

Please cite the published version in *Human Studies*, available at Springer via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10746-011-9199-4>

Review: Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Death and Desire in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Princeton University Press, 2011, 103 pp. + index.

Trip Glazer

In the world of Hegel studies, Robert Pippin casts a long shadow. His first book on the philosophical giant, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), defended a daringly revisionary reading of Hegel's overall project, which has since become standard fare. His more recent venture, collected in *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), breathed new life into Hegel's theory of agency by pitting it against contemporary Hobbesian and Kantian reconstructions. Now, Pippin's newest contribution to the literature, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, returns to the subject of self-consciousness and provides a detailed reinterpretation of Hegel's notorious master-slave dialectic. On Pippin's insightful and bold new reading, Hegel's aim in this section is to develop a novel conception of self-consciousness, defined as the practical activity of questioning and confirming the truth of one's own beliefs, which Pippin describes as a normative and social achievement rather than as a two-place observational relation.

Readers at every level of familiarity with Hegel can find something of value in this book. The uninitiated will appreciate Pippin's accessible and reader-friendly prose—the text is adapted from a lecture series, and it retains a conversational style punctuated with frequent sign-posting and summary—as well as its clear articulation of Hegel's general philosophical

project, couched in terms familiar to contemporary philosophical discourse. Students and scholars in disciplines outside of philosophy will benefit from the clear, concise, and philosophically rigorous account of a frequently cited but rarely read text, which is too often commandeered for philosophically negligent purposes. Finally, graduate students and even seasoned experts in the field will find value in the work, too, as it presents an overview and assessment of the interpretive project which began more than 20 years ago and which has endured numerous challenges, clarifications, and revisions in the time since. One passage in the book is dedicated to articulating what is at stake in Pippin's disagreement with John McDowell's heterodox interpretation of the master-slave dialectic. Another spells out Pippin's divergence from more conventional approaches to this section, and a third discusses alternative readings of the *Phenomenology's* transition from chapters I-III on "Consciousness" to chapter IV on "Self-Consciousness."

Given its dramatic and ambitious title, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, the book is surprisingly short. Filling altogether around 100 pages, it is composed of two chapters, which are preceded by a brief introduction and followed by an equally brief conclusion. The "Introductory Remarks" serve three explicit purposes: to present, in broad overview, Hegel's philosophical project in the *Phenomenology*, to specify the sections of the text that will be explicated, and to provide motivation for thinking that these sections deserve the reader's patient attention. Although these remarks are brief, they are important for situating the book within the literature on Hegel and within philosophy more generally, and thus repeating them will hopefully aid the reader in deciding if she or he would benefit from reading this book.

Pippin sums up the *Phenomenology's* task in a single sentence: it is "the attempt to understand the basic competencies involved in distinctly human sentience, sapience, and agency, and, especially and above all in Hegel's project, the complex inter-relations among all such competencies" (p. 1). In order to carry out such an impressive task, Pippin contends that Hegel develops a unique methodology, "phenomenology," which involves

imagining possible models of experience...and then demonstrating by a series of essentially *reductio ad absurdum* arguments that such an imagined experience, when imagined from the point of view of the experiencer, really could *not* be a possible or coherent

experience, thus requiring some determinate addition or alteration to repair the imagined picture, and so a new possibility to be entertained (pp. 1-2).

Employing this methodology leads Hegel through a series of increasingly complex models of experience, including his famous conception of *Geist*, or “spirit,” which Pippin reads as a form of collective like-mindedness. Unlike its antecedent form of individualistic *Vernunft*, or “reason,” *Geist* models a form of cognition that is essentially embedded within intersubjective social practices, and as such demands that its concepts be studied in their historical development and evolution, rather than merely in quiet abstraction. This “social” reading of *Geist* signals the key departure of Pippin’s approach from the traditional metaphysical reading, according to which *Geist* denotes an absolute metaphysical substance, a “cosmic mind” as Charles Taylor glossed it, which grounds all existence. Although *Hegel on Self-Consciousness* does not explicitly defend this interpretative approach, readers seeking such a defense can consult Pippin’s first book on Hegel to find one.

One of the most important developments in the unfolding of Hegel’s story is of course the infamous master-slave dialectic, which is known for its obscurity as much as for its profound influence on the philosophical tradition. Pippin grabs the bull by its horns, introducing the sections of the text in which he is interested by noting that “there are two points in the progression of topics where puzzlement can easily become complete bafflement” (p. 2). Each point is found in chapter IV, and each is represented by a single quote from Hegel’s text: “self-consciousness is desire itself” and “self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (pp. 2-3). These two quotes provide the titles for chapters one and two of Pippin’s book, respectively, and, as we shall see, they correspond to two central theses developed and defended by Hegel.

Pippin concludes the “Introductory Remarks” by giving two reasons for thinking that these sections are important and worthy of careful study. First, they are where Hegel’s ambitious project really begins to take form. Pippin, like most commenters, takes the master-slave dialectic to pack more punch than any other section in the *Phenomenology*, and he argues that the main trajectory of Hegel’s mature philosophical project is presaged and prepared

in that section. Second, Pippin argues that Hegel is largely responsible for the purported divide between the so-called “Analytic” and “Continental” philosophical traditions, and thus that reading Hegel will help us to understand this rift. He notes that “Continental” philosophers have tended to accept Hegel’s refusal to separate epistemological from metaphysical concerns, as well as his emphasis on the sociality of reason, while “Analytic” philosophers have tended to disagree with Hegel on both counts. Pippin’s gloss unfortunately oversimplifies recent developments in the philosophical tradition, and it further reinforces the alienating myth of an “Analytic”/“Continental” divide. Since Pippin’s work otherwise demonstrates masterfully how so-called “Analytic” and “Continental” approaches can work together in tandem, this motivating comment feels surprisingly out of joint.

Pippin’s Hegel is a post-Kantian Hegel, which is to say that he pursues a “completion” rather than a rejection of Kant’s critical project. The defended narrative therefore begins with a brief discussion of Kant on the apperceptive nature of experience, according to which reason always involves conceptual activity and every thought could in principle be accompanied by the self-conscious “I think.” Hegel inherits from Kant the idea that “all consciousness is inherently, though rarely explicitly, self-conscious” (p. 9), and Pippin maintains that the *Phenomenology* is Hegel’s attempt to work out a conception of self-consciousness that retains Kant’s greatest insights while correcting his greatest errors.

These Kantian preliminaries bring Pippin to his central claim about Hegel, which he then defends over the course of the book:

I think that Hegel’s position is that we misunderstand all dimensions of self-consciousness, from apperception in consciousness itself, to simple, explicit reflection about myself, to practical self-knowledge of my own so-called identity, by considering any form of it as in any way observational or inferential or immediate or any sort of two-place relation...Hegel, I want to say, treats self-consciousness as (i) a practical *achievement* of a sort... And (ii) Hegel sees such an attempt and achievement as necessarily involving a relation to other people, as inherently social (pp. 15, 19).

As I noted above, (i) will be somehow explained by Hegel's assertion that "self-consciousness is desire itself," and (ii) by the assertion that "self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness."

Before jumping into the nitty-gritty of defending this claim, however, Pippin pauses to reflect on previous approaches to interpreting the text. One reason why chapter IV (entitled "Self-Consciousness") presents such a challenge is because it can be difficult to see how it follows from the topics discussed in chapters I-III (gathered under the heading of "Consciousness"). In those earlier chapters, Hegel deals with narrowly defined and seemingly complex cognitive capacities, such as perception and the understanding. Suddenly, he then reverts in chapter IV to a broader and seemingly more basic conative capacity, namely desire and its relation to sustaining life. Grappling with this transition has demarcated various approaches in the literature. Some have chosen simply to ignore chapters I-III. Others have argued that the *Phenomenology* changes projects in chapter IV, since, in his rush to publish the manuscript, Hegel was unable to reconcile two (or more) different and perhaps incompatible philosophical projects. Finally, a third approach emphasizes continuity between chapters. John McDowell has taken up this approach by arguing that chapter IV uses the metaphor of desire to address the question of "how to understand the right 'equipose' between independence and dependence in the relations between subjects and objects" (p. 12). Since chapters I-III demonstrate the inadequacy of conceiving subjects and objects as wholly dependent or wholly independent, chapter IV follows naturally from them. Like McDowell, Pippin argues for continuity between chapters, but, unlike McDowell, he maintains that desire must be read literally rather than figuratively:

I want to argue that when Hegel says that self-consciousness *is* 'desire überhaupt' he means that to be relevant to the question of the apperceptive nature of consciousness itself; and that *thereby* he provides the basis for the claim that self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness (p. 14).

Let's return to the nitty-gritty. To support his claim that Hegel sees self-consciousness as a kind of practical achievement, Pippin points our attention to paragraph 167 of the *Phenomenology*, in which Hegel writes:

“But this opposition between its [self-consciousness’s] appearance and its truth has only the truth for its essence, namely, the unity of self-consciousness with itself. This unity must become essential to self-consciousness which is to say, self-consciousness is *desire* itself” (p. 20). Pippin contends that the “practical turn” in Hegel’s conception of self-consciousness occurs precisely when Hegel writes that “this unity must *become essential* to self-consciousness” (my emphasis). The unity is something that self-consciousness must secure, rather than being something naturally or innately given, and it is something that self-consciousness could potentially fail to obtain. What self-consciousness strives to secure, Pippin maintains, is a certain “position toward what it thinks,” namely a capacity to question and confirm its beliefs, to justify its claims, and to achieve knowledge in the face of doubt (p. 20). Thus, self-consciousness is for Hegel not simply a two-place observational relation—consciousness of one’s own consciousness, as it is usually understood—but rather the ability to treat one’s conscious states as defeasible. A self-conscious being is one uniquely capable of, among other things, withholding assent to its conscious experience. As Pippin puts it later in the book,

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, an openness we might say everywhere and always to whether I am getting it right, an openness that must be “held open” (p. 59).

This interpretation seems to read a great deal into a single sentence, but Pippin points back to paragraph 80 from the *Phenomenology*’s introduction, in which Hegel states that self-consciousness always “goes beyond itself,” which Pippin reads to mean that the givens of conscious experience can be critiqued, revised, and even abandoned as they are placed within a broader normative system.

So how do we get from mere desire to a sophisticated sensitivity to normative propriety and objectivity? Pippin contends that Hegel’s methodology in this section begins with the simplest type of practical self-relation, i.e. sustaining one’s life, and then considers what would need to be added to get the type of self-relation that is distinctly human. Hegel argues

that we must consider a desire that cannot only be frustrated or denied, but one that can be challenged or refused as well. To be a creature sensitive to norms, one must be responsible to another rational subject, and not just responsive to an indifferent world. “Self-consciousness must find its satisfaction in another self-consciousness,” as Hegel puts it. This brings us to the topic of chapter two.

Chapter two defends Pippin’s claim that normatively sensitive human mindedness is for Hegel essentially social, “that our answerability to the world is inextricably bound with, even dependent for its possibility on, our answerability to each other” (p. 61). In short, Pippin argues that when we act from reasons rather than desires, we undertake the responsibility of justifying our actions against challenges, and that what counts as a satisfying justification for me must count as a satisfying justification for others as well. The guiding thought here seems to be that reasons authoritative only for me are not genuinely normative, and would remain functionally equivalent to mere desires. Genuine normativity—the ability to act from reasons—therefore “unavoidably involves an attitude toward another” (p. 74). The capacity to respond to challenges and to defend one’s commitments is precisely the practical achievement that Hegel terms “self-consciousness.”

Pippin’s defense of this crucial point in chapter two is quick, and the flow of the argument sometimes gets tangled in clarifications of subsidiary points. One section discusses why recognition cannot be coerced, and another responds to Robert Brandom’s figurative reading of the struggle to the death. Although the argument feels rushed at times and remains sketchy, the basic claim and its philosophical significance are far from lost. Chapter two flows directly into the “Concluding Remarks,” where Pippin explains that the rest of the *Phenomenology* is dedicated to articulating the conditions under which a genuine mutual recognition between subjects can be achieved.

Without a doubt, Pippin’s work is an important contribution to the secondary literature on Hegel, and ought to be read by anyone working in or around the field. There is a great deal in this book that I find persuasive and illuminating, but, nevertheless, I would like to conclude this review with two constructive criticisms. First, although Pippin’s strategy of reading an early section in light of where the *Phenomenology* is going is certainly

helpful, and perhaps more enlightening philosophically, the cost of the approach is that it packs too much into that section. Pippin leads us to believe that, by the second half of chapter IV, Hegel has already developed a robust conception of nature-independent normativity, sustained by the mutual recognition of authority and responsibility between subjects, which he then uses to explain the most important aspects of human mindedness. But a closer look at the text suggests that Hegel does not take himself to have achieved quite this much yet. Indeed, much of the rest of the *Phenomenology* seems concerned with getting the relationship between the natural and the normative right. To borrow one of his own metaphors, Hegel refuses to view the category of the normative as a “minted coin that can be given and pocketed ready-made” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* [Oxford University Press, 1977], §39); rather, it is not until the last pages of the book that he takes himself to have articulated an adequate model of normativity, whose conceptual independence from the natural can be sustained. As far as I can tell, all that Hegel takes himself to have achieved at the end of the master-slave dialectic is the conclusion that the slave understands its activity to have achieved *some kind* of freedom from the law-like determinacy of the natural order. The discussions of Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness which follow are Hegel’s first and most basic proposals for a positive account of that freedom. The ultimately satisfactory account of freedom in terms of nature-independent normativity, which is central to Pippin’s interpretation, remains in chapter IV a speck on the horizon. Thus, while I find Pippin’s reading of chapter IV to be a persuasive interpretation of the *Phenomenology*’s project *in general*, I am less persuaded by it as an interpretation of that particular chapter, whose conclusions should be somewhat more modest.

Second, while Pippin gives the cognitive and conative aspects of human mindedness their due, there is noticeably no discussion of the affective aspect. Pippin mentions Hegel’s exploration of sentience, sapience, and agency with great frequency, but what of emotion and feeling? Although it is true that Hegel has less to say about feeling than about thinking, he still has a great deal to say about it. Indeed, one of the most famous lines in the master-slave dialectic prominently features a core emotion: “the fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §195). Pippin even quotes Hegel here (p. 94), but he makes nothing special of the

invocation of emotion. We should be somewhat suspicious of this omission, however, especially since Hegel's mature work emphasizes the importance of emotion more explicitly, as when he writes in the *Encyclopaedia* that "The difficulty for the logical intellect consists in throwing off the separation it has arbitrarily imposed between the several faculties of feeling and thinking mind, and coming to see that in the human being there is only *one* reason, in feeling, volition, and thought" (*Philosophy of Mind* [Oxford University Press, 1971], §471). An account of the role of emotion in Hegel's theory would yield interesting and informative philosophical results, and would serve to supplement Pippin's otherwise comprehensive interpretation. As I mentioned above, these two points are intended as constructive, and should motivate readers to expand upon Pippin's interpretation, rather than to reject it.

With its admirable clarity and rigor, Pippin's short monograph brings Hegel's elusive philosophy more clearly into view, and it paves the way for future research in a remote but fertile corner of philosophy. I would not hesitate to recommend this book to anyone working in or around the vicinity of Hegel, whether in philosophy or in related fields.

References

- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. New York: OUP.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1971). *Philosophy of Mind. Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. New York: OUP.
- Pippin, R. (1989). *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pippin, R. (2008). *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1975). *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.