

Mediation and Intersubjectivist Interpretations of Hegel

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Abstract: Writers such as Robert Williams have attempted to use the concepts of 'recognition' and 'intersubjectivity' to construct a 'non-metaphysical Hegel'. Such narrowly pragmatic interpretations of 'spirit' fail because they erase the crucial moment of mediation in Hegel's idea of human life and in particular the role of material culture.

The fundamental concept in Hegel's philosophy is 'spirit' and Robert Williams (1997) is one of those writers who seek a non-metaphysical Hegel which *retains* the concept of Spirit, by means of a pragmatic interpretation. Others, such as Stephen Houlgate (2005), want to appropriate Hegel's philosophy *without* Spirit by relying on some concept of universal reason. Williams is surely right in this, for Spirit is the very substance of Hegel's philosophy and makes no sense without it.

For the young Hegel, prior to 1805, Spirit was the spirit of this or that people or of the times, a *Volksgeist* or *Zeitgeist*, terms he inherited from Herder (1774). Motivated by the fragmented and stateless condition of the Germany of his day, Hegel was interested in why and how a people had one history rather than another. What was the source of their specific culture and institutions? (Hegel 1804 and 1795) After 1805, there was a subtle change in the conception, with Spirit becoming something which underlay history, manifesting or unfolding itself in history. Nevertheless, Spirit as simply the 'nature of human beings *en masse*' (Hegel 1821, p. 163), a *product* of history rather than its *presupposition*, is easily reconciled with the mature Hegel and is a conception from which Hegel never really departs.

So key to any modern appropriation of Spirit has to be the appropriation of its specific forms, *Gestalten*, or 'shapes of consciousness' (Hegel 1807). A *Gestalt* is simultaneously a certain *way of thinking*, a certain *way of life* or social system if you like, and a certain *material culture*. Spirit is the coincidence or identity of these three things, and nothing outside of that. Surely it is not too difficult to read Hegel in such a way that Spirit is not *presupposed*, but purely and simply the coincidence of thinking, social practice and material culture. Such a reading I would call a non-metaphysical conception of Spirit; i.e., a '*pragmatic*' reading of Hegel, a reading which opens up Hegel for an appropriation of his prodigious insights, without the unwanted baggage of an extramundane, Hermetic or Pantheistic Spirit.

Robert Williams pioneered the use of 'recognition' as the basis for a modern, pragmatic appropriation of Hegel's notion of Spirit. In fact, it was 'recognition' which Hegel's predecessor, Johann Fichte (1796), used to make a pragmatic critique of Kant: a person learns that they are a free being when they are recognised as a free being by someone who is already free, summoning them to exercise their freedom and respect the other's property rights. The Young Hegel continued this pragmatic use of 'recognition', but *in reverse*. According to Hegel, Fichte had deduced the state from the individual, but what was required was to approach the nature of the individual from the nature of the whole people. (Hegel 1817) 'It is in the kind that the individual animal has its notion', said Hegel (1830, p. 41). But the relation of the activity of a person to the activity of the particular community of which they are an individual differs from that of an individual

organism to its species, because spirit is '*self-construing*' - the environmental niche or *object* to which the individual or group is oriented is its own product, its *own material culture*, universal norms inherited from previous generations and recreated anew. If the mediating role of this material culture is erased from the relation between individuals, there can be no 'self-construing' Spirit.

It is true that, as Williams claims, the concept of 'recognition' appears throughout Hegel's writing, but up until 1805, Hegel gradually expanded the scope of the concept of 'recognition'. However, by 1805 it had *lost its original focus* and meaning. 'Recognition' no longer referred to a confrontation between two mutually alien subjects. 'Being recognised' referred, for example, to an individual's experience of seeing their product circulate in the market or experiencing protection under the rule of law (Hegel 1806, p. 120). So from 1807, Hegel limited the scope of recognition and gave it its paradigmatic exposition in the master-servant narrative of *The Phenomenology* (Hegel 1807). In the *Philosophy of Right*, 'recognition' figures, but only incidentally, not structurally.

Hegel retains the structural role of recognition in the subjective spirit from which the concept of right emerges. But by contrast he uses Kant's dictum: "Be a person and respect others as persons" (1821: §36) as a definition of abstract right, the beginning point of the domain of Right itself. Recognition arises where Hegel considers the various forms of mediation constituting the social fabric of the family, civil society and the state, but here 'being recognised' plays an derivative role in comparison with the concept of 'mediation'.

It is the contention of this paper that in mobilising 'recognition' in the service of a pragmatic reading of Hegel, Williams misreads the canonical version of 'recognition' in *The Phenomenology*, combines it with the over-extended scope of 'recognition' in the earlier works, and the inessential usage of the concept in the *Philosophy of Right*, to produce a generalised concept of recognition which provides the basis for what I will call a *narrow* pragmatic reading of Hegel, commonly referred to as 'intersubjectivity', as opposed to a *broad* (mediated) pragmatic reading, which I defend here.

The aim of *pragmatism* is to do away with recourse to abstractions or universals deemed to have some kind of objective existence independently of the activity of human beings. The distinction between 'broad' and 'narrow' pragmatism is as follows: —

Narrow pragmatism aims to explain everything solely by means of the solitary use of objects by individuals and essentially *unmediated* interactions between individuals. This reduces social life and history to a gigantic *chain reaction*, a discrete series of events without any kind of continuity binding them together other than what is in the individuals themselves. The idea that meaning is *renegotiated anew* with each interaction between individuals overlooks both the fact that meaning is *already vested* in culturally inherited artefacts, and that as material things, relations inhering in an artefact *transcend* the intentions of the individuals using it. This narrow pragmatism corresponds to the spirit of liberalism which was given its canonical expression by Johann Fichte (1796).

Broad pragmatism, on the other hand, understands that all interactions are *mediated*. Mediation between subjects depends on the *prior* existence of a material culture which is subject to interpretation and use in *common projects* or conflicts. Human life is possible thanks to the use of this shared culture, inherited and modified by each generation. It is this role of material culture which is systematically ignored by Robert Williams and by

liberalism in general, narrow pragmatism in particular.

For Hegel, *every* relation is mediated. At the very beginning of the *Science of Logic* (Hegel 1816, p. 68) he says: ‘there is nothing, nothing in Heaven, or in Nature or in Mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation’. This is absolutely fundamental to what Hegel has to teach us. Even the concept of ‘Being’ is mediated by all the social development that went into making possible the first philosophical reflections of Thales and Parmenides at the beginning of the history of philosophy, and the subsequent creation of a philosophically educated public.

This question of mediation takes us to Hegel’s social theory and his vision of modern society. According to Hegel, modernity is a society in which there is no single mandated form of life, and yet people exercise their freedom as individuals thanks to being *part of a state*. This contrasts with traditional communities, such as Hegel believed existed in ancient Greece, where a single form of life was mandated and an individual was simply an *individual instance* of their city-state. According to Hegel, modernity presupposes the *sublation* of many forms of mediation and the negation of a multiplicity of notions of the good, ways of seeing things and ways of life into the construction of a common form of ethical life.

The problem lies in understanding how such a process can even begin, because mutually foreign subjects – with no common language or culture, no trading relations, no shared ethos or religion or law – cannot interact. They are each to the other a wild force of Nature; war to the death or withdrawal into mutual indifference are the only alternatives. Except under certain conditions to be outlined below, unmediated intersubjectivity is an impossibility.

And this is not just a question of cultural origins or pre-history. Exactly the same problem arises whenever new social movements, new natural scientific paradigms, and so on, come on to the scene. Interaction is possible only thanks to mediation. Recognition is about mutually alien subjects or communities or social movements, finding *within themselves* the resources to interact with one another. This is possible only by the subjects *splitting in two*.

In his 1803 ‘System of Ethical Life’, Hegel begins with the origins of *consciousness* in the separation of needs and the means of their satisfaction. Instead of what is given by Nature being immediately consumed, a gap opens up between consumption and production, and this gap is mediated by labour. Labour itself generates new needs, needs met by new products. Nature is thus supplemented by a ‘second nature’ in the form of an artificial environment; along with the separation of consumption and production comes a *division of labour*, the possibility of supervision of labour – the differentiation of *theory and practice*, and most importantly a *surplus product*.

A self-contained community which produces no surplus, or anything of use to anyone else, which is unable to utilise the labor of others, when confronted by an outsider can only fight to the death. No mystical ‘drive to domination’ (p. 56) is required. In the absence of mediation, outsiders have no more respect for your property rights than a horde of locusts. And no-one imputes a ‘drive to domination’ to locusts.

But if a community is able to produce a surplus and is able to supervise their own labour, then they are candidates for conquest and exploitation or they can exploit others. Along with being able to defend themselves in a fight to the death and repel the attack of others,

these are the pre-conditions for recognition. These capacities presuppose the self-differentiation of the subject into two, into needs and the means of their satisfaction, into subject and object. If the conquered subject can be incorporated into a system of needs and labour within the life-project of another subject, then the first step towards modernity can be taken.

In order to live in interaction with other subjects, a subject must be able to reproduce itself and defend itself against outside criticism, either alone or together with others, and receive from other subjects a material affirmation of the validity of its way of life. While such recognition is paradigmatically granted by another subject like itself, recognition is invariably granted by a subject acting on behalf of a collectivity of subjects by way of inclusion into a 'family'. Such inclusion constitutes 'being-recognised' and normally provides a multiplicity of forms of mediation not otherwise available.

To reiterate, if there is no shared system of law, language, labour and culture to mediate interactions and no 'third party' to mediate, then subjects nevertheless *can* interact by *splitting in two*, with the *needs of one* mediating between the other's needs and the means of their satisfaction, whilst *the labour of the other* mediates between the first's needs and their satisfaction. In other words, the subjects both differentiate into subject-objects, so as to be incorporated into a single project or system of needs and labour, a circumstance, of course, in which one is subordinated into the project of the other, dominant, subjectivity. (Hegel 1807: §§178-196) But as Hegel showed in the *Phenomenology*, such initial subordination to another form of life proves to be the first step towards modernity.

Robert Williams claims that one and the same concept of 'recognition' underlies Hegel's ethics, not only for the young Hegel, but the mature Hegel as well. Using an appropriately generalised, essentially unmediated, idea of 'recognition', Williams renders Spirit as 'intersubjectivity'. The result, however, is an accommodation of Hegel's notion of Spirit to a narrow pragmatism which misses Hegel's key insights.

Many of Williams' claims are attractive. For example:

"For Hegel, recognition mediates the affirmative consciousness of freedom and plays a crucial role in the formation of the ethical sphere, including ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]. Recognition decentres the modern concept of the subject found in Descartes and Kant, not by displacing it as in structuralism, but by transforming and expanding it into intersubjectivity. In short, subjectivity is transformed [*aufgehoben*], expanded, and elevated into intersubjectivity." (p. 2)

But Williams fails to demonstrate that these unique features of Hegel's philosophy can be recovered in his intersubjective interpretation because:

1. He renders the relation between subjects as a *bipolar* relation essentially lacking *mediation*, which is the very heart of Hegel's idea of Spirit, and
2. *Material culture* simply does not exist in Williams' reading. But material culture is the objectivity of the Universal, without which we are left with Individuals and Particulars, from which no Hegelian Spirit of any kind can be resurrected, and
3. Despite himself, he adheres to a unitary, individualistic notion of the subject, which, although conditioned by transactions between individuals, remains nonetheless, a unitary, *individual* person, and

4. He replaces the Hegelian concepts of spirit and *Gestalt* with two 'levels': individual and social-historical, wrongly identified with subjective and objective spirit.

To justify these charges, I should first clarify why I see the concept of 'intersubjectivity' as problematic. Its current usage in social philosophy is new. Earlier in the twentieth century, Pragmatists such as Mead and Dewey, and epistemologists such as Karl Popper, used 'intersubjective' to refer to meaning whose validity falls short of 'objective' (which could be taken to imply a standpoint beyond human society), but is nonetheless shared between all relevant 'subjects': neither objective nor simply subjective, but intersubjective. For Williams and other proponents of recognition theory, 'intersubjective' refers to what is constructed by interactions between individuals *alone*. That is, its meaning is *narrowly* pragmatic and directed specifically against notions for which meaning entails some third, mediating element, whether 'metaphysical' entities such as spirit, matter or nature, or entities like language, means of production or social context which are simply seen either as derivative or as epiphenomena. The intentions are wise, but the direction taken is misguided.

Implicit in the notion of 'intersubjectivity' is that a 'subject' is something which is capable of touching or immediately interacting with another subject, essentially without the mediation of material elements such as the body, the sense media, artefacts or processes such as spoken words, gesture, force and so on, not to mention literature, the mass media, legislation and so on. Such a conception is intelligible only if these material elements and processes are not given an essential role in the relation, but either discounted as trivial and relegated to the instrumental status of background, natural resources, or *subsumed into* the respective subjects. Thus 'intersubjectivity' presupposes a unitary, unproblematic concept of the subject as an individual person (organism). Recognition that the individual uses the resources of culture and is influenced by other individuals does nothing to impinge on the fact that such a conception is fundamentally individualist. There has never been a methodological individualist who denied that individuals 'influence' one another and are 'influenced' by their cultural environment. To regard the mass media, societal institutions, forces of production, and so on as external to the subject, simply as an environment or resources for the individual is the *normal, common sense* view of the subject today. It is the same if we subsume within the notion of the subject, the body hexis, language-use, habits and dispositions which an individual has acquired in society. This falls below even the Kantian conception of the subject which Hegel was criticising. As George Herbert Mead put it (1956, p. 120n): it is like prisoners locked up in cells who contrive to send each other messages. The 'intersubjective' notion of social action is methodological individualism: the normal, common sense view of postmodern society.

'Intersubjectivity', so understood, is quite incompatible with Williams' claim for it as a counter to structuralism, as "decentering subjectivity" or as a "a third alternative to abstract atomic individualism and collectivist communitarianism." The aim is worthy, but it cannot be reached by intersubjectivity so conceived.

Although Hegel says that "Spirit is the nature of human beings *en masse*," (Hegel 1821: §264) a large number of individuals do not make "human beings *en masse*" or any kind of Spirit. Without the use of a *shared material culture* given meaning in shared forms collaborative activity, a large number of human individuals would be pandemonium, a nightmare worse than "Lord of the Flies." It is in constructing the mediating elements in

collaboration or conflict with other subjects, that the subject is “dissolved,” loses its “self-identity,” and the “middle term,” which is self-consciousness, “breaks itself up into the extremes” (to use Hegel’s terms from the master-servant dialectic). Williams, on the other hand, makes no mention at all of material culture and seems to regard established institutions and social practices as more or less irrelevant to ‘intersubjectivity’.

When Williams (1997, p. 86-7) comes to the question of how it is that Hegel does not think that every individual has to engage in a ‘life and death struggle for recognition’ when they leave the family to become a person in their own right, he introduces a conception of two ‘levels’. Instead of a ‘formation of consciousness’, he suggests a ‘collective social-cultural world-historical level’ (‘the level of objective spirit, that is, a people’) and an individual level (‘subjective spirit’). The life and death struggle for recognition is apparently only necessary at the ‘world-historical level’, but not necessary at the individual level. We can all understand this, because the conception of two levels of the world, we individuals operating on one level, while history is played out on another level, is the common sense consciousness of the postmodern world, but what has been gained by an appropriation of Hegel if we introduce these two ‘levels’ in lieu of Hegel’s concepts of Spirit and *Gestalt*?

And if ‘the struggle for recognition’ is not applicable to individuals, what *is* the relation between recognition and intersubjectivity? If the struggle for recognition is operative only at the ‘collective social-cultural world-historical level’, how are the collective bodies that engage in these struggles *constituted* if not by means of a ‘struggle for recognition’ and what motivates individuals to participate in struggles taking place at the ‘world historical level’ or do these struggle not involve individuals? Or, if it is the ‘struggle’ rather than the ‘recognition’ which is applicable only at the ‘collective social-cultural world-historical level’, it raises the question of how it is that recognition is given to individuals without a struggle on their part. What model of ‘recognition’ do we have for this relation if not the master-servant dialectic, for which the ‘life and death struggle’ is essential. On what basis do individuals receive recognition? In what way is the master-servant dialectic relevant to modern society which lacks both slaves and masters?

Although the 1805-6 manuscripts gave an opening for this kind of confusion, none of these questions are problems for the mature Hegel, and a successful pragmatic appropriation of Hegel cannot have a problem with them either. There is good grounds for seeking a pragmatic interpretation of Hegel, but it remains to be proved that ‘recognition’ and ‘intersubjectivity’ are sufficient for such a task.

Williams claims that Hegel abandoned the independent role he had given labour in the construction of subjectivity in his early writings, such as “System of Ethical Life,” in favour of intersubjective interaction. It seems that along with labour, material culture is also excluded from the domain of subjectivity. But both these moves are unwarranted.

It is undeniable that the prominent role that the labour process had in Hegel’s pre-1807 works was abandoned in the later works. But we do not have to celebrate it. Hegel never knew a social movement like the trade union movement or the modern women’s movement, and like almost all social reformers of his time he believed that social change would come through the agency of community leaders, whether military, intellectual, religious or whatever, and never entertained the possibility that the ‘rabble’ could gain an independent self-consciousness, let alone become an historically progressive agency.

Further, it seems that advocates of intersubjectivity throw out the baby with the bathwater. Communication and therefore self-consciousness, is possible only thanks to material culture; if the production and use of material culture is removed from the picture, then communication is reduced to 'intersubjectivity' and the whole philosophical problematic, which led up to Kant's conception of the transcendental subject and ultimately Hegel's philosophy of consciousness, is obliterated. The point is that interaction between subjects entails the use of objects and the use of objects invariably entails interactions between subjects.

The "System of Ethical Life" gives us the clue as to how Hegel is dealing with the ontological status of universals. In the production of material life, whether in the form of means of production, symbolic culture or the raising of children, human beings are constructing universals which have an objective form. Instead of dealing with the kind of dualism which led Kant into an impasse, Hegel dealt with things as in terms of the *logical* moments of Individual, Particular and Universal. Every artefact is an individual, a particular *and* a universal, and it is by means of working with artefacts as objective material things, whether in the labour process or in communicating with others, that we acquire these moments as subjective thought forms.

Thus while Hegel abandoned the labour process as a paradigm of the dialectic he did not abandon concern with the production and use of material culture, but transformed it into a logical figure. Thus, when the advocates of 'intersubjectivity' erase the use of artefacts from communicative action, they leave out Spirit itself. The triplicity of Individual-Universal-Particular is thereby reduced to dualisms of Ego-Other, Signifier-Signified and so on.

Universals like legal right, property, culture, ethics, and so on are products of the collaborative activity of individual human beings. But individual human beings only interact and conflict with one another by means of these universals. Universals are both the product of the activity of individuals in particular forms of activity, and necessary components of that activity, without which they are impossible. It is the materiality of artefacts which is universal; their specific use or meaning is particular to the social context, but their material form is universal.

It would be quite mistaken to believe that universals can be subsumed into particular relations and/or individual actors. Universals exist thanks to the material products which are endowed with meaning by the human actors who use them, but they are nonetheless material, and for that very reason universal.

Williams claims that Hegel transformed subjectivity into intersubjectivity. But 'intersubjectivity' is unintelligible and inconsistent with core elements of Hegel's view of subjectivity. But Williams is driving at an important idea. Hegel has indeed decentred, transformed and expanded subjectivity and elevated it into a concept which embraces the activity of individuals collaborating through shared use of material culture, with agency and identity which transcend the personal. However, the inclusion of material culture in this definition is non-trivial.

Self-evidently, it is only living human beings who have moral responsibility for their action, have knowledge and beliefs, awareness and self-consciousness; the artefacts which people produce and use in their activity are not conscious in any sense at all. But nor can the psychic aspects of culture be detached from their material forms. Ideas

doubtless exist in some fleeting way in the psyche of individual human beings, as an image exists in some sense on the surface of a mirror, but is categorically distinct from its material basis just as it is inseparable from it. Material culture plays a crucial role in the coordination of the activities of indefinitely large numbers of individuals in a common project over very long periods of time. Take for example the concept of a nation, e.g., "Australia," or the Christian concept of "God" or the idea of "socialism." These universals cannot possibly exist other than through the books, speeches, buildings, clothing, land, body-forms, images, etc., etc., in which they are objectified, not to mention the land mass itself. And isn't it self-evident that millions of people over a period of centuries have exercised a common identity, engaged in common projects, exerted common agency in the world, had moral responsibility for events, in and through those concrete universals? Hegel's notion of the Subject encompasses this real expansion of the notion of subjectivity. But the key text for this concept of subjectivity is not the master-servant dialectic, or even the *Philosophy of Right*, but the section on Subjectivity in the *Science of Logic*.

Hegel's ideas, including his concept of the Subject, cannot be appropriated without coming to terms with 'Spirit'. The idea of a pragmatic rather than metaphysical or rationalistic rendering of Spirit seems to be a promising route to a 'non-metaphysical Hegel'. Spirit *is* amenable to a pragmatic interpretation, but such an interpretation is possible only if the use of material culture in mediating human activity is understood as central to human life.

It is interesting that George Herbert Mead, who, without mentioning Hegel, offered a pragmatic interpretation of Hegel in the 1930s, avoided the pitfalls which recent interpretations have fallen into. Mead himself however, has suffered exactly the same fate as Hegel, with recent interpretations of Mead reading him in the spirit of 'intersubjectivity'.

Finally, a few words on the concept of 'recognition'. There is no doubt that the concept has functioned well to express a number of problems related to exclusion or discounting of subjects, from national liberation movements through to the cultural recognition movements of the late 20th century. Some researchers today seek to extend the notion of 'recognition' to provide a vehicle for a wider range of ethical problems. I think this direction is mistaken. Hegel himself abandoned the notion for all but the restricted place it finally occupied in the *Encyclopaedia*, because it was ill-fitted for those wider tasks.

In a sense, 'recognition' is an eminently *un*-Hegelian notion because it presupposes the absence of effective mediating institutions and artefacts. It became Hegelian by the way Hegel demonstrated that *even here*, where no mediation seemingly existed, mediating elements could be found through a system of needs and labour. But it is this aspect of 'recognition' which is most often ignored by modern interpreters, such as Williams.

Recognition proved useful because it shed light on emergent subjectivity, but it is *subjectivity* which ought to be the focus of attention, not just one moment of its development. The widespread feeling that structuralism 'went too far' and that some third way is needed between individualism and structuralism is correct in my view. But it is Hegel's conception of the Subject which offers the way forward here, not 'intersubjectivity' which despite claims made for it, solidifies the individualist notion of the subject and misses the insights offered by structuralism.

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