

The Ethics of the Negative: Overcoming the Frustrations of Thinking Dialectically in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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The scholarship on Hegel in educational philosophy is concentrated heavily in three broad areas. First, writers have emphasized a basic understanding of dialectical thinking and its application to various educational problematics. Second, there has been a great deal of interest in reading Hegel's phenomenology as a representation of developmental psychology. And third, Hegel has been referenced in relation to individual educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire. In this essay, I wish to take a closer look at a very important dimension of Hegel's philosophy that has remained largely unexplored within the context of education: the ethic of "the strenuous effort of the Notion." One of the most surprising and perhaps emotionally stimulating aspects of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is his honest, if not brutally honest, depiction of intellectual labor as a strenuous task that demands an ethical commitment to thinking as such. Here I will argue that this ethical practice involves overcoming self-righteousness, stubbornness, and vanity. As long as educational philosophy does not address the ethics of the negative then any discussion of dialectical thinking (detached from the affective component of thinking) and developmental psychology (interested in necessary stages without reference to the contingent toil of intellectual labor) are simply abstractions not equipped to address the hurdles and pitfalls on the path towards self-determining learning. Such an analysis will therefore further support and refine Nigel Tubes's emphasis on the centrality of the *experience* of dialectical thinking in Hegel's phenomenology.¹ After a brief review of Hegelian scholarship in educational philosophy, I will outline Hegel's ethics of learning with specific reference to the Preface and Introduction of *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

REVIEW OF HEGEL IN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

As stated above, the use of Hegel in educational philosophy roughly falls into three camps. In the first case, Rhonda Hammer and Peter McLaren have attempted to map the various formulations of dialectical thinking in philosophy in order to reframe these interpretations within a "critical communicational approach" to education.² Looking at the works of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, and Engles, Hammer and McLaren emphasize the communicational dimension of their dialectical practices — a dimension most important for educators. This communicative approach focuses on both the relations between particulars within an internally contradictory unity and the construction of meaning within specific historical contexts. Applying their model to a variety of educational issues, Hammer and McLaren state,

Educators can employ the dialectic in a number of ways: in recognizing the mutually constitutive nature of theory and practice; in helping students to analyze the hierarchical positioning of individuals within the social order on the basis of race, class, and gender; and in acknowledging the asymmetrical ways in which power operates in the larger society to

reproduce the interests of the dominant culture organized as an arena of conflicting discourses and material relations and marred by competitiveness and corporate greed.³

While providing an interesting overview of the history of dialectics in philosophy and importantly emphasizing the power of dialectics in tackling major educational problems, Hammer and McLaren rely mostly on secondary literature and as such are unable to engage Hegel's important reflections on the *toil* of dialectical thinking. As we shall see below, dialectical thinking is not a simple procedure abstracted from the actual process of dialectical unfolding; it is also a strenuous labor in relation to the concept.

Others such as A.W. Vincent and Michael George attempt to reconstruct a Hegelian theory of education from Hegel's own writings, in particular *Philosophy of Right*.⁴ Their guiding questions are: "What is the metaphysical structure and end of education as understood by Hegel, and the integrally related question, what for Hegel are the specific methods and stages of the educational process?"⁵ Merging Hegel's theory of the state with his developmental psychology, the authors argue that Hegel's theory of education is defined in three phases. Beginning with the family, the subject engages in intuitive education. The family setting stimulates feelings of love, which work towards a further goal of moral education. Also, the family helps the child cultivate a sense of independence. Formal schooling, on the other hand, replaces the immediacy of independent desire with the universal law of the state. Here the child is confronted with abstract rules, which he or she must obey. As such, formal schooling guides the child towards synthesis with the spirit of society. The third stage of education and psychological development corresponds to the entrance into civil society. Participation here is education for citizenship, which is the final goal of education as such. Following self-interests in the sphere of civil society and market exchange leads to action as the actualization of a self-determining formal freedom. In acting, the individual as citizen comes to realize his/her interdependence with community. The educated subject as citizen thus comes to embody the rationality of the universal (for example, laws and customs) in his/her character. Here the individual rational mind corresponds with Spirit and the educated subject becomes the philosopher. While Vincent and George gesture towards a theory of such development as a form of intellectual labor, they fail to comment on the particular *nature* of this labor. Thus, the authors present a view of psychological and moral development that misses the very real sweat that must go into dialectical thinking in order to reach a harmonious recognition between society and the individual. The consequence of this move is that individual development appears to be *guaranteed* by Spirit itself, which in Hegel's description of education is not always the case.

Finally, theorists such as Carlos Torres have focused more explicitly on the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational theorist, and his appropriation and critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic.⁶ Torres demonstrates the centrality of Hegel's dialectical conception of educational development for Freire and for the long tradition of critical pedagogy. In particular, Torres argues that Hegel was the source for Freire's important insight into education as a situation of oppression and

a struggle for freedom through consciousness-raising. Mediated by Freire, Torres's analysis of Hegel comes closest to recognizing the struggle of thinking necessary to achieve a truly dialectical perspective. Yet, Torres does not fully grasp how Freire's own analysis of the labor of thinking in relation to social oppression is part of a much more extensive analysis of education and the ethics of "the strenuous effort of the Notion," which is guiding the whole of Hegel's phenomenological project.

THE HARD LABOR OF THE NOTION

In this section, I would like to look briefly at several passages from the introduction and preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to examine their contributions to our understanding of what it means to actually engage in the act of dialectical thinking. For Hegel, dialectics is not a simple procedure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Rather, it is itself a *struggle* that contains many affective obstacles that prevent the movement of thought from self-certainty (an immediate and intuitive relation to the environment) towards self-determination (as a mediated and rational reconstruction of this relationship via concepts). It is this path that is most important for educators to understand, and yet is — as my brief literature review suggests — the least commented upon. As such, we must come to understand, not simply Hegelian dialectics, but also how to properly approach dialectical thinking as a form of intellectual labor. Ultimately, an analysis of the rigors of thinking will, in my reading, generate the ethics of the student.

In the introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states that the goal of the following phenomenology will be the exposition of "how knowledge makes its appearance," culminating in full knowledge of the self as a process of development through negation.⁷ Because the project of self-understanding is one of self-supersession or overcoming, it is also a project full of "doubt" that all too easily transforms into "despair" (*PS*, 49). But this path is not simply negative, for through negation the self returns to itself as more fully determined. Thus, the despair of the project is also positive in that it represents the "history of the *education* of consciousness" (*PS*, 50).

The despair of the naïve consciousness as it educates itself throughout the narrative of the text is also the despair of the *reader* whose own consciousness sees its developmental path retrospectively through the mediation of Hegel's phenomenology. While Hegel maintains throughout an alliance with the reader (his famous use of *for us* to address the philosophical audience), the feeling of hopelessness attributed to the naïve consciousness is itself representative of our own process of thinking through the various contradictions of Hegel's phenomenology. Anyone familiar with reading Hegel's work can attest to this feeling of despair as it is transferred from naïve consciousness to the consciousness of the particular reader. Stated simply, the phenomenological unfolding that Hegel illustrates is the reader's own process of unfolding reflected back through the narrative. As such, the reader is readied to see him or herself in the text as a mediation point between the naïve consciousness fully submerged in the process of development and Hegel who stands at the end of this process, presenting us with a summary of its stages. The reader in this sense identifies with the despair of the consciousness that must negate itself to

return to itself more fully developed, but also with the certainty that such negation is itself a positive experience of education.

The position of the reader demands a certain ethical attitude that does not retreat from the despair of the submerged and tormented consciousness in the text or embrace the premature confidence of Absolute Knowledge. This is the precise location of the reader *as a student* of his or her own experience of being a developing consciousness. It is through the subjective position of the student that consciousness, reflecting on its own development, also moves Spirit forward. In other words, Spirit is revived when consciousness appropriates it, relives it, and sees itself in the once alien movement of Spirit's historical becoming. As Hegel writes, "Regarded from the side of universal Spirit as substance, this [the education of the individual consciousness] is nothing but its own acquisition of self-consciousness, the bringing-about of its own becoming and reflection into itself" (*PS*, 17). In other words, the student's labor to tarry with the negative of dialectical movement animates Spirit to move forward. The universal Spirit is revived or surcharged via a process of individual education. Thus, the unique ethical position of the reader as a student is to persevere through the despair of negation with the assurance that such despair is a necessary step in the further enhancement of Spirit as a universal substance. Learning is, in this sense, not simply reiteration, but an iteration that produces something new; education of the self is also education of Spirit.

Here we must look more closely at this despair. Hegel states that, to achieve the goal whereby subject and object are reconciled, the path must be necessary, unhalting, and without satisfaction (*PS*, 51). Driven by the lure of Truth, consciousness must undergo an "uprooting" that "entails its death." Yet, because consciousness supersedes its own negation, it "suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction" (*PS*, 51). To think this process of self-alienation through negation, Hegel argues that consciousness must be courageous so as not to back down from the challenge ahead. "When consciousness feels this violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth, and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing" (*PS*, 51). Consciousness must remain vigilant and resist retreating into "unthinking inertia" or "sentimentality" wherein everything remains "good in its kind" (*PS*, 52). Such sentimentality is nothing more than pure relativism and thus denies reason the ability to mediate between claims. Furthermore, consciousness must at all costs resist the vanity of feeling superior to others. "This conceit which understands how to belittle every truth, in order to turn back into itself and gloat over its own understanding, which knows how to dissolve every thought and always find the same barren Ego instead of any content — this is a satisfaction which we must leave to itself for it flees from the universal, and seeks only to be for itself" (*PS*, 52).

In other words, the student must not merely give up, remaining in a state of unthinkingness. Nor should the student dip into sentimentality whereby all perspectives are equally valid, including his or her own immediate opinions (a particularly valuable observation considering the rise of postmodern relativism). Finally, the student should avoid the greatest trap of all: vanity at being the cleverest. In short, the violence of development will cause pain and suffering whereby the self will

recognize that it must be sublated through negation — that what it is is an inadequate approximation of what it must become. Here Hegel's honesty speaks directly to the student of consciousness, providing warnings against possible affective barriers that one will encounter along the way to self-determining learning. Such barriers are not intrinsic to the process of education; and if encountered, must be overcome by relying upon the self-correcting momentum of thought, that is, transformed from halting regressions into necessary but temporary setbacks through which consciousness learns from its mistakes. Only when one remains on the proper path towards self-determination, to use Hegel's famous analogy, can the acorn *necessarily* grow into the oak tree. In short, necessity is produced through a proper ethical orientation to knowledge and, as such, does not precede the act of dialectical thinking, but rather emerges from within it.

The preface further develops these themes by explicitly linking the education of consciousness with the question of ethics. Asserting that speculative philosophy is the true expression of science, Hegel then turns his attention to the ethical practice of such a science. "What, therefore, is important in the study of Science, is that one should take on oneself the strenuous effort of the Notion" (*PS*, 35). The strenuous effort speaks to the challenge of genuine intellectual labor in the face of despair. Opposite to the science of speculative philosophy, which concerns itself with dialectical development, Hegel posits material thinking and argumentation. Material thinking is thinking in freeze frame without movement. Here the world is reduced to a series of pictures or snapshots that remain unrelated, detached from the totality that conditions them. This position is the philosophical equivalent of "unthinking inertia" whereby consciousness itself remains fixated on a small fragment of the social universe, opting for the security of certainty at the cost of the complexity of social reality, which forces us to hold contradictions together within a mediated totality. Argumentation, on the other hand, produces the true enemy of knowledge: vanity. Argumentation has no growth, only an endless stream of back and forth movements. Thus, it is a form of skepticism whereby the motive force is not to understand but rather to assert the superiority of the self over the other. As such, argumentation is complicit with vanity and self-righteousness and is, in short, an unethical approach to learning.

Once involved in an educative process, consciousness may very well attempt yet another retreat. Concerning a confrontation with a contradiction, Hegel writes that consciousness "resists it in order to save its own freedom and its own insight, its own authority, from the alien authority (for this is the guise in which what is newly encountered first appears), and to get rid of the appearance that something has been learned and of the sort of shame this is supposed to involve" (*PS*, 35). Here Hegel suggests that consciousness would rather cling to its identity as absolute rather than engage with a truth that is perceived to be alien to its internal constitution. Thus, consciousness, full of its own vanity and self-love, repels the educative moment of negation because it would cause too much pain. If it were to accept its own limitations, then it would most likely feel shame in education. Shame is the emotional reaction of a vain consciousness to the experience of learning. Shame thus

results from an ego that has beforehand determined itself to be absolute without consciously passing through a negative moment (a proverbial “beautiful soul”).

But this is only one set of possible outcomes. “Similarly, when the unfamiliar is greeted with applause, the reaction is of the same kind, and consists in what in another sphere would take the form of ultra-revolutionary speech and action” (*PS*, 35). In this scenario, consciousness accepts the shock of the new, the surge of education, and in its over-enthusiastic endorsement of the determined concept, rushes towards the immediacy of revolution. Here revolution becomes the abnegation of reason, jumping on the bandwagon of the “latest fad,” riding it out until the next new experience comes along to jolt it out of its unthinking conformity. At its most horrific, this approach to the lure of educational adrenaline could lead to social terror. In both cases, the real work of hard toil in relation to the concept is rejected for either retreat into shame or into uncritical revolutionary zeal.

Opposed to these various movements of consciousness, Hegel proposes an ethic of intellectual labor that does not result in feelings of impotence or hyper-inflated euphoria: an ethics guided by the virtue of restraint. “This refusal to intrude into the immanent rhythm of the Notion, either arbitrarily or with wisdom obtained from elsewhere, constitutes a restraint which is itself an essential moment of the Notion” (*PS*, 36). Restraint signifies the *concentration* and *patience* necessary to understand the internal movement of the Notion through a series of immanent contradictions and negations. It is also the emotional fortitude needed to overcome shame, vanity, or sentimentality, all of which are distractions. Overall, Hegel’s brief reflections on the ethics of being a student of consciousness constitute an important point of entry into the text through which the reader is hailed and given mandate: Don’t give up! It is the ethical principle that for Hegel is the philosophical groundwork for a genuine revolution in the realm of thought.

In short, Hegel urges the reader to be a student fortified by the temperance needed to approach the project of education. Such restraint will forge the courage necessary to undergo the pain of negation without retreat. Restraint becomes the path of true education whereby the subject and substance or reason and reality can become reunited within a mediated universal. In the end, it is restraint that enables the student to reach a higher stage of self-determining intellectual development and thus further the work of Spirit.

Several qualifications are necessary here. The focus on restraint and reconciliation with the universal could be critiqued from two directions. First, Foucauldian theorists could argue that an ethics of restraint is nothing more than a form of disciplinary power attempting to normalize and homogenize the subject.⁸ In his description of childhood, Hegel writes: “By nature, the child is neither bad nor good...self-will and evil soon make their appearance in the child. This germ of evil, must be broken and destroyed by discipline.”⁹ As such, obedience for Hegel becomes the “beginning of all wisdom.”¹⁰ Here Foucault’s analysis of disciplinarity seems to ring true, and education becomes nothing more than a technology of a disciplinary regime. Second, conformity with the universal could be read through a Marxist lens as promoting the exploitive nature of the (inherently irrational) status

quo under capitalist relations. For a Marxist, Hegel's theory of educational restraint would lead to quietism rather than revolutionary transformation of the social relations which determine thought in the last instance.

While agreeing that normalization and quietism are potential threats lingering in Hegel's thought, I would also argue with Allen Wood that such threats do not take into account the complexity of Hegel's overall phenomenological theory of education.¹¹ For instance, reconciliation between the subject and the universal is not normalization. As suggested above, this activity of overcoming the contradictions inherent in the various stages of consciousness development affects Spirit, moving it forward. As Wood states, to harmonize with the universal is not a reconciliation with what is, but rather, with the social world in its essence as that which it ought to be. Education of the individual is therefore an active event through which subject and environment, reason and reality are transformed via sublation. Second, quietism is the opposite of an educative relationship, for the subject must enter into contradiction with the environment in order to develop its internal potentials against the obstacles of the present that impede such movement. For critical theorist Theodor Adorno, the patience, concentration, and restraint described by Hegel fortify the subject against quietism. For Adorno, true dialectics is opposed to detached introspection (a retreat from the object into the rarified inner world of the self as absolute). In direct opposition to quietism, which Adorno sees as intellectual laziness and complacency, the "expansive concentration" Hegel endorses lends itself to praxis in a very concrete way.¹² Adorno writes, "Without a contemplative moment praxis degenerates into conceptless activity, but mediation as a carefully tended special sphere, severed from possible praxis, would hardly be better."¹³ As such, Hegel's educational ethic does not necessarily coincide with either normalization or quietism, but is, at its core, the motor of critical consciousness raising necessary for a viable and transformative social praxis. To use Adorno's language, dialectical thinking involves the risk of rupture, hence the need for an ethical disposition towards the labor of negation.

CONCLUSION

The final question becomes: How can the teacher facilitate the correct orientation of the student towards the dialectical path of self-determining learning? How can the educator help students overcome (or stave off) shame, vanity, and self-righteousness? Here the question of self-determining education necessarily turns towards a question of pedagogy. If dialectical thinking is the labor of tarrying with the negative, then pedagogy itself must be an internal aspect of this movement, helping the acorn grow into the oak tree.

In conclusion, I will now briefly outline a truly pedagogical moment within Hegel's text that might act as a model for educators interested in teaching students, not only dialectical thinking, but also the patience and the fortitude necessary for tarrying with the negative. In the first chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the "I" reaches a standstill. If sense-certainty is to remain certain, then it must stop thinking and with obstinacy, remain fixed on the object of its truth. In order for the dialectic to continue, Hegel makes an interesting and an inherently pedagogical move. "We

[the philosophical observers, or as the case might be, the teachers of consciousness] must therefore enter the same point of time or space, point them out to ourselves, i.e. make ourselves into the same singular 'I' which is the one who knows with certainty. Let us, then, see how that immediate is constituted that is pointed out to us" (*PS*, 63). Hegel enters into the position of the other to understand it from the inside out. In other words, rather than forcing sense-certainty to come out of its shell through an external intervention of force, Hegel will engage self-certainty on its own terms in order to demonstrate the untenable consequences of such stoicism. The lesson for educators is clear: the dialectical pedagogue cannot simply force the student to think. Such an approach would be a manipulation from the outside rather than an internal movement from within the thinking process of the student. This external manipulation (not unlike Hegel's description of mathematical proofs or, empiricism in general) could all too easily end with resentment or shame on the part of the student, thus unintentionally halting consciousness on the path towards self-determining education. Here, knowledge dialectically unfolds from within the "inertia" of certainty. It is by patiently following through this process step by step that consciousness becomes more determinant and, in turn, self-determining. Thus, that which was thought to be esoteric knowledge held by the philosopher or teacher emerges organically from within the logic of the student's own position in relation to knowledge. The esoteric becomes exoteric and democratic through this educative movement. In this way, the teacher does not verify the knowledge produced by the student (its correctness according to a set standard) but rather the student's vigilance in the act of philosophical cognition, demanding that the student not give up and thus remain faithful to thinking the emerging thought through all impediments. Thus Spirit is in the end nothing more than the cumulative notion of human beings attempting to comprehend themselves of which education is its historical enactment and furtherance. In sum, if Hegel's phenomenology urges the student to embrace an ethic of thinking, then it also and equally speaks to the teacher who should facilitate the proper relation between the student and knowledge as such.

1. Nigel Tubbs, "Hegel's Educational Theory and Practice," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 44, no. 2 (1996): 181–199.

2. Rhonda Hammer and Peter McLaren. "Rethinking the Dialectic: A Social Semiotic Perspective for Education," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 1 (1991): 23–46.

3. *Ibid.*, 45.

4. W. Vincent and Michael George, "Development and Self-Identity: Hegel's Concept of Education," *Educational Theory* 32, no. 3–4 (1982): 131–141.

5. *Ibid.*, 134.

6. Carlos Torres. "Education and the Archeology of Consciousness: Freire and Hegel," *Educational Theory* 44, no. 4 (1994): 429–445.

7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 49. This work will be cited as *PS* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 60.

10. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*.

11. Allen Wood, "Hegel on Education," in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998).

12. Theodor Adorno, *Critical Model: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 131.

13. Ibid.

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