Hegel has a particularly striking and original contribution to the field of hermeneutics: a contribution long recognized, but a contribution still not sufficiently appreciated. Hegel's hermeneutical insight, itself the inspiration for the massively influential ideas of both Gadamer and Derrida, is that things interpret themselves. To say that things interpret themselves is to say that things are not fixed and static entities but are themselves dynamic, self-transforming processes. Our own practice of interpretation, then, should not be understood as the imposition of some independent method upon some independent object, but should be a matter of our recognizing the thing's own self-interpretive process. To understand this insight, we must first work through another hermeneutical thesis central to Hegel's philosophy, that, prior to our deliberate interpreting of objects, we are engaged in an act of interpreting that gives objects; in other words, there is no neutral "given" upon which we perform optional practices of interpretation but, instead, experience is ongoingly interpretive through and through, such that the very "given" is already dependent upon interpretive acts. We will explore these theses in relationship to a third and definitive Hegelian thesis, namely, that precisely our own sense of self-identity is a product of shared social practices of collective self-interpretation.

Experience and Interpretation

Like Descartes, Hegel begins his philosophical study by exhorting his reader to perform a self-reflective practice: focus exclusively, he urges, on this immediate moment "now." He then describes what our experience is like if we do this:

The Now is pointed to, this Now. "Now": It has already ceased to be in the act of pointing to it. The now that is, is another Now than the one pointed to .... In this pointing-out, then, we see merely a movement which takes the following course: (1) I point out the "Now," and it is asserted to be the truth.... (2) I now assert as the second truth that it has been.... (3) But what has been is not; ... [1] thus return to the first assertion, that the "Now" is, [i.e., I recognize the "Now" in which I am making this observation].

In trying to hold on to the immediate moment, we precisely notice that it does not occur immediately: the immediate moment—"now"—takes time, that is, it is experienced only as a passage, as a moment.

inherently involved with other moments. This passage is noticed in a “Now” that itself contains the multiplicity of nows through which the temporal passage has occurred. In other words, we recognize a “now” only within an ongoing recognition of a non-instantaneous temporal frame. The present is not fully present in the present.

In recognizing that, even at the most immediate level, the object of our experience is mediated, we are recognizing that our apprehension of the present is similarly never a simple apprehension, but is itself a more complex process. The “Now” and the pointing-out of the “Now,” are thus so constituted that neither the one nor the other is something immediate and simple, but a movement which contains various moments.2 Our experience is indeed “intuitive,” in the sense of “being struck” by what appears, but this “passive” receptivity is itself only possible inasmuch as we are ourselves responding from a complex position and “active” as a contributor to the form the experience takes: apprehension is, as Kant recognized in Critique of Pure Reason, always also a matter of imagination and understanding as much as it is a matter of simple intuiting.3 Hegel’s observation about the “Now” applies more broadly to the recognition of anything we take to be immediately present: though some identity or situation may be experientially immediate to us in the sense that we do not go through any explicit, discursive steps to “produce” this object—we perceive it directly—the very ability to recognize such a presence implies implicit acts of interpretive synthesis. Therefore, we can ask of any object or situation, “What interpretation—what mediation—is already at play such that this object can be present for us?”

This recognition underlies Hegel’s characteristic philosophical practice of showing how our very perception of a seemingly immediate world of things and relations in fact reflects a more basic but unacknowledged interpretive practice on our part. Hegel takes the “given” objects and relations precisely as what is to be explained, rather than taking them as providing the terms for explanation. Though these hermeneutical issues are relevant in all domains, this inversion of explanans and explanandum is especially powerful in the interpretation of human relationships.

Identity and Social Self-Interpretation

Our own individuality is something we typically take for granted: we view the natural world as an object upon which our individual choice operates and, similarly, we view the political world as an artificial structure chosen by a collection of individuals for the regulation of their otherwise independent behavior. One of the most striking and powerful dimensions of Hegel’s philosophy is his demonstration that our apparently self-defined individuality is actually mediated by relations of “recognition” [Anerkennung], that is, our identities do not naturally accrue to us as individuals but are rather the way we are empowered to identify ourselves within shared social systems of interpretation: “the self,” in short, is a hermeneutical rather than a natural reality. Thus, whereas we typically think of interpretation as an explicit practice that already existent individuals enact upon a fixed world, we must instead recognize that it is only in and as a shared practice of interpretation that identifiable individuals and an identifiable world come into being in the first place. In our efforts to understand people, then, we must not simply take as given their apparent identities, but we must instead ask “What system of interpretation manifests itself as this system of individuals and their relations?” In Hegel’s language, what we must recognize is “spirit” [Geist].

Our individual identities are collectively constituted, and this “I” that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’ is spirit, the socially enacted system of mutual interpretation that is the shared context and fabric for our individual identities.4 Our sense of self is a kind of equilibrium that we have established with others and with the world by adopting ways of interpreting ourselves and our situations that meet with the confirmation of our relevant others, just as their practices similarly conform to our own established expectations. This system of shared interpretation is essentially the world of inherited custom—that what Hegel calls “ethicality” [Sittlichkeit]—that we adopt through our upbringing.5
[Ethicality] is nothing else than the absolute spiritual unity of the essence of individuals in their independent actual existence; it is an intrinsically universal self-consciousness ... This ethical substance ... [is] immediately actual self-consciousness, or it is custom. The single individual consciousness, conversely, is only this existent unit in so far as it is aware of the universal consciousness in its individuality as its own being, since what it does and is, is the universal custom.... [T]he individual in his individual work already unconsciously performs a universal work.... But this existential unchangeable essence is the expression of the very individuality which seems opposed to it; the laws proclaim what each individual is and does; the individual knows them not only as his universal objective thinghood, but equally knows himself in them ... and in each of his fellow citizens.7

Immediate individual actions that explicitly carry out immediate self-conscious purposes—I order coffee because I want to satisfy my appetite and settle into working, or I reach out my hand because I want to greet you—are actions that implicitly carry out more fundamental symbolic acts of social confirmation: our actions are not just individually defined, but carry on instead the characteristic behavioral patterns endorsed by particular cultures, and in and through performing these actions we unconsciously affirm to each other that we belong to the same world, and we thus supply to each other an ongoing sense of comfort that, for each of us, things are as we had imagined. This structure of a defining and unconsciously shared practice of interpretation that manifests itself as apparently independent individuals engaged in apparently self-chosen activities provides a powerful model for the interpretation of cultures.

Different social regimes are systems that operate with different principles for our “recognizing” each other, different ways in which “we” find it possible to say “I.” Hegel offers both a synchronic and a diachronic interpretation of societies to show, first, that the various “different” aspects of a society, such as religion, art, and politics are all expressions of the same basic principle of recognition. Discussing this point specifically in relation to the interpretation of religions, Hegel writes:

[T]he nature of a nation's moral life, the principle of its law, of its actual liberty, and of its constitution, as well as of its art and science, corresponds to the principle which constitutes the substance of a religion. That all these elements of a nation's actuality constitute one systematic totality, that one spirit creates and informs them, is a truth on which follows the further truth that the history of religions coincides with the world-history.8

He then shows, second, that the changing forms its historical existence takes are workings-out of the logical demands of this principle. Understanding this diachronic interpretation brings us in touch with Hegel's most distinctive hermeneutical tool: the notion of contradiction.

Beyond Method: Contradiction

Apparently independent individuals (human individuals in our example, but ultimately individuals of any sort) in fact possess their independence only by standing on mediating structures that precisely integrate them with other seemingly independent individuals in the single coherent fabric of a situation or a system. This entails that any finite individual is ultimately incapable of accounting for itself on its own or, again, that its form (as a discrete individual) is at odds with its reality (as an integrated member of a system).9 By its very nature, then, any discrete individual inherently points beyond itself to a greater, defining reality that is its substance, and the individual will not be properly interpreted unless it is seen in terms of this, its implicit “mediation.” And yet, this mediating “universal” does not exist and is not defined independently of the individuals that realize and express it. For that reason, there is no way to access this universal except through the individuals that are to be explained by it. What is most distinctive in Hegel's “hermeneutics” is his exclusive appeal to the individual itself to see how that individual points beyond itself to its own contextualization by a specific reality that exceeds it.
Hegel's "method" is thus precisely the renouncing of method inasmuch as it is the refusal to "apply" independently defined "rules" of interpretation to things, but instead to attend exclusively to the rigorous description only of the individual thing itself, and to allow only what is revealed in that description to establish the terms for interpretation.\(^{10}\) Hegel approaches each thing on the immediate terms it presents—its manifest appearance of self-defined independence—and then simply watches to see if that manifest self-interpretation is indeed adequate to the phenomenon of its existence. In fact, Hegel's descriptions typically reveal the inadequacy of the explicit terms of a thing's self-presentation adequately to interpret the whole of its existence (as we should expect, based on our understanding of the integrated nature of each thing's existence), and his descriptions then follow out the contradiction between what the thing claims about itself and how it actually manifests itself, in order to see how the thing's own existence requires us to transform the terms with which we approach the interpretation of it. In this sense, the thing—whether a text, a theoretical position, or a culture—interprets itself: there is no given universal "method" to be "applied"; rather, one starts from the individual, and is propelled by its concrete, contradictory nature to recognize in specific ways the insufficiency of its self-interpretation. This is what Hegel means when he writes:

> It is in this way that the content shows that its determinateness is not received from something else, nor externally attached to it, but that it determines itself.... Scientific cognition ... demands surrender to the life of the object, or, what amounts to the same thing, confronting and expressing its inner necessity.\(^{11}\)

This idea that it is the thing itself that supplies the unique terms for understanding its determinate, changing forms is the same as the idea that a thing enacts its own "dialectic." In the case of our example of cultural interpretation, it is this "dialectical" method of attending to the contradiction between a thing's self-presentation and its actual existence that allows Hegel to interpret the changes a culture undergoes as coherent expressions of its defining principle of intersubjective interpretation.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel studies two main historical forms of social life—the form enacted in the ancient republicanism of Greece and Rome, and the form enacted in Christian Europe in its medieval and its early modern form—demonstrating that the principle of social self-interpretation involved in each case is ultimately insufficient to account for the full reality of that intersubjective world.\(^{12}\) For this reason, these societies do not maintain stable forms, but, instead, take changing forms as the insufficiently recognized dimensions of human reality make themselves manifest.

The cultural world of ancient Greece, in the first case, was premised on the recognition of people in terms of their belonging to particular natural and social groups: being a Greek, being an Athenian, being a member of this or that family, being a man or a woman. This society cultivated human flourishing, but a flourishing for people understood in these established terms. Our humanity, however, is not exhausted in these specific social and natural determinacies, but is also and essentially realized in the individuality of our subjective choice: that is, we are as much defined by how we take on these identities (in the double sense of "take on" as "accept" and "challenge") as we are defined by these determinacies themselves. This singular subjectivity is not officially acknowledged in the formal and informal institutions of Greek social life, but it is nonetheless an essential dimension of our lives—indeed, this singular initiative is the veritable "motor" of experience, of our very ability to be someone who can "belong." For this reason, the social system is built on a misinterpretation of itself, and must contend with the ways in which this unacknowledged dimension of our subjectivity shows itself irresistibly in our experience. Greek society, through its encouragement of the development of persons (presuming wrongly that that development would operate within the established terms of natural and social belonging), in fact gave rise to figures such as Aristophanes and Socrates, figures who themselves demonstrated the unsurpassability of the singular standpoint. Greek society had, on its own terms, given rise to its own criticism, a criticism manifest as a historical development and transformation
within that society. The Roman society which eventually took over the world of Greek culture was a world premised on a culture of singular subjectivity, effectively becoming the "conclusion" to a sort of historically enacted syllogism in which the insufficient "major premise" of the ancient Greek system of social self-interpretation revealed the precise form of its insufficiency in principle to account for itself, and this final, Roman social world was the eventual institutional recognition of this excluded "moment."

In an analogous way, Hegel argues that the medieval Christian and modern Enlightenment forms of European culture, though manifestly at odds with each other, were in fact changing phases in the development of a single principle of social recognition. Here, the principle is the recognition of the equal worth of all individuals according to their having converted to a higher, universal truth. This social system as a whole is ultimately inadequate as a system of human self-interpretation, for this principle of recognition precisely fails to acknowledge adequately the nonuniversal aspects of our identities. It is this contradiction between the explicit principle for social recognition and the actual reality of social life that is ultimately demonstrated in the "Terror" of the French Revolution, in which the society promising universal human inclusion in fact amounts to a society from which all individuals, qua individuals, are excluded.

In each of these cultural situations, then, the development of the society is at each point recognized to be the consequence of how that society, working on its own terms, grapples with the contradiction between its self-interpretation and its reality. Thus, diachronically as well as synchronically, the various manifest differences that constitute a society are actually a unified and systematic expression of a single animating principle of social self-interpretation.

**Conclusion**

The notion of "hermeneutics," as a distinctive form of philosophy, is typically associated with the tradition of thinkers that runs through Schleiermacher and Dilthey to Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Hegel's philosophy, however, clearly incorporates the central tenets of this philosophical movement in his notion that all experience is interpretive, in the "concrete" or holistic principle of his interpretive practice, in his notion that self-identity is a hermeneutical phenomenon, and in his notion that hermeneutics is beyond method. His central notion of dialectic, further, anticipates the tradition of deconstruction associated with Derrida. Though it is not typically associated with the historical movement of "hermeneutics," Hegel's is a systematic hermeneutical philosophy, of profound relevance to contemporary studies of interpretation and its role in human life.

**Notes**


2 M107, W/C 75.


4 This argument in general is worked out in Part A, "Consciousness," in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. What I refer to as "interpretation" corresponds most closely to what Hegel refers to in these chapters as "understanding" [Verstand].
5 M177, W/C 127.
7 M350-1, W/C 235.
12 This is the substance of Parts A and B of Chapter VI, “Spirit.” For a discussion of the overall argument of this section, see John Russon, Reading Hegel’s Phenomenology (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 138–144.