

Hegel's  
*Phenomenology*  
The Sociality of Reason

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## Acknowledgments

Several years ago I gathered up some articles I had written on Hegel and published them as a book. Shortly after that book appeared, several new books and articles on Hegel were published, which led me to fundamentally rethink many positions I had taken in that earlier work. Foremost among those pieces were Robert Pippin's works on Hegelianism, particularly his *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* and the essays that came after that book. Pippin's work led me to reevaluate certain key ideas I had held; I had the good fortune to discuss many of those issues with him in print, at conferences, and through the modern means of electronic mail. The ideas contained here owe much to the dialectic of those conversations.

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## Modern life's project of self-justification

“faculty” that allows them to do this is *reason*. In acquiring the idea that even the truths of nature can be known by human agents provided that they bring their subjective points of view into line with what the impersonal point of view requires, the “unhappy consciousness” in the form of late medieval European culture arrives at a different understanding of itself than that with which it began: the idea that by appealing to impersonal reason alone human agents can discover what truly counts for them as knowledge, and that they have the means to affirm for themselves that what counts *for them* really is what counts *in itself*, and that *reason* – not pure faith or reliance on mediator-priests – can give an account of itself that, unlike its predecessors, does not undermine itself. Not only can these agents bring their subjective points of view into line with what the impersonal point of view requires, when this impersonal point of view is understood as that of *reason*, it is capable of reassuring these agents of its authoritativeness that the older view of the “unchangeable” could not. The participants of the “unhappy consciousness” had to simply *accept* the teachings of the mediator-priest; the participants of the culture of reason, however, can expect an account by reason that reassures those agents of its authoritativeness. This is the project of modern life, a reliance on reason to replace an insufficient, dogmatic theological foundation for life and culture; modern life sheds its old faith in favor of new trust in reason, a conviction that it can succeed where the past reliance on dogmatic faith had failed.

## I. Reason, science, and modern affirmations

*The transition to “Reason”*

After concluding the section on the “unhappy consciousness,” Hegel begins an entirely new section titled “Reason.” Hegel’s reasons for this transition have proved puzzling to some commentators, leading some to hypothesize that the book indeed has no coherent structure and that the section on “Reason” in particular shows that Hegel changed his mind about the composition of the book while he was writing it and did not have the time to revise the whole manuscript in light of this change of plan.<sup>1</sup> Other commentators, noting the differences between the transition in the 1807 *Phenomenology* and in the later works, particularly the *Encyclopedia*, have concluded that Hegel in his later Heidelberg and Berlin years simply abandoned the *Phenomenology’s* approach to things.<sup>2</sup>

However, Hegel’s reasons for making this transition can be elicited both from the structure of the *Phenomenology* and by attention to his later writings. There are good, systemic reasons within the structure of the text of the *Phenomenology* itself for the move. In the section on “Consciousness,” the issue of what counts as knowledge is treated as having to do with a kind of unreflective fusion of both the subjective and the objective points of view and a failure to distinguish them. In “Consciousness,” we have an account of knowledge in terms of some kind of direct awareness of the objects of consciousness; this account undermines itself as it follows out its own logic: The direct awareness of objects in “sense-certainty” turns out really to be a perceptual awareness of objects, which itself turns out to be a more reflected awareness of supersensible entities “behind” appearance that determine the structure of perception. However, the reflective “understanding’s” description of supersensible entities itself becomes contradictory and antinomial, and “the understanding’s” claim that it consistently describes the world thereby also undermines itself. “Consciousness” thereby becomes *self-consciousness* in trying to give an account of how it could possibly grasp the world as it really is; rather than taking an account of knowledge as a kind of passive, direct awareness of objects as authoritative, it must instead *reflect* on the accounts it gives itself.

In “Self-Consciousness,” the issue of what we take to be an authoritative reason is at first explicated from the subjective point of view, and its insufficiencies then generate the objective point of view. After the two distinct

points of view have been generated, they are then understood as being in opposition to each other in the sections that deal with stoicism, skepticism, and the "unhappy consciousness." The "unhappy consciousness," however, ends with the possibility of a unity of the objective and the subjective point of view in which the reasons that we take to be authoritative reasons are seen as subjectively determined by us but nonetheless as valid principles governing the world both in theory and in practice when seen from the detached, objective point of view.<sup>3</sup> That is, it creates the *possibility* for the individual thinker of having it affirmed for him that the world as viewed from the standpoint of principles that he endorses from his own *individual* point of view is the same as the world as seen in terms of principles that he would adopt from a more detached standpoint, with no conception of a metaphysical "beyond" being needed to affirm for him these principles that he *takes as valid really are valid*. This unity of the two points of view is called "reason" by Hegel, for it signifies that the capacity to affirm that "this is the way the world is" is based not on our "matching up" our representations with the world "in itself" – not, that is, based on any kind of metaphysical relation between our representations and reality – but on our capacity to construct explanatory accounts about ourselves and the world that are then tested internally to see if they can make good on their claims within the terms that they set for themselves.<sup>4</sup> At first, of course, this belief in "reason" is no more than a matter of faith; it is a historical *project*, an attempt to affirm a certain conception of the relation between human thought and reality that at the outset must be simply presumed and that in its development can later be demonstrated.

This is linked with the historical reasons for making the move from "Self-Consciousness" to "Reason": If the progression of history begins with the Greek attempts to work out the problems inherent in relationships of mastership and slavery such that self-generated skeptical doubts about what the Greeks themselves had come to count as authoritative reasons were to be answered by the doctrines found in late antiquity, then what follows should be the later conceptions that historically emerged out of the earlier attempts to work out the problems inherent in the Greeks' (and the Romans') own attempts to affirm for themselves that their reasons were good ones. The various attempts found in stoicism and skepticism led of course to the "unhappy consciousness" of late antiquity and early Christianity, which were incorporated into the medieval Christian period's reflection on the problems of the "unhappy consciousness." The move to modern life, however, gets underway with the post-medieval conception of the investigation of nature through the empirical sciences, what Hegel calls in both the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere the "observation" of nature.<sup>5</sup> The beginnings of experimental science in the period preceding and following the Reformation exhibited the idea that rational agents could in fact unlock the secrets of nature provided they were to follow a *method* that would be determined by their own rational powers and the force of which would provide them with a knowledge of nature that would be useful to humanity (in other words, Francis Bacon's

ideal of science).<sup>6</sup> The result of the emphasis by early modernity on scientific *method* is the affirmation that humanity has within its power the capacity to determine for itself that what it takes as an authoritative reason can in fact be shown to be an authoritative reason, to be something that reveals to us the way the world is. That is, it affirms a conception of human agents' having a certain power – namely, that on their own they can develop a method that forces nature to give up its secrets. This kind of "power" spills over into the fields of social life and leads to political self-determination and, so Hegel argues, eventually to his own system of self-determining concepts.<sup>7</sup>

The results of the attempt to apply these methods of reason to nature and to society thus result in the formulations of the laws of nature and the laws of society, which culminate in that period of European life called "the Enlightenment." By constructing rational methods for the observation of nature, people find that they are then led to construct a view of themselves as rational independent agents. This view of ourselves as independent agents gives rise to modern life's idea that its form of life can be completely self-justifying, that it can affirm its social and political institutions for itself without appeal to anything other than that which is demanded by human reason itself. Based on the success of the sciences of nature, modern life attempts to establish a science of human social life that would uncover the heretofore hidden laws of human social and political organization. The idea of there being a "method" appeals to a conception of impersonal reason, "the view from nowhere," something that itself is supposedly independent of all social practices, which itself transcends history. (As the conception of impersonal reason, the "view from nowhere" thus replaces the idea advanced in the "unhappy consciousness" of the "unchangeable.") The section on reason attempts to narrate the dialectical history of that attempt at establishing a self-justifying form of life by the application of various "methods" in order to discover the general laws of nature and social life.

#### *Science as "observing reason"*

Hegel's discussion of scientific method and the rationale of the search for various laws of nature differs from his discussion of "sense-certainty" and "perception" in that the latter concerns itself with attempts to construct forms of self-sufficient knowledge that we could in principle have independently of any social practice or historical period, and with the failures of those attempts. Hegel's discussion of modern science, on the other hand, does not treat it as a form of self-sufficient knowledge but as a form of knowledge that presupposes the background of antiquity and the "unhappy consciousness" for its own possibility. The dialectic of the "unhappy consciousness" results in a "faith" that the nature of the world is not something intrinsically alien to our own ways of thinking. That kind of "faith" is the basis of a project of extending the powers of human thought. The rise of humanism, which presupposes the outcome of the "unhappy consciousness," gives rise to a conception of knowledge as serving human interests in which agents see themselves

as determining *for themselves* what may count as authoritative reasons for belief and action rather than thinking of the world itself as somehow making certain reasons count for them.

The idea of a self-determined "method" that underlies modern science makes possible the break from the ancients' idea that the ends of life and knowledge are set by nature or by the cosmos – more generally, it makes possible the shift from a conception of "fate" to a conception of freedom. The world is not merely to be contemplated but studied in terms of *human* reason, that is, in terms of how well it satisfies human desires and interests, with the presumption being that by constructing a proper *method*, human agents can discover the way the world is in itself such that they can reshape that world into something that better satisfies human desires and fits human projects. In order to do this, the agents must be content not merely to describe and to classify things (even supposing that the classifications match up with natural kinds); they must get at the nature of things, their essence, and this means describing them as falling under laws – in Hegel's terms, as bringing them to the universal.<sup>8</sup> Basic to this method is observation, observing things as they are, not as we would wish them to be, and constructing our system of laws out of these observations. By making careful, controlled observation central to its method, the scientific community affirms for itself that its rational methods are indeed appropriate to the reality being studied.<sup>9</sup> (Hegel seems to be describing basically what he takes to be Baconian procedures, noting all the while that many philosophers, including Bacon, take themselves *only* to be observing and describing, when in fact they are doing something more – namely, actively constructing theories and postulating entities to explain the correlations observed in their observations.)

The section on "observing reason" is the place in the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel attempts to outline his views on modern science and to come to terms with it (something he attempted later in a slightly different fashion in his *Encyclopedia* in what we now call his "Philosophy of Nature.") Several things about Hegel's treatment stand out. First, he does not go into much detail in the *Phenomenology* (and even less so in his later "Philosophy of Nature") about many themes that have come to be identified with philosophy of science in our time. He does not discuss scientific method in any real detail, and he does not offer any extended philosophical treatment of the problems of induction, on questions of theory construction, on the role of theoretical terms versus observational terms in scientific theory, on the logic of discovery versus the logic of justification, although a judicious reading of the section in the *Phenomenology* could arguably find some things that at least look like a discussion of each of these topics. This is because Hegel did not think that a philosophical theory could *prescribe* to working scientists what their method should be. In that sense, he apparently did not think that questions of scientific method were per se philosophical questions. At best, philosophy can enter into a debate with the scientific community about what are the proper procedures of scientific method, and it certainly can reflect on the role that science and scientific method play in the historical and philo-

sophical development of our conception of ourselves. But the nature of scientific method is best left to the working scientists to determine for themselves; it is up to the *scientific community* (the community of researchers) to determine what is to count as a scientific reason *for them*. Philosophy can no more dictate to the scientific community what counts as an authoritative reason for them than it can dictate to painters what counts as a valid application of paint to canvas or to composers what counts as a valid construction of musical notes. Philosophy can, however, seek to understand the connections between the basic conceptions arrived at by the scientific community and the rest of our conceptions; this is what Hegel takes to be the major task of the kind of philosophy that he is pursuing, for this task helps to situate science within the larger question of the philosophical project of constructing an account of what it means for us to take something as authoritative for ourselves. Philosophy can ask why it is that we have come to accept scientific reasons as *authoritative* reasons or why the kinds of reasoning that the scientific community itself has come to accept have also come to count for the larger community as models of what we should count as authoritative reasons. That is, the Hegelian philosophy of science aims to see scientific practice as part of the overall development of reflective social practice, of "spirit." (Needless to say, it is also part of the legitimate task of philosophy to debate with the scientific community when it starts formulating, perhaps unwittingly, metaphysical or very generally philosophical theses about what it is doing.)<sup>10</sup>

#### *Physics and biology*

Hegel argues that science, especially in the form of what we now call classical mechanics, strives for necessity and not just statistical regularity in its laws – that is, it strives for more than the kinds of statistical regularities discovered by inductive observation. Hegel also thinks, however, that what gives the necessity to the laws is that they express the essence of the things they study – for example, that stones fall to earth is a statistical regularity, but that they *necessarily* fall to earth has to do with the intrinsic nature of stones, which is their weight. (The Newtonian view, of course, sees weight as an accidental property of bodies.) Because they have weight "in and for themselves," stones have a necessary relation to the earth. (These kinds of views of weight as an essential property account for some of Hegel's misunderstanding of certain key Newtonian concepts.<sup>11</sup>) However, Hegel's point – which is independent of the somewhat peculiar mixture of modern and pre-modern scientific views in his conception of nature – is that modern science cannot be content with mere Baconian induction but must strive to formulate theories that lend a certain necessity to the laws they come up with. This is done in several ways. The first way in which the agents affirm these findings as adequate is through experimentation. Second, scientists introduce theoretical terms, such as "matter," to explain the various ways in which what might look like different things and different laws can be subsumed under more general cases, thereby fitting what would otherwise only be disconnected observations into a richer

conceptual apparatus. The introduction of theoretical terms thus allows for a richer and tighter set of inferences than would be possible if the scientific accounts were left simply at the stage of inductive generalization.<sup>12</sup> (As modern philosophers such as Wilfrid Sellars have argued, mere collections of inductive generalizations cannot explain why the generalizations sometimes do not hold.<sup>13</sup>) The third way is through the construction of *theories* in which the various inductive laws are reformulated in *mathematical* form. (This is not mentioned explicitly in the *Phenomenology*, but it is implicit in Hegel's discussions there, and it later becomes explicit in his mature philosophy of nature in the Heidelberg and Berlin years.) The mathematical form of the laws gives them a necessity that they could not have as mere generalizations from experience. Situating the laws within theories of mathematical form gives them a conceptual status that a mere series of observations could not have. The mathematical formulations of the sciences of nature, along with the generalizations and inferential possibilities offered by the introduction of theoretical terms, thus serve to affirm for modern agents that their own constructions (those of mathematics) are in fact adequate to know the workings of nature, and that therefore what they count as reasons can be shown to be authoritative reasons since mathematics is a human construction that can be shown to be justified and consistent. Scientific practice in early modernity does not, of course, formulate its results in this way. Instead, it takes itself to be offering only an "observational proof" that human reason and reality are not alien to each other; it takes itself, that is, to have formulated a method for "taking in" the world as it really is.

Hegel's reflections on the role of mathematics in scientific law also led him to the belief that the science of organisms would have to take a form different from that of mechanics, since the conditions that allow the formulation of mathematical laws are not present in the study of organisms. The entities of mechanical nature are only "externally" related to each other in purely quantitative and qualitative ways; thus, mathematics is the proper language in which to give a rigorous description of them. Organisms, however, are *self-maintaining* wholes. The proper language to describe them is therefore not mathematics but the language of teleology, of purposiveness. One cannot find any purposiveness, for example, in the solar system; the planets do not orbit the sun to serve any kind of purpose. As a mechanical system, the solar system is held together by sets of countervailing forces, none of which need make reference to any sort of purpose.<sup>14</sup> However, when one describes the system that is an organism, one must employ purposive descriptions (for example, that the heart beats in order to circulate blood, not that it just happens to circulate blood). The kinds of teleological descriptions appropriate to the description of organisms are what we would nowadays call *functional* descriptions. They are not the purposiveness of someone intentionally doing something (such as "going to the university in order to hear Hegel's lectures"). No beliefs or desires need be attributed to the organism when we describe it functionally – we say, for example, that the heart beats in order to circulate the blood, not that the heart "desires" to circulate the blood and

therefore it beats, or that the heart "believes" it must beat in order to circulate the blood.<sup>15</sup> Because organisms require these teleological functionalist explanations, which are completely out of place in the physical explanation of inorganic nature, it follows for Hegel that biology must be a science separate from that of physics.<sup>16</sup>

Like physics, biology is based on observation, but, so Hegel argues, it is even less plausible that it could be a purely inductive science than it is that physics could be such a purely inductive science. The kind of functionalist teleology that is necessary for understanding an organism is not something that one simply observes; in order to understand an organism as an organism, one must make some extrapolations and infer to the various purposes that are served by this and that arrangement of organs. Like physics, biology looks for necessities in its subject matter, but in its case, the necessities that it reveals are the necessities to be found in functionalist teleological laws. Such laws assume the general purpose of the organism, which is that of its maintaining itself as an individual and maintaining its species, and then show that certain organs and processes can be seen to serve the attainment of those ends, even though we cannot deduce the exact nature of those organs from the functions which they serve. For example, we understand that the heart beats in order to circulate the blood only when we understand how the circulation of blood plays such and such a role within the self-maintenance of the organism.<sup>17</sup> Everything from the heavy fur of northern animals to the nature of the internal organs can thus be understood in this fashion, even if they cannot be deduced from knowing the general ends of the organism. The success of biology, which shows that even the sphere of life may be treated scientifically, serves further to affirm for modern agents that their point of view on the world is adequate to grasp the way the world is in itself – that is, is at one with an objective point of view. (In all his discussions, Hegel argues that the reason that such laws cannot be given a mathematical formulation is because they are not mechanical but teleological, but he seems simply to assume all along that functionalist teleological laws simply cannot be given a mathematical expression, an assumption that we nowadays need not make.)

Hegel reconstructs the way in which the biological sciences of his day tried to develop the basic ends (or functions) in terms of which all organisms took on their shape (*Gestaltung*) – namely, sensibility, irritability, and reproduction (which Hegel sees as serving the logical structures of universality, particularity, and individuality). These functions flow from the general function of the organism as a self-maintaining system, and they are subsidiary functions that serve this larger function. Sensibility refers to the internal structures of feeling within the organism, irritability refers to the structures by which it can be stimulated or provoked by its environment into some kind of action or reaction, and reproduction refers to those structures that regenerate the organism on a daily basis as an individual and also serve to regenerate the species.<sup>18</sup> (Typically for him, Hegel holds that reproduction is the unity of sensibility and irritability.) These three functions themselves then are specifiable into more detailed functional subsystems, such as the nervous system

as serving the functions of sensibility, the musculature system as serving the functions of irritability, and the intestinal system as serving the ends of reproduction. (These subsystems must be seen as serving the more general ends of the organism and not as being identical with them; moreover, taken outside of the ends they serve, they can appear only as merely inert pieces of matter, for what is important in them is not the "stuff" of which they are made, but how this "stuff" plays its role in the organism – that is, satisfies the functions that it does.<sup>19</sup>) Once again, Hegel argues that there cannot be genuine laws at work in the biological sciences (at least not in the sense that physics has laws), for one can neither deduce nor predict from the general end of sensibility, for example, that it must be specified in a nervous system, especially if some other system could serve the same end as well.<sup>20</sup>

Hegel takes the so-called laws of biology as supposedly stating the necessity of the "outer" as being only the expression of the "inner." These laws are the kinds of so-called laws of development discussed by, among others, Lamarck and Buffon, in which there are "inner forms" that receive modification by the external circumstances but that effectively determine the course of development of an organism. Lamarck, for example, thought that just as there were laws of human development from child to youth to adult to elderly, animal and plant life went through a similar "law-like" development in which whole species could be seen as the "youthful" and others as the "adult" stages of animal life in general. But there can be no such laws, so Hegel argues, for what he calls the "universal individual, the earth" determines the organization of species in accidental ways that does not allow for there to be any genuine laws governing the distribution and kind of species – that is, anything like a system of laws specifying the necessity for there being such and such types of species.<sup>21</sup> The arrangement of nature as a system of living things existing within a context of non-organic material factors is too full of contingency to permit us to formulate any necessary laws for it.

The sciences of biology and physics (Hegel was later to add chemistry) are, however, unsuited to treat human reality, the social world of agents, because, as Hegel puts it, that world is essentially *historical*, whereas nature has no genuine history.<sup>22</sup> It obviously has a past, and there are obviously causal accounts of it that can be given, but it has no history because it is unintelligible how there could be any narratives that could be told of its developments that show how some later set of events can be said to be *completing* what came before them in the way that a later set of events in history can be said to be the completion of earlier events, even though the earlier events were not aiming at those later events. The teleology found in history has to do with the way in which the internal insufficiencies of a form of life's accounts of what has come to be taken as authoritative for it – the insufficiencies that generate skepticism about themselves – are resolved by those accounts given by the form of life that succeeds it; the narratives that make up history can only be understood in terms of the way in which these later accounts (as being essential to the self-identity of an age) overcome or fail to overcome the deficiencies of earlier accounts. The functional teleology inherent in biological nature is insuffi-

cient to provide the kind of narrative connection – of something's completing something else, of bringing a story to a close – that is necessary for there to be any genuine history. History is about stories that have at least potential completions, whereas in nature there are merely endless successions about which it makes no sense to say that this or that succession of events is now complete. The French Revolution, for example, may be seen as the consummation of a series of events leading up to it in the way that a new geological formation is not the fruition of anything but simply the accidental result of a series of past causal chains that have resulted in it. Hegel argues that human agents cannot therefore find that their sense of themselves *as agents* to be completely affirmed by the rise of modern science. Modern science teaches modern agents that what they construct with their own powers of thinking – what emerges from the human, subjective point of view – is in fact in accordance with the way things are and can thus be affirmed for them as knowledge; the practice of modern science affirms for modern agents that their own "subjective" capacities of reason are in fact in harmony with the "objective" nature of the world. But it cannot affirm for them that they know themselves *as agents*, and therefore really as human.

#### *The "science" of self-identity*

The question is thus whether their own nature *as agents* is something beyond the reach of science, or whether it too can be brought under the purview of inductive and postulational science. Since the answer to this question is not obvious, it is thus logical and certainly not surprising that at a certain point in early modern history, the European community would have tried to apply the idea of scientific method to itself in order to determine the laws of social life, and, to paraphrase Kant's description of Rousseau, to produce a "Newton of the moral world" who would thereby demonstrate the rationality of certain ways of thinking about human social life and the irrationality of others. It is this attempt that Hegel claims leads to the great crisis of modern life in its effort to justify itself by appeal to the methods of modern science.

In order to get to that point, Hegel takes a somewhat idiosyncratic detour through some contemporary (to him) attempts to apply the methods of natural science directly to human life, attempts that he thinks are not even remotely adequate for understanding the kind of historical and social character of human agency. Life, so he argues, exhibits an analogous structure to human agency in that the individual organism has, as it were, a subjective point of view, a set of drives and impulses that function together with each other that have as their goal the preservation of the organism; likewise, there is, as it were, an objective point of view on the organism, in that its various functions and drives serve to perpetuate the species without the organism's "knowing" this. But these "as it weres" mean only that the organism does not really have anything like a unity of the subjective and the objective point of view. Such a characterization of the organism is done from *our* point of view. The various functional teleologies in nature are there *for us*, not for the



organisms themselves. We can see the various adaptive strategies exhibited by spiders, for example, as serving the purpose of preserving the individual and propagating the species, but this is not "for" the spider, any more than the function of circulating blood is "for" the heart (something that the heart is aware of).<sup>23</sup>

The question, though, is whether there are also *laws* that govern the way in which things are *for us* – that is, whether there are the same kind of functional teleologies within our own system of thought that govern how the world can be for us without our necessarily being aware of those laws. Candidates for such laws would be inductively established psychological laws of association. Hegel alludes to what in his time was a lively attempt to construct such laws, and the logic books of his day were full of attempts to explain various laws of logic as inviolable laws of human thought in that they were taken to be the ironclad necessities of the way in which humans (as opposed to cats or monkeys) had to think. Hegel's objection to this is fairly straightforward: Even if we could demonstrate some kind of typical association of thoughts (which he does not deny), we would still not have explained one of the most distinctive aspects of human thinking – namely, that the nature of thoughts is such that they can be reflectively criticized and reformulated in terms of other thoughts. Any associationist doctrine misunderstands both the normative character of thought and its reflexivity, the way in which it is capable of modifying itself. Thought, as Hegel likes to put it, is in movement not because it consists of a set of events following each other (as an inductive characterization of "associations" would have to have it) but because it is forever modifying itself by supplying itself with new concepts and new contexts for old concepts. The nature of a thought has to do with its relationships – particularly, its normative, inferential relationships – with other thoughts, and this normative structure itself is historical and social in character. Moreover, the reflexive structure of thought is such that it can always throw into question any particular association in terms of its adequacy or fit with other thoughts. Introducing new "thoughts" (such as the divine right of kings, the principle of entropy, syncopated rhythms, or whatever) can change the context of all the other thoughts such that any previous association ceases to be valid. The various thoughts that a person can have do not come in little sacks that prevent them from being modified by the introduction of new thoughts and of new connections with other thoughts. Moreover, the attempt at prescribing some kind of associationist laws for thought is bound to confuse simple idiosyncrasy – as when one person always associates Kantianism with Lutheran piety whereas another always associates it with egalitarian humanism – with what are the genuine inferential connections among those thoughts themselves. Those latter inferential connections are not idiosyncratic to the individuals involved; they are part of the *spirit*, of the common shared set of principles, vocabularies, and beliefs that individuals as members of a determinate historical community share.<sup>24</sup> The world may impinge on *individuals* such that it creates certain associations for them; but the world's impinging on individuals does not determine the inferential connections of

human thought, which are normative, reflexive, and ultimately social in character, and which structure the community in terms of which the individual agent is a member. Thus, although we may be able to formulate associative laws for our consciousness, we cannot do so for *self-consciousness*, for self-consciousness is possible only by locating oneself in "social space," and there are no associative laws for the way in which the historical insufficiencies of certain kinds of inferential structures give way and are seen to be justifiably replaced by other forms of authoritative reasons. The world does not determine that for human agents; they collectively and historically determine it for themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Hegel also takes up various pseudo-sciences of his time – handwriting analysis, physiognomy (the attempt to correlate character with particular anatomical features such as the length and the shape of the nose), and phrenology (the attempt to correlate character and intelligence with the shape of the skull and with the bumps on the skull) – in order to show how these could not be sciences and thus how the attempt to construct a "science of self-identity" would be a false start. The "science of self-identity" could not affirm for modern agents that who they took themselves to be was in fact who they are because it rests on the wrong assumptions about the nature of character and self-identity. Individual self-consciousness is one's taking oneself to be located in a determinate "social space"; an individual's self-identity is made up of his actions in that "social space" and how those actions are taken by others. The "social space" is both the basis of the principles on which actions are taken and the basis of the interpretations of those actions by others. Self-identity cannot be something determinate and "fixed" that an individual could have outside of acting in any determinate "social space." The pseudo-sciences of self-identity however, see it as exactly that: as something that is completely formed and is then *expressed* in actions. For these pseudo-sciences, self-identity (or "character") is taken by them as something formed, fixed, and *inner*, whereas its expressions are taken as something that is *outer*, something available for observation. The pseudo-sciences of self-identity thus hope to find the laws that correlate the ways in which "inner character" is necessarily expressed in outer observable behavior.

On the one hand, this might seem unexceptionable. We might take certain behavior to be explicable only as being the outward expression of the internal process of thought. For example, we might see a person look at two things on a counter in a store, wrinkle his brow, then pick out one of them, and conclude that he was thinking about which one he wanted, which was better, or whatnot. But this already imputes a public conception of thought to the person being observed, and without using this public conception, we cannot hope to conclude what "inner processes" were transpiring in the person's mind. We might postulate, that is, that he was *thinking* about such and such and that this was linked with his behavior. But the pseudo-sciences of self-identity went farther; they reasoned that since there is a necessary connection between internal process and external appearance, the connection must be such that can find determinate laws that necessarily correlate external appear-

ance with these fixed "inner processes." They claimed to find these correlations in facial shapes, handwriting, and the shapes and bumps of skulls. Behind their various proposals was the assumption that a person's character is something fixed and indifferent to its social expression such that it would be what it is without its being expressed in any actions at all. Because the pseudo-sciences of self-identity take character to be this kind of fixed, independently describable and identifiable entity, they concluded that it could be correlated with other fixed, independently describable and identifiable items like the shape and length of noses or the shape of skulls. Indeed, for there to be a lawlike connection between the two – between the "inner" and the "outer" – each would have to be independently identifiable, for only if the law correlates some independently identifiable X with some independently identifiable Y can it count as a genuine correlation. The idea that there could be such laws is thus the idea that there is some "inner" thing (one's character) that necessarily causes some "outer" thing (a shape of the face, a bump on the skull) to come into existence; in that way, the necessities of the correlations can be maintained.<sup>26</sup> However, the nature of action is such that its expression in various actions (such as a grimace) is a matter of *interpretation* by both the agent himself and by others in light of certain social norms. A person's character is inseparable from what he does, and what he does is a matter of interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Character cannot be a "thing" that exists independently of its expressions in various actions. Even what might look like a prime candidate for such "inner" things – namely, one's feelings – are themselves subject to interpretation; one must interpret one's feelings in order to know what one is feeling.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the ideal of finding lawlike correlations between the "inner facts" of one's character and its "outward expression" in the shape of the face is wrong-headed from the outset. In fact, there is no incontrovertible knowledge of character available either through introspection to the agent himself or to the observer of the agent's face or skull. Neither the agent himself nor his observers can be in a position to say indubitably that this is "who" he is outside of any social context. Each is making an interpretation based on the norms of his time, and each interpretation is fallible.<sup>29</sup> To say that it is an interpretation, however, should not suggest that there is some fixed "thing" that is being interpreted; rather, the "self" that is being interpreted is itself a *project*, something that the agent constructs within a social context and which he is not able fully to control. (In my own eyes, I might be selflessly devoted to the welfare of others, but in seeking the political power necessary to accomplish the ends connected with that I find instead that others regard me as a dangerous demagogue; or I might take myself to be devoted to the improvement of the lot of the disadvantaged only to find that I have become an arrogant paternalist.)

This necessity of this kind of interpretation in "social space" and of the self being more of a project than a fixed "thing" makes it impossible to have the kind of observational science for humanity that is possible for inorganic and organic nature. Agents do not have a character that is formed and fixed such that it can be observed and correlated with external occurrences in such a way

that one can come up with a science of character that would provide us with the laws of character. Human agents have the possibility of reflection and thus deliberation; because of this, they may be said to *act* in a genuine sense. This is not to deny that human actions are not predictable. A "person of character" is precisely a person whose actions *are* predictable. He acts "in character" when he does things that are predictable in light of what we know about what he has done in the past and the circumstances in which he did it (in short, he is predictable in light of details of his biography). A person's character is thus a *historical* matter in that it involves knowledge of his past and how he responded in that past. This past, however, is the kind of thing that can be completed by later events; it is also a past that itself requires an interpretation by the agents confronting it, for they act in light of what they take the present situation to be, and that present situation cannot be construed except in terms of its links with its historical past and how they take that past. One cannot understand, for example, how a nineteenth-century German intellectual reacts to his time unless one also knows a bit about the Napoleonic wars, the stories that the Germans told themselves about these wars, and what the list of relevant possibilities for the future appeared to be for those people. In short, one cannot understand the person's actions unless one has some idea of how he *takes* himself and his situation to be, and understanding that "taking" is not a matter of correlating "inner" things with "outer" things. Of course, this also implies that one cannot simply observe one's rational agency within oneself as a datum of experience; one's rational agency is not some internally introspectible object. To be a rational agent is to be a *self-conscious* agent, which is to assume a position in "social space." Self-consciousness, that is, is a *doing* of something, not a *reporting* about oneself. One can report on others by taking them to be self-conscious – that is, by locating them in some kind of "social space" – but one's own self-consciousness is neither itself a reporting on one's inner life, nor is it imputing something to oneself; it is *doing* something.

The force of modern science was that it allowed modern agents to construct a view of themselves as capable of determining their own destinies through the application of "reason." That is, by appeal to their own rational powers they were capable of determining for themselves what would count as authoritative for them; the success of modern science affirms for them that this is indeed a true view of themselves. Yet, so it would seem, they cannot apply the *methods* of study to themselves that they applied to nature. Thus, if they are to be able to affirm for themselves that what they take to be authoritative really is so, then they must somehow be able to affirm for themselves that they are indeed these rational agents, and they must be able to do this by appeal only to their own powers of reason, not by appeal to any kind of "fate" external to themselves. The only way in which they could do this, consistent with the historical situation in which they found themselves, is not to look for some kind of observationally based inductive science of themselves but to look to themselves to construct themselves as rational agents. By appealing only to their own powers of reason – that is, without appeal to anything

simply “given” – they must transform the “social space” in which they live and in terms of which they act and think into a properly rational set of principles and supporting institutions such that they can indeed affirm for themselves that they are indeed the independent agents they take themselves to be.<sup>30</sup> The early modern emphasis on reflective independence thus emerges with the early modern emphasis on reason and science, and the European community comes to be engaged in a political and social project of trying to show that its form of life can be justified in terms of the modern standards of reason it has set for itself. That is, it comes to be engaged in the project of showing that its form of life is rationally *self-justifying* and that the participants in that form of life are therefore truly independent.

## 2. Early modernity's social construction of individualism: Faustianism, sentimentalism, and natural virtue

In affirming for themselves that their form of life is itself self-justifying in terms of reason, modern agents are led to a view of themselves as independent individuals, whose own lives and values must themselves be justified purely by appeal to reason. Just as modern culture supposedly need not accept anything outside of its own resources in order to be able to justify itself, the modern individual need accept no reason that can count *for him*, as a rational agent, as an authoritative reason. Although reason itself as a general reflective capacity to evaluate and criticize our practices, including the practices of reason-giving itself, is something that itself has a history, for these early modern individuals it appears as something itself that is simply present within each individual. If nothing counts for an individual as an authoritative reason unless he can come to count it *for himself* as an authoritative reason, then the individual (or his “reason”) must remain the ultimate locus of authority for what does and does not count as authoritative for belief or for action. For example, early modern political theorists were led to the idea that political legitimacy must come from reason, and it must be such that each rational agent could affirm for himself that the actions and form of life generated out of this set of institutions constitute for him authoritative reasons to act in such and such a way, to feel in such and such a way, and to think in such and such a way. They were also led to present this as a kind of fictional history of how man emerged from a natural state into a political state. Moreover, the impact of modern science made it seem that individuals need only apply the *methods* of reason to human affairs in order to bring about a state of affairs in which agents could rationally affirm for themselves their view of themselves as independent agents who need accept no ends that they cannot rationally affirm for themselves.

In that context, it would be logical to take the *social* concept of individuals as a *natural* category.<sup>31</sup> For example, Hobbes, one of the preeminent thinkers of the new individualism, understood the individuals of which he was speaking to be natural individuals who could be described and explained in terms

continuous with the categories of natural science, as simply endowed with natural desires that led them to do predictable things in certain types of circumstances. Given this knowledge of individuals, Hobbes argued that we could therefore rationally set up a better social order. But the Hobbesian theory could only serve as a mediating point between the culture of the past and the emerging modern self-consciousness, for it could offer no way in which these modern individuals could affirm for themselves that they really were independent, since for him they were ultimately pushed by their given desires for power and security. However, Hobbes expressed the view that what had counted as a *traditional* reason for action no longer could count as such a reason simply because it was traditional. All particular reasons for action would have to be submitted to scrutiny by “reason” itself; individuals must affirm for themselves what will henceforth count for them as valid reasons for belief and action, and something's being the traditional “way things are done” was no longer sufficient to underwrite the normative force of any particular reason.

### *The Faustian project*

Hegel uses Goethe's story of Faust to illustrate the immediate way in which the self-understanding of this kind of individuality is constructed.<sup>32</sup> Faust, a scholar offended by the fact that “theory” has not given him what he thinks it should, turns his back on science and goes forth into life to seek his pleasure, forging a kind of agreement with Mephistopheles to provide him with the powers he needs to pursue this kind of life and to affirm for himself that he is master of his own fate. Taking a witch's brew that makes him younger and rouses his passions, by chance he runs into a young woman, Gretchen, on the street and decides that he will have her. He then seduces Gretchen and abandons her. Faust passes from his life as a scholar to the life of a hedonist, from the pursuit of science to the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>33</sup> Goethe's version of the character of Faust offers a paradigm of this type of modern agent: Faust, a scientist-scholar, has found both that the practices of modern science cannot completely affirm for him what he takes himself to be (someone for whom nothing counts unless he, *as an individual*, elects to have it count for him) and that therefore neither past traditions nor contemporary mores can per se count for him as authoritative reasons. Merely describing and understanding the world in the terms of modern theory cannot satisfy Faust; not content to passively record the world, Faust attempts to establish that he is indeed independent, that he, as Faust the individual, is capable of doing as he pleases in that world. Faust takes the ideal of independence and transforms it into a pre-romantic program of self-realization and self-assertion: He will sample life and take what he elects to take. For Faust, independence is thus simply unimpeded freedom to do “as he pleases” unconstrained by past convention or mores. Faust desires to see himself affirmed as free in the sense of being unimpeded in his doing what he wants. In this way, Faust stands for the darkly self-realizational romantic side of modern