

**Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 103, \$ 29.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780691148519**

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Chapter Four of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (PhG) is notably one of the most important texts of Hegel, and it is one of the most influential in his *Wirkungsgeschichte* as well. In recent years – following to the new philosophical attention raised on Hegel especially by the so called “normative turn” – this chapter has come again to the fore. Interpreters turned to it guided by a set of fundamental questions concerning in particular the status and origins of normative authority.

On the one hand, this chapter has partly become a battlefield for those who look at Hegel in order to formulate their competing account on norms – notably “socialists” (Brandt 2007, 2009) versus “second naturalists” (McDowell 2009a, 2009b) – each trying to enroll Hegel into their party. On the other hand, in more Hegelian terms, the question “Where do the norms come from and why?” ranges over a fundamental issue on the nature of spirit, namely: “How is *Geist* (as the peculiar human normative domain both for our conceptual and practical activity) to be conceived?”

Robert Pippin is both a prominent Hegel-scholar and an influential voice in the debate (Pippin, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). Already in his path-breaking book of 1989 he put this part of PhG, which Hegel himself calls a “turning point”, at the center of his interpretation of Hegel. Now, in a brief book stemming from the *Spinoza Lectures* he gave in Amsterdam in 2009, he explains why he still considers the chapter not only as the “turning point” of PhG, but as “the most important chapter in all of Hegel” (p.vii) and even as a “much broader turning point in the modern Western philosophical tradition” (p.4). In doing so, he displays some of the crucial Hegelian views he developed over the past two decades on many topics: the practical dimension of spirit, the achievement-character of *Geist*, recognition, how to lead one’s life, how to understand norms, self-legislation and modernity etc.

The book has two main chapters, with a brief introduction and some concluding remarks. It preserves the lively and high legible form of a lecture. Pippin focuses on the first part of Chapter 4 of PhG (almost on §§166-175), shedding light on two well-known statements made by Hegel.

- 1) "Self-consciousness is desire itself"
- 2) "Self-consciousness finds its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness"

The explanation of each sentence covers respectively the first and second chapter. In contextualizing those two claims, Pippin also carries on his critical engagement with concurrent interpretations of the text, given in particular by J. McDowell (Ch. I, pp.39-51) and R. Brandom (Ch. II, pp.68-79) – but also A. Honneth, P. Stekeler-Weithofer and others. I will first summarize what seems to me Pippin's main line of argumentation, then I will briefly sketch his criticism to McDowell and Brandom, finally I will do a brief consideration.

i) Pippin sets the context for his reading in the introduction, presenting the distinctive trait of his interpretation of Hegel over those years: the legacy of Kantianism. Hegel, he argues, answers in a highly different and revolutionary philosophical way to basic Kantian questions. In particular, Hegel shares with Kant the fundamental claim that all consciousness of an object involve an "inherent reflexivity", a basic self-relation (pp.8, 52). This reflexivity has taken during the last decade an explicit normative flavor, and, for Pippin also, it has to be understood as an inherent "responsiveness to normative proprieties" (p.8). "In all my conscious attentiveness to the world there is some kind of *self-relating going on*, an *implicit attention to the normative dimensions of all experience* [my emphasis], an openness we might say everywhere and always to whether I am getting it right" (p.59).

How to attain such self-relation and keep it "held open"? According to Pippin the principal aim of Hegel's argument all along the first four chapters of PhG is to answer this question, giving account for this constitutive feature of all experience. The idea of a continuity in Hegel's argument is another Pippinian *Leitmotiv*. It is a pillar of his general interpretative framework in the book (p.15), and it marks the first differentiation against those who "isolate" the chapter (Honneth), thinking it involves a sudden radical thematic shift (Kojève).

ii) After saying that in the first three chapters Hegel shows "the necessary role of self-consciousness in consciousness"(p.11) – *i.e.* the "need to understand some sort of normative autonomy" (p.32), or normative responsiveness (pp.26,58) – Pippin moves rapidly to the question: How does one come to "open his eyes" on the normative? How do we become normative beings? Hegel starts in the fourth chapter of his PhG to show developmentally how this status is to be achieved,

giving to the problem a radical “practical turn” (pp.20,28). The first two main steps in his argument are those respectively expressed by the sentences (1) and (2).

iii) First, “in a way that is typical of his procedure, he tries to begin with the most theoretically thin or simple form of the required self-relation” (p.19, and 34). This most immediate, minimal form of self-relatedness in relation to the world is *desire*. According to Pippin, Hegel’s talk about desire makes up the first great transfiguration of the Kantian claim on apperception (p.36): in accounting for the genesis of a normative reflexivity (*i.e* normative responsiveness), the self-relation is initially conceived as a practical way of coping with the world. The first Hegelian claim finds its context here: “Hegel’s claim is that consciousness is desire, not merely that it is accompanied by desire” (p.36).

iv) Nonetheless this “first example of the desideratum, a self-relation in relation to objects” (p.35) does not grant us what we are looking for. The self is at this stage still absorbed in life, subject to desires, and not yet reason-responsive. To become a fully normative being one has to perform the fundamental jump, from being “subject *to* desire” to being “subject *of* desire”. This is for Pippin a crucial conceptual difference to grasp in order to fully appreciate Hegel’s argument (pp.32, 36, 66, 73, 80): being subject *to* desires as “biological” *impulses*, on the one hand, is different from being a taker of a desire as *reason to act*, on the other. In the first case the subject follows blindly the imperatives of life, leaving in an “endless circle of being subject to one’s desire and satisfying them” (37,52); in the second case he is reflectively aware of a normative claim.

vi) The framework Hegel works out moving to §175 is one of the first kind: a self still plunged in life, subjected *to* desires (there is no space to do justice to all details of Pippin’s reading on this point). But the situation must evolve with the appearance of another “like-minded being” (p.38), “another self-ascribing subject” (p.72), and the subsequent conflict it brings about. For the struggle, Pippin says, “forces on a subject a question of commitment” (p.73). But how does Hegel articulate this step?

vi) I here see the new and peculiar element of Pippin’s interpretation: the notion of “risk of life”, which plays a crucial role in the transition from the natural to the normative.

“Hegel asks us to imagine how an inescapable conflict with others attempting to satisfy their desires forces on one the nature of one’s attachment to life. It is in response to such conflict that

the relation *can now count as a commitment* [my emphasis], given that one surrendered or sacrificed the original commitment for the sake of life. *Life has become a value*, not a species imperative.” (p.79, and 39)

Thus for Pippin life is not only a metaphor or an allegory, but it is a substantial element in the Hegelian argument. It is precisely the risk of life that forces on the challenger some kind of normative awareness. In this way (2) is also vindicated: one’s becoming responsive to normative claims is a *social achievement*, originating from risking one’s life in the struggle. This is the sense of the second statement “Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”

vii) Here Pippin’s main concern is fulfilled. (I have no space to add more details to this sketchy idea of the argument). Although this is only the first part of the Hegelian narrative which tells us how the normative space for our thinking and acting, originated, we can already see a crucial point in Pippin’s account of Hegel’s conception of spirit. “The self-relation in relation to objects and others must be achieved, is a practical phenomenon inseparable from a relation with and initially an unavoidable struggle with, others. Genuinely human mindedness, the soul, spirit, the variety of designations for the distinctly human, are all going to be read through the prism of this idea that such a distinction is fundamentally a result” (p.86).

At this stage, however, recognition has still a defective form, because it is not mutual. Hegel has still to go a long way before showing how genuine recognition and normativity has to be attained: history has come in play and several forms of recognition are to be “tested” during his developmental procedure (p.90). But this is another story and it is told by Pippin in other volumes of his. In this book we find so to speak the *Vorgeschichte* and *seminal genesis* of the normative. To push the point in Sellarsian terms, we face the much richer Hegelian articulation of a well-known Sellarsian claim: “The transition from pre-conceptual patterns of behaviour to conceptual thinking was a holistic one, a jump to a level of awareness which is irreducibly new, a jump which was the coming into being of man” (Sellars 1991, p.6).

With respect to concurrent interpretations: in stressing the link between Chapter Four and the first three chapters of PhG, Pippin agrees with McDowell in seeing Hegel preserving a role for experience and its sensible features in his picture, but he denies the intra-psychical reading offered by McDowell (and Stekeler-Weithofer): there is more than one self on stage at this

point of the narrative. In this respect Pippin accepts Brandom's social reading, but again on the basis of the continuity-thesis between Chapter 4 and the precedent chapters he is not disposed to agree with the dichotomy of his two-ply account. More importantly, as I said, Pippin's interpretation gives to the "risk of life" a substantial role, which is absent in both readings made by his Pittsburgher colleagues.

In this respect, the claim concerning the *internal necessity* of the transition from preserving "life" (as impulse) to becoming aware of "life" (as reason) leaves the reader in search for some further clarification. First, consider the question "why could one not indefinitely continue to treat the 'other' as simply an object (say, a predator)?" Sometimes it seems that it is because the "other" is a like-minded being (p.38). But it appears as a presupposition on Hegel's part to postulate at this stage some sort of (even latent, potential or dispositional) like-mindedness in the "other", which is exactly what has to be produced. This view seems hard to reconcile with Pippin's idea of a radical "bootstrapping" procedure, which should in principle lack any such presupposition. For the same reason – even though Hegel's narrative is not to be understood as matter-of-historical-fact (p.34, n.31) – referring to "the simple empirical premise that there are other such subjects around in a finite world" (p.79) cannot be of help. Given the form of a lecture, it is sometimes difficult to sort out the details of Pippin's own answer to this question. Probably the background of Pippin's institutional rationality should be brought into sight in order to clarify the status that recognition has in this context. It would be interesting to see those aspects of the Hegelian exit-strategy from the animal state developed in a more systematic fashion, and accommodated with Pippin's historical and institutional account of Hegelian normativity, which does not come into sight.

In conclusion: in my view, the book is enjoyable and rich on insights. It could serve as an introduction for those who approach the Hegelian text for the first time: in this respect, it provides a useful key to the text as well as an outlook on what is going on in contemporary debates on Hegel. At the same time it is an opportunity for those who know Pippin's theory, to see some of his general points at work in a closer *Auseinandersetzung* with the text and with concurrent interpretations.

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