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Hegelian Influence on Inferentialism, Plausibility and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine both the potential and limitations of Hegelianism in contemporary epistemology. To achieve this, the paper first explores Robert Brandom's interpretation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his 2019 work, *Spirit of Trust*. In this context, Hegel is positioned as a precursor to the holistic, historical, and social dimensions of belief, as well as a critic of the empiricist intuitions prevalent in modernity, aligning with the framework of American inferentialism. This section demonstrates that it is possible to discuss the constitution of concepts without invoking sensations or immediate knowledge. The paper then turns to the reception of Brandom's proposal by scholars such as Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek, who concurs that Brandom falls short in maintaining a radical stance toward empiricism, and highlight the ethical and political challenges inherent in Brandom's neo-Hegelian inferentialism. In this section, it becomes evident that Brandom's concept of the Hegelian absolute and his notion of remembrance cannot be reconciled with a conception of reality as negative and contingent, a view that assumes progressiveness—something Žižek, in contrast, succeeds in recognizing within Hegel's philosophy.

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Intruduction

The objective of this paper is to present Robert Brandom's interpretation of Hegel as a therapeutic antecedent to the empiricist intuitions of modernity and contemporary epistemology. It is aimed to show that Hegel's philosophy represents an early alternative to the idea of representation. This idea is understood as correspondence with the world, thereby avoiding the possibility of skepticism. To this end, the manner how Brandom updates Hegel, following and expanding Wilfrid Sellars' inferentialist perspective is explained. Thereby the idea of how the content of concepts is constituted without resorting to empiricism can be explained. The above can be done particularly to the idea of sensation, of immediate knowledge, and to the mechanical metaphor of friction with the world as the normative element of said content. At the same time, we aim to show how this proposal is capable of accounting for an objectivity and normativity of a historical and social nature regarding beliefs.

To this end, we will take some general features of the inferentialism that Brandom has been developing for several decades, and which he systematizes in Hegelian terms in his latest book, *The Spirit of Trust* (2019). This project is also not unrelated to pragmatism if we consider Richard Rorty's preface to Philosophy as Cultural Politics:

> Like my previous writings, they are attempts to weave together Hegel's thesis that philosophy is its time held in thought with a nonrepresentationalist account of language. That account, implicit in the later work of Wittgenstein, has been more carefully worked out in the writings of Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom. I argue that Hegelian historicism and a Wittgensteinian "social practice" approach to language complement and reinforce one another (Rorty, 2007, ix).

Under these premises, we will outline a general epistemological scenario. In particular, we will use the Hegelian concepts of *experience*, *recognition*, *idea*, *absolute spirit* and *fetishism*. We will also use their dynamics and consequences to account for knowledge avoiding the problems of the classical representationalist framework.

In the second part of this paper, the interest is focused in qualifying these propositions with some critiques developed by authors who are closer to the continental perspective, such as Slavoj Žižek, but also by Rorty himself. Although in general terms we believe that these Anglo-Saxon analyses provide us with a plausible overview of which of Hegel's epistemological premises are, as mentioned above, a harbinger or even a precise anticipation of what contemporary times will successfully assume. It is going to also be explained to what extent we believe these criticisms of Hegelian inferentialism to be accurate, especially for their lack of radicalism and for their ethical-political difficulties, as Žižek rightly points out. However, it is also attempted to be explain these discrepancies based on a distinction of philosophical temperament, as William James put it, attempting to critically connect both traditions.

20th Century, criticism of empiricism and Hegelian approaches

In broad terms, perspectives on modern representationalism, as articulated by philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant, aimed to explain knowledge through a correspondence between the world and our beliefs. The foundation of this "correspondence" or "adequacy" served as the guarantor of knowledge's validity and, by extension, a response to skepticism. In this framework, representations were assessed as either accurate or inaccurate reflections of reality, with epistemology occupying a central role in intellectual culture as the discipline capable of evaluating and adjudicating the legitimacy of such representations. This approach positioned epistemology as the authoritative arbiter of the truth, tasked with determining the conditions under which knowledge could be considered valid.

This modern epistemological model inherited its essential elements into the contemporary world, primarily from a period of enthusiasm for Kantianism that was notably influential in the 19th Century[1]. This Kantianism came to significantly shape the professional pretensions of philosophy. Its dominance persisted even after the linguistic and hermeneutic turn, such that problems concerning the correspondence of representation with reality were reformulated in 20th-century terms. Thus, epistemology retained the requirement to elaborate a justification of the relationship between the internal, now in terms of language, and the world.

Much ink has been spilled, but without much success, in attempting to explain how this adequacy or correspondence is established for any vocabulary. As a result, during the 20th century, various critiques of the representation model arose from points of view as diverse as those developed by Martin Heidegger, Charles S. Pierce, John Dewey, and Rorty himself. Notably, in the analytical tradition, Sellars's (1956) proposal (later, that of Donald Davidson) challenged the empiricist ideas that sensations could be considered the foundation of knowledge and the content of our basic concepts. Consequently, suggestions emerged regarding a change in the model for knowledge and, with it, the abandonment of the notion of representation, or at least a reconceptualization of it. In other words, these currents propose establishing an alternative semantics and epistemology that enables knowledge and avoids skepticism. Among them, inferentialism emerges, with a clear Hegelian influence.

In response to criticisms of the representational model of knowledge, two primary approaches to the issue of correspondence emerge. The first involves a complete departure from the internal-external contrast, proposing alternative frameworks. For instance, pragmatism introduces metaphors such as the tool and the habit of action to explain the

[1] Following Rorty, a "return to Kant" movement emerged in Germany beginning in the 1860s, promoting a spirit of metaphysics and epistemology as the core of philosophy—one that would shape the future of the discipline. According to Rorty, Hegelian philosophy had generated a kind of resistance to this image: "Hegelianism produced an image of philosophy as a discipline which somehow both completed and swallowed up the other disciplines, rather than grounding them. It also, made philosophy too popular, too interesting, too important to be properly professional […]." This attitude emerged when Kantian influence redirected philosophy toward being the discipline concerned with the objectivity of knowledge. (Rorty, 1979, 175).

production and utilization of knowledge. The second path, as José Giromini (2023) suggests, seeks to develop a semantic notion where access to the world is mediated through representations, that is, from an internal perspective (p. 31). Using Platonic terminology, the distinction lies in whether one establishes a divide between appearance and reality from within the representation itself, a path followed by Brandom, or trivializes this distinction, as thinkers like Davidson and Rorty tend to do. Consequently, Brandom can be positioned as occupying a middle ground between those who attempt to address skeptical concerns by offering an external guarantee for representations—such as John McDowell's minimal empiricism[1]—and the more radical pragmatist approach that entirely abandons the notion of representation and its underlying assumptions.

Enter the Spirit of Trust

In *Spirit of Trust*, Brandom seeks to close the door on the skeptic, exorcise empiricist intuitions, and abandon the idea of Hilary Putnam's (1998) "God's eye" perspective. This idea sought to postulate an absolute and external point of view with respect to which it is possible to affirm the correctness or incorrectness of our representations. To abandon this assumption, Brandom aims to show that epistemological evaluation can be made "from within" the representation. More specifically, his objective is to demonstrate that by engaging with the content of representations, it becomes possible to analyze the obligations these representations entail—not in direct relation to the external world itself, but rather in connection with a constellation of other representations and shared meanings through which speaking subjects construct and negotiate their understanding of the world. In such a way that, if the empiricist position affirmed that "if something is real, the mind has an obligation to it," Brandom proposes inverting the meaning of this normativity of knowing: "if something has [enunciative] authority, we can say that it is real" (Giromini, 2023, 34). This implies that it is not the external world itself, but rather the structuring of the language through which we articulate the world, that establishes the criterion of reality. This proposal is based on Brandom's timely reception of the Hegelian philosophical system. His reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2010) is crucial to explaining the proposed solution to the problems inherent in modern epistemology and the series of dichotomies it forged.

It is well known that the spirit of Hegelian philosophy is characterized by its commitment to demonstrating that the classical dichotomies and oppositions of philosophical thought—such as subject/object, reason/nature, mind/matter, and receptivity/spontaneity—are merely *apparent* and must ultimately be sublated within an original unity or identity. This unity, in turn, undermines the presumed autonomy of the distinct forms of intelligibility these

[1] In his famous book *Mind and World* (2003), McDowell sets out to construct what he calls a “non-dogmatic empiricism” or minimal empiricism, which consists in showing that experience can still serve as a foundation for beliefs. Thus, he preserves the idea that the normativity of our beliefs lies in the connection between mind and world, since the mind is *answerable* to the latter, while also taking into account the critiques developed by Sellars and Davidson. To this end, he proposes the existence of “appearances” that have conceptual content without being beliefs or judgments.

dichotomies entail (Beltrán, 2016, 24–25). Crucially, it is precisely the tension and interrelation between these forms of intelligibility that lies at the heart of the discussion concerning the skeptical question. Accordingly, the Hegelian concepts that dissolve this divide constitute the point of departure from which Brandom seeks to elucidate both the process by which beliefs are acquired and the conditions under which they attain objectivity.

In the view of the philosopher of the Pittsburgh School, Kant acknowledges the propositional character of knowledge and maintains that discursive activity entails the adoption of doxastic and practical responsibilities and commitments, mediated by the rules embedded within concepts. From the Kantian perspective, conceptual content provides the normative basis for determining our reasons to apply, or refrain from applying, a given concept in a particular judgment (Brandom, 2019, 9–10). Nevertheless, Kant's phenomenalist turn renders all knowledge fundamentally dependent upon sensibility. Within his transcendental framework, the notion of intuition—as immediate and tacit cognition—assumes a central role. Conceived as direct access to the world, Kantian intuition designates sensibility itself, which, though mediated by the categories, is ultimately elevated to the status of indubitable certainty and posited as both the point of departure and the culmination of scientific knowledge. It is precisely within this transcendental empiricist orientation that intuition remains the foundational ground of human cognitive capacities vis-à-vis the world. Ultimately, however, Kant's continued reliance on the external authority of the world precludes a decisive break with skepticism.

In Brandom's terms, although Kant recognizes that "discursive creatures are distinguished by having rational obligations" (Brandom, 2019, 11), his account of norms remains opaque, insofar as it is entangled with certain persistent difficulties inherent to his transcendental idealism—most notably, the distinction between the phenomenal realm, which is amenable to representation, and the noumenal domain, which is by definition inaccessible (Brandom, 2019, 11). It is well established that one of Hegel's principal criticisms of Kant targeted precisely this bifurcation, which, together with the notion that the mind's content is self-legitimating, helps to illuminate the manner in which the philosopher of the absolute sought to transcend the limitations of the Kantian framework.

The Hegelian inferential experience

Hegel's principal strategy, subsequently taken up by Brandom, consists in reconceptualizing what philosophical tradition had long defended as immediate knowledge in terms of the processes by which conceptual content is determinately articulated. In the 20th Century, a decisive development in this discussion emerged within the context of analytic philosophy through Wilfrid Sellars's influential critique of the "myth of the given," articulated in his seminal 1956 essay *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. From that point onward, the suspicion that there is no form of knowledge whose apprehension is instantaneous and incorrigible began to gain significant traction. Sellars observes that this critique of immediacy is anticipated in Hegelian thought, particularly in the "Sense-Certainty" chapter of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel exposes the illusory confidence placed in the

senses and contests the very possibility of knowledge conceived as unmediated givenness. "... it appears as the most veritable, for it has not omitted anything from its object, but rather, has its object in its complete entirety before itself. However, this certainty in fact yields the most abstract and the very poorest truth." (Hegel, 2018, 60). Hegel then criticizes the supposed immediacy of the intellectual premise of the self on which other philosophies have sought to base knowledge: "it turns out that neither the one [the I] nor the other [the object] is only immediately within sensuous-certainty; rather, both are mediated" (61) These philosophies are determined by a multiplicity of concomitant beings that deny them and, in turn, by the determinants of language that finds its negation as soon as we stop enunciating and perceiving that which we believed to be immediate. Thus, sensory certainty (*sinnliche Gewißheit*) is described under a dialectical principle that leads it to be nothing other than "the simple history of its movement or its experience" (Hegel, 2018, 69) "It is clear both that the dialectic of sensuous-certainty is nothing but the simple history of its movement (that is, its experience) and that sensuous-certainty itself is nothing but just this history" (Hegel, 2018, 66) and in no way a simple and immediate fact. This Hegelian conception of language reveals its dialectical constitution in relation to a consciousness that is in motion and a universality that synthesizes particular conceptions. It further complements the thesis of sensible knowledge in a subsequent stage—namely, perception (*Wahrnehmung*)—whose structure is simultaneously negative, differentiated, and multiple: "This salt is a simple Here and is, at the same time, manifold; it is white and also tart, also cubically shaped, also of a particular weight, etc.," all unified by the universal, which is "the thingness that unites and conjoins them" (Hegel, 2018, 181). As Hegel elaborates elsewhere, "This salt is a simple Here and is at the same time manifold; it is white and also tart, also cubically shaped, also of a particular weight, etc. All of these many properties are in one simple Here in which they also permeate each other" (Hegel, 2018, 69), unified by the universality of "the thinghood keeping them together in that way" (Hegel, 2018, 70). This account of perception demonstrates its inherent complexity and lack of simplicity, thereby revealing the impossibility of direct intuition insofar as perceptual experience is mediated by its interrelation with other concepts and presuppositions about the world.

In this same vein, Sellars contends that sense perceptions, in themselves, cannot constitute any form of knowledge, insofar as knowledge—unlike mere sensation—is inherently propositional and entails a network of inferential relations that define the content of any concept[1]. Sellars's critique extends to any philosophical position that posits something as given, external to and independent of language. Both Hegel and Sellars reject the intelligibility of conceiving any concept as immediate knowledge, on the grounds that

[1] Sellars states that "classical sense-datum theories uphold three mutually contradictory propositions**:** A) That the proposition *X perceives the sensory content red s* implies that X knows non-inferentially that *s is red*. B) The capacity to perceive sensory contents is not acquired. C) The capacity to gain knowledge of facts of the form *X is Y* is acquired. He resolves the contradiction by rejecting A. Thus, he holds that we perceive particulars through the senses, which does not amount to knowledge. Therefore, the existence of sense data does not logically imply the existence of knowledge (Sellars, 1997, 32)

conceptual determination invariably requires the exercise of inferential capacities. Moreover, they concur that although there may be non-inferential observational judgments (i.e., judgments informed by sensory content), for such judgments to acquire determinacy and potential significance, they must be situated within a web of logical relations to other contents. In this respect, both thinkers endorse a form of semantic holism: to grasp any conceptual content is necessarily to grasp a multitude of other contents and their interconnections, a process that unfolds within what Sellars famously termed the "logical space of reasons."

Brandom advances along this same trajectory, developing an inferentialist framework most fully articulated in *Make It Explicit* (1994). His account is grounded in the idea that a knower demonstrates understanding by being able to "give and ask for reasons," that is, by articulating a justificatory response that can be assessed within a shared normative space. A statement, in turn, acquires cognitive authority insofar as there exists a practical attitude toward it that consists in ascribing such authority—namely, in its recognition by others. Consequently, when an individual is regarded as reliable, and thus as possessing knowledge, a belief is implicitly attributed to them in the form of an inferentially articulated commitment. This entails that they are likewise committed to a constellation of related beliefs that either serve as premises underwriting this belief or function to maintain its coherence by precluding incompatibilities. Accordingly, when we ascribe knowledge to someone, we both attribute and assume a commitment that can operate as a premise or conclusion within an inference, as well as serve as a qualification shaping that inferential process (Beltrán, 2016, 28–30).

To elucidate this cognitive structure, Brandom recuperates from Hegel the notions of *determinate negation* and *mediation*, which he interprets in terms of incompatibility and material consequence—that is, as inferential relations of inclusion and exclusion that constitute the fundamental architecture of thought (Brandom, 2019, 2). As Alejandro Cavallazzi (2016) clarifies, determinate negation does not operate on the truth-value of a proposition, as it does in formal logic, but rather on the meaning of a term (p. 91). In this view, a concept attains significance only insofar as it can be delimited through contrast with other concepts.

> Skepticism which ends with the abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot progress any further from this point, but must instead wait to see whether something new will present itself and what it will be, in order that it can also toss it into the same empty abyss. By contrast, while the result is grasped as it is in truth, as determinate negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation, the transition is made whereby the progression through the complete series of shapes comes about on its own accord (Hegel, 2018, 53).

In general, people make inferences to understand the meaning of words. Materially opposite terms allow us to derive implicit properties, and understanding their relationship allows us

to understand a third term from which other material inferences can be drawn (Cavalazzi, 2016, 98). As Brandom says: “The concept of material incompatibility,or as Hegel calls it "determinate negation," is his most fundamental conceptual tool” (Brandom, 2002, 180). For example, the property "square" implies the property "polygon," but this excludes materially incompatible properties such as "round." For Brandom, Hegelian mediation is equivalent to material inference, a correct inference depending on the premises (Brandom, 1994, 97).

> Understanding a certain thing involves not only abstracting a concept but also understanding how that thing is, is not, can be, and how it relates to the world (Cavalazzi, 2016, 102).

According to Brandom, this procedure enables us to recognize errors in our judgments by identifying incompatibilities that become manifest in practice (for example, what is copper cannot simultaneously be silver, yet it must share certain properties characteristic of metals). In response, we engage in processes of rectification to revise our network of judgments accordingly, thereby adopting specific normative attitudes (Brandom, 2019, 78–79). Moreover, this approach entails an analysis of the content of entities in the world; for Hegel, it thus assumes the character of a metaphysics, inasmuch as it renders explicit a content that was previously implicit and susceptible to multiple levels or contexts of articulation (Cavallazzi, 2016, 95):

> With regard to dialectical movement itself, its element is the pure concept; it thereby has a content that is out-and-out the subject in its own self. Therefore, there is no kind of content that comes forward which behaves as an underlying subject and which gets its significance by being attached to this as a predicate (Hegel, 2018, 41).

Ultimately, any claim must be integrated into a network of numerous other judgments that we endorse within an interdependent web, a web that is subject to revision in light of the consequences and incompatibilities arising in relation to other claims, as well as through practical engagements with objects. Conversely, in order to regard someone as a knowing subject, the implicit commitments embedded in their observational reports are treated as premises within their inferential practices, underscoring the point that the normativity governing these inferences is not assessed solely by the subject themselves but rather by a third party (Beltrán, 2016, 30). As Brandom observes:

> I defend is that the representational dimension of propositional contents should be understood in terms of their *social* articulation—how a propositionally contentful belief or claim can have a different significance from the perspective of the individual believer or claimer, on the one hand, than it does from the perspective of one who attributes that belief or claim to the individual, on the other (Brandom, 2000, 158-9).

This structure elucidates how the meanings embedded in judgments are constituted in a holistic and practical manner, while also accounting for the normative dimension of beliefs and, by extension, of objectivity itself, insofar as this is understood as a logical rather than a merely psychological process. This entails that, as Hegel maintains, the objective world is always given in conceptual terms, articulated through the uses and functions that language assumes within our social practices—practices that are themselves dynamic and subject to continual transformation (Brandom, 2019, 3–4).

> Hegel repeatedly emphasizes that human individuals can only appear and exist within the heart of the human community, since their very human condition can only emerge and be preserved in the intersubjectivity that unfolds across the different levels and settings where the life and activity of the community take place... (Cortés del Moral, 77).

As a consequence, we cannot apprehend the conceptual structure of the objective world except as part of an ongoing narrative that encompasses what we are actively doing when we engage with the world—namely, continually justifying our claims, elaborating their implications, and resolving contradictions with the remainder of our commitments, all within a practical context that is itself perpetually evolving and subject to revision (Brandom, 2019, 4). This dynamic process of determining content through the incorporation of new judgments and the continual adjustment of conceptual commitments is what Hegel designates as *experience*, upon which the very establishment of norms ultimately depends.

In accordance with this perspective, empiricism's immediate knowledge, traditionally conceived in terms of sensations, undergoes reinterpretation as the determination of conceptual content. Building on Sellars' framework, Brandom argues that perceptual experiences can be redefined as certain beliefs acquired non-inferentially through specific causal interactions, albeit lacking the capacity to serve as reasons. As previously discussed, adherence to conceptual norms necessitates adjustments in conflicting commitments, involving the abandonment of some judgments while adopting others (Brandom, 2004, 22). Throughout the process of experience, individuals may retain portions of their network of commitments over extended periods, leading to a sense of familiarity that can be deemed "immediate," albeit contingent upon this stability. Essentially, individuals function as "carriers and conveyors of societal values, beliefs, and lifestyles, often unwittingly, or even in defiance thereof" (Cortés del Moral, 78).

Hegel’s conception of knowledge production posits that knowledge emerges within a dynamic constellation of forms of life and consciousness. This knowledge is immanent, as it is not preordained or derived from a separate or independent entity; rather, it arises and evolves through the very development of the entities and processes constituting reality in each instance (Cortés del Moral, 71). This perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the objective and subjective realms, not by resorting to a stark distinction between them, but by integrating them as forms of a singular, evolving process: that of the spirit, the term Hegel uses to characterize humanity’s unfolding development.

Recognition and remembrance as the basis of epistemological progress

As previously discussed, this process suggests that norms are socially constituted through the discursive practices outlined above. Brandom further elaborates on this possibility by invoking a key Hegelian concept: reciprocal recognition. In the epistemic context, within the discursive framework of giving and demanding reasons, a subject's acknowledgment of responsibility for their assertions must be met with a socially adequate recognition from another, to whom the initial subject grants the authority to assign such responsibility. Consequently, the attitudes of recognition and attribution are mutually dependent. Thus, the inferential relations that are articulated and that yield practical consequences serve to establish norms regarding the structure of the world, grounded in the principle of recognition. As Brandom states:

> The recognitive community of all those who recognize and are recognized by each other in turn is a kind of universal under which its members fall, and they count as self-conscious individuals *as* particulars characterized by that universal. Self-consciousness in Hegel's sense is practical awareness of oneself as such a recognitively constituted subject of normative statuses. It is accordingly a social achievement and a social status. Not only is it not the turning on of a Cartesian inner light; it is not even something that principally happens between the ears of the individual so constituted (Brandom, 2019, 26).

For Brandom, recognition also underscores the historical nature of practices, institutions, and self-conscious subjects who are guided by norms and attitudes (Brandom, 2019, 29). Given its practical dimension, the fixation of a concept is a gradual and progressive process: as it is applied to a broader range of circumstances, its content becomes progressively more refined and better defined. In this regard, Hegel posits that the understanding of a concept entails a rational reconstruction, a continuous and evolving history of its determination (Brandom, 2019, 29).

In this regard, the American philosopher employs the narrative of a concept's history as a reflective phase of the experience of error. This recollection not only accounts for the processes of conceptual change but also illustrates their progressive nature (Brandom, 2019, 683). In essence, we construct a narrative that traces the development of the justifications we support today. Thus, it exemplifies the rationality inherent in our discursive practices by demonstrating that the norms we justifiably endorse are grounded in attitudes that reflect how the past consistently provides reasons for present positions (Brandom, 2019, 451). As Giromini explains,

> Brandom often asserts that recollections are an account of how we progressively achieve present successes through past errors; the story of how, through successive, increasingly refined appearances, we arrive at reality (Giromini, 2023, 102).

Notably, recounting the succession of appearances or phenomena is precisely the act of composing a phenomenology, as Hegel conceived it. Furthermore, as Giromini highlights, the concept of recollection demonstrates how the correction of a conceptual network is immanent within the process of determining conceptual content. It reveals how we arrive at conceptual clarity through its progression, retrospectively observed, through ongoing corrections, its relation to other networks, and its interaction with the world (Giromini, 2023, 49).

In contrast to Kant, Brandom asserts that Hegel attributes to the pragmatic criterion for determining conceptual content a social normativity grounded in recognition, offering a historical explanation for the representational dimension, justification, and authority of this content through the lens of collective rationality:

> Hegel brings the normative down to earth by explaining discursive norms as the product of social practices (Brandom, 2019, 11).

> Rather than being an immaterial and intangible entity, both Hegel and his intellectual predecessors argue that the spirit encapsulates and regulates the diverse values, works, activities, institutions, knowledge, customs, ways of life, and organizational structures that constitute the real and concrete life of peoples within each historical context (Cortés del Moral, 77).

By interpreting norms as products of social practices, we can naturalize them, framing ourselves as self-constituting beings. In Rorty's view, this conceptual shift facilitates a full secularization, as it liberates us from the need for an external authority beyond our own practices. This process not only redefines normativity but also enables a more self-reliant, immanent approach to ethical and social life, free from reliance on transcendent or metaphysical justifications:

> Hegelian communities are constellations of reciprocal-recognitive dyads. The recognitive attitudes of others, who hold one responsible, are equally as important as the normative attitudes of one who acknowledges a commitment (Brandom, 2019, 14).

Subject and object, reason and nature

The scenario outlined above provides a framework for understanding how Hegel's philosophy unifies dichotomies and, consequently, how these dichotomies have been integrated into the inferentialist discourse of the 20th Century. As previously discussed, the justification of knowledge occurs within the logical space of reasons, articulated in a fully conceptual manner, consistent with the preceding outline. According to Beltrán and Olvera, the Hegelian Idea enables the reconciliation of all oppositions within thought. They follow Halbig (2008) when he asserts that both "reason" and "nature" are moments of the Idea, as they are both determined by the conceptual arrangement presented in a logical moment of

the conceptual totality (Halbig, 2008, 83). Therefore, the subject's epistemological access to nature is made possible by the inherent identity between the two. In other words, there is an analogy between the Idea and the logical space of reasons, which constitutes the totality of conceptual space, as it is defined by the determinations of the concept itself (Beltrán, 2016, 43). In Hegel's terms:

> Now the idea has shown itself to be the concept liberated again into its subjectivity from the immediacy into which it has sunk in the object; it is the concept that distinguishes itself from its objectivity – but an objectivity which is no less determined by it and possesses its substantiality only in that concept. This identity has therefore rightly been designated as a subject-object, for it is just as well the formal or subjective concept as it is the object as such (Hegel, 2010, 673).

Thus, we can observe the unity between subject and object, illustrating that the space of reason is inseparable from the external world. Consequently, it becomes evident that these two domains cannot possess contrasting or independent intelligibility, as their interrelation is fundamental to the structure of knowledge itself. This unity underscores the coherence of thought and reality, where the logical space of reason and the external world are inherently interconnected and mutually constitutive.

Brandom, like Hegel, ascribes to both things and thought a shared structure that is intelligible in the sense outlined above. As Hegel and Brandom both assert, Being is rationally intelligible. The conditions for intelligibility, which Hegel identifies as logic, provide a framework for rationality that, for him, aligns with metaphysics. This perspective is consistent with Robert Pippin's thesis, which argues that idealism, much like inferentialism, does not posit the mental dependence of the world; rather, it serves as a critique of empiricism. Both Pippin and Brandom suggest that Hegelian philosophy affirms reason's ability to determine the knowability of the world. In contrast to the empiricist view that positions the world as the ultimate arbiter of reason, idealism asserts that reason is the tribunal of itself.

In this sense, Hegel's *Logic* represents a metaphysics of things as thoughts, whereas the traditional empiricist metaphysics emphasizes a conception of things, or "the essence of things," as existing independently for their own sake (Pippin, 2020, 24). As Pippin articulates:

> Pure thinking, as Hegel understands it, is neither dependent on nor independent of the empirical, or the materiality or the brain, or the "indifference point," or whatever new "absolute" comes into fashion (Pippin,2020, 21).

In contrast to Kant, Hegel asserts that thought actively generates content, rejecting Kant's notion that thought merely structures or conditions experience. For Hegel, the pure forms of intuition represent the subjectivizing element within Kantian philosophy, which he

critiques as reducing the objective world to a mere product of the subject's faculties. As Pippin articulates: “So, Hegel thinks that Kant had neglected his own achievements in the Metaphysical Deduction and, in “fear of the object,” needlessly subjectivized his results” (Pippin, 2020 358).

In conclusion, this proposal offers a way to explain the objectivity of concepts without relying on intermediary entities in knowledge, such as sensations, or on metaphors of friction between the world and the subject. The traditional form of empiricist normativity can be understood through what Marx later describes as "fetishism"—the projection of human-made products, arising from social practices, onto the objective world, treating them as though they existed independently of human activity. As Corona explains, fetishism involves conceiving the concept—whether being, non-being, substance, matter, commodity, or experience—as a self-sufficient totality (Corona, 2008, 126). From Hegel’s perspective, the traditional view mistakenly treats the normative products of social recognition as if they were objects independent of empirical cognition. For Hegel, as Brandom notes, the core of modernity lies in the idea that we are the creators of the norms that define us. If we create the norms and they depend on us, how can we genuinely perceive ourselves as bound by them? Alienation—the attitude by which we regard constructed norms as natural—thus becomes another name for empiricism, as it interprets the world through a lens that assumes sensibility or empiricism as the founding point of all knowledge. This leads to the false construction of reality, imposing categories that are mistakenly regarded as universally definitive, even though they may be contextually contingent.

Reality in Itself

Despite the virtues of Brandom’s contemporary reinterpretation of Hegel, we can observe that he does not fully detach himself from the fetishism we have described when he attempts to redefine both the notion of representation and the distinction between appearance and reality, rather than simply discarding them. In this sense, we will see how Rorty and Žižek’s critiques of the neo-Hegelian partially converge.

According to Rorty, Brandom’s inferentialism explains the epistemic authority traditionally attributed to the world (God, Experience, or Reality-in-itself) in exclusively sociological terms (Rorty, 2007, 8). This means, as we have already noted, that authority is always the community itself. This thesis aligns with Žižek’s own critique of Brandom: “The reason is that reality is not just what there is but also its ideological supplements, symbolic fictions that structure reality, false hopes and fears.” (2022, 25).

However, these positions remain controversial in contemporary epistemology due to the persistence of empiricist intuition, which insists on the possibility of unmediated contact with reality or transcending merely human authority in relation to our beliefs. Nevertheless, both Sellars and Brandom agree that this amounts to conflating the causes and justifications of beliefs. Rorty summarizes it as follows:

> Empiricism's appeal to experience is as inefficacious as appeals to the Word of God unless backed up with a predisposition on the part of a community to take such appeals seriously. So experience cannot, by itself, adjudicate disputes between warring cultural politicians (Rorty, 2007, 33-34).

Ultimately, for the self-proclaimed American pragmatist, what is at stake is the possibility of abandoning the ambition of transcendence or the very idea of ultimate authority, which ultimately refers back to a theological society. That is, it is about accepting that any dispute over our beliefs can only be resolved by the alternative that seems best according to our own cultural standards. Rorty calls this attitude, in which existence is determined by culture, the "ontological priority of the social," a thesis easily derived from the Hegelian and inferentialist considerations we have described. As a result, the most desirable philosophical attitude for our culture would be to stop asking what is *really real* and instead ask what human goals we wish to achieve (Rorty, 2007, 16). But this is a step Brandom does not fully complete, as we will see.

While Hegel and Brandom seem to correct Kant on the debate about existence —tying it to a specific description (i.e., a set of inferences) and thus multiplying the logical spaces where we can discuss the existence or non-existence of objects in practical and social terms— Brandom retains some of the vocabulary he seeks to leave behind.

The inferentialist consistently argues, in line with his critique of empiricism and the idea of representation, that there is no neutral logical space in which the question of existence can be settled:

> There is no bird's-eye above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified, nor from which even necessary and sufficient conditions for such deserts can be formulated (Brandom, 1995, 601).

This means that nothing in the natural world or natural science grants it privileged status in relation to "reality," because all norms are determined by social practices that can be replaced by better ones—this is what fallibility consists of. Let us see how Rorty remind us Hegel's words:

> Meanwhile, if the concern about falling into error sets up a mistrust of science, which itself, untroubled by such scruples, simply sets itself to work and actually cognizes, it is still difficult to see why on the contrary a mistrust of this mistrust should not be set up and why one should not be concerned that this fear of erring is already the error itself. In fact, this fear presupposes something, and in fact presupposes a great deal, as truth, and it bases its scruples and its conclusions on what itself ought to be tested in advance as to whether or not it is the truth. This fear presupposes representations of cognizing as an instrument and as a medium, and it also

> presupposes a difference between our own selves and this cognition; but above all it presupposes that the absolute stands on one side and that cognition stands on the other for itself, and separated from the absolute, though cognition is nevertheless something real; that is, it presupposes that cognition, which, by being outside of the absolute, is indeed also outside of the truth, is nevertheless truthful; an assumption through which that which calls itself the fear of error gives itself away to be known rather as the fear of truth (Hegel, 2018, 50).

In these lines, Hegel challenges the skepticism that assumes our discursive practices must serve as a means of representing something absolute or in itself. Accordingly, Rorty suggests we stop thinking that these discursive practices must be embedded in a context that constitutes the background of all possible social practices (Rorty, 2007, 24). Thus, the Hegelian lesson, in Brandom's hands, ultimately means that both reason and experience are social and collective matters. However, according to Rorty, Hegel does not complete this project because he should have abandoned the idea of Absolute Knowledge, in which his system points to a certain convergence between the divine and the human (Rorty, 2007, 79). Brandom exhibits a similar attitude when, within his inferentialism, he tries to redefine the distinction between appearance and reality or give meaning to representationalist intuition.

For Rorty, Hegel's claim that we will never escape from the "the struggle and labor of the negative, is merely to say that we shall remain finite creatures, the children of specific times and specific places" (Rorty, 2007, 82). Assuming this finitude means reinterpreting nature as a moment in the unfolding of Spirit's consciousness—one without an end—and knowledge as an expansion of its horizons, but not as a kind of contact with Reality in itself (Rorty, 2007, 111). The immediate consequence of abandoning the debate about noumenal reality is abandoning the debates around distinctions such as objective/subjective, analytic/conversational, Kantian/Hegelian, or representationalism/inferentialism, as they are derived from the former (Rorty, 2007, 128). That is, Rorty's suggestion is to adopt a therapeutic attitude, a result of this metaphilosophical consideration where we cease to be interested in the relationship between language and world, in the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of sentences, and instead adopt the idea that logic is merely a tool for making our norms explicit. In his words:

> The therapy consists in saying: imagine how a term like "refers to" o "is about" came to be used, and you will thereby know all you need to know about how reference, aboutness, and intentionality came into the world (Rorty, 1998, 125).

From this perspective, Brandom falters by distancing himself from the idea that beliefs can be true or false but do not represent anything—that it is better to discard representations and correspondence theories of truth because they are the source of relativism (Rorty, 2000). This becomes evident in statements he makes in *Make It Explicit*, such as:

> [...] the representationalist semantic tradition incorporates an undeniable intuition: anything possessing propositional content necessarily has a representational aspect; nothing lacking it would be recognizable as an expression of a proposition (Brandom, 1995, 496).

or when he claims:

> Objects are what they are regardless of what anyone takes them to be. (Brandom, 1995, 594-5).

In these passages, the American philosopher seems to suggest that truth can be defined in non-epistemic terms and that we can still speak of non-linguistic facts or some kind of reality unmediated by language, therefore, in itself.

It is clear that retaining the notion of representation, as well as the contrast between appearance and reality, commits him to an unrepresented world and to the notion of how things really are. But as Rorty says, this demands an explanation of how representation works and what it means to respond to how things really are. Defending non-linguistic facts leads him into the same Kantian trap: he is tempted by the *bird's-eye view* even as he denies it. He wants to defend a notion of correctly grasping things that incorporate transcendent norms, even as his own framework is aimed at refuting them. In Rorty's words:

> To sum up, my hunch is that Brandom, like Kant, is trying too hard to find a compromise in an uncompromisable dispute, and so falls between two stools (Rorty 1998, 134).

Likewise, Žižek points out that Hegel's *Unaufhebbare Rest* (irrevocable remainder) is not, as Brandom thinks, a brute empirical immediacy but rather the subject itself in its actuality, which cannot be overcome:

> what resists notional mediation is its own actual existence in the guise of some 'brute immediacy'" (Žižek, 2022, 47).

The Slovenian philosopher asserts that there is always a deadlock in reality constitutive of it—not because knowledge is partial or perspectival, but due to the historical and fallible constitution of reason. In his words:

> ... we are totally exposed to the meaningless contingency of natural necessity (Žižek, 2022, 50).

He also notes that Brandom remains trapped in the duality between norms and truth when he insists on distinguishing between the objective realm of being and the subject of thought, even though Hegel moves beyond this dichotomy. Unlike Rorty, however, Žižek argues that the German philosopher does not reduce the deontic to positive reality but rather:

> Hegel's problem is not how can we reach reality-in-itself, but why (and how) does reality appear to itself and thereby get caught into illusions and imperfections that are part of reality itself -in short, Hegel's point is the our

> (epistemic) failure to grasp the noumenal dimension signal an imperfection of this noumenal dimension itself. The deontic dimension of human spirit is just the ultimate form of a "deontic" dimension of reality as such (Žižek, 2022, 62).

It is clear that the critiques of both thinkers partially overlap, as both challenge Brandom's distinction between appearance and reality, between objective and subjective. However, the Slovenian introduces an ideological notion as structuring reality—one that the American philosopher has dismissed in various parts of his work as unproductive[1]. For Žižek, our discursive norms always incorporate this ideological element, thematized through the Lacanian *big Other*, "this alienated order cannot ever be "sublated" in a self-transparent reflexive rationality," as Brandom naively suggests (Žižek, 2022, 65).

In short, both agree that Brandom is mistaken in his idea of Absolute Knowledge as a positive ideal order that overcomes our errors or that we gradually achieve an objective understanding of external reality. Like Rorty, Žižek criticizes the neo-Hegelian's flirtation with the *bird's-eye view*, arguing that we are never outside the structure to compare our perspective with external reality—that is, the separation between the space of reasons and the space of nature. They agree that when Hegel says truth is not merely the adequacy of our concepts to things but, at a more basic level, the adequacy of a thing to its concept. So, he introduces the deontic dimension into reality itself. As Žižek puts it, it is not that concepts more or less reflect reality, but that reality itself is mediated by concepts. But he adds nuances that are not minor: a truly Hegelian spirit forces us to say that there are realities that can only exist insofar as they incorporate a mistaken notion, because ideological misperceptions are inscribed in social reality itself, sustaining practices and institutions (Žižek, 2022, 71-72).

We believe Rorty would have no problem accepting that, as Žižek argues, the Hegelian absolute goes beyond the Kantian duality between the alethic and the deontic—that the absolute is substance and subject, meaning that Spirit can mediate or internalize external objectivity. In reality, we cannot distinguish between the mediation of natural and social processes, but it is not that a finite subject [is] trying to understand the elusive substance that transcends its grasp is definitely not Hegel's position -for Hegel, the excess in objective reality that eludes the subject's grasp is ultimately subject itself… (Žižek, 2022, 55). The Slovenian philosopher describes how Brandom wavers when he claims that "recollection is in one sense made, and in another sense found." (Brandom, 2019, 684). For Žižek, Brandom reads Hegel's statement—that in a dialectical process, things become what they always

[1] Rorty dismisses the notion of ideology as false consciousness when he discards the opposition between power and truth, following Dewey and Foucault (reducing it to well- and misused power). However, Žižek does not conceive of ideology as opposed to truth. For the latter, ideology is not linked to falsity but to a hidden oppressive power—in fact, an idea can have a much more effective ideological impact if it is true than if it is false. It is clear that Rorty never engaged with post-Marxist thought. The American philosopher always displayed a quasi-Freudian rejection (his parents were Trotskyists) of Marxism, which prevented him from taking seriously the economic and structural critiques that are now seen as indispensable.

were—teleologically, as if the process merely actualized what was implicitly there (Žižek, 2022, 57). But what he ignores is that the conceptual content developed through relations of incompatibility and consequence and the brute immediacy of perception are one and the same—or, in Rorty's terms, that the difference between finding and inventing is irrelevant in this context.

For Rorty, the opposition between the universal and the empirical, or necessity and accident, is a false one, and history is merely a set of contingencies that could have happened otherwise (if power had unfolded differently). For Žižek, however, it is a tension that is part of reality—not in the sense that necessity is realized through contingencies, but rather: "a deeper necessity realizes itself through a complex set of contingent circumstances, it's that contingent circumstances decide the fate of necessity itself: once a thing (contingently) happens, its occurrence retroactively becomes necessary." (the externalization of the big Other) (Žižek, 2022, 77). In short, for the Slovenian, the distinction between appearance and reality is an ideologically structuring one.

Thus, as we said earlier, the unfolding of consciousness means expanding its horizons, for the latter it is a process of overcoming natural immediacy, detaching or alienating oneself from it, as Hegel already indicated (Žižek, 2022, 85). But it is also crucial to note that essence itself is barred by an immanent impossibility, which means, for Žižek, that Hegel is not merely a historicist analyzing perpetual change, but that there is a fundamental non-transparency in our beliefs and actions with central consequences, as we will see in the next section. For Rorty, however, it is enough to recognize that this historicism implies an inescapable link between knowledge and power to assert that we do not know the direction it will take, as it depends on a specific cultural politics unfolding amid historical contingency[1]. We will now see how this difference in readings articulates a critique of the notions of recollection and progress—one that will be particularly diverse from the Slovenian's perspective. But we will account for this difference in light of the distance between the Marxist and liberal philosophical temperaments of the authors discussed.

Recollection and Progress

Finally, as we have seen that, for Brandom, the teleological character of the evolution of Spirit and concepts is expressed in his account taking the form of a final, fully adequate description of reciprocal recognition:

[1] While Rorty, in his reading of Freud, highlights the crucial decentering of the "self" that the unconscious brings to thinking about identity—because it reveals "our accidental idiosyncrasies, the 'irrational' components of ourselves, those that split us into a collection of incompatible beliefs and desires" (1991, 148)—and in this sense would agree with the Slovenian that there is always a "non-transparent" rationality, we do not believe the American philosopher considers this particularly relevant for justifying the beliefs we present to others in the game Brandom describes as giving and asking for reasons. In this regard, Rorty attempts a distinction between the private and the public, which would render Žižek's psychoanalytic considerations largely irrelevant to public life—though this stance has also drawn significant criticism. To explore Rorty's position further, (see "Freud and Moral Reflection", Freud, 1991).

> [...] the recollective recognitive structure of confession and forgiveness for which I appropriate his term "trust" [Vertrauen]. This is the culmination of *The Phenomenology*: that "one, far-off, divine event, to which the whole creation moves". It is the final lesson Hegel´s book has been aiming to teach us: to understand ourselves in terms of the postmodern structure of normativity, community, and individual self-consciousness that is articulated by recognitive practices having the form of trust (Brandom, 2019, 30).

Here we find two controversial elements in Brandom's Hegelian reconstruction: first, that his narrative about the articulation of concepts is progressive, as we have said, moving from appearance to reality. Second, that the basis of the historical normativity Hegel provides lies in the expansion of mutual recognition, reflexive forgiveness, and thus approaches a kind of reconciliation and a state of communal trust. In short, there is an optimistic notion of cognitive progress, ultimately grounded in ethical and political progress. As Brandom himself puts it: "If we properly assimilate the achievements and failures of modernity, we can build upon them new and better kinds of institutions, practices, and self-conscious beings, which will be normatively superior because they embody greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the kind of beings we are" (Brandom, 2019, 456).

While we believe Rorty could accept cognitive progress insofar as we increasingly have more tools to satisfy more sophisticated needs, we do not think he would defend its link to the political dimension (in fact, he is careful to separate these two dimensions in his philosophical outlook). It is true that, for him, we must prioritize the conditions of democratic life over those of knowledge, as he often said: "Take care of freedom, and truth will take care of itself" (1998). But we do not believe he would find any historical necessity or ethically and politically progressive narrative—in reality, democratic achievements are more like fortunate contingencies in which we manage to provide better lives for more people[1].

For Žižek, however, Brandom's reading in this dimension is entirely misguided—it is no accident that his critique is titled *The Spirit of Distrust* (2022). For the Slovenian, Hegel's thought is not an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself. On the contrary, Hegelian reconciliation is a reconciliation with "madness"—with the idea that there is no way to leave it behind. Contrary to Brandom's reading, in which there is a teleology and historical progress, for the Marxist, Hegel defends a completely open idea of the future (Žižek, 2022, 21-22). To justify this reading, Žižek explains that the recognition relationship Hegel develops is not one of mutual dependence that, once we become aware of it, we simply adopt and enjoy, thereby remedying the injustices it reveals. On the contrary, the bond with the other occurs primarily through domination (recall that it arises from the

[1] This is achieved primarily through sentimental education, following the British tradition. Moreover, Rorty acknowledges that there is no way to rationally safeguard—as thinkers like Putnam or Habermas believe—against the possibility of an authoritarian society.

master-slave dialectic), and recognition and solidarity are only achieved through solitary action and the suffering of its consequences—that is, there is an ethical necessity of violence that remains unresolved (Žižek, 2022, 23).

Moreover, as we anticipated earlier, knowledge is not, as Brandom thinks, a continuous attempt to overcome inconsistencies to achieve full comprehension of the object, but rather an insurmountable inconsistency is precisely the sign that we have *touched the real* of the object. Reconciliation is with the paradox itself, and this paradoxical character includes the ethical and political dimension of history. If for Brandom there seems to be a justification of the past, for Žižek there can be no higher synthesis between the objective view of history and ethical judgment. The Slovenian illustrates his argument with cases of colonial genocide, asking: Can we retroactively justify them because they ultimately led to decolonization or future justice? Can there be reconciliation and forgiveness for these errors? In his view, Hegel's absolute knowledge is not a form of normativity or a final point of knowledge and life in harmony, as Brandom or even Rorty think (though for the former it is an achievable goal, and for the latter it is not). Rather, it is an acceptance of the abyss between facts and norms—an irreducible and constitutive abyss, the acceptance and reconciliation with error itself (Žižek, 2022, 36).

Thus, we can see that the crucial difference between the Slovenian and the more liberal or Anglo-Saxon reading of Hegel is that the former introduces the dimension of the symbolic, drawn from the psychoanalytic tradition, whose fundamental characteristic is openness—making it impossible to guarantee an outcome, let alone a rational and happy one. In fact, the Marxist follows Zambrana's reading that the dialectical process establishes negativity—not in Rorty's style as mere finitude and contextualism, but as an irreducible feature of intelligibility that introduces structural precariousness and ambivalence into every form of rationality. This means that any conceptual content we develop can collapse before being realized and that, at the same time, its opposite or its own contradiction emerges. As an example, Žižek points to how the emergence of modern human rights and freedom simultaneously gives rise to market slavery (Žižek, 2022, 94-95). But we can also consider the Jewish case as an example of such ambivalence and collapse: Has not the Israeli "State" become its own opposite and contradiction by now seeking the genocide of the Palestinian people? This negativity shows that we are never at an endpoint but always in a precarious situation that not only requires continuous revision of our judgments but also threatens the destruction of any progress achieved. Thus, according to the Marxist, Hegel's ethical and political lesson is that it is not enough to critique immanent and potentially emancipatory norms—we must also be alert to how they can turn into their very opposite (Žižek, 2022, 99): "the *reconciliation* resides just in the fact that we resign ourselves to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom" (Žižek, 2022, 100).

It is clear that the Slovenian philosopher adopts a perspective from psychoanalytic Marxism, which differs markedly from the liberal one. The latter displays an unjustified optimism, particularly from an ethical and political standpoint. The symbolic dimension and a more structurally Marxist reflection dismantle Brandom's teleological reading,

introducing irrationality and uncertainty about the world as constitutive elements and reminding us that "language is a productive activity, a "signifying practice", as it was popular to say: the relationship between speech and its meaning is not the one between expression and its content but the one between productive activity and its result" (Žižek, 2022, 53). In short, language makes the world—fragilely, contingently, and uncertainly.

Ultimately, we could say that while the epistemological dimension of Brandom's appropriation of Hegel represents a sharp critique aimed at completely eliminating empiricist intuitions (despite Brandom himself) and accounts for the social character of norms in a particularly radical way—as we said, it outlines complete secularization and allows for full finitude—it is also pertinent to see how this reading is imbued with a liberal spirit, typical of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, which is often unjustifiably naive and optimistic. In this context, it is essential to recover Cornel West's critique of pragmatism and its inferentialist strand, when he argues that this tradition needs more Marx and a certain sense of the tragic.

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