

Capital and the Space of Reasons

This presentation has at its basis the paper “Capital as space of reasons: Analytic, Neo-Hegelian Marxism?” by Justin Evans

Introductory remarks

The point of presenting this paper is to approach some of the issues entangled with Pittsburgh Neo-Hegelianism as it may or may not relate to Marxist themes.

The issue is interesting from a historical-philosophical point of view, since, as Evans himself mentions, the relationships between the three terms, Marxism, Hegelianism and Analytic philosophy are a convoluted one.

The first sustained engagements of analytic philosophy with Marxism under the guise of so-called “Analytic Marxism” were carried out under the condition of dropping the Hegelian influence on Marx’s thinking.

Introductory remarks

Evans paper is interesting precisely in the sense that it is putting forward a new possible form of engagement of Analytic phil and Marxism, this time mediated through the resurgence of interest in Hegelian thought on the aftermath of Wilfrid Sellars' influence.

While not agreeing with Evans final construal of this relationship, this presentation uses his approach as a launching platform for other, different kinds of approaches, such as Ray Brassier's that try to weave Marx and Pittsburgh Hegelianism.

Marx and Hegel

“The literature on Marx’s relation to Hegel is as vast as the literature on Marx himself; philosophers, critical theorists, social scientists, historians and revolutionaries have all had something to say on the matter. But the argument can be seen as having a few central, possible positions: [1] that Marx rejected Hegelianism; [2] that he fell back behind Hegel; [3] that his work mapped onto Hegel’s; or [4] that he transcended Hegel in positive ways.”

Marx and Hegel

He relate a few specific authors to each position:

1. Althusser, Colletti
2. Gillian Rose, Charles Taylor
3. Uncharitable: Popper, Tony Smith; Charitable: Uchida
4. Chris Arthur, Marcuse, etc

Marx and Hegel

“This is the approach that I will take below: I will apply a very charitable reading of Hegel to Marx’s thought. The charitable reading of Hegel is that of the Pittsburgh school of thinkers, and those Hegel scholars who are in conversation with them. Unlike most of those thinkers, I also read Marx charitably. Using the tools of the Pittsburgh school gives us a philosophically interesting understanding of Marx’s relationship to Hegel, and, more importantly, of Marx’s work itself.”

The Pittsburgh School

“The central figures in the Pittsburgh School – Wilfrid Sellars, Robert Brandom and John McDowell – can perhaps best be understood as trying to show us what it means to be a rational creature. Rationality is clearly tied to reasoning, and this leads to the longstanding philosophical problem of knowledge. What justifies us in our claim to know that, say, gin is a colourless beverage? The most straightforward response is to point to some gin, and thus confirm our claim. The hope is that the thing we point to can found our claim to knowledge without needing any further justification.”

The Pittsburgh School

This raises what Sellars calls the myth of the given. Sellars lists possible candidates for the given – ‘sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself’ – and charges that much traditional Western philosophy includes some form of the myth (Sellars 1963, 127, §1). In each case, philosophers seek some fact that (i) will be independent of ‘any other cognitive state’ but which will also (ii) provide justification for other cognitive states.”

The Pittsburgh School: Left and Right Sellarsians

Sellars is famous for upholding two, potentially contradictory theses: semantic holism; and scientific realism. The contradictory character is not apparent from the beginning but shall become manifest by reading the canonical texts on each as selected by Brandom.

The Pittsburgh School: Left and Right Sellarsians

“Several decades ago, Richard Rorty suggested that philosophical admirers of Wilfrid Sellars could be divided into two schools, defined by which of two famous passages from his masterwork *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* are taken to express his most important insight:

The Pittsburgh School: Left and Right Sellarsians

In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not. (§41)

or

[In] characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says. (§36)”

The Pittsburgh School: Left and Right Sellarsians

The first passage asserts the primacy of scientific procedures on matters of ontology. Which means, to the ontological question “What is there?” as Quine puts it, the answer must be informed by positive Science.

The second gives an epistemological thesis on what constitutes knowledge. And knowledge here is not direct contact with any entity, but it is the positioning of a piece of language, say, a declarative sentence, in a web wherein in such declarative sentence yields consequences- consequences that in turn will compose the sentence’s meaning itself-in a sense to be further exposed.

The Pittsburgh School: Left and Right Sellarsians

The contradiction alluded, and best articulated by Sellars in his paper “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, concerns the fact that the justificatory relations that obtain between pieces of knowledge are not straightforwardly reducible to causal relations observed in Science. This problem was made explicit as the cooperation and conflict between the two “images of man in the world”, what Sellars called the Manifest Image and the Scientific Image.

In Evans’ paper he refers to a further philosophical problem stems from this same difficulty and is expressed in John McDowell’s philosophy as the conflict between The Given and coherentism.

Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given

Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given can be seen as a means to compatibilize the Scientific Realist thesis that the entities to which the Scientific theories refer to are real with the idea that concepts are determined within a web of commitments that will be called the Space of reasons.

Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given

The Sellarsian formulation of the Myth of the Given is presented within this inconsistent triad:

- A) 'S senses red sense content x' entails 'S non inferentially believes (knows) that x is red.'
- B) The ability to sense sense contents is unacquired
- C). The capacity to have classificatory beliefs of the form 'x is F' is acquired.

Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given

It all hinges upon the continuity between sensing and knowing. If it is possible to sense facts, then sensible contents have propositional form, and we are capturing a given.

Sustaining A and B implies negating C; sustaining B and C implies negating A; sustaining A and C implies negating B.

Coherentism X The Given

“But if one cannot have an individual concept without having more than that individual concept, then a concept cannot fulfil one of the conditions of a given. No concept can be independent of other cognitive states, because all concepts necessarily rely on other concepts. This suggests that if there is to be a given, it must be non-conceptual: so, instead of the concept of gin, we might try to found knowledge on the immediate visual appearance of colourless liquid. But this given would fail to fulfil the other condition of the given, that it justify further cognitive states.

Coherentism X The Given

This is because Sellars and those who follow him take rationality (judgements, inferences, concept usage) to be normative, and not just causal. Although the light bouncing off the tumbler will cause certain effects on my retina, and they in turn will cause neurochemical effects and so on, none of these causal effects suffices to produce thought. Thought is not merely causal – it is not what Brandom calls a ‘reliable differential response disposition’ (Brandom 2001, 38). For this reason, Sellars claims, the attempt to analyse statements about knowledge into statements about non epistemic facts is ‘a radical mistake’.

Coherentism X The Given

So, there can be neither a conceptual nor a non-conceptual given. But then, what does our rationality involve? How do we know things? We seem to be thrown back on the position that the external world cannot provide us with reasons at all, or that it cannot constrain us (as if I could, Christlike, transform the water in my bottle into gin simply by altering my concepts). John McDowell has argued that philosophers get caught in this oscillation between appeals to the given and claims of coherentism (McDowell 1996, 8–9).”

Wittgenstein's Paradox: Regulism and Regularism

“This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.” (L. Wittgenstein)

“Kripke understands the first paragraph of PI 201 as presenting a genuine sceptical problem: the apparently paradoxical situation that whilst we seem to use language meaningfully, there is no fact about us that constitutes our meaning one thing as opposed to another, and consequently the possibility of our actually meaning anything seems to disappear.” (S. Weir)

Wittgenstein's Paradox: Regulism and Regularism

Two interpretations of rule-following are commented by Robert Brandom that give rise to the paradox:

Interpretation one is called regulism, and it is the idea that rules are always explicit statements about how to do something.

Interpretation two is called regularism, and it is the idea that rules are regularities of behavior.

Wittgenstein's Paradox: Regulism and Regularism

Problem with solution one is that if every rule is an assertion, every rule must be specified by a rule about how to apply the first rule. And that makes it an infinite regress. One never applies any rule.

Problem with solution two is that regularities cannot account for the normative character of a rule. Regularities aren't right or wrong, they just are.

Brandom's solution is to make rules implicit in practice. Wittgenstein advances this idea when he says following a rule is a practice, a custom, an institution. Brandom in addition to the wittgensteinian priority of practice proposes the idea that norms implicit in practice can be made explicit by normative vocabulary. Modal and logical vocabularies are the organon of this explicitation.

Pattern-governed vs Rule-obeying behavior

Pattern-governed behavior is ubiquitous in the biological and physical realms. Physical systems realize complex patterns without intending them. The pattern is incarnated by the components of the system, each part of which constitutes it, but the constitution is effectuated by something as mindless as a wiring-diagram. The latter mechanism codes for the pattern, without the structure of the pattern having to be represented by any part of it. Thus the turns and wiggles performed by a dancing bee occur for a reason—to communicate information about flowers—without this reason being intended: the bee has no mind with which it can intend to realize the dance:

Pattern-governed vs Rule-obeying behavior

What would it mean to say of a bee returning from a clover field that its turnings and wiggings occur because they are part of a complex dance? Would this commit us to the idea that the bee envisages the dance and acts as it does by virtue of intending to realize the dance? If we reject this idea, must we refuse to say that the dance pattern as a whole is involved in the occurrence of each wiggle and turn? Clearly not. It is open to us to give an evolutionary account of the phenomena of the dance, and hence to interpret the statement that this wiggle occurred because of the complex dance to which it belongs—which appears, as before, to attribute causal force to an abstraction, and hence tempts us to draw upon the mentalistic language of intention and purpose—in terms of the survival value to groups of bees of these forms of behavior. In this interpretation, the dance pattern comes in not as an abstraction, but as exemplified by the behavior of particular bees.¹

Pattern-governed vs Rule-obeying behavior

What does it mean to say that the bee's wiggling is part of a dance? Or to explain its wiggling by saying that each wiggle occurs because of the dance? To say this is to say that organic movement happens for a reason—it has an adaptive function—but this reason (or function) is not represented in the brain of the organism motivated by it. This is to distinguish between doing something for a reason and doing something because of a reason. The ability to do something because of a reason arises from the capacity to do something for a reason. Yet it should not be confused with it.

(Ray Brassier- “unfree improvisation/compulsive freedom”)

Brandom's Hegel and Freedom

“For Brandom, Hegel is meant to have answered two different kinds of scepticism: first, he offers us a semantic theory that explains how concepts come to have determinate content (i.e. to explain why the concept of gin really does have a connection with one and only one beverage); and, second, a pragmatic account of how norms can come to bind us. The semantic theory is explained by the fact that concepts are linked by relations of incompatibility and consequence. The pragmatic theory is a theory of social recognition and score-keeping in the space of reasons. They are bound together by ‘an expressive process of recollection’ (Brandom 2019, 636). This latter process, when complete, will yield us genuine freedom.”

Brandom's Hegel and Freedom

“Engaging in that activity produces, sustains, and develops a synthetic unity of apperception: a self or subject. What must one do to be doing that? One must integrate new endorsements into the whole that comprises one’s previous endorsements. Synthesis by successive integration can be thought of as involving three sorts of activity: critical, ampliative, and justificatory. One’s critical responsibility is to weed out materially incompatible commitments. This means rejecting candidate judgments that are incompatible with what one is already committed to and responsible for, or relinquishing the offending prior commitments. Judgers as such are obliged to renounce commitment to contents that are incompatible with their other commitments, or which have such commitments as their consequences. For if two commitments are incompatible, each serves as a reason to give up the other.” (Brandom- ‘Reason in philosophy’)

Brandom's Hegel and Freedom

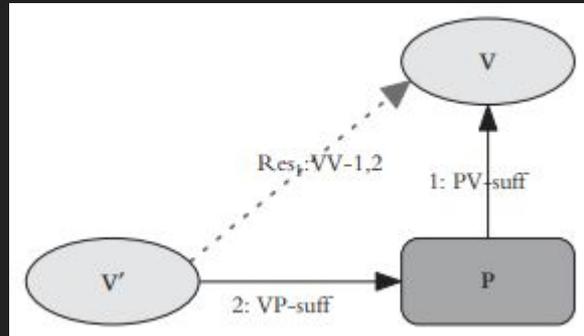
Negative and positive freedoms: To get an intuitive sense of how such a capacity can sensibly be thought of as a kind of positive freedom, it is helpful to think of an example suggested by the guiding metaphor of Kant's popular essay "Was ist Aufklärung?" Consider what happens when a young person achieves her legal majority. Suddenly she has the authority to bind herself legally, for instance by entering into contracts. That gives her a host of new abilities: to borrow money, take out a mortgage, start a business. The new authority to bind oneself normatively, to take on these new normative statuses, involves a huge increase in positive freedom. The difference between discursive creatures and non-discursive ones is likewise to be understood in terms of the sort of normative positive freedom exhibited by the concept users. Further, for Kant this sort of normative positive freedom is a kind of rational freedom.

Brandom's Hegel and Freedom

On this account, far from being incompatible with constraint, freedom consists in a distinctive kind of constraint: constraint by norms. This sounds paradoxical, but it is not. The positive freedom Kant is describing is the practical capacity to be bound by discursive norms. This is a capacity that is compatible with but extends beyond being bound by the laws that govern natural beings. It is by exercising this capacity that we raise ourselves above the merely natural, and become beings who live and move and have our being in the normative space of commitments and responsibilities, and so (because it is the rational relations they stand in that articulate the contents of those normative statuses) reasons

Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

Brandom devises what he calls meaning-use diagrams, which are category theory diagrams that are intended for the representation of the relations between what he calls “practices” and “vocabularies”. An example can be seen below.

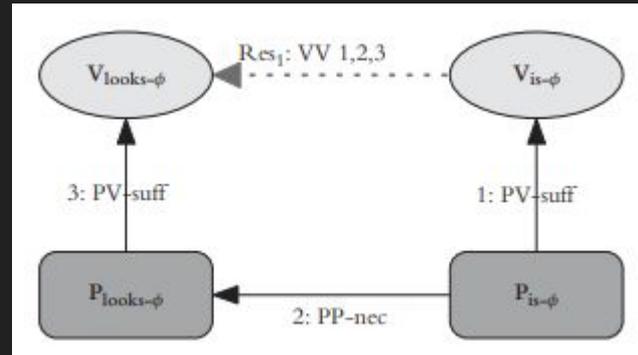


Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

In the example the oval bubbles represent vocabularies while the rectangular ones represent practices. In the example what Brandom calls a “pragmatic metavocabulary” relation is depicted, wherein a specific vocabulary, V' is able to specify a set of practices P that are necessary for using a second vocabulary V . In a sense, it is like V' says everything one is doing (“ P ”) when one is using V . So, V' is a pragmatic metavocabulary for V .

Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

A second example given by Brandom fleshes this out further with specific vocabularies.



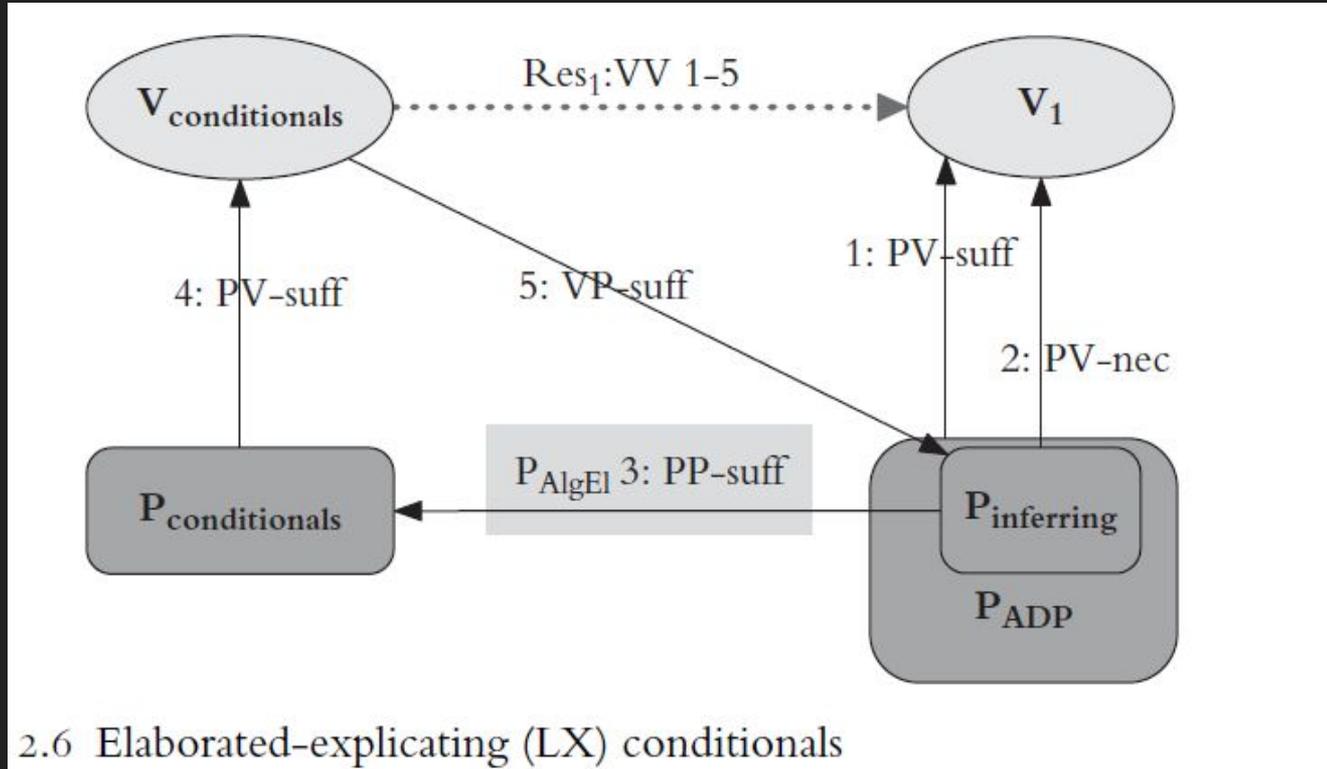
Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

In this example Brandom tries to formalize in a MUR (meaning-use relation) diagram Sellars' argument about the practical dependence of the "looks"-vocabulary to the "is"-vocabulary. It is not necessary here to rehearse the whole argument, but the core of it is that one needs to have already the concept of "is", as "x is red" in order to use the concept of "looks", as in "x looks red". This is akin to a rebuttal of a phenomenistic picture of the hierarchy of vocabularies, since phenomenal concepts can't have the foundational role they are assigned to by phenomenologists. But the argument aside, the example is informative regarding how to use the diagrams. They are basically meant to make explicit relationships between pieces of language (vocabularies) in the sense of their mutual dependencies to different kinds of practices, that are also ordered by dependencies in the sense "P1 is needed in order to count as doing P2". Two different kinds of dependencies are formulated: sufficient relations and necessary relations.

Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

A very special and important case of MUR is the so-called LX relation, meaning “elaboration-explication”. In this MUR a certain set of practices is algorithmically elaborated into another set of practices that specify a vocabulary that, in turn, is able to specify the original set of practices.

Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations



Brandom on pragmatically mediated semantic relations

In this the activity of inferring is a necessary part of a practice of an autonomous discursive practice – P-ADP (which Brandom defines as a practice one can engage in while she engages in no other), and they both have PV relations to a vocabulary. These practices are algorithmically elaborated (PAlgEI) into a practice that is PV sufficient for the use of conditionals (V conditionals), which in turn make explicit in the sense of asserting what is going on in the practice of inferring. If one was able at some point to infer from “it is raining” the consequent “the streets will be wet”, with the elaboration of the conditional vocabulary she is also able to say why this is the case, which is expressed by a conditional “If it rains, the streets get wet”.

Evans' Conclusion

The claim that capital and spirit can be understood in similar terms is motivated by Marx's use of Hegelian terms in *Capital's* chapter on the general formula. He says there that 'value' becomes 'an automatic subject', or the 'dominant subject', and that it 'presents itself as a self-moving substance'. This 'value' is capital (Marx 1990, 255–56). So, capital fulfils Hegel's suggestion that spirit is subject which is also substance (Hegel 1977, §37, 21).

Evans' Conclusion

Following this analysis of the concept of commodity, Marx asks what forms value can take and concludes that the most adequate form of value is money. For this reason, 'the simple commodity form is therefore the germ of the money-form' (Marx 1990, 163). This does not mean that commodities historically precede money. Rather, it is a quasi-Hegelian demonstration. The analysis of the concept of the commodity necessarily leads us to the concept of money. We cannot understand the former without understanding the latter, nor the latter without the former. They are tied by chains of inference.

Evans' Conclusion

The reason this form of exchange occurs is that 'more money is finally withdrawn from circulation than was thrown into it at the beginning' (Marx 1990, 251). This is what we see with capital: the creation of new value, here, in the form of money. This new value is not any different from the value at the start; they are both money (whereas in C-M-C, the commodities must be different for the exchange to make any sense). But the quantity of money has altered. So, this cycle can, in theory, continue uninterrupted: M-C-M₀-C-M₀₀-C-M₀₀₀ and so on. Both money and the commodity are forms of value, so we could also rewrite the cycle as V-V-V₀-V₀-V₀₀-V₀₀-V₀₀₀ and so on.

Evans' Conclusion

This is why Marx calls value the automatic subject. It appears to be a fully independent, self-increasing system.⁴⁶ It is also the self-moving substance. There can be little doubt that Marx is mocking Hegel. At the same time, his use of this rhetoric brings the horror of capitalism home, because it shows such a stark contrast to German Idealism's insistence on the nature of modern subjectivity and freedom.

Evans' Conclusion

To move even further into the language I have been using here, if capital is the subject that is also substance – that is, Geist – and if Geist is a set of concepts that we can imagine as a space of reasons, we can claim that a society structured by the economic demands of capital is a space of reasons.

The contradiction of capitalism is that freedom is denied to us by the very space of reasons that is supposed to make freedom possible.

Is Capital an impoverished space of reasons?

A. Capital is not an impoverished space of reasons. To claim so is to elide the distinction between causes and reasons that undergirds the critique of the Given as we (but not Evans) presented it. The Marxian critique of capital is usually portrayed as a genealogical critique of the reasons provided by a certain space of reasons. If capital is a space of reasons, from the Marxist viewpoint it is the ideological view of capital, while what Capital does is instantiate a unconscious pattern-governed behaviour under the self-interested justification for it provided rationally.

B. Capital though is also not reducible to immediate causes. The problem of scales present itself in the eliciting of abstractions out of social practices is enmeshed with the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Is Capital an impoverished space of reasons?

C. To account for the mutual influence between the exceptionally complex space of causes that is capitalism and the space of reasons proper a more nuanced approach to the problem of the disambiguation between norms and causes ought to be provided, as well as of their occasional overlaps, which cuts across the distinction between concreteness and abstraction.

D. While not having a complete account to offer for it, a few pointers can be taken from the Pittsburgh approach: Reasoning is a doing. Doings are articulated within not one but at least two spaces at once- the causal-natural space of occurrences and the normative-rational space of justifications. The grounding of reason, though in practice might yield a few interesting research topics regarding the relationship between Capital and the Space of Reason.

Brassier on Brandom's 'liberalism'

Ultimately, the standoff between philosophy and “theory” in the Jamesonian sense is the standoff between philosophical (which in this context means Hegelian) confidence in reason’s justificatory resources, such that the true qua justifiable can always be aligned with the good, and theory’s legitimate suspicion of this alignment of justice and justification—its exposure of a gap in reason such that what is right or just is precisely what remains unjustifiable. This gap is simply reason’s “other,” variously figured as the sensible, time, becoming, event, etc.

Dialectics between suspicion and trust

But Hegel's fundamental insight is that reason takes time, such that both the dogmatic rationalism that equates what is currently justifiable with justifiability tout court, and the theologized skepticism that inflates the shortfall between justice and justifiability into the ruin of justification fail to realize how it is the very failures of justification (its historical limitations, blindspots, aporias, etc.) that spurs the expansion of justificatory resources such that reason is retrospectively compelled to acknowledge what it can only belatedly recognize as its own failure to render the resources of justification adequate to the demands of justice. This is why for Hegel the path of progress is indissociable from the "highway of despair."

Dialectics between suspicion and trust

This makes Hegel the thinker who preemptively supersedes the opposition between Enlightenment optimism and postmodern pessimism, or between hope and despair: we are rationally compelled to recognize that the history that subjects us is also the history that sets us free as subjects; but free only to recognize what must be borne in order for us to be free. Hegel is a sphinx: what is is really wrong; but only what is really wrong can be retrospectively acknowledged as what was really right. There is no escape from the slaughter-bench of history. Perhaps this is what Bataille had in mind when he spoke of the expression of fathomless “horror” he detected in the aged Hegel’s painted countenance: the horror of having got to the bottom of everything and understood history in its necessarily rightwrongness and necessarily wrong-rightness.

Dialectics between suspicion and trust

Dialectics' grasp of the cunning of reason changes everything and yet leaves everything as it is. It is an accomplishment that undoes itself, an understanding that suffocates both hope and despair.³ But this suffocation forces a transformation. To acknowledge the necessarily equivocal or Janus-faced character of Hegelian reason is to enlarge our conception of what is revolutionary about rationality. This does not consist in overturning established norms and hierarchies—this would be revolution in the literal but philosophically conservative sense; nor in holding discourse accountable to some transcendent, supradiscursive absolute—this would be revolution according to the theological conception of reason.

Dialectics between suspicion and trust

It consists rather in marrying the logic of explicitation, identified by Brandom as the compunction to extract reasons from causes, with the diagnosis of the unconscious blockages, whether social or sexual, impeding this labor of extraction. The call to combine rational explicitation with the disenchantment of reason is the call to reconstruct the form of life in which the pathologies of discursive and social practices have their common root”

Concrete in Thought, Concrete in Action

“Consciousness of the individual act of exchange occludes consciousness of its social precondition. Consciousness is necessarily false in the sense that we can only be individually conscious of what we are doing in exchange by not being conscious of what we are collectively doing in exchange. The collective practice of commodity exchange is precisely what cannot be intuited or represented from the vantage of individuals engaged in exchange. Exchange is a practical abstraction whose concreteness can only be grasped by abstracting from what appears as concrete from the vantage of individual consciousness.”