

Philosophy in Review



Robert B. Brandom, "A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology."

Yael Gazit

Volume 41, Number 2, May 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078048ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078048ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gazit, Y. (2021). Review of [Robert B. Brandom, "A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(2), 52–58.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078048ar>

Copyright © Yael Gazit, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Robert B. Brandom. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Harvard University Press 2019. 856 pp. \$46.50 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674976818).

Robert Brandom's lifelong reading of Hegel reaches full fruition in *A Spirit of Trust*. In this impressive long book, Brandom presents a meticulous reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that resembles no other; a reading that stands 'substantially apart from the mainstream tradition of Hegel interpretation,' as Brandom writes in one of the few remarks he makes on other readings of Hegel (6). In the first sentence of the book, Brandom states that it presents 'a rational reconstruction' of the *Phenomenology* (1). This statement, however, is not cashed out, and cannot be fully comprehended for its gravity and importance, until the final chapters of the book. For Brandom's way of reading Hegel—what he terms 'rational reconstruction'—is not simply another hermeneutical method for interpreting texts, but rather a practical commitment to *recollective rationality*: the very key idea of Hegel's Idealism in Brandom's view. As Brandom shows in detail in the last part of the book, *recollective rationality* stands at the heart of Hegel's philosophy, it is his most important and novel contribution to philosophy, and understanding and acknowledging it provides no less than the pathway to the third age of *Geist*: an age of better communities and individuals. To accomplish it one needs to exercise a selective engagement with the past that renders it a history: to construct a tradition or a narrative that shows how a specific view (norm) achieves explicitness over time by finding it implicit in past cases. This rational recollective reconstruction is also what Hegel *does* in the *Phenomenology*, according to Brandom, and it is likewise what Brandom does in his own book. Recollective rationality is thus the view that explains and justifies Brandom's hermeneutical choices, *and* the view that is explained and justified by their outcomes. As Brandom writes in the last sentence of the book: '*A Spirit of Trust* exemplifies the process of recollective rationality whose structure it is its business to articulate' (769). To thoroughly understand what is meant by this idea, and to judge whether the circularity it evinces is valid or not, one needs to wait, and follow Brandom's story, for nearly 500 pages. Nevertheless, it is a wait richly worthwhile.

The idea of recollective rationality is built on a set of commitments that Brandom attributes to Hegel, but they are also, first and foremost, his own philosophical commitments. Working his way to show how they are implicit in Hegel's work, rationally reconstructing it to make them explicit, Brandom uses his own terminology and philosophical framework: his is a pragmatist semantic reading, guided by a strategy he names 'semantic descent' its vocabulary is Brandomian and Fregean, and its main interlocutors are Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Sellars. Accordingly, most of the lessons Brandom derives from this strategy and setting are those he had articulated in his masterpiece of 1994, *Making It Explicit*, and later developed throughout his career. However, as he reads them out of, or into, the *Phenomenology*, these lessons gain further development, clarity, and are sometimes significantly altered. The most important among them is the idea of recollective rationality itself, which Brandom introduced briefly in 2002 as the missing piece in his earlier inferentialism, and now appears to stand at the center of the philosophical system he presents. The second is the model of reciprocal recognition that replaces (or underwrites?) his earlier score-keeping model to account for the structure of the essentially social discursive realm of intersubjective relations. These two ideas are discussed at length in the second and third parts of the book, as Brandom reads the *Self-Consciousness*, *Reason*, and *Spirit* chapters. The first part of the book contains less development of Brandomian themes, but it is nevertheless interestingly rich and important, for it prepares the ground for the social and historical dimensions that follow by taking the earlier chapters of the *Phenomenology* to lay the foundations of inferentialism.

Brandom's *Introduction* and the *Consciousness* chapters lay out Hegel's semantics generally. Hegel's project is (as Brandom elsewhere describes his own) a critical response to representational theories, that account for knowledge by driving a wedge between the representing a subject has (the thing *for consciousness*) and what is represented by it in the objective world (the thing *in itself*), by taking the first to be intelligible in a way that the second is not. What Brandom calls the 'commitment to strong differential intelligibility of appearance and reality' (43) begins with Descartes's idea of immediate awareness, but also characterizes Kant's division between the conceptual phenomena and the nonconceptual noumena (and Frege's notions of sense and reference). Hegel, according to Brandom, takes this division to render the possibility of genuine knowledge, and the idea of intentionality, unintelligible, and so to support an inadequate epistemology. His alternative is a non-psychological conception of the conceptual that draws on Kant's understanding of judgment in normative and pragmatist terms. To close the gap of intelligibility between the subjective and objective we have to see that both are conceptual, and this is possible only if we understand conceptual contents in terms of their use in inference—as a matter of the inferential relations in which they stand to one another: the material *consequences* and *incompatibilities* they have. These, according to Brandom, are Hegel's *mediation* and *determinate negation* that characterize not only the relations between concepts on the subjective side (between *commitments*, in Brandom's terminology), but also those on the objective side. For properties and facts also stand in relations of consequence and exclusion, even if they are *lawful* relations of *necessary* consequences and *impossible* incompatibilities, and not the deontic-normative relations between commitments that assert that consequences *ought* to be extracted and incompatibilities, while possible, *ought* to be excluded.

This understanding entails the first of three views that Brandom takes Hegel's Idealism to comprise: the view of *bimodal hylomorphic conceptual realism*. Hegel's non-psychological conception of the conceptual states not only that the objective world is as conceptually structured as the subjective is (conceptual realism), but also that the objective and subjective are 'two different forms that conceptual content can take' (84), specifiable by two different modalities: an alethic modal vocabulary for objective relations, and a deontic normative vocabulary for subjective practices (bimodal). This view closes the intelligibility gap between the representing and the represented, which now appear as complementary conceptually structured aspects of one and the same content, 'the subjective and objective poles of the intentional nexus' (106), but leaves the question of their relations open. Hegel's answer, according to Brandom, holds to mind-dependence of the objective but rejects the sort of ontological *referent*-dependence Berkley had in mind. 'There were sunsets that were beautiful before there were any suitable responders,' Brandom writes, 'and they would still have been beautiful even if there never had been such responders' (83). What there was not and cannot be without suitable responders, in Hegel's view, is an understanding of them—lending them sense. For to grasp the objective—to deploy the alethic modal vocabulary by claims of impossibility and necessity—is in practice to take one's commitments as normatively incompatible or entitling. Normative deontic vocabulary is on this view a pragmatic meta-vocabulary to alethic modal vocabulary. This understanding entails reciprocal *sense*-dependence between the objective and subjective, which Brandom calls *objective idealism*. This is the second view in his tripartite analysis of Hegel's Idealism.

The third is *conceptual idealism*, which builds on the notion of recollection that was briefly introduced above. In the hierarchical structure depicted by Brandom (205), conceptual idealism presupposes the two views that come before it, and in particular, follows the two phases of the process of experience (*Erfahrung*) that Hegel builds on the two initial views. Drawing the implications of his

conceptual conception of the subjective and objective, Hegel rejects the traditional notion of immediacy (in an argument that Brandom takes to be the same as Sellars's Myth of the Given) and offers it a different treatment that exposes his understanding of determinate contents. The immediate, in this account, is not and cannot be the foundation of knowledge and determinate empirical contents, but rather the source of friction with the recalcitrant world that yields an acknowledgment of incompatibility among commitments, which, in turn, drives a *process* of their *determinateness*. In the face of incompatibility, one is normatively obligated to *repair* because one is normatively *responsible* for the unity of one's commitments and exercises *authority* over the conceptual contents of concepts they apply. In repairing, one excludes incompatible commitments and endorses new ones, thus changing the conceptual content of the concept at hand. This process, however, is not complete without the third phase of recollection, in which the new endorsements are *vindicated*. In recollection one 'retrospectively rationally reconstruct[s] the course of experience from which they emerged, exhibiting it as expressively progressive: as the gradual, cumulative becoming (more) explicit of what then shows up as having been implicit all along, in the form of a norm governing and guiding the process of experience' (226). Similar to the common law judge, which Brandom takes as a model (449-50), the narrative (rationale) justifies both the reconstruction and its outcome. This is a dynamic open-ended process in terms of which we should understand the determinateness of conceptual contents; it is Hegel's expressivist view, according to Brandom; and it is the center of the metaconceptual categories of 'Vernunft,' which Hegel offers in place of the Kantian (and later, Fregean) 'Verstand.'

Conceptual idealism, as Brandom also puts it, is a response to a question raised by the doctrine of objective idealism. In the latter, both the objective conceptual relations and subjective conceptual practices are taken as jointly valid and essential, but the question of their relative priority is left open. Conceptual idealism states that both 'must be understood in terms of the process that institute those relations' (396), thus according explanatory priority to the subjective. This framing of conceptual idealism thus binds the three views comprising Brandom's tripartite account of Hegel's idealism tightly together and emphasizes their hierarchical structure. However, the hierarchy is not symmetrical, and the three views are not as closely related as they may seem. For the idea of recollection, as noted above, receives full treatment only in the last part of the book, far after the first two are established. A great deal of philosophical work is still needed to get to the final third element of the tripartite and to achieve the complete absolute idealism of Hegel. The significant missing piece of the story told so far is its social dimension, which often seems like an entirely different story. Indeed, Brandom explains that in moving from *Consciousness* to *Self-Consciousness* Hegel is 'shifting focus': moving from 'considering knowing from the side of what is known to considering it from the side of the knowers' (231), that is, to exploring the normative—now *self-conscious*—subject who rejects and endorses commitments in the experience of error. This shift begins with an evolutionary story of the early desiring creature and his stepping into the normative realm via an encounter with another, and goes deeper into the different relations between them and the different kinds of selves they can become.

Desiring creatures act on their desire by taking something as what would satisfy their desire, and so institute its significance as such if the desire is successfully satisfied. According to Brandom, when Hegel says that 'Self-consciousness is Desire' in the opening section of the *Self-Consciousness* chapters, he considers this structure as applied to the specific desire for recognition, 'the desire that others take or treat one in practice as a taker, as an instituter of significances' (249-50). This desire can be properly satisfied only by *reciprocal* recognition. In recognizing others, one takes their practices as 'authorizing and assessing performances' (259), as involving normative commitments

that can be assessed: as selves. Self-consciousness is the application of this concept of self to oneself, the identification of oneself as a recognized and recognizing being. Such a being is no longer a subject of mere desires, but of *normative statuses*, in Brandom's 'regimented idiom' (262), and it constitutes itself as such by its normative *attitudes*: by *taking* itself *as* such. How subjects conceive themselves, what they are *for* consciousness, is, therefore, a crucial element in what they really are, what they are *in themselves*. This idea, however, can be taken too far, as in the case of Mastery.

Brandom takes Hegel's allegory to show how the structure of subordination is implicit in the same story of desiring being and why it leads to a defective self-consciousness. The desire, he explains, is accompanied by a second-order desire that the first-order desire will be satisfied: 'that things should be in themselves just what they are for the desirer' (330) so that there would be no resistance to one's *authority* over how things are. This is an ideal of pure independence, of 'authority without any correlative responsibility' (314), that denies the attitudes of others (yielding the struggle of the allegory), entails no separation between content and force, and suggests that 'what seems right to me would be right,' as Brandom quotes Wittgenstein (301). In this conception there is no sense to incompatibilities, and hence no sense to determinate conceptual content and so to any undertaking of conceptual commitment at all. For to undertake a commitment (responsibility), as Brandom writes, 'must always also be to acknowledge the authority of others to hold me responsible—which is *implicitly* to attribute that authority' (306). The allegory shows that the Master *is*, in fact, dependent on the Servant, that their relation *is* recognitive, and so that their normative attitudes do institute normative statuses. But, failing to recognize this relation, and being wrong about the nature of their statuses, they are asymmetrical and defective relations and statuses (340). This model persists into modernity in Kant's model of autonomy.

Brandom goes a long way to explain why Hegel can say that 'Kant was *almost* right' (278), introducing diagrams and incorporating Kant's idea of *respect* into them to show that there is some attribution of authority to others in his view, but also that it remains a problematic model of pure independence nonetheless. According to Brandom's Hegel, the attitude-dependence of normative statuses is one of the most central insights of modernity, but in the form of pure independence it entails *alienation*. The traditional view saw the normative structure of its practices in a one-sided objective way, as norms were thought to be naturally in the world and attitudes to merely answer them. Modernity, however, only replaced it with the opposite extreme, namely with a one-sided *subjective* view, which leaves no sense to the idea of *answering* to norms to begin with. Alienation is 'not acknowledging the authority of norms over one's attitudes' (493), as opposed to the traditional element of *Sittlichkeit*, as Brandom takes it. To overcome alienation (and move to the third age of Geist) we need to bring the acknowledgment of the authority of norms over attitudes of *Sittlichkeit* back into our account (475-6); we need, as Brandom puts it in his *Introduction*, to explain 'just how the adoption of normative attitudes can institute determinately contentful norms by conferring meanings or conceptual contents that semantically *transcend* the attitudes that institute those norms and confer those meanings' (16, my emphasis). The challenge is, therefore, to reconcile the status-dependence of normative attitudes that characterize the traditional view, with the attitude-dependence of normative statuses that characterize modernity.

These two central views are manifest in, and hence, elaborated by, two subsequent discussions in the book, as Brandom reads them: that on the work that was forced on the Servant by the Master in the allegory, in the *Reason* chapters, and the allegory of the hero and his valet in the *Spirit* chapter. In the first, we see once more how 'one of the achievements of modernity'—this time, the distinction within an action between what makes it mine (action, *Handlung*) and its consequences (deed, *Tat*)—results in incoherence. This modern distinction redeems the agent from the *tragedy* of

the traditional heroic agent who takes responsibility for the entire deed and so becomes burdened with fate, but it also, with the model of authority as Mastery, separates its two elements in a way that prevents a unifiable notion of action (376). In the allegory of the hero and his valet, ‘holding fast to the disparity that action involves’ is part of the meta-attitude of ‘niederträchtig’ expressed by the valet (‘mean-spirited’ in Brandom’s translation), as opposed to the ‘edelmütig’ meta-attitude of the hero (‘generous’ or ‘magnanimous’) (547, 550). The first only see normative attitudes, whereas the second ‘takes it that there really are norms that attitudes are directed toward and answer to’ (547). What is added here to the already established counterpositions is Brandom’s identification of the niederträchtig meta-attitude with the view of reductive naturalism and the ‘threat of a norm/nature dualism’ it entails. In Brandom’s reading, Hegel’s story of the emergence of social norms from organic nature briefly mentioned above is already a ‘down payment on a response’ to reductive naturalism, and with the allegory of the valet, this response comes to completion (24).

Confronting the reductive naturalist brings Hegel to the final major step to the third age of Geist. By tracing every action of the hero to his personal attitudes—to some selfish motives—the niederträchtig consciousness points to the *particularity* and *contingency* of the hero’s actions (552), and so of every action, which undercuts the *rational bindingness* of our norms (567). According to Brandom, Hegel, like Wittgenstein after him, worried about this effect of the parochiality of our practices, but unlike Wittgenstein’s quietism, Hegel offered in response ‘a detailed systematic account of the process by which and in which actual, and therefore contingent, application of concepts both institute norms ... and acknowledge the authority of those norms’ (660). This is the process of ‘giving a contingency the form of necessity,’ that regains the force of norms and secures the status-dependence of attitudes. It is achieved by the recollective-reconstructive phase of the experience of error, or, as Brandom takes Hegel to construe this phase: by ‘magnanimous forgiveness.’ Meticulously reading the short allegory of the confessing miscreant and the hard-hearted judge at the end of the *Spirit* chapters, Brandom explains how Hegel’s solution resides in a higher kind of Edelmütigkeit, in which one forgives prior applications of concepts, and trusts future agents to forgive one’s own. In this process, one reconstructs past cases so that they are shown, retrospectively, to be implicitly governed by a norm—thus turning causes to reasons, contingencies to necessities—but also confesses his inevitable failure to do so. This is how ‘Immediacy, contingency, particularity, and their recalcitrance to conceptualization are not done away with. But they ... take their proper place’ (756).

The unalienated *sittlich* form of the third age of Geist therefore goes beyond the modern conception not only in the structure of reciprocal recognition, with which Hegel started out and on which he later builds the idea of recognitive ‘community of trust’ (529) but also in the historical dimension, in which this recognition ‘takes the form of recollection’ (582). In terms of the *Reason* chapter, the postmodern conception of agency is ‘heroic (but not tragic)’ (477). The tragedy of being subjected to fate is replaced by acts of recollection that render what *happens* to something that was *done*. This, Brandom emphasizes, is a communal task, in which ‘everyone takes responsibility for what each one does, and each takes responsibility for what everyone does’ (625). This is the meaning of Hegel’s idea of the “I” that is “We,” the “We” that is “I” (757), that explains the structure of the community of trust whose agents go through and exercise the process of experience by which conceptual contents are constantly determined and truth is, in Hegel’s metaphor, ‘a vast Bacchanalian revel with not a soul sober’ (699).

Finding all these different pieces in play in Hegel’s ‘theory of action,’ Brandom takes the *Reason* chapter to be ‘the heart of the *Phenomenology*’ (371). In his Davidsonian reading, the *Tat*

and *Handlung* aspects of action exemplify the different social perspectives that partake in the institution of contents, teaching us that the content of my action ‘does not depend on me alone’ (396). In his treatment of the notion of *plan* – another crucial element in that analysis—its temporal character and its changing in the face of consequences exemplify the diachronic dimension of recollection. The chapter thus shows the dynamic process of determinateness according to the metacategories of Vernunft, in which ‘it is of the essence’ that ‘neither of these perspectives’—the prospective nor the retrospective— ‘is intelligible apart from its relation to the other’ (17). To discuss that process and the idea of changing plan Brandom interestingly takes the act of writing a book as an example, and in particular, Hegel’s writing of the *Phenomenology*. ‘Hegel as I am reading him,’ he writes, ‘is happy to say that this is a process of finding out what the *actual* content of his intention had been all along’ (413). Brandom refers to changes throughout the book, but also to its interpretation by others: ‘it is never too late for a new context to arise within which a previously failed ... project can count as successfully contributing to the realization of a plan’ (415). This is, indeed, the aim of Brandom’s book itself. Just as he takes Hegel to have done in his engagements with past philosophers, Brandom suggests a new context for reading Hegel and rationally reconstructs the *Phenomenology* accordingly. As noted, Brandom says this explicitly in his introduction, and true to the thesis his reading yields he adds that his reading has ‘the characteristic form of a recollective confession’ and that ‘[a]s such, it is accordingly also a trusting recognitive petition for forgiveness by more capable readers’ (2).

Brandom thus expresses deep and impressive self-awareness and reflection. But is this confession enough? While openly admitting to the selective character of his reading, and how he ‘ha[s] not hesitated to use [a] vocabulary that is not Hegel’s’ (633), one wonders whether it can count as a full confession without also openly admitting to the norm that is made explicit by Brandom, in so reading, and is endorsed as his own. But even then, one could simply dismiss the confession and reject the entire interpretive undertaking or parts of it for being an inappropriate appropriation. In this view, Brandom’s confession has no bearing on the evaluation of the correctness of his interpretation and on the *fact* that it is sometimes *wrong* about the meaning of Hegel’s text and what Hegel had originally intended. Such a response, however, would miss out on the most insightful lessons Brandom’s reading can teach us, with respect both to philosophy in general and to Brandom’s thinking more specifically, and overlook the rich philosophical ground on which Brandom builds his engagement with the text (and his understanding of the concept of *intention*). As seen, *A Spirit of Trust* presents great philosophical ideas worth considering, and sheds light on and adds to the central elements of Brandom’s philosophy in a way that can occupy many great studies. Brandom’s engagement with Hegel’s text as recollection, characterized as a confession, stands on all of these.

The more interesting questions pertain, therefore, to the idea of confession itself, the thesis it builds on, and whether or not it can apply in the way Brandom applies it to his work. (Note, however, that this is not to diminish the critical work addressed to Brandom’s interpretation as such. On the contrary, interpretive disputes help make Brandom’s reconstruction explicit, and so allow a better examination of his exercise of recollection). One such question is whether the kind of failure that stands at the heart of confession and forgiveness can at all be attributed in the case of such reading-in. In the case of empirical concepts, the possibility of failure was ensured by the recognitive social structure, but can that structure be similarly applied in the diachronic sphere as Brandom claims it does (618)? To put it differently: can ‘recognition take the form of recollection,’ or is something not lost in the reciprocal intersubjective structure once we move from the synchronic sphere, in which our interlocutors are living responding ones, to the diachronic sphere of dead figures and not-yet living ones? A possible answer would assert that there is no need for such symmetry to begin with,

because the two spheres should be understood together as one unified process. But that would only point out how the relations between the two are, in fact, vague in Brandom's account, and how depicting them as 'two sides of one coin,' as Brandom often does (e.g. 421), does not suffice to settle the issue. A different but related question would be just what a better recollection (without or with fewer failures) might look like. The way Brandom describes the incorporation of more and more contingencies (particulars) under universals may imply that it is a matter of incorporating more of Hegel's text(s) into the interpretation, but Brandom's explanation for leaving out the *Religion* chapters (583) suggests it is not, leaving it unclear what the alternative might be.

These thoughts and many more arise from reading Brandom's magnificently rich work of recollection. Perhaps these, if not failures then at least open gaps to be further explored, are what we inherit from Brandom to be forgiven and expressively developed.

Yael Gazit, Humboldt University of Berlin