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Phenomenology and De Re Interpretation: A Critique of Brandom's Reading of Hegel

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Phenomenology and *De Re* Interpretation: A Critique of Brandom's Reading of Hegel

Stephen Houlgate

Abstract

Brandom's interpretation of Hegel in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* is subtle, tightly argued and hugely impressive. It takes no account, however, of Hegel's distinctive conception of phenomenology and as a result – for all its subtlety – offers a somewhat distorted picture of Hegel. In the opening chapters of Hegel's *Phenomenology* we learn that perception is committed as much to the unity of differences as to exclusive difference, that neither perception nor understanding is committed to holism as Brandom understands it, and that the understanding is not governed by the law of non-contradiction but in fact understands the world to be a thoroughly contradictory place. All of this, however, gets lost sight of in Brandom's *de re* interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Keywords: Brandom; Hegel; *de re* interpretation; phenomenology

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De Dicto and *De Re* Interpretation

At first sight Robert Brandom's two essays on Hegel in his book *Tales of the Mighty Dead* appear barely to be about *Hegel* at all.[1] The first essay on holism and idealism, for example, talks of 'sense dependence' and 'reference dependence', and even invokes a point in logic made by Gilbert Harman (*TMD* 191–2, 194). Scarcely normal fare for the average commentator on Hegel. Brandom himself is acutely conscious of the impression his work on Hegel (and on the other philosophers discussed in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*) might have on his readers. 'I am aware', he writes, 'that the relations between the stories told here and my own philosophical views […] may seem to some particularly problematic' (*TMD* 90). In the section of his book called 'Pretexts', however, Brandom provides a subtle defence of his approach and makes it clear that he is by no means simply 'foisting' his ideas on the helpless dead (*TMD* 91; see also 389). He does so by distinguishing between two different modes of interpretation: *de dicto* and *de re*.

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Brandom states that interpretation of a philosophical text seeks to establish the claims made in it and to determine what follows from them. This task, however, presupposes a 'context' of interpretation (*TMD* 95).

When a text is given a *de dicto* interpretation, the context is supplied by the author's own commitments. The aim is thus to determine what the author *himself* would have said in response to questions of clarification, given those commitments (*TMD* 99).

The aim of a *de re* interpretation of a text is different. It is to determine not what the author himself would have said about this or that, but what *really* follows from the claims he makes, what follows from them in truth (*TMD* 100).[2] In this case, the context of interpretation is supplied by other claims that the *interpreter* (rather than the author) holds to be true. When it is argued that a commitment follows *in fact* from a philosopher's claims, the interpreter has to make reference to the facts '*as she takes them to be*; that is the best any of us can do' (*TMD* 101).

In Brandom's view, neither the *de re* nor the *de dicto* approach is intrinsically better than the other: 'all contexts define in principle equally valid perspectives from which to specify the conceptual content of a claim'. One's choice of interpretive approach depends, therefore, on pragmatic considerations, namely, on 'the purposes, interests, and plans of the interpreter' (*TMD* 106).

In his essays on Hegel Brandom aims to establish what really follows from Hegel's claims, rather than what Hegel thought should follow. The first essay in particular offers what is 'basically a *de re* reading'. As Brandom openly admits, therefore, the argument in that essay 'crucially depends on claims that *I* undertake' (*TMD* 103).

In view of this it makes little sense for readers of Brandom's work to complain that Hegel himself would not have thought in terms of reference dependence or sense dependence. To challenge Brandom's reading of Hegel properly one would need to challenge Brandom's own commitments, or at least show that he misunderstands what follows, given his own commitments, from Hegel's claims. Such an endeavour is, however, beyond the scope of this article. My aim here is more modest: it is simply to suggest that if one adopts the approach to Hegel taken by Brandom, something distinctively Hegelian – and intrinsically important – gets lost. Furthermore, I am not sure that Brandom realizes it gets lost, because I am not sure that it forms part of his picture of Hegel in the first place.

The principal thing that gets lost, in my view, is the very idea of *phenomenology*, as Hegel understands it. This is because it is hard to see how Hegel's idea of phenomenology can be accommodated within Brandom's twofold distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* interpretation.[3]

On the one hand, Hegelian phenomenology does not seek to determine merely what consciousness *itself* would have said in response to questions of clarification; it aims to determine what follows *in truth* from the claims of

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consciousness. Indeed, each new shape of consciousness arises precisely by taking up and affirming the truth that emerges in the previous shape. (In this sense the transition from sense certainty to perception or *Wahr-nehmung* is paradigmatic for the whole phenomenology.) From this point of view, therefore, phenomenology looks like an exercise in *de re* interpretation.

On the other hand, phenomenology does not seek to assess the claims of consciousness in the context of 'facts' that the phenomenologist endorses. Indeed, the whole point of phenomenology is to avoid bringing any external criteria to bear on consciousness at all. As Hegel famously argues, whatever criterion is employed in phenomenology to assess the claims of consciousness must be found within (and be endorsed by) consciousness itself.[4]

What phenomenology seeks to determine, therefore, is what really follows from the claims of consciousness *alone*, without reference to any other commitments that the phenomenologist may have. Furthermore, phenomenology aims to determine what really follows from the claims of consciousness alone *within the experience of consciousness itself*. What really follows from these claims is not what consciousness itself expects to follow. Nonetheless, it is a truth that emerges – despite consciousness's best endeavours – *for* consciousness and *within* its own experience.[5]

In this respect phenomenology does not look like a mode of *de re* interpretation in precisely Brandom's sense. It is at most a special case thereof in which the only commitment of his own the phenomenologist may bring to bear on the study of consciousness is the commitment to *set aside* any determinate commitments of his own and to work out what experience is made necessary by the commitments of consciousness alone. Such a form of understanding, which does not overlap exactly with either *de re* or *de dicto* interpretation, might be called understanding *de experientia*.

It appears, then, that Brandom's distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* interpretation – a distinction on which he relies in order to justify his own approach to Hegel – fails to allow for the possibility of phenomenology in Hegel's sense. This is because it fails to allow for an approach to consciousness that aims to determine what follows *necessarily* from the claims of consciousness *alone* and *within* the experience of consciousness itself.

At one point in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* Brandom acknowledges that there is a distinctive mode of interpretation that can be called '"phenomenological" in a hegelian sense' (*TMD* 110). This, we are told, involves '*both* a retrospective interpretation of a text *de traditione and* an immediate *de re* reading'. The interpreter thus assesses claims in a text both in light of his own commitments and in light of the 'most developed position in the tradition' to which the text in question belongs (*TMD* 110). This confirms, however, that Brandom does not understand Hegelian phenomenology as a rigorously *immanent* study of consciousness in which all commitments are set aside, except for those endorsed by consciousness itself. On my reading, therefore,

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Brandom does not understand phenomenology in a distinctively Hegelian sense.

Brandom's own, overtly *de re* interpretation of Hegel is clearly incompatible with Hegel's phenomenological approach as I understand it. It is also incompatible with Hegel's expectations for us as readers. Hegel's use of the word 'we' in the *Phenomenology* suggests that we readers are not simply to study *Hegel's* attempt to understand consciousness, but are to participate with him in that very attempt. That is, we are to do phenomenology ourselves, not just to assess the merits of the text in which Hegel does it. That in turn means that the proper object of our study is actually consciousness itself, rather than a book. Furthermore, we are meant to approach consciousness in the same way Hegel does: by setting aside our own commitments and thinking through the consequences for consciousness of taking its objects to be a certain way. By contrast, Brandom's approach entails assessing Hegel's arguments in light of claims that he (Brandom) holds true independently.[6]

It is Brandom's avowed purpose in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* to provide a *de re* interpretation of Hegel, so from that point of view we have no real grounds for complaint. It is important, however, to have a clear idea of the alternatives to Brandom's *de re* approach. These do not just include *de dicto* interpretation and the fusion of approaches that Brandom names 'phenomenological'. There is also the alternative – apparently neglected by Brandom – of engaging in phenomenology as Hegel conceives it. This is an alternative for us as much as it is for Hegel.

Brandom's Hegel

On my reading, Hegel's phenomenology does not present Hegel's *own* understanding of the world. It sets out his understanding of the consequences *for consciousness* of taking the world to be a certain way. Hegel presents his own view of the world in the *Logic* and the *Realphilosophie*, but not – at least not directly – in the *Phenomenology*.[7]

Brandom, by contrast, takes Hegel to be making direct claims of his own in the *Phenomenology*. The principal claims he ascribes to Hegel in his first essay on him in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, 'Holism and Idealism in Hegel's *Phenomenology*', are these. First, 'the way things are or could be taken to be must be *determinate*' (*TMD* 178). Second, determinateness involves not just 'mere difference', but also 'modally robust *exclusion*' (*TMD* 179). The properties 'square' and 'red' are different, but also compatible. Fully coherent determinateness, however, requires '"exclusive" difference'; that is, it requires properties to be 'materially incompatible' with certain other properties (in the way that being 'square' is incompatible with being 'triangular'). Hegel's claim, as Brandom presents it, is that only a world in which properties *exclude* – are materially incompatible with – certain other properties can

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be a coherent world. This exclusiveness is 'codified', as Brandom puts it, in the principle of non-contradiction: '*p* rules out *not-p*; they are *incompatible*' (*TMD* 179). Far from rejecting the law of non-contradiction, therefore, Brandom's Hegel 'radicalizes it, and places it at the very center of his thought'.

Brandom goes on to understand the concepts 'object' and 'subject' in terms of material incompatibility (*TMD* 182). Objects are things that *cannot* at the same time exhibit two incompatible properties. Subjects, on the other hand, are things that *ought not* to attribute incompatible properties to the same object. This is the distinction between objective and subjective incompatibility, to which we shall return in a minute.

Brandom's Hegel is said to prove that content must be determinate in the strong sense of exclusion in the chapter on 'sense certainty' (*TMD* 179, 183). In the following chapters he then works out the consequences of this claim. The first consequence is that such an understanding commits one to *semantic holism*. This is the view that states of affairs and properties are rendered determinate by the broad set of relations of exclusion in which they stand. Brandom argues that Hegel is committed to such holism, whether he likes it or not, but that he also explicitly endorses it himself. (In this sense, his reading of Hegel is in part a *de dicto* interpretation.)

Brandom distinguishes two kinds of holism. First, there is weak individuational holism – the claim that 'articulation by relations of material incompatibility is *necessary*' (though not sufficient) 'for determinate contentfulness' (*TMD* 183). Evidence that Hegel himself endorses weak holism is said to be found in the chapter on perception, specifically in the claim (here in Brandom's wording) that '*one* property can be understood as determinate only by understanding *many other* properties […] as similarly determinate' (*TMD* 183).

Second, there is strong individuational holism – the claim that 'articulation by relations of material incompatibility is *sufficient* […] for determinate contentfulness'. Such strong holism is incoherent, in Brandom's view, because relata are utterly dissolved into the relations between them so that nothing is left *between which* there can be relations (*TMD* 187). Brandom's Hegel is committed only to weak holism, not to its strong, incoherent counterpart (*TMD* 188, 201). Nonetheless (as we shall see), Brandom believes that understanding properties *solely* in terms of their incompatibility with other properties is one important part of the process of understanding determinacy properly. Strong holism is thus not completely misconceived, but corresponds to 'one (ultimately inadequate) phase in the process of grasping or understanding a holistic relational structure' (*TMD* 201; see also 205).

Evidence that Hegel incorporates into his weak holism the idea that properties are *wholly* defined by relations of exclusion is found by Brandom in the concept of 'infinity' in the chapter on 'force and understanding'. Such infinity, Brandom writes, is 'a structure of differences (exclusions)' in which

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'the identity or unity of the differentiated items is understood as *consisting in* those relations of reciprocal exclusion' (*TMD* 189, my italics).

The second consequence of holding that determinateness involves exclusion – after the necessary commitment to holism – is that one is committed to what Brandom calls 'objective idealism' (*TMD* 196). Brandom explains what such idealism involves as follows. First (following Gilbert Harman), one must distinguish *relations* between concepts themselves from *processes* of reasoning in which we engage. Second, one must understand the above-mentioned distinction between objective and subjective incompatibility in terms of this distinction between relations and processes. Objective incompatibility is a simple *relation* between concepts or properties: the fact that two properties exclude one another and so cannot both belong to the same object at the same time. Subjective incompatibility is a relation between commitments held by a subject: the fact that two commitments *ought not* both to be held by the same subject. This relation between commitments makes it necessary for the subject holding them to engage in a certain *process* of reasoning. Specifically, the subject must try to resolve incompatible commitments by revising them or relinquishing one of them (*TMD* 193).

'Objective idealism' is the thesis that one cannot understand what it is for properties to be *objectively* incompatible unless one understands what it is for our commitments to be *subjectively* incompatible. That is to say, one cannot understand the objective *relations* that render the world determinate, unless one understands the subjective *process* of acknowledging and resolving our own incompatible commitments (*TMD* 193).[8]

Indeed, Brandom goes further and maintains that the grasp of objective relations does not merely require, but actually '*consists* in engaging in the corresponding processes': understanding properties to be objectively incompatible just *is* acknowledging a subjective obligation to resolve our own incompatible commitments (*TMD* 194).

This, Brandom tells us, is the thesis of 'conceptual pragmatism', according to which 'grasp of a concept […] is a *practical* capacity, […] the capacity to *do* something' (*TMD* 194). As far as I can tell, Brandom never explains in his essay precisely why the capacity to understand relations of incompatibility or exclusion involves, or consists in, the 'capacity to *do* something'. He thus never explains precisely why Hegel should be committed to objective idealism and conceptual pragmatism. But he makes it very clear that Hegel is so committed, and he maintains that Hegel's idealism (in the sense just specified) emerges explicitly 'from the expository transition from "Consciousness" to "Self-consciousness"' (*TMD* 193).

Brandom goes on to explain that Hegel's idealism asserts a relation of 'sense dependence', not 'reference dependence', between objective relations of exclusion and subjective processes of understanding. A concept is sense dependent on another when one cannot *understand* the first without the second. The concept 'nail', for example, is sense dependent on that of

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'hammer', because we cannot understand what a nail is unless we understand what a hammer is (*TMD* 195). A concept is reference dependent on another when the first cannot actually *apply* to anything in the world unless the other one does as well. To claim that the concept 'nail' is reference dependent on that of 'hammer' is thus to claim (wrongly) that nails cannot exist unless hammers exist.

Objective relations of exclusion are sense dependent on subjective processes of understanding, therefore, because one cannot *understand* the former without the latter. This is not to say, however, that such objective relations depend for their *existence* on processes of rational thought. Hegel's idealism, Brandom insists, does not claim that the world is mind dependent. It claims only that our understanding of that world involves an understanding of the processes and practices of reasoning (*TMD* 198).

In the last section of his essay, Brandom discusses one final condition of understanding the world to be determinate. This is the process called 'traversing the moments', that is, Hegel's own 'distinctively structured dialectical *process of understanding*' (*TMD* 202, 209). '*Determinateness* requires a kind of *holism*, and that holism is intelligible only on the hypothesis of objective *idealism*' (*TMD* 201); but holism also requires us to think *dialectically*.

The example Brandom gives to illustrate such dialectical understanding is that of understanding *properties*. The first stage in such understanding, Brandom writes, involves grasping a property 'as *immediately contentful*'. The property is taken to be 'just the thing it is, brutely there' (*TMD* 204). What is grasped at this initial stage is not merely the bare *form* of a property: we do not note simply *that* there is some property there. Rather, we grasp an immediate *sensuous content*: we judge that something is red, blue or green.

The second stage involves grasping the relations to other properties which render a property *determinately*, rather than just immediately, contentful. These relations, as we have seen, must be relations of exclusion. One sees, therefore, 'that the property is determinate only insofar as it *strongly differs* from other properties', that is, excludes them as incompatible with it (*TMD* 204).

If one were to focus solely on this second stage and take it to contain the whole truth about properties, one would be committed to strong holism. As we know, however, such strong holism is regarded by Brandom as incoherent, because it dissolves things completely into their relations and so leaves nothing *between which* relations can hold. Strong holism thus renders impossible the very determinacy that relations of exclusion are meant to explain. Fortunately, this second stage does not tell the whole story. For, although a property is rendered fully determinate by its exclusion of other properties, the property is not reducible to such relations of exclusion. It is also what it is in its *immediacy*. This immediacy is precisely what provides

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the *relatum* without which relations cannot be understood. Relations of exclusion are thus necessary, but not sufficient, for determinacy, and we are committed to weak, not strong, holism (though strong holism captures one important aspect of that weak holism).

The third stage involves putting the first two stages together. That is to say, we understand the *immediate* identity of the property to consist in its *relations* of exclusion and difference (*TMD* 205). This does not mean that 'red' is simply eliminated in favour of 'not-green', 'not-blue', and so on. It means that 'red' itself in its very immediacy *is* 'not-green', 'not-blue', and so on. As Brandom puts it, what we have at this stage is 'immediacy *as* mediated', 'fully *mediated immediacy*' (*TMD* 206). What is accessible to observation is just the immediate property; what we understand conceptually are the relations of exclusion which constitute that property. The observable immediacy thus serves, as Brandom puts it, as a *sign* which *expresses* 'the underlying, only *theoretically* […] accessible *reality*' of the relations (*TMD* 206). In so doing, however, the immediacy of the property does not point beyond itself to something else, but points merely to 'something *implicit* […] in it, in the content it has' (*TMD* 206). The process of traversing the moments that Brandom describes thus renders *explicit* the relationality – or 'inferential articulation' (*TMD* 181) – that is *implicit* in the immediacy with which we begin.[9]

Note that this process does not simply happen but involves our being *active* and *doing* something (see *TMD* 207, 384). We begin by taking things in their immediacy; we then move on to grasp them as what they are mediately or for others; and lastly we understand them 'as *mediated immediacy*' (*TMD* 209). We thus build up an understanding of properties and their relations by *altering* our commitments and thereby *resolving* commitments that are otherwise incompatible (*TMD* 206–7). Indeed, our understanding of those properties consists precisely in knowing what we have to *do* to make them intelligible. In this sense, traversing the moments exemplifies Hegel's idealism, as Brandom understands it: for it shows that 'the determinateness of the objective world and the structured process of grasping it are reciprocally sense dependent concepts, each intelligible only in terms of the other' (*TMD* 208).

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Hegel on Perception and Understanding

Brandom's interpretation of Hegel in 'Holism and Idealism in Hegel's *Phenomenology*' is subtle, tightly argued and hugely impressive. In my view, however, it takes no account of Hegel's distinctive conception of phenomenology, and as a result – for all its subtlety – offers a somewhat distorted picture of Hegel.

I have already noted that, on my reading in contrast to Brandom's, Hegel in his *Phenomenology* does not make direct claims of his own about the

world, but shows what emerges in the experience of consciousness – *for consciousness* – when it takes the world to be a certain way. Hegel's phenomenology thereby at most reveals indirectly aspects of his understanding of things.

In my view, Brandom also simplifies what emerges from the experience of sense certainty. He maintains that what is proven in the chapter on sense certainty is (a) that content must be determinate and (b) that full determinateness requires exclusiveness and 'material incompatibility' (*TMD* 179, 182–3). By contrast, what actually emerges in the experience of sense certainty (as Hegel articulates it) is that the object of consciousness must be – for consciousness – a *unity* of differences. Not only, therefore, must content be determinate; it must also be unified and self-identical, or what Hegel calls '*reflected into itself*' (*PG* 89 / 64). This is made necessary by the experience of pointing (*Aufzeigen*) at the end of the chapter on sense certainty.

Hegel describes the experience of pointing as follows: I point out, and bring to mind, what is before me *now* – '*this now*. *Now*' (*PG* 88 / 63). In being pointed out, however, this now ceases to be, and so becomes something past. What I bring to mind is thus in fact a now that is no longer, a now that *has been*: '*ein* gewesenes'. Yet the movement that Hegel is examining is not one that simply fails to do what it sets out to do; it is one in which what is there *now* is, indeed, pointed out. The now, therefore, *is* brought to mind: it comes before me *now*. It is brought to mind, however, not just as a pure now, but as a now that also has a past, a now that has been. In the experience of pointing, therefore, the now emerges as a unity of different moments. On the one hand, it is a simple unity – the *now*; on the other hand, it is the unity of the present and the past, the now and the no-longer-now. Such a unity that includes within it its own negation Hegel calls a 'universal'. This is not the abstract, indeterminate universal that arises in the first two forms of sense certainty. It is a new, concrete universal: 'a simple that, in its otherness, remains what it is'. This is the 'now which is an absolute plurality of nows' or the here that is 'a simple complex of many heres' (*PG* 89–90 / 64).

It is this idea that the object of consciousness must be a *unity* of differences – not just the idea that content must be *determinate* – that is taken up by perception as the truth. Indeed, the very idea of a 'property' is nothing but a sensuous immediacy understood *as* such a unity of differences or *as* a universal (*PG* 94 / 68). Properties are not only universals or unities, but are also *differentiated* from one another; and, as Brandom notes, this means that '*many* such properties are posited simultaneously, one being the negative of another' (*TMD* 183; see also *PG* 94 / 68). Yet each property in its difference from others remains a *universal* or *unity* that is related only to itself. Consequently, Hegel states, 'each is on its own and free from the others'; in other words, they are 'indifferent to one another' (*PG* 94 / 68). In this respect they do not exclude one another but can co-exist in one here and now; they are

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different but *compatible* properties that can belong to the same thing. The salt, therefore, is 'white and *also* tart, *also* cubical in shape' (*PG* 95 / 68).

According to Brandom, Hegel argues in 'sense certainty' that the idea of a world exhibiting mere 'indifferent' difference, without exclusive difference, is incoherent (*TMD* 179). Brandom fails to point out, however, that the experience of sense certainty commits perception just as much to the 'indifferent' difference of properties – that is, to their compatibility with one another – as to their incompatibility. This is because properties are defined not least by their *relation to themselves*.

This self-relation, by the way, preserves the immediacy and independence of properties and so prevents them from being dissolved into nothing but relations. Brandom, as we have seen, also recognizes that properties have an immediacy of their own. He thinks of this immediacy, however, as that from which we start and from which we move on to consider the relations of exclusion in which the property stands. He does not think of the distinctive immediacy of a universal property as *emerging in* the same experience in which properties prove to be fully determinate. This, I think, is because he does not recognize – at least not explicitly – that what results from the experience of sense certainty is not just difference and determinacy, but also the *unity* of differences (and unity *in* difference).

Yet why should it matter that the objects of perception – things and their properties – are characterized as much by unity and 'being-for-self' as by exclusive difference? Because what will concern perception throughout Hegel's discussion of it is precisely the relation between these two moments, not the specific question (and problem) of *holism*. The question which Brandom's Hegel has to answer is whether the holism to which his conception of determinacy commits him is weak or strong. This, however, is not a problem that arises for *perception* as Hegel understands it.

Perception relates to the thing with properties and tries to perceive it as it is (*PG* 96 / 70). It is also aware, however, that it is capable of deception and error. The criterion it employs to distinguish truth from error is that of 'self-equality' or 'self-identity' (*Sichselbstgleichheit*) (*PG* 97 / 70). The object is perceived properly, therefore, when it is perceived to be what it is and to lack internal contradiction: the object of perception cannot both be and not be what it is. The initial experience of perception requires it, however, continually to correct its perception in order to take account of the different aspects of its object but also to preserve the latter's self-identity. In this experience the object is perceived to be, first, *one* thing, then an *aggregate* of universal properties that continue in other things, then a distinct thing with properties *opposed* to those of other things, then a mere medium in which *independent* properties subsist, and, finally, nothing but those properties themselves (*PG* 97–8 / 70–1). What comes to the fore in this experience is not only now the thing and now its properties, but also now *unity* and now *difference* (and indeed different kinds of difference).

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This experience is then repeated, but this time the different aspects of the object are attributed now to the thing itself and now to the perceiving subject (*PG* 101 / 73–4). In this way, perception once again has to correct itself in order to take account of the different features of the thing while preserving the latter's self-identity (*PG* 99–100 / 72–3).

Any contradiction in the way the thing appears to perception is initially put down to perception itself and is seen as a mark of error on its part (*PG* 99 / 72). At the same time, however, the thing *itself* is understood to show one face to perception and to be another thing for itself. In this way, the thing is understood to be divided *within itself* (*PG* 101 / 74). It is also perceived to be divided into what it is for itself and what it is in relation to *other things*. This division within the thing, however, plunges it into self-contradiction: for its relations to other things are perceived to undermine its independence as a thing and thereby to destroy it. As Hegel puts it, it is through the thing's 'opposition that it *relates* itself to *others*, and is essentially only this relating. The relation, however, is the negation of its self-subsistence' (*PG* 103 / 76).

This is the point at which the experience of perception does, indeed, throw up a problem close to the one Brandom examines. The two are not, however, precisely the same. The problem faced by Brandom's Hegel is that a world of pure relations – without relata – cannot be made intelligible. Intelligibility is restored, however, if relations are understood to be between properties that have an immediacy of their own.

The problem faced by perception in Hegel's account is not so easily dealt with: for the object of perception proves to be *irreducibly* self-contradictory. This is because the relation to others that undermines a thing's independence is rooted in the very determinacy or 'absolute character' that gives the thing its independence in the first place (*PG* 103 / 75–6). The thing is independent or 'for itself' because it has its own *intrinsic* distinctness: 'it has its essential difference from others *in its own self* [*an ihm*]' (*PG* 102 / 75). That difference, however, differentiates the thing from other things and sets it in *relation* to them. Furthermore, since that difference constitutes the very essence of the thing, it turns the thing in its very essence into nothing but relations to others. And yet, that difference is at the same time what gives the thing its distinct character and independence.

This is not a contradiction that perception can avoid or 'resolve'. On the contrary, it is what has emerged in the experience of perception itself as the true character of its object. Perception has tried all along to avoid contradiction and to preserve the self-identity of its object; but the object has now shown itself – despite perception's best endeavours – to be '*in one and the same respect the opposite of itself*': for it is '*for itself, so far as it is for another*', and '*for another, so far as it is for itself*' (*PG* 104 / 76). This unity of opposing determinations Hegel calls 'unconditioned absolute universality' (*PG* 104 / 77). It is this idea of internally contradictory universality – not, as Brandom

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suggests, a commitment to holism – that is inherited from perception by the understanding. Brandom's own concern with *holism*, however, leads him to overlook the distinctive focus of perception and so to miss the fact that its object proves necessarily to be a *self-contradictory* unity.

For Brandom, Hegel's holism is governed by the law of non-contradiction: properties are rendered fully determinate by excluding other properties and thereby being what they are, not what they are not. The truth as the understanding conceives it, however, is that the fundamental determinations of things pass immediately into their opposites and so are never just what they are. Almost all the basic concepts that Hegel associates with the understanding exhibit this structure of contradiction. The play of forces, for example, is one in which 'each [force] *is* solely through the other, and what each thus is, it immediately no longer is in being it' (*PG* 115 / 86); and infinity is the 'absolute unrest […] in which whatever is determined in one way or another […] is rather the opposite of this determinateness' (*PG* 133 / 101). Such contradictory statements do not show understanding misunderstanding its world, but give expression to the *truth* that emerges in the experience of understanding. As Hegel puts it, 'we have to *think* […] *opposition within itself, or contradiction* [*Widerspruch*]' (*PG* 130 / 99). This is even true when Hegel appears to argue at one point that understanding is committed to holism. The play of forces, Hegel writes, is 'the *whole* [*dies Ganze*] as a whole or as *universal*'. What this means, however, is not what Brandom means by holism, but rather that things 'as they are in themselves […] immediately […] *turn into their opposite*' (*PG* 116 / 87).

If there is no evidence that the understanding (or Hegel) subscribes to *holism* as Brandom conceives it, is there any evidence that the understanding (or Hegel himself at this point in the *Phenomenology*) subscribes to objective *idealism*? This question is a little more difficult to answer, for it involves considering the notoriously difficult transition from consciousness to self-consciousness.

Consciousness, Self-Consciousness and Objective Idealism

Through the play of forces, Hegel argues, the understanding is brought to understand the truth of things to be their 'inner being' (*Inneres*) (*PG* 115–16 / 86). This inner being is known to be objective. At the same time, the understanding recognizes that it can move beyond what is perceivable in this way only because it does not remain passive but *does* something. Specifically, it 'reflects itself out of the movement [of appearance] back into itself as the True' (*PG* 116 / 87).

This sense of being active is heightened when the understanding turns to the work of 'explanation' (*Erklärung*). The understanding enunciates a certain law (say, the 'law of gravity') and then distinguishes from that law a force that grounds or explains it. At the same time, however, the

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understanding recognises that the distinction between 'law' and 'force' is not a clear distinction in reality, for it declares that '*the force is constituted exactly the same as the law*' (*PG* 125 / 94). The understanding thus recognizes that in fact 'this difference is no difference'. There is, indeed, for the understanding, a formal distinction between 'force' and 'law', but 'both have the *same* content, the *same* constitution' (*PG* 125 / 95): what is made necessary by the postulated 'force' of gravity and what happens according to the 'law' of gravity is precisely the same thing. The phenomenologist concludes from this that the understanding is not actually *explaining* anything and that the 'movement' of explanation 'falls only within the understanding itself, *not within the object*' (*PG* 126 / 95, my italics). (This is the reason, Hegel will say a few pages later, 'why "explaining" affords so much self-satisfaction': 'because in it consciousness is, so to speak, communing directly with itself, enjoying only itself' (*PG* 134 / 101).)

From the perspective of the understanding, however, in drawing this distinction that is not a distinction consciousness is explaining, and deepening its comprehension of, what is going on in the *world*. Understanding, indeed, takes this very conception of a 'difference that is not a difference' to disclose directly the inner being of things themselves. It comes to see it, therefore, as 'the *law* of *appearance itself* that differences arise which are no differences' (*PG* 126–7 / 96). In its work of explanation, the understanding posited a difference between law and force that it knew was not a clear difference in reality. Now it understands the world *itself* to generate differences that are not clear differences. This, however, brings about a dramatic change in the way the world is understood: for it reintroduces self-contradiction into a world that had been momentarily stabilized by the idea of law. The first laws the understanding takes to govern the world (and in terms of which it seeks to 'explain' phenomena) are 'the *stable* image of unstable appearance' (*PG* 120 / 90). This new law, by contrast, guarantees only the 'stability of *instability*' (or 'permanence of *impermanence*') (*Beständigkeit der Unbeständigkeit*), because it lays down 'that what is *self-same repels* itself from itself' and that 'differences are […] in reality no differences and […] cancel themselves' (*PG* 126–7 / 96).

The understanding was initially led by its experience to the view that the world is different from the way it is *perceived* to be. Now the world is understood to be different from the way it is initially *understood* to be; indeed, it is understood to be in truth the *inversion* of what it is initially understood to be (*PG* 128–9 / 96–7). But that is not all: for the understanding comes to the view that there is in fact just *one* way of understanding the world and *one* world of the understanding. That world is 'the inversion *of itself*; it is itself and its opposite in one unity' (*PG* 131 / 99, my italics). When the understanding conceives of the world as such a profoundly self-contradictory unity, it conceives of it as exhibiting the structure, or rather movement, of 'infinity'.

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Hegel writes that infinity has been 'the soul of all that has gone before' (*PG* 133 / 101) in that previous objects of the understanding (such as the play of forces) have involved differences that are not differences and so have united such differences with their opposites. Now, however, the understanding knows explicitly that its object is infinity. It is at this point, Hegel tells us, that consciousness becomes *self-consciousness* (*PG* 133 / 101).

Understanding already grasps *itself* as the movement of infinity, since it understands itself to be the activity of 'explanation' in which it explicitly posits a difference that is not a clear difference. Infinity appears in the guise of the play of forces, but 'it is as "explanation"', Hegel writes, 'that it first freely stands forth' (*PG* 133 / 101). When consciousness comes to understand its *object* explicitly as infinity, therefore, the difference between its understanding of itself and its understanding of its object collapses and it encounters in the object the very movement *that it itself is*. As Hegel puts it, 'since this concept of infinity is an object for consciousness, the latter is consciousness of a difference that is no less *immediately* cancelled; consciousness is for its own self, it is a distinguishing of that which contains no difference, or *self-consciousness*' (*PG* 134 / 102)[10].

Consciousness becomes self-consciousness, therefore, because in the movement of objective infinity it 'experiences only *itself*' (*PG* 135 / 103). This argument, by the way, is subtly different from the one dismissed by Brandom as the 'bad' (or 'dreadful') argument. Hegel is not inferring an identity between consciousness and its object from a mere 'analogy' between them. Nor is there is any mystery as to why Hegel should maintain that consciousness encounters *itself* in its object, rather than *objectivity* within itself (see *TMD* 189–90). Consciousness turns out to be self-consciousness because it comes to understand the object to be the *very same* movement of infinity that it *already* knows itself to be.

The question that now needs to be considered is whether this transition to self-consciousness proves that the understanding – or Hegel – is committed to objective idealism as Brandom conceives it. Such idealism, we recall, is the view that one cannot understand the world to be determinate unless one understands the *subjective process* of acknowledging (and trying to remove) error (*TMD* 196). As I see it, however, there is nothing to suggest such idealism in the transition we have just considered: for the understanding does not comprehend its object *in and through* comprehending its own activity, but understands the object to be *in itself – independently* – the movement of infinity it also knows itself to be.

The understanding would be committed to something like Brandomian idealism, if it understood its conception of the object to be dependent in some way on its understanding of itself and its own activity. This, however, is not the case. Understanding is, indeed, aware that it is active when engaged in the work of explanation, but it does not see the initial idea of the inverted world as resulting from, or as dependent on, that explanatory

activity. On the contrary, it 'learns that it is the *law* of *appearance itself* that differences arise that are no differences' (*PG* 126 / 96). That is to say, it understands that law to be out there in the world itself, not to be derived in some way from reflection on its own activity. Even when it comes to understand the object explicitly as the movement of infinity, it does not regard the thought of such infinity as its *own* work. Rather, it understands infinity simply to be the true character *of the object itself*.

In my view, therefore, Hegel's account of the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness provides no support for the claim that the understanding is committed to and comes to endorse Brandomian objective idealism. Nor, as far as I can see, does it provide any support for the claim that *Hegel* is committed to such idealism. Indeed, even if the understanding were compelled by its own experience to endorse objective idealism, this would not mean that Hegel himself would have to endorse it, any more than he has to endorse the perspective of the unhappy consciousness or of conscience. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel traces the development of the experience made *by consciousness* and shows what consciousness is committed to by its own experience. He does not, however, assume that this experience always at every point discloses the truth about the world (or about the mind). The experience of consciousness does not, therefore, require Hegel himself to adopt the world-view of the particular shape of consciousness he is examining. Accordingly, even if such experience were to commit consciousness to objective idealism – and in my judgement it does not – it would not thereby require Hegel to endorse that idealism himself.

None of this, of course, directly refutes Brandom's *de re* argument that Hegel is committed to idealism whether he likes it or not. My aim, however, is not to address *that* argument. It is to show what follows if Hegel – and, indeed, his reader – is understood to be doing *phenomenology*. Phenomenology, as Hegel conceives it, shows us what consciousness is committed to by its own experience, and such experience, on my interpretation, does not commit the understanding to objective idealism as Brandom defines it. Moreover, even if it did, this would not commit Hegel himself or his readers to such idealism: for we are committed to what emerges in the experience of consciousness only when we know that such experience discloses the true nature of being, but we know this only when consciousness turns into 'absolute knowing' at the end of the book. (The task of Hegel's *Logic* is then to set out precisely what absolute knowing – or speculative thought – discloses being to be.)

If the experience of consciousness, as Hegel describes it, commits neither the understanding nor Hegel himself to objective idealism, what is consciousness shown to be (and not to be) committed to in the opening chapters of Hegel's book? We learn that perception is committed as much to the unity of differences as to exclusive difference, that neither perception nor understanding is committed to holism (as Brandom understands it), and

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that the understanding is not governed by the law of non-contradiction but in fact understands the world to be a thoroughly contradictory place. All of this, however, gets lost sight of in Brandom's *de re* interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Concluding Thoughts

Although the experience of consciousness does not and cannot show that Hegel is *required* to endorse objective idealism, there is nonetheless, from Hegel's point of view, something right in Brandom's claim that 'the determinateness of the objective world and the structured process of grasping it are reciprocally sense dependent concepts' (*TMD* 208). Hegel's philosophy proper – that is, his *Logic* and *Realphilosophie* – is evidently based on this 'idealist' principle, since the way the world is understood to be in that philosophy is intimately bound up with the way in which speculative thought is understood to proceed (that is, with the *method* of speculative philosophy). It is also true, I think, of the *Phenomenology* that the *experience of consciousness* and 'the structured process of grasping it' are reciprocally sense dependent, insofar as Hegel's understanding of the way in which that experience develops is intimately bound up with the way in which phenomenological thought is understood to proceed (that is, with the *method* of phenomenology). In this sense, there is, indeed, merit in Brandom's claim that Hegel endorses 'idealism'.[11]

I do not believe, however, that Hegel endorses conceptual *pragmatism* as readily as Brandom does. This is because the *process* of understanding the world philosophically and the experience of consciousness phenomenologically does not, in Hegel's view, involve our actively *doing* something in the quite way Brandom understands this. On the contrary, it involves following 'passively' (as Hegel claims in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*) the immanent development of the matter at hand.[12] We must, of course, actively focus on that immanent development and actively keep our own bright ideas at bay. Such active 'restraint' (*Enthaltsamkeit*) is an indispensable condition of philosophizing. We exercise such restraint, however, by giving up our 'freedom' to determine the course of thought, 'letting [the content] move spontaneously of its own nature' and simply 'contemplat[ing] this movement' (*PG* 56 / 36).

Brandom provides two accounts of the process we must go through (on a Hegelian view of the world) if we are to understand the world to be something determinate. In each case, thinking is understood primarily as something that *we do*. In the process of 'traversing the moments', we begin with the immediacy of a property, then *we move* on to consider the relations of the property to other properties, and finally *we put* these first two perspectives *together* to understand immediacy as mediated. What is missing in the process Brandom describes, however, is any genuine *dialectic*:

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immediacy is not understood to become determinate *itself* through its *own* immanent logic (as happens in fact in the opening chapters of both the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*); but *we* are understood to *make* immediacy intelligible in terms of its mediating relations (*TMD* 206). Brandom quotes Hegel as saying that 'the movement of a being that immediately is, consists partly in becoming an other than itself' (*TMD* 206; see also *PG* 51 / 32); but all Brandom can hear in these lines is Hegel 'struggling […] to say something that we can now put in somewhat clearer terms', and so the distinctive point Hegel is making gets lost.

Traversing the moments is a specific form of the more generic process of acknowledging error and then acknowledging an obligation to 'remove or repair the incompatibility' (*TMD* 193). This is the process Brandom describes as that of 'experience' (*TMD* 196, 207). Once again emphasis is placed by Brandom on what we do, or what consciousness does: error is to be avoided by actively *altering* one's commitments oneself (*TMD* 193). The idea that consciousness *necessarily* develops in a certain way that is determined by the very form of its object – that the experience of perception, for example, is driven forward by the 'play of abstractions' inherent in the form of its own object – is not given prominence (see *PG* 105 / 77; *TMD* 384).[13]

It should also be noted that experience, for Brandom, involves altering one's commitments in order to *avoid contradiction*. This conception of experience is, however, hard to square with Hegel's view that 'contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality'.[14] It is also at odds with the experience undergone by the understanding: for what that experience teaches is that 'we have to *think* […] *contradiction*' (*PG* 130 / 99). Brandom's conception of experience does, however, match that of *perception*. At least, it agrees with what perception thinks experience should be: for perception seeks to avoid contradictions and recognizes that if contradictions emerge in the way it sees the world, it is up to it to 'correct' (*korrigieren*) its mistaken view of things (*PG* 99 / 72). As we have seen, perception is eventually led by its experience – despite its best endeavours – to regard its object as the contradictory unity of opposing moments Hegel calls 'unconditioned absolute universality' (*PG* 104 / 77). It also fails to realize the extent to which its experience is driven by the 'play of abstractions' that constitute its object. Nonetheless, from the point of view of perception itself, experience essentially involves actively correcting itself – or 'altering' its commitments – in order to avoid error and contradiction.

This suggests the following concluding thoughts: Brandom by no means reduces Hegel's view of the world to that of perception – his problematic accounts of Hegel's 'idealism' and of the process of 'traversing the moments' are clear evidence of that. Nonetheless, Brandom understands Hegel's philosophical position to be *based* on, and to *overlap* in significant ways with, that of perception. He takes them to overlap in this way because

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he thinks that in the chapter on perception Hegel is giving us the fundamentals of his *own* understanding of the world, rather than just showing us the consequences of viewing the world as perception does. And he thinks this, because he does not take full account of the fact that Hegel is doing *phenomenology* there, rather than presenting his own philosophy. Brandom makes a good case for the legitimacy of his *de re* interpretation of Hegel. In my view, however, his failure to recognize what Hegel is really up to in the *Phenomenology* leads him to present a picture of Hegel which, for all its subtlety, is a distorted one.

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Notes

1 See Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Further references to this book will be given in the text in the following form: *TMD* 194.
2 See Robert B. Pippin, 'Brandom's Hegel', in E. Hammer (ed.) *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 174.
3 For my account of the differences between Brandom and Hegel that become apparent if one looks to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, rather than to his *Phenomenology*, see Stephen Houlgate, 'Hegel and Brandom on Norms, Concepts and Logical Categories', in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 137–52.
4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), pp. 76–7; G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 53–4. Further references to the *Phenomenology* will be given in the text in the following form: *PG* 76–7 / 53–4 (with the German page numbers given first). I have occasionally altered Miller's translation.
5 See Hegel, *PG* 87 / 62: 'Sense-certainty thus comes to know by experience […]', and 90 / 64: 'the dialectic of sense-certainty is nothing else but the simple history of its movement or of its experience'.
6 For my more detailed account of the method of Hegelian phenomenology, and of the role played in it by the 'we', see Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (1991) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 48–66.
7 Ibid., p. 63.
8 See Pippin, 'Brandom's Hegel', pp. 156, 160.
9 Ibid., p. 160.
10 Hegel notes that understanding initially 'falls short of infinity as such' in so far as infinity remains for it veiled by a 'sensuous covering' (*PG* 134 / 102). In this respect, understanding is only implicitly self-conscious. Once this covering falls away, however, and the object shows itself to be infinity *as such*, consciousness becomes explicitly self-conscious.
11 For a more detailed account of the method of both Hegel's speculative logic and his phenomenology, see Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, Chs 2 and 3.
12 See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and

H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), p. 305 [§238 Addition]. See also Houlgate, 'Hegel and Brandom on Norms, Concepts and Logical Categories', pp. 148–9.

13 A similar point is made by Brian O'Connor in his article 'Hegel's Phenomenology and the Question of Semantic Pragmatism', *The Owl of Minerva* 38(1–2), (2006–7), pp. 127–43. See especially p. 132: 'Each phase of experience is produced by a rational compulsion' and p. 134: 'revisions which are compelled by the experience of an unsatisfactory judgement'.

14 G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), p. 439.

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