

Geist and Normativity in Hegel's Early Theological Writings

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This is an exercise in what, for the purposes of this essay, I will call social pragmatism – a philosophical approach that I am drawing out of Robert Brandom's neo-Hegelian revision of pragmatism.¹ Most generally one might see such an approach as uniting phenomenology with idealism by anchoring both on a pragmatist basis. The paper focuses on the social constitution of meaning, conceptual content and value, that is; it focuses on the social constitution of normativity,² but also holds that such constitution is not arbitrary, or completely relative. Natural conditions constrain such social constitution yet do so **without** completely determining it. The normative flows out of an interaction with the world, but this interaction is free in that whilst the world itself certainly binds beliefs and actions it does not completely determine such beliefs and actions. I will refer to this constitution of normativity as free, not in the negative sense of the word freedom, as freedom from constraint, but in the positive

¹ For Brandom's reading of Hegel see: Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, 2002; and 'Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel: Comparing Empirical and Logical Concepts' in *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism*, Vol 3, 2005; *Deutscher Idealismus und die analytische Philosophie der Gegenwart/German Idealism and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, Karl Ameriks editor, 131-161; 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms,' *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 7 (2), 1999, 164-189.

² To quote from Stephen Darwall: 'Something is said by philosophers to have "normativity" when it entails that some action, attitude or mental state of some other kind is justified, an action one ought to do or a state one ought to be in. Stephen Darwall, 'Normativity' in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, London, 2001, [cited 30/6/06]. Available from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L135>.

sense of the word which indicates a capacity to choose, or determine for oneself, the rules or maxims through which one acts. Nature provides a context for belief and action yet leaves us under-determined as to what we will believe and which actions we will perform, our natural context conditions but does not determine normativity. This leaves us free to determine for ourselves the norms that underwrite our responses to the world. Thus the key line of thinking presented in this paper is that whilst normativity is socially constituted and in a sense freely constituted, this freedom is not completely unconstrained but rather takes its leave from the kinds of natural constraints that serve as a context for the expression of those norms.

The main methodological tool that this approach offers the study of religion is the idea that normativity, and the 'nature' that is orientated by it, are mutually informative and mutually transformative. The normative and the natural interpenetrate, there is reciprocity between them. Further, this helps us to think through the relation between culture and nature in a way that sees culture as arising out of nature, but irreducible to the kind of linear causation through which the natural realm is understood by science. Social-pragmatism firstly allows us to give an account of the social constitution of value and meaning that can neither be reduced to a naturalistic account nor lead to cultural relativism. That is, it allows us to take culture seriously without committing the 'anthropologist's fallacy.'³ Secondly it allows us to be non-reductive naturalists, to hold that there is nothing outside of the frame of nature but that there is a dimension of life that

³ The idea that culture or cultural beliefs determine the facts of the world so that if a culture believed that the earth was flat then, for that culture, the earth would be flat. This notion leaves beliefs completely unconstrained by anything but the system of beliefs of which they are a part. On such a view the world itself has no impact on what is believed. Thus for a culture that believes the world is flat there could be no 'experiential evidence' which might count against that belief. Such a position is one-sided and might be thought of as the culturally relativistic reflex of what I will call the empiricists fallacy; the thought that empirical experience gives us direct access to a world of fact.

naturalistic sciences can never account for or can never be accounted for under the kind of linear causality that predominates in the natural sciences – it allows us to be naturalists without being led to scientism.

Most particularly this paper is a social-pragmatist account of Hegel's early development of a theory of *Geist* or Spirit. This term, *Geist* is a Hegelian term of art for culture in its most broad sense, *Geist* or Spirit refers to all institutions written and unwritten within a culture, or more comprehensively within human life. More straightforwardly we could say, along with Habermas, that *Geist* refers to the normative in general.⁴ As such reference to the spiritual is a reference to the normative; correspondingly talk of normativity is talk of Hegelian Spirit.⁵ This places us firmly within the non-metaphysical reading now common, though perhaps still somewhat controversial, in Anglo-American Hegel scholarship.⁶ In this view, *Geist* arises with intersubjectivity; *Geist* has intersubjectivity as its ground and could not exist outside of it.⁷ There are three levels at which normativity is intersubjectively constituted; socially, inferentially and historically.⁸ In this paper the focus will be on the social and historical, leaving the logical issues for another day.

Normativity is most commonly contrasted with the natural. The natural comprises actual states of affairs. For instance: the cat is on the mat. This is a naturalistic description – two objects in a spatial relation. The normative relates to issues of both meaning (semantics)⁹ and value (axiology and ethics)¹⁰ and orientates us

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, Boston, 1973, 146.

⁵ Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, 2002, 47-8.

⁶ Here I would refer the reader to Robert Pippin, Robert Williams, Terry Pinkard, Robert Brandom and for we in the antipodes Paul Redding.

⁷ Habermas, op cit, 146.

⁸ Brandom, op cit, 47-8.

⁹ Darwall, op cit, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L135SECT6>.

¹⁰ Ibid, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L135SECT2>.

on what we ought do. Human cultural life is normative, a web-work of values and meanings orientating us firstly to the world, providing a hermeneutic; and secondly to what we ought to do in it. Some approaches to philosophy tend to dichotomise this distinction. Many philosophers who take this view see the natural is something with cognitive import, that is, we can stand in objective epistemic relation to it. But by adopting such a position the normative seems to be reduced, to mirror Hume, to a blanket that humans arbitrarily throw over a world of fact.¹¹ Thus contemporary philosophy has at times, and somewhat ironically, come to value facts over values or norms.

Further, naturalistic accounts use natural causal laws as their explanatory tool. These laws are such that we do not have a choice about conforming to them; I do not choose whether drinking a glass of sulphuric acid kills me. The causal explanations invoked in naturalistic accounts are determinative; they determine what happens with necessity. The second law of thermodynamics, a law which governs heat transference, is not something that we are at liberty to resist, it is simply operative. On the other hand normative accounts of human phenomena invoke socially engendered norms (concepts, beliefs, meanings and values) to account for agential actions. One might say – it is correct, to place the wine glass on the right hand side of the plate, above the knife. This expresses a cultural norm, it tells us what we ought to do, and the actions of agents that express this norm (the setting of tables) are assessable in normative terms. We might say of a setting that conforms to this norm that it is ‘well set’, or one that does not so conform could be assessed as ‘poorly set’. Norms are a matter of how culture orientates us to the world but we are at liberty to resist. The normative realm is indeterminative, it does not determine what we do. Rather it guides or orientates us, so that whether I respond to a norm is contingent.

¹¹ Ibid, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/L135>.

This distinction is structured by and helps to structure another distinction, that between the theoretical and the practical. In philosophy the theoretical relates to an explanatory engagement with states of affairs; it offers objective third person descriptions. As such it coheres with the scientific world view and has all the prestige of science. The practical relates to the normative sphere. Here discourse aims to tell us what we ought to do, how we ought to take things, what is valued or seen as good. But because the factual is privileged, much of this is cashed out in factual terms; hence **normative** ethics is reduced to giving an account of human moral orientation that can be inferred from facts. This already points up a problem with the fact/value dichotomy. Lastly this distinction maps onto that between nature and nurture, or genes and environment. Do we account for human behaviour biologically, or in terms of the cultural and environmental influences that shape the normative life of agents? Current wisdom favours the natural; human behaviour is accounted for in terms of biological imperatives, drives, desires and passions.

Because normativity is generated intersubjectively¹² or socially, to speak of a society is to speak of an already constituted normativity. This makes it look as if the individual is powerless against the normative. Further, we do not choose to enter social space nor what social space we enter, we just find ourselves in some preconstituted society, replete with norms. Such concerns can be addressed. *Qua* social member I play my part in constituting the normative. I affirm or reject norms by my actions – the way I act expresses my relation to them. But I will be held responsible to those norms by other social members.¹³ They can assess the way I respond to such norms and they can express that assessment in their interactions with me. I am not powerless against the normative, but it is a standard against which I will be

¹² Habermas, op cit, 146.

¹³ Robert Brandom, 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism,' in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1999, 7 (2), 180-182.

evaluated by other social players.¹⁴ My culture or society might view a certain action as wrong or sinful, it is up to me whether or not I commit that action, but it is not up to me to decide whether I have or have not sinned – that authority lies with the community of which I am a part. I, qua subject, am not an independent authority that can determine by pure self-legislation what does or does not constitute a sin. I only have conceptual grasp of this norm through a process of socialisation.¹⁵ I can try to challenge the norm through my behaviour, I might, through my actions, try to demonstrate that something that is seen as sinful is not, but whether or not this is successful depends on the reception of the community. Thus norms can be resisted, we are not completely determined by the normative, but it we do not get to choose how that resistance will be evaluated or assessed by other members of our community.

Further the process of acculturation that we undergo is a process of orientating us to the norms of our life-world; acculturation is a process of internalising values and meanings. This is something that happens socially. It requires others; it is an intersubjective process. The normative life of our community helps to form us, but we are not so embedded in that form of life that we cannot register tensions and inconsistencies within its norms. In so far as we can do this we can help in the process of reforming our norms. In so far as we see certain norms as good, or correct, we acquiesce in their goodness or correctness, they pass over into customary life. Yet, this does not mean that we cannot assess certain norms negatively; as pejorative, or ineffectual and so on. In so far as we can negatively assess our own normative life we can challenge the norms by which we live; but whether our challenge to such norms is effective, whether it is sufficient to bring about normative revision, is not up to us but is rather up to the community in which we live.¹⁶ If our challenge is effective

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

then we help to reorientate our community on that value. If our challenge is not successful than the norm holds firm and we are seen as perverse for challenging it. We are both the authors of and authored by our norms.

An influential feature of Hegelian thought is that it breaks down the distinction between norm and nature. They become two sides of one coin. The normative is second nature; arising out of, but not reducible to, first nature. Culture is natural; it has the natural as its precondition. But the normative transcends the natural because the normative cannot be reduced to a description of states of affairs. Thus, as Pinkard points out, the mature Hegel tells us, in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, 'For us, spirit has nature as its presupposition, and it is thereby its truth and its antecedent.'¹⁷ But, if there is continuity between the natural and the normative, then this implies that for Hegel the distinction between the normative and the natural is a normative one, a product of human culture, and being a normative distinction, it is one that we are not compelled to make, one that we can revise.

This brings us to the Hegelian term *Geist* which, as I have said above, we can interpret as culture in its most broad sense; culture in this sense refers to all those aspects of the world that are dependent on human thinking, all rules and norms, written and unwritten. *Geist* has nature as its precondition,¹⁸ but transcends it; we have to make sense of the notion of nature transcending **itself** in *Geist* or culture. In order to do so we could take up the suggestion by Robert Williams that the existential genesis of *Geist* is the intersubjective act of reciprocal recognition.¹⁹ A suggestion leads us to a consideration of another piece of Hegelian theory; recognition theory. *Geist* emerges from a natural event, an interaction between two natural beings that

¹⁷ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy: 1760-1860 The Legacy of Idealism*, Cambridge, 2002, 277.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Robert R Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, Berkeley. 1997, 90-92.

naturally have the capacity to reciprocally accord each other a positive status. To speak of two beings as reciprocally recognising each other is to say that they are able to see or recognise the other, as sharing common features whilst not allowing this to over-ride otherness or difference.²⁰ You are like me, yet not me, and as such I transcend the perspective of subjectivity, captured by the first person singular pronoun 'I', and move to the perspective of intersubjectivity, captured by the plural pronoun 'We.'²¹ This cannot be described through an account of states of affairs, which would only have recourse to: A meets B. Such a description cannot capture what passes between subject A and B. What passes between them is spiritual in the Hegelian sense. In recognising you as being like myself, I recognise that I **ought** to ascribe to you certain features that I find in myself, and so come to see us as having something in common; the mere act of recognition brings a norm. In recognition, subjectivity completes itself, transcends itself, by passing over into intersubjectivity.²² This is a natural relation between natural beings, but it is the existential genesis of Spirit; normativity. In this moment the first norm emerges, in that I recognise you, I feel that I **ought** to accord you some positive status; thus in this minimal act, the whole field of ethics opens up. We reach the threshold of the ethical when the other comes to count and in the act of recognition the other comes to count ethically.

If we understand *Geist* correctly then we will understand that all human institutions, written and unwritten, all laws, all customs, all duties, all systems of meaning, all language is normative. Now if *Geist* is just a way of referring to the normative then it seems as if, to borrow from Pippin, we have left nature behind and are entering a world of pure thought. For on Pippin's reading the Hegelian trajectory is away from nature and towards Spirit or

²⁰ Ibid, 79-81.

²¹ Ibid, 82-3.

²² Ibid, 116-118.

Geist.²³ But the very locution 'away from "nature" and "towards" "Spirit," *Geist*...' ²⁴ seems to indicate that there is something non-natural about Spirit. It seems to suggest that Spirit 'transcends' nature and such transcendence of nature seems to imply a break with nature. Of course, as is well known, Hegel sees *Geist* as a sublation or *Aufhebung*²⁵ of nature. But the term sublation implies that what is sublated, nature, is preserved within that which sublates it, *Geist*.²⁶ The term sublation never implies a breach. Thus *Geist* develops out of nature, whilst preserving nature, and does not leave it behind. *Geist* is a modification of nature. Pippin is aware that, for Hegel, *Geist* is a modification or development of nature (it is something that must be acquired through a process of socialisation). In fact Pippin himself evokes the metaphor of the tended garden. He contrasts untended 'biological'²⁷ growth with the 'tended growth'²⁸ of *Geist* suggesting that *Geist* is not merely the product of blind forces but a more complex kind of development. Despite understanding *Geist* as a development of nature, albeit a very complex one, Pippin seeks to understand Spirit in a way that views it as somehow leaving nature behind. Thus he urges us towards an understanding of their relation that sees the former transcending the latter in such a way as to open a gulf between them. In this authors opinion such an understanding distorts or conceals the preserving element in the Hegelian sublation.

To try to capture the continuity between nature and *Geist* Hegel invokes a piece of Aristotelian terminology, the notion of

²³ Robert Pippin, 'Leaving Nature Behind Or Two Cheers for "Subjectivism,"' in Nicholas H Smith, *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, New York, 2002, 60.

²⁴ Loc cit.

²⁵ The German 'Aufheben' is a semantically rich concept and Hegel plays in this richness. It could be translated as; a) to raise or lift up, b) to cancel and c) to keep or preserve.

²⁶ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford, 1999, 283-5.

²⁷ Loc cit.

²⁸ Loc cit.

a“second nature.”²⁹ In entering the sphere of *Geist* we have not ‘left nature behind’, rather we have stepped into Aristotelian second nature and - as already stated - this cannot be reduced to descriptive accounts of first nature, or states of affairs because such accounts can never capture what passes between subjects in an intersubjective or recognitive relation. To re-emphasise: whilst the normative, spiritual or cultural arises out of nature, it cannot be reduced to nature. We cannot have a purely naturalistic account of normativity. But that does not make it non-natural. This opens the way for naturalists to be non-reductive naturalists, to see everything as natural yet refuse the idea of a naturalistic account of everything.

This could be understood on empirical anthropological terms. By considering cultures with common ecological bases, but lacking historical or genetic connection and in circumstances that would count against diffusion, anthropologists have noted quite a deep normative resonance.³⁰ Thus J H Steward offers us the insight that there might be an ecological basis for culture.³¹ This moves away from evolutionary and diffusionist³² accounts towards one that sees culture as expressing a human response to natural circumstance. Accordingly culture can be classified ecologically: ‘desert nomad’ or ‘arctic hunting.’³³ Following this work, Ake Hultkrantz argued for an ecological basis for religion,³⁴ types of religion can be deeply informed by the cultural type in which they are found. He envisages a taxonomic system whereby types of religion are described ecologically, allowing for comparisons between traditions with no geographical or historical relations,

²⁹ G W F Hegel *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. translated by H B Nisbet, Cambridge, 1998, 35 (§4).

³⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle: a study in the ecology of religion*, Berkeley, 1981, 6.

³¹ *Ibid*, 10.

³² *Ibid*, 6.

³³ *Ibid*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

but which share a common ecology.³⁵ This avoids evolutionism and diffusionism, as for Hültkranz, religion does not rely on evolutionary development, but rather is dependent on ecological conditions.³⁶ In this view nature is the first context of culture. Culture does not arise within a vacuum, nor is it given from on high, it is authored; authorship requires a context and nature provides the first context of authorship.

From my Hegelian perspective there are two interrelated problems with Hültkranz's work. Firstly it is not dynamic; it paints a static picture. We might say history, as temporal process, is not paid its due. The temporal continuities and discontinuities between traditions in a community seems to have been sidelined. The normativity thesis tells us that we cannot simply abandon one set of norms in favour of another: but culture certainly changes; it is dynamic. A change in norms will reflect a change in circumstance and orientation. Further the norms that we held to before the change in circumstance and orientation are the ground of new norms, they grow out of a relation to older norms: extension, rejection, revaluation and so forth. This is a dynamic process, a process in which we are embedded, a process that we as social creatures author, but which reciprocally helps to author us. Secondly it does not take account of the implicit freedom of the normative realm, the institution of norms is the spontaneous response of a group to actual circumstances in which it finds itself. But the exact nature of their response cannot be seen as completely determined by those circumstances, because there will be a number of possible responses to any particular circumstance. The facts by themselves do not determine how we respond to them. Whilst ecology and natural circumstances provide a context for the development of culture, and circumscribe limits to culture, this does not result in any strict causal determination. Rather it leaves culture 'underdetermined' in terms of its response to its circumstances.

³⁵ Ibid, 10.

³⁶ Ibid.

Nature has set us up in a certain way. We are limited by a whole range of natural facts. This we share with our animal friends. But there is something peculiar about us, our capacity for reflection leads us to acknowledge that there are a variety of ways in which a certain need could be satisfied. The need is natural, but the need does not come complete with instructions for realising it, so that it is up to us and the circumstances we are in. It is because we are caught between natural determinacy, our needs are dictated, and normative indeterminacy, there are multiple ways of realising them, that the possibility that norms could be spontaneously generated arises. We have determinate needs, but how we satisfy those needs is indeterminate. Norms are generated when we start to favour certain modes of practice; when we realise that we have a better chance at catching cattle than birds, we start to favour the practice of catching cattle. Cattle catching becomes a social norm, it is how we survive. How we respond to **our nature** is never fully determined, even though the natural facts are.

Hegel introduces the idea of cultural change, normative change, through the idea of a 'perceived' break with nature.³⁷ Normative change does not have to come from something so dramatic. But this notion of a perceived break with nature is instructive for it does not imply any kind of metaphysical relation to nature rather it implies a changed hermeneutic that itself results from an interaction with nature or natural event. What is meant by the break with nature is that our environment all of a sudden presents itself to us in an unexpected guise,³⁸ say a tsunami or a hurricane. This introduces new circumstances to respond to. Initially we must save ourselves, but after the initial shock we must come to terms with what has happened. We could relate to the weather in a different way. Further we might develop

³⁷ Henry S Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight 1770-1801*, Oxford, 1972, 272-5.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 274.

projects, such as building a sea wall to protect us. Thus our way of life, the way we understand ourselves, our culture generally, has been transformed. Perhaps we once earned a bounty from the sea and saw ourselves as those who partake in the sea's bounties, but now it seems threatening, its meaning has changed. Now we win our bounty from a potentially hostile and destructive sea and so we view ourselves as those who struggle against the sea to win their bounty. Alternatively that break with nature could come through contact with other peoples with different norms. Culture is not a straight-jacket, nor is it static, with every change in circumstance we have something before us with the potential to drive us to normative revision.

So far we have been discussing Hegel's mature view but the title of this paper promises to say something about Hegel's earliest writings and it is to this task that I shall now turn. The controversial claim I will make is that Hegel's theory of *Geist* was largely in place by the mid 1790's, that even then *Geist* is seen non-metaphysically, as arising with sociality and that the core of the theory was normativity. From the beginning the theory was, much like Hegel himself, focused on the social. So we can profitably read the early Hegel through a social-pragmatist lens. Less controversially the theory of *Geist* expresses the bringing together of streams of socio-political thought that have been with Hegel from his high school years, and which persist to shape his mature view. Firstly, the Aristotelian: quoting from Aristotle's politics, that 'the polis arises from the needs of life but carries on for the sake of the good life.'³⁹ Secondly, the Rousseauian notion that in the constitution of a 'General Will' we achieve autonomy in that my will is so deeply connected with the 'General Will' that I identify myself with it, it expresses my will.⁴⁰ Aristotle is claiming that society is firstly natural, in arising from the needs of life it arises from natural facts, but secondly it is teleologically

³⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by T A Sinclair, London, 1987, 28-30 (1252 b1).

⁴⁰ J J Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated by M Cranston, Harmondsworth, 1968, 60-3.

orientated towards a social form that is valued, 'the good life'. Hence it is orientated towards something of normative significance. How could Hegel connect this with Rousseau? Through the idea that something like a 'General Will' is constituted, if at times deficiently, through the recognitive relations that bind **natural** communities. From this perspective the 'We', the perspective of generality, already exists. Where groups of human beings think of themselves under the plural pronoun, then their collectivity has already taken a self-conscious form.

Whilst Hegel's understanding of *Geist* develops with his thinking, its outlines are present in his earliest writings. In the so-called *Tübingen Fragment*⁴¹ the term *Geist* is used by Hegel to describe the self-consciousness of a community, its capacity to be an object to itself through certain of its institutions.⁴² In particular the term *Geist* is used in reference to modalities of thought and action in which a community becomes conscious of its particularity *qua* community.⁴³ Such institutions are orientated towards us, the 'We', they are evidence of the recognitive relations that already unify the community. In the *Tübingen Fragment* he tells us that the spirit of a people is the nexus of its history, religion and political life, each of these are modes of a people's self-consciousness but none of them is sufficient to be regarded as that people's Spirit, only the unity of the three.⁴⁴ As Hegel tells us:

The [S]pirit of a people <is> its history, its religion, the level of political freedom – [these things] cannot be treated separately either with respect to their mutual influence, or in characterising them [each by itself] – they are woven together in a single bond – as when among three expert colleagues

⁴¹ G W F Hegel, 'The Tübingen Fragment of 1793,' translated by H S Harris, In H S Harris, *Towards the Sunlight*, 481-507.

⁴² Ibid 506.

⁴³ Ibid, 273.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 506.

none can do anything without the others but each gets something essential from the others...⁴⁵

Yet this is not a sufficient exposition of Hegel's understanding of the concept of *Geist* even in 1793, for Hegel goes on to show these modalities of social self-consciousness are not only the product of the normative life of that society but also shape the normative life of that society.⁴⁶ There is reciprocity between self-understanding, the perspective we are given in these institutions, and lived existence, because our self-understanding orientates us to the meaning or significance of lived existence. But further, our self-understanding can fail to meet the demands of, or to be adequate to, lived experience, and so our self-understanding can need re-orientation based on that experience. If we take self-understanding to be the normative node of the equation and our lived existence the natural node, then we can see that here we have reciprocity and community between the normative and the natural, they are almost in a communicative relation. They are mutually informative and mutually transformative – there is reciprocity. Hegel scholarship tells us that cognitive relations exist between members of a social group and their institutions.⁴⁷ In so far as an institution accords me some positive status, this is a mark that the community, of which I am a part, accords me a positive status. The institution recognises me, but in so far as I accord other social players the same status, I affirm, or recognise, the positive status of the institution. The three forms of community self-consciousness that Hegel focuses on in this essay are grounded in a normative system that they, *qua* discourses, help to articulate whilst themselves being shaped by that normative system. So it seems as if the Spirit of a people is not only its history, political structure and religion but also simultaneously orientates its particular historical, political and religious outlook. Spirit is a community's modality of self-

⁴⁵ Loc cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid 506-507.

⁴⁷ Williams, op cit, 262-4.

consciousness, it is a way a community can think itself, but that form of thinking itself shapes what is thought.

Hegel, during this early period sees himself as a social reformer. He is going to spread the ideals of the French revolution through central Europe in a non-violent, intellectual revolution. Hence, he views himself as someone engaged in the pursuit of normative reform. But he famously condemns **utopian** social reform – political theorists retreat into their studies, and think up ideal societies, ideal forms of life. Hegel thinks that these will fail unless they emerge from an understanding of the pre-existent form of life and can be seen as in dialogue with that form of life, to accord it some positive status, particularly reforms fail unless they can be seen by a people as its own product.⁴⁸ A form of normativity cannot just be brushed aside, reform is not the institution of a vision but rather a transformative process of revision. So how ought reform take place? Well, Hegel suggests that we need to attend firstly to our form of life, the normative life that orientates us on the world; further, we have to understand how that form of life, those norms that orientate us, have developed with history.⁴⁹ Norms, values and meanings, are historical entities, they emerge and develop in time, but our norms shape the way we relate to history, if we understand the trajectory through which a form of life has developed, this interplay between people and norms over time, then tensions and inconsistencies within the status quo are more readily registered.

So for Hegel philosophers ought to turn their attention to the actual form of Spirit in which they live and find those aspects of its normative life that lie in conflict or tension with its own deepest orientating values. By thematising such tensions we can show how a form of life is inadequate to the actualisation of its deepest

⁴⁸ Susan Meld Shell, 'Organizing the State: Transformations of the Body Politic in Rousseau Kant and Fichte,' in *International Yearbook of German Idealism*, K Ameriks and J Stolzenberg, editors, Berlin, 2004, 58-9.

⁴⁹ Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom*, New Haven, 1999, 48.

values and in that way bring about a normative revision in accordance with its Spirit, that is, in accordance with its deepest orientating values. Specifically Hegel claims that the best way to do this is through religion. Religion plays a special role in human life. As we saw in the Tübingen fragment, it is our midwife, gently ushering us into a world replete with norms, but it is also our wet-nurse, nourishing us through our vital social developmental phases, our acculturation. Religion nourishes us on the milk of normativity, it is a primary way of orientating ourselves to our world and to what we ought to do in it and so for Hegel if one wants to achieve lasting social reform one needs to work at religious reform. Reforming religion is, for Hegel, a way of bringing about broader normative reform, it's his way of bringing the French revolution to Germany.

What does all of this tell us about the study of religion? Spirit is a system of norms that define our relation to the world by orientating our judgments about it and in doing so situates us in relation to that world. Norms that simultaneously orientate us to the world and to ourselves but which arose from natural creatures, with natural needs engaging with natural circumstances. One of the features of our normative life is religion. Religion is a response to the world, it helps us to find our way, it orientates us to the world and what we ought to do in it; it uses narratives, discourse, images and practices to orientate us to things of value, to uncover meanings, to bring us into social relations, but also gives us a way of understanding ourselves. Religion articulates the normative, it expresses the normative, and so it is a way for us to encounter our deepest values. In entering dialogue with our religious traditions we enter a dialogue with the norms that have shaped our form of life. At least this is the Hegelian social-pragmatist view, as from this perspective, religion, along with art and philosophy, is absolute *Geist*, it opens the normative up to us as something that we can view and dialogue with rather than just express.