Ibid.*, § 129). They are thus unstable on their own and “the ‘matters’ posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity.” (*Ibid.*, § 136) Universality, that which is meant to be immediate, is here superseded but preserved as what is meant to be, but is not, captured by these moments, by mediation. It is that which is negated by the process of mediation.

Perception, because of its instability, collapses and a new shape of consciousness arises – namely, the Understanding. In the Understanding it is “Force

⁶ This is not to say that we could insert any person, with acknowledgements of any commitments whatsoever, into position x. The person in position x would have to acknowledge the same commitments Camille acknowledges. The point is that Camille need

not regard the person in position x as herself. Person at position x can simply be regarded as the person named Camille in position x, who acknowledges commitments b, c, d, etc. in applying concept A.

proper” (Ibid.), which is the unity of the independent ‘matters’, now taken to be the expressions, or appearances, of this unity, that is meant to be immediate. The ‘matters’ in this sense are appearances of a stable inner, or supersensible, world that underlies their instability and vacillation. The problem for this shape of consciousness is that it finds a need to posit distinct laws for distinct appearances, which must then draw back into the unity of Force. As Hegel says, “this unifying of them is equally and immediately a sundering, for it supersedes the differences and posits the oneness of Force only by creating a new difference, that of Law and Force, which, however, at the same time is no difference.” (Ibid. § 163) Consciousness here finds it is conversing only with itself, positing an inner, supersensible “being containing different moments, but for which equally these moments are immediately not different” (Ibid. § 165). The Understanding thus collapses, and again the immediacy with which the shape of consciousness began is superseded but preserved as what is meant to be, but is not, captured by the mediation of appearances.

3.3 – Why Hegel cannot be read along Inferentialist lines: the importance of Immediacy in Experience

Brandom is on the right track in claiming that for Hegel it is ‘experience’, as a negotiation (exhibited with clarity between the immediate and the mediate), which determines the content of concepts. For as we have seen, it is through the process of mediation, as an attempt to capture that which is meant to be immediate, that a shape of consciousness, and thus also the concepts within that shape of consciousness, is determined. Moreover, he is right to claim that there is a normative obligation incumbent upon an individual to dispel, through negotiation, the conflicts, the contradictions, between the immediate and the mediate that arise for that individual. The movement from one shape of consciousness to the next in the *Phenomenology* is due precisely to this obligation. However, as has been made clear, what Brandom means by the notion of immediacy is not what Hegel means. Brandom takes immediacy to involve the noninferential application of inferentially articulated concepts, whereas Hegel takes it to be knowledge that is meant to be of an object through nothing other than the object itself, free from determination by inferential articulation. It is this difference that has dire consequences for Brandom’s Inferentialist reading of Hegel.

If the process of mediation could capture what is meant to be immediate, then the immediate could be both *meant* and *said*. It could be brought out unchanged into language, and in this sense it could be detached from any consciousness in particular. But as we have seen, the immediate, for Hegel, is exactly that which is meant but cannot be said; the process of mediation fails to capture it, it is what is negated by the process of mediation. For this reason, the immediate is precisely

for consciousness, it is what cannot be brought out, unchanged, and detached from consciousness. Moreover, insofar as the immediate belongs to the particular consciousness – that is, to the individual - any conflict that arises between the immediate and the mediate is thus a conflict *for* that consciousness. And because the conflict is a conflict for the particular consciousness, the normative obligation to dispel the conflict is also *for* that particular consciousness. For Hegel it is because this normative obligation is for the particular consciousness that ‘experience’ comes about.

But in Brandom’s account, as we have seen, there is no reason why an individual should regard the normative obligation to dispel the conflict between the immediate and the mediate as *for* her. Any talk of such an obligation can always be put in the third person. And this is due to the fact that Brandom’s notion of immediacy does not involve anything that is *for* the individual. Immediacy for Brandom involves only the application of inferentially articulated concepts; hence, for him, immediacy involves nothing that cannot be brought out into language. Because of this Brandom cannot make proper sense of ‘experience’, as brought about by an obligation being incumbent on a particular individual.

If we do not pay proper heed to the way in which, for Hegel, what is immediate is specifically *for* consciousness, then the rise of experience remains mysterious; and thus so too do the movements from one shape of consciousness to the next.

4 – THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTRADICTION: CONSCIOUSNESS AND TRAGEDY

This section proposes that the shapes of consciousness make a unique epistemological contribution toward Hegel’s theory of tragedy. This may seem like a premature connection, for Hegel does not explore tragedy as a specific theme until chapter 5 in his discussion of ethical life and chapter 7 in his reading of religion in the form of art. Yet we will try to show that the shapes of consciousness outline the basic elements of tragic experience, revealing the epistemological implications of tragedy that are implicit in Hegel’s speculative reading of tragedy in chapters 5 and 7. We suggest that these epistemological implications show that the standard reading of Hegel’s theory of tragedy overlooks the experience of contradiction in the life of consciousness.

4.1 - Hegel’s theory of tragedy: the standard view

It is not until the twentieth century that Hegel’s theory of tragedy was understood in Anglophone philosophy as a significant element of his philosophical project. In particular, A. C. Bradley’s essay ‘Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy’ (1909) sparked a renewed interest in tragedy as a serious theme of philosophical concern. Yet for Bradley, Hegel’s

attempt to read the tragedies in terms of recognition and renewal neglected the tragic hero's *experience* of the catastrophe: "[Hegel] certainly takes too little notice of it [i.e. the hero's experience]; and by this omission he also withdraws attention from something the importance of which he would have admitted at once; I mean the way in which suffering is borne" (Bradley, 1962, p. 374). Bradley argues that the experience of the hero, the one who bears the suffering in her body, is overlooked in Hegel's speculative reading of tragedy as the self-development of Spirit.

Bradley's reading of tragedy has remained the standard view. In 2002 Sebastian Gardner (p. 243) reiterated Bradley's framework by arguing that Hegel can only maintain the connection between tragedy and ethical development "by stepping outside the experience of tragic art so as to view the perspective of tragedy as merely partial, [which] is to break faith with the experience of tragedy, to fail to give it its due." Both Bradley and Gardner argue that Hegel's reading of tragedy is speculative, neglecting the terrifying experience undergone by the heroes by sublating the tragic moment to the movement of history.

Until recently, Bradley's reading of tragedy remained the standard view. However, in the past decade several attempts have been made to refute the standard reading, arguing that the experience of suffering is implicit within Hegel's speculative reading of tragedy in terms of ethical life.⁷ We want to extend this argument, but not by searching for a notion of experience in Hegel's reading of ethical life. Rather in the experience of consciousness outlined in the opening chapters of the *Phenomenology* we find that Hegel's theory of tragedy does not simply concern the development of ethical life but the epistemological development of consciousness in its experience of contradiction.

Hegel's intention in the chapters on consciousness is to show that the possible avenues that promise to guarantee our knowledge independently of any historical or social practice fail to provide the kind of knowledge they aspire toward. In other words, Hegel refutes claims to knowledge that hold themselves to be *self-sufficient*. These chapters pre-empt the experience of the tragic heroes who represent ethical life, the '*immediate truth*' of a nation, for the heroes hold an immediate relation to an ethical power, bringing it into being through their activity (Phen. p. 265). Similarly, in the forms of knowledge outlined in chapters 1 to 3 we have versions of 'immediacy', for the knower holds that their relation to the known is not based on an inference but is immediate. In immediate knowledge we would apprehend an object as it really is, meaning that there would be no contribution on our side. Yet through walking through the failures of each candidate for immediate knowledge we are led to a view of ourselves as situated in a reflective form of life. Following Terry Pinkard (1994, p. 21), we discover that this form of life

is constituted by a set of assumptions that determine "what counts as knowledge, what is to count as a standard of right action and what is to count as a legitimate form of character." In other words, we discover that the problem of knowledge is not solved by inspecting the contents of our consciousness to see if they match up to the world but to recognise that our knowledge is mediated by a form of life. We are then ready to explore the development of ethical life, of the forms of life that govern what we hold to be true, where Hegel argues that tragedy is of speculative use for it reveals a moment wherein consciousness becomes aware that its knowledge is mediated by the community.

Yet how does the transition from a form of knowledge that holds an immediate understanding of the relation between knower and known to a reflective form of life (what Hegel calls Spirit) occur in the first place? Such a transition necessarily comes before we can reflect on tragedy as a process of learning of which we are a part. The answer is through the experience of contradiction.

4.2 - The experience of contradiction

Sense-certainty: In the first shape of consciousness, sense-certainty, we see the beginning of an epistemology of tragedy. Such an epistemology gives an account of how the hero suffers, undergoes a process of recognition, and comes to a greater understanding of who they are as an embodied and social being. In the shape of sense-certainty we are certain that we are sensing a particular object independently of the object's relations, context, or other claims we might make about it. Sense-certainty appears to be the truest knowledge, for all that it says about what "it knows is just that it *is*; and its truth contains nothing but the sheer *being* of the thing" (Phen. p. 58). However, by pointing to objects through the use of indexicals ('this', 'here', 'now' etc.), we find that the referent of 'this' varies with the context. Thus we discover that if the content of sense-certainty is a 'this', then it is in fact "the universal that is the truth of self-certainty" (Phen. p. 60). However, this discovery brings a contradiction between what sense-certainty holds to be true (that its truth is the being of the thing) and what it discovers (that the referent of the 'this' is not constant). The immediate apprehension of the object takes a particular point of sensation to exhaust an object's being. By discovering that an object is linked up to other sets of description, that an object's features are mediated by universals, sense-certainty discovers that it was in error: that its knowledge is not immediate but mediated.

Sense-certainty anticipates the experience of Antigone in Hegel's discussion of ethical life. In Hegel's terms, ethical life is the '*immediate truth*' of spirit – the relationship of the citizens to their world

⁷ See Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, Julia Peters, 'A Theory of Tragic Experience According to Hegel,' in

European Journal of Philosophy, 19:1, 2009, pp. 85-106, Robert Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012

without the mediation of subjective reflection (Phen. p. 271). Antigone must act in order to bring the ethical power into being, yet by this very act she discovers that she does not have an immediate relation to the ethical power, i.e. divine law, but that her relation is mediated. From the tragic view, the hero is not a demi-god or one destined to rise above the many. The hero is simply the agent who seeks to affirm for themselves that the structures of their own thought and practice really match up to the way that things are or have to be. By doing so they draw the contradictions that lie implicit within their mode of knowledge into being, allowing them to expand their self-awareness in a process that is based entirely on the experience of contradiction.

Perception: Yet after sense-certainty we do not have self-awareness. Sense-certainty reveals that before there is knowledge of objects there are objects of perception. It turns out that we have mediated knowledge of something more basic, to wit, the objects of perception, for sense-certainty turns out to be an abstraction from the immediate perception of objects. The claim of perception is that we require nothing outside of perceptual experience itself which gives us an immediate take on things; we can know the objects of perception without having to know anything else. Yet again we find that the action of perception will reveal its mediated reality in a process of tragic reversal.

Perceptual knowledge understands that its knowledge of objects are mediated by a universal, meaning that it comprehends that the referent of a universal will differ in different cases. In this way it is able to hold the insights it gained from the failure of sense-certainty within itself, within its own essence. To use Hegel's example of a grain of salt, the object shows itself as the universal, as "*the thing with many properties*", for it is constituted of properties such as white, tart, cubical etc. (Phen. p. 67). For perception, the universal and the particular are one, for to be *aware* of the whiteness and tartness of salt's properties is to *know* that salt is white and tart. In this way perceptual consciousness takes the object to be a One. It is not relative to other things but has an "absolute character" of its own (Phen. p. 74-75). Yet a contradiction arises for consciousness, for the object cannot be at the same time a bare particular and a universal. The object becomes "*the opposite of itself: it is for itself, so far as it is for another*" (Phen. p. 76). In other words, it is a representation, both an intuition (for itself) and a universal (for another).

By securing the object's immediate truth perceptual consciousness "convicts *itself* of untruth", for by taking responsibility for the truth of the One perception reveals the 'absolute character' of the bare particularity to be conditioned by its universal (Phen. p. 79). The tragedy unfolds as the action of perception reveals its own error, for the experience of the contradiction comes from the activity of thought itself. It is perception's desire to embody its self-sufficient

knowledge that leads to the discovery that our perception is not immediate but mediated in a *representation* of the thing.

Force and the Understanding: In Hegel's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* in chapter 5 he argues that Antigone's self-recognition brings a significant shift in the life of spirit toward self-consciousness. This observation caused Bradley and Gardener to argue that Hegel overlooks Antigone's suffering by turning to the speculative meaning of tragedy. Yet as I have been suggesting thus far, the initial discovery of mediation is not made by speculative thought but is only possible by the activity of individual agents who go through the painful experience of contradiction. It is only then that speculation becomes a possibility, for a new shape, self-consciousness, emerges that makes a speculative reading of art a possibility. In Antigone's act, suggests Hegel, spirit "gives up the specific quality of the ethical life, of being the simple certainty of immediate truth, and initiates the division of itself into itself as the active principle" (Phen. p. 282). This moment is the experience of contradiction undergone in the shape of Force and the Understanding, opening up the possibility of self-consciousness, the division of itself into itself.

Perceptual experience was supposed to give immediate knowledge of the objects of perception but instead revealed that what was immediately available to perception is not the direct acquaintance with things themselves but a *representation* of things. It is a manifestation of our "inner nature" where it is both *for itself* as particular appearance and *for another* as a universal. The attempt to seal self-sufficient knowledge must now try to claim that the understanding brings together our representations and combines them to give a true picture of the world. Understanding makes the claim that the unity of our representations of the particulars and universals is explained by a supersensible essence. This 'inner world' that lies in contrast to the outer world of experience remains a pure beyond, for "consciousness does not yet find itself in it" (Phen. p. 88). It is an "inert realm of laws", fixed and determined, and infinity that is the inversion of consciousness. The supersensible allows consciousness to view appearance as the expression of underlying essence, appearing to us in such a way that we can know it. The laws behind the appearance, the supersensible, explain why appearances have the ontological structure that they do, and we are aware of things in a similar manner that physical forces become manifest in appearance. Understanding can thus reach beyond the appearance to the thing by grasping its essence as it is expressed by the supersensible. The knowledge gained must therefore be independent of history and social practice, meaning that it would be available to any rational agent who wishes to reflect on the world of appearance.⁸

The understanding makes the claim that nature differentiates itself into forces which can be deduced

⁸ See Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, p. 38

from a more general law, the supersensible. However, this claim begins to fall apart when consciousness realises that the existence of many forces is not necessary for our understanding of force per se. Hegel uses the example of motion, where he suggests that there is not one 'motion' out of which we derive the constituent elements, such as space, time and velocity. We can only separate these elements from an analysis of the *concept* of motion, not motion itself. Thus we discover that the different elements of motion were *already* contained within our concept of motion and are assumed by the scientific analysis we undertake, while motion itself resists differentiation. Thus the different elements that the understanding deduces from a general law cannot be known in themselves through logical reflection. Rather, they turn out to be something the understanding imposes onto nature. The elements of time, space and velocity turn out to be the result of a theory the understanding has constructed about how nature must be in itself. Thus understanding does not grasp the essence in the appearance but rather demands that nature conform to a theory it has constructed.

While the understanding set out to uncover the inner necessity of things, this very attempt turned out to reveal the way in which we *think* about things. This is the final moment of tragic epistemology, for we no longer have the tragic hero who assumes an immediate relation to the ethical power. We have the *modern* hero, who, like Hamlet, knows that their relation to ethical demands is a matter of thought: that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."⁹

CONCLUSION

Tragic epistemology begins from the recognition of one's error and results in the awareness of our thought processes. Specifically, it results in the awareness of the impossibility of non-inferential knowledge, that is, that there is nothing that can be known without having to know anything else. This recognition comes from the experience of contradiction, the painful awareness that what we formerly held to be immediate knowledge is in fact mediated by a prior assumption. Understanding this process as the epistemology of tragedy helps us to see that this recognition is not devoid of experience but occurs via the tragic experience of human agency, for the hero who seeks to affirm for themselves that the structures of their own thought and practice really match up to the way that things are or have to be (i.e. who takes on a shape of 'immediate' knowledge) is the one who reveals their own thought to fall short of reality.

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⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, ll. 250-1



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