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A SYSTEM OF TRUST? ROBERT BRANDOM AND HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*[1]

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we discuss Robert B. Brandom's reading of G. W. F. Hegel, especially his later work, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology, in order to tackle the question of "trust" as the structure of recognition. First, we reconstruct Brandom's reading of Hegel's philosophy as a form of "social recognitive pragmatics" with a "historical recollective account of conceptual content", by which he aims at a re-definition of practical normativity based upon trust. Then, we examine his notion of trust as the ground for a future, post-modern society. Finally, we point at some difficulties concerning Brandom's notion of post-modern age and examine the concept of trust as key to the modern understanding of social bonds.

1. Brandom's Reading of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: A Social-Pragmatist Perspective

In 2019, Robert B. Brandom published what could be his definitive philosophical contribution, the impressive study A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel*'s* Phenomenology, on which he had worked for almost thirty years (Brandom 2019). With almost 900 pages, it delivers an interpretation of the main themes in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* from a pragmatist semantic

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perspective, in the tradition of Rorty and Sellars. In his words, the aim of the book is to highlight "[...] the emergence in it [the *Phenomenology*] of Hegel's social recognitive normative pragmatics, the distinctive holistic semantics he elaborates in terms of that pragmatics, and his original historical recollective account of the representational dimension of conceptual content" (Brandom 2019: 19). It is thus a contribution to the line of Hegelian studies carried out by other post-analytical philosophers such as Robert P. Pippin or Terry Pinkard, who have developed an intersubjective theory of rationality and meaning in relation to Hegel's *Phenomenology*.[2]

Brandom reads *The Phenomenology of Spirit* to investigate what Hegel has to teach us about the topics of semantics and pragmatics, that is, about meaning and use as displayed in both the knowing and the acting subject, as well as in conceptual contents, their forms of use and normativity (Brandom 2019: 4). Starting from the idea of the objective world as always already conceptual, that is, thinkable, intelligible, Brandom notes that Hegel adopts a pragmatist approach to this semantic understanding of content, i.e., that the conceptual role of acts, attitudes and linguistic expressions is conferred by the role they play in the practices of the subjects. This conceptual content also bears a normative character. To "understand something" means to grant authority to that representative content as a standard for assessment and correctness, so that our understanding of the objective ontological structure of the world directly refers to what we *do* in order to count as *taking* the world to have that structure, even if the world could have that structure in absence of our epistemic activity (Brandom 2019: 670).

This normative content certainly extends to practical norms. Brandom claims that norms are not just something we find already constituted, but rather are "instituted" by our attitudes and practices. This reflects a special kind of authority of normative content, in which we take ourselves to be bound by such content. Brandom aims to outline the transcendental conditions of the possibility of such conceptual norms (Brandom 2019: 532). The question could be posed as follows: how can we be bound by the norms that we ourselves institute? Norms are indeed instituted by social processes, in which we acknowledge someone's ability to respond to a particular claim. Practical norms therefore involve reciprocal acknowledgment between those making the claim and those held accountable for guaranteeing those claims. Thus, we must distinguish between norms, on the one hand, and normative attitudes on the other hand. Importantly, normative attitudes can in turn be considered as either "recognizing" or "being recognized". In Hegel's view, this process is articulated regarding oneself and one's reciprocal relation to others. Communities arise from recognitive relations among particulars who adopt recognitive practical attitudes towards one another and thus become recognized and self-conscious individual normative subjects (Brandom 2019: 14).

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2   Although there are some differences. For a reconstruction of Brandom's neo-pragmatist Hegelianism in this context, see Renault 2012.

It is important to note that this recognition occurs within a historical process – the construction of normative contents occurs by mediation with previous historical contents. This also implies that we can reconstruct the concrete history of how and which normative status result from specific practical attitudes of acting and judging subjects. Brandom proposes the notions of "recognition" and "recollection" as nuclear concepts to understand these dual social and temporal-historical dimensions of discursive normativity. "Recognition" enables us to understand the social character of normativity, while the notion of "recollection" points to the historical character of both institutions and the individual self-conscious subjects and their practices.

This process requires attitudes of "forgiveness" and "confession" towards the history of the perpetually unfinished construction of objective norms, by which we assume past failures, contributions or attempts to build up our collective world of normative contents. Specifically, in Brandom's view, Hegel exercises a "recollective rationality" which retrospectively selects the applications of a concept that gradually make it more concrete and determinate (Brandom 2019: 17). Thus emerges a progressive experience by which the concept's implicit normativity, both regarding its conceptual content and the agent's intention, is revealed as explicit[3].

Starting from this framework, Brandom offers a reinterpretation, or rather, one could even say, a re-writing of the *Phenomenology*, a work that originally aimed to provide, (according to its subtitle), an "Experience of Consciousness". According to Hegel's intention, the reading of the *Phenomenology* should elevate natural consciousness to a new point of view, namely that of "science" or Absolute knowledge. In the same way, the reading of Brandom's *Spirit of Trust* should also provide the reader with a new point of view. The result, ideally, would be a new form of theoretical consciousness enabling a new form of practical normativity, in which "[…] norm-instituting recognitive practices and practical attitudes take the form of norm-acknowledging recollective practices and practical attitudes. When recognition takes the magnanimous form of recollection, it is forgiveness, the attitude that institutes normativity as fully self-conscious trust" (Brandom 2019: 19). Upon reading Brandom's book, then, we ought to acquire this new recollective rationality which enables trust as a practical attitude. This idea of recollection, according to Brandom, is the "keystone" of the whole Hegelian edifice (Brandom 2019: 637), with "a fully self-conscious trust" constituting the outcome of the process.

2. Trust as Recognitive Structure, Modernity and the Post-Podern Age

Why is trust, the concept chosen by Brandom as the cornerstone of a possible new form of community with a symmetrical recognitive structure, so crucial? To help explain this position, Brandom provides an interpretation of Modernity as well as an outline of a future "post-modern age".

3   This is the theme of his *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Brandom 1998). See also Brandom 2019: 267 ff., 762 ff.

In contrast with premodern societies, in which norms appear as "given" in the world or in the nature of human beings, Modernity bears the mark of "alienation" – a cleavage between self-consciousness and the normative force of norms. Brandom identifies Hegel's statement on the rights of the individual as the core of Modernity[4], and further develops this view referencing two concepts. The first, *Niederträchtigkeit*, can be understood as a small-souled, selfish approach to life, and lack of commitment to the common norms and welfare of others – the famous *Kammerdiener*, also quoted in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*[5]. The second is *Edelmütigkeit* – a higher, moral form of recognitive attitude and commitment to norms and practices (Brandom 2019: 578). Brandom reads the "Spirit" as Hegel's description of a new age which will overcome the one-sidedness which both modern and traditional forms of *Geist*, as mirror images of one another, share in their account of normativity (Brandom 2019: 646).

Brandom posits that these aforementioned future societies will finally be able to strike a balance between individual attitudes and norms. In this ideal society, "together these reciprocal practical attitudes [of confession and forgiveness] produce a community with a symmetrical, *edelmütig* [noble] recognitive structure" (Brandom 2019: 621). Hegel himself does not offer a name for this higher, unalienated *Sittlichkeit*. Brandom, following Hegel's use in a related context, proposes the term "trust" [*Vertrauen*], as "[…] recognition conceived and practiced according to the categories of *Vernunft*."[6] For Brandom, trust enables the structure of reciprocal recognition introduced in the "Self-Consciousness" section: by trusting others we acknowledge the authority of those trusted to forgive, what's more, we invoke their responsibility to do so.[7] The mere structure of cognition and action, and the presupposition of discursivity both theoretical and practical, Brandom argues, drives us towards the achievement of such social bonds exhibiting the practical recognitive normative structure of recollection: forgiveness, confession, and trust (Brandom 2019: 31). In this phase, the preeminent, fundamental role of the subjective principle in Modernity, and its identification with normative contents, can finally be reconciled. As a result, modern alienation is overcome by these new forms of practical self-consciousness, and heroic and tragic agency can be achieved.

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4   Hegel states: "The right of the subject's particularity to find satisfaction, or – to put it differently – the right of *subjective freedom*, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern* age" (Hegel 1991, §124, comm., p. 151. References are to section numbers and page of this edition).

5   About *Niederträchtigkeit* in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Brandom 2019: 550–554.

6   Brandom 2019: 738. So Hegel: "The *certainty of self* whom I trust, is, to me, *my own certainty of itself*. I cognize my being-for-myself in that certainty of itself, I know that my being-for-myself bestows recognition on it, and I know it is purpose and essence" (Hegel 2018, §549, p. 319. References are to section numbers and pages of this edition).

7   Brandom 2019: 621. He illustrates this transit to the intersubjective ideal of reason [*Vernunft*] with the motive of the "breaking of the hard heart of the judge" by which the judge, hearing a confession of the criminal, acknowledges and forgives: a "forgiving recollection" (Brandom 2019: 608 ff.).

This age is denominated the "post-modern" age, and represents the final stage of self-consciousness (Brandom 2019: 720 ff.).

3. The System: A Problematic Absence

Brandom delivers interesting perspectives on the notion of trust for a social philosophical approach. However, as a reading of Hegel, his work presents a series of problematic elements, which can be grouped into two categories.

The first issue is methodological. Brandom chooses to base his interpretation of Hegel solely on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, leaving out the mature works of the Hegelian system. He does not, for example, analyze the problematic relation of the *Phenomenology* to the Logic, which, Hegel states, "[...] makes up metaphysics proper or pure speculative philosophy [...]" (Hegel 2010: 9), or to the complete Logic-Nature-Spirit system as set out in the 1817 *Encyclopedia*. Brandom only broaches these questions as minor examples in a discussion on intention and deed – and, furthermore, in doing so makes an error when referencing the title of the work – [8]. This lack of discussion of *Phenomenology's* relation to Hegel's system as such is remarkable, considering that the role and meaning of the *Phenomenology* has been widely discussed among both European and Anglo-American specialists[9]. By 1805-06, following the *Jenaer Systementwürfe*, which corresponds to the three university courses from 1803 to 1806, and the *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript from 1802-03, Hegel believes he has drafted the basic outlines of his system. He writes *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as an introduction to the system, or, as it finally appears in 1807, as its first part: *System of Science. First part, the Phenomenology of Spirit*. As a result of confusion stemming from the first subtitle "Science of the Experience of Consciousness", which Hegel himself later instructed to remove, as well as the fact that Hegel deleted the "First Part" from the title in his corrections for a second edition in 1831, the role of the *Phenomenology* within the Hegelian system as a whole remains unclear[10]. In any case, it is generally agreed that the work's relevance within the mature system of the *Encyclopedia* is very much reduced. Introduction, first part or a whole alternative system?

Brandom, however, does not enter this discussion. For him, the "systematic" approach consists in applying a "metaconceptual reading" which organizes

8   Brandom 2019: 412 ff. See cited Pinkard's "Introduction" to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* for the title problem.
9   A wide discussion of the *Phenomenology* started in mid-XXth century in France and Germany, with contributions such as the first commentary of the work by Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, from 1946, and the works of Kojève and Labarriere; or Fulda, Siep, Pöggeler Heinrich on the German side – Fulda, Heinrich 1973 –; in the Anglo-American sphere, works as the ones by Pinkard and Pippin, or Brandom himself, pursue Hegel's discussion from pragmatist or postanalytical traditions; Stewart (1998) is a reference volume.
10   See Nicolin 1967; Labarriere 1968; Jaeschke 2016.

Hegel's ideas around the notion of normative and conceptual contents[11]. Although he mentions it repeatedly, Brandom never explicitly discusses the meaning of Hegel's "system" as such, only hinting at it briefly when claiming to present the *Phenomenology* under the principle of "forgiving recollection", as Hegel did with his predecessors (Brandom 2019: 633). In my view, this discussion is lacking – for, as Stephan Houlgate states, it cannot be assumed that Hegel's *Phenomenology* presents Hegel's definitive ideas on being, truth, consciousness or action[12]. While we cannot fully reconstruct the discussion regarding the role of *Phenomenology* within Hegel's overall body of work here, it seems hardly debatable that Hegel, at least after finishing the work, attributed a certain preliminary character to it. The "coming-to-be of science itself", "this ether [...] the very ground and soil of science", "the exposition of knowing as it appears" or "the preparation for science", as he presents the work in the "Preface", "Introduction" and "Announcement"[13], can hardly be equated with "science", "knowledge" or the system *per se*. Later on, however, this introductory or preliminary character of the work became problematic for him, and thus the difficulty to integrate it within the mature system[14]. Brandom could have provided a more solid ground for his reading had he tackled this question. As Pippin's account shows, in an approach very akin to Brandom's, the analysis of internal transitions – especially to the C unnamed section – and their relation to the whole system is relevant and can shed light on Hegel's account of the *Geist*, or, as he puts it, of "a mutually recognizing and so mutually reassured social subjectivity" (Pippin 1993: 52–85). Interestingly, Brandom refuses to acknowledge the vast majority of the critical reception of *Phenomenology* and only names Pippin and Pinkard as commentators. In any case, perhaps we needn't choose between either focusing solely on the *Phenomenology* or disregarding it as an unsystematic sketch from Hegel's youth – a proper account should accurately consider the Phenomenology not in isolation, but rather within the context of Hegel's body of work.

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11   See for instance Brandom 2019: 16, 78.

12   In his opinion, it is, as Hegel wrote, a "ladder", the discipline that renders spirit 'competent' to examine truth as exposed in the Logic and the philosophy of Spirit. "This, however, is clearly not how Brandom understands Hegel's *Phenomenology*. For him, that text does not merely provide a sceptical 'ladder' *to* Hegel›s philosophy (PS §26), but it *contains* Hegel's most significant philosophical ideas. It presents Hegel's *theory* of conceptual content in cognition and action", Stephen Houlgate 2020.

13   See Hegel 2018: 16–17, 52.

14   Gómez Ramos 2010: 7–44. Fulda insists that this question can and should be addressed: "The way in which Hegel has assimilated the basic concepts of the *Phenomenology* into his *Encyclopedia* doctrine of Subjective Spirit has by now been studied in detail. Even the possibility of connecting the later more complex content of the *Phenomenology* with the systematic philosophy of Objective and Absolute Spirit now appears much more plausible". Fulda insists that this text is "a preface to the planned "system of science" in which the *Phenomenology* would be the first, introductory part" (Fulda 2008: 22, 26).

A second and perhaps even more substantial problematic aspect of Brandom's reading is that Brandom's views are not fully compatible with Hegel's on some crucial matters, especially Brandom's teleological claim of a post-modern age based on trust. Brandom proposes that we practice "semantics with an edifying intent", as the theoretical understanding should educate and motivate us who live "in the post-modern form of trust" (Brandom 2019: 32, 720 ff.). Hegel, however, warned about philosophy's temptation to be "edifying" – her task is, rather, to look back to the Real and "paint gray on gray", to grasp one's times in concepts, not to decree a future state of affairs. In Hegel's words: "The impossibility of directly borrowing from the future is grounded in the very fact of retroactivity which makes the future *a priori* unpredictable: we cannot climb onto our own shoulders and see ourselves 'objectively', in terms of the way we fit into the texture of history, because this texture is again and again retroactively rearranged. [...] We are free only against the background of this non transparency" (Žižek 2012: 221, 223).

In addition, it is surprising that a pragmatist study of trust and the forms of practical, normative and social action does not examine the differentiated developments in the philosophy of objective spirit – which can be seen both in *Encyclopedia* and the *Philosophy of Right*, as well as in the lessons on universal history. The concept of "civil society", for instance, and its dialectical relation to the State, is completely absent from Brandom's account. Starting from the plausible hypothesis that our societies suffer an erosion of trust, we should seek to explain if, and how, a potentially universal bond can arise given the modern, thoroughly individualistic formation of the subject, while also examining the ways in which the great change of modern economic rationality did not abolish, but rather redefine the logic and structure of society. The question of how the State can accomplish its aim of universal justice and equality under the conditions of market economy should also be addressed. This should be done, however, avoiding a danger that haunts some of the Anglo-American readings of Hegel, even the most rigorous ones – such as Pippin's, who aims to revindicate the dignity of the old label of idealism and reconsider the value of Hegel's solutions to technical philosophical problems – : "[...] the slippage of the non-philosophical (or 'sociological') chapters into the impressionistic flabbiness of a generalizing 'culture critique'", as Jameson rightfully warned[15]. This task, in fact, is one of the core aims in Hegel's philosophy of objective spirit. The subtle genius of Max Weber, who rejected the strict delineation between pre- and modern societies of classical sociology, reassumed this task, by "[...] paying attention to tensions and links between a particularistic trust of 'communal relationships' and the universal trust of 'associative relationships' (social relationships whose 'orientation of social action within it rests on a rationally motivated adjustment of interest')" (Misztal 1992: 8).

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[15]   Jameson 2010: 11. Adorno's *Hegel: Three Studies* is an attempt to avoid this danger by considering society not as a mere, given fact, but as *Geist*: "Society is essentially concept, just as spirit is" (Adorno 1993: 20).

4. Conclusions

Trust is by no means an exclusively Hegelian topic. Ever since Simmel's classic statement, "Without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate", the concept of trust has held an important position in practical philosophy in general[16]. The founding fathers of sociology, too, inherited this focus from philosophy when trying to account for the differences between traditional societies, primarily based on mutual dependence and communitarian systems, and the modern, individualistic societies governed by instrumental reason (Coleman 1997). At stake was the possibility of social existence as such: how is a social bond possible under the conditions of modern individualism? Many recent contributions point to the erosion of mutual trust as one of the key factors in the institutional, cultural and political crises of our contemporary societies[17]. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a revival of the view of civil society as the "synthesis of public and private needs" (Seligman 1992: 5), in which the bonds of trust play a fundamental role. The concept of trust, one could say, is thus tightly bound to the idea of bond in modern societies.

Brandom's work can be seen as a philosophical contribution to these wide-ranging discussions of trust, and his reflections on the "ages of Spirit" regarding the characteristics of Modernity, the history of the subject, the nature of our present, and the form of its practical, collective agency, surely constitute relevant questions. In summary, Brandom's endeavor is relevant for a philosophical questioning of action, meaning and normativity from a pragmatist semantic approach, but could have built upon stronger foundations in order to constitute a more systematic contribution to the study of Hegel.

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16   Quoted in Barbalet 2019: 11. An overview in Hardin 2002, and the rest of "The Russell Sage Foundation Series on Trust" (1998-2014); Peperzak 2013. The implications on the ability to trust at will, Thompson 2017, and Flores, Solomon 1998. About the role of trust from an epistemological point of view, Dormandy 2019; Rinard 2021; Kallestrup 2020.

17   A recent compilation in the cited work of Sasaki and Cook (2001).

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Sistem poverenja? Beleška o čitanju *Hegelove Fenomenologije duha* Roberta B. Brendoma

Sažetak

U ovom tekstu diskutujemo Brendomovo čitanje Hegela, posebno njegovo novije delo, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, da bismo razmotrili pitanje „poverenja" kao strukture priznanja. Na početku rekonstruišemo Brendomovo čitanje Hegelove filozofije kao oblika „pragmatike društvenog priznanja" uz „objašnjenje pojmovnog sadržaja zasnovanog na istorijskom pamćenju", kojim on nastoji da ponudi redefiniciju praktične normativnosti utemeljene na poverenju. Potom razmatramo njegovo shvatanje poverenja kao temelja budućeg, postmodernog društva. Na kraju skrećemo pažnju na izvesne poteškoće u vezi s Brendomovim pojmom postmodernog doba i razmatramo pojam poverenja kao ključa za moderno razumevanje društvenih veza.

Ključne reči: Hegel, *Fenomenologija duha*, poverenje, modernost, postmoderno doba