Autonomy and Community

Some remarks on the second movement of Brandom's sonata

John McDowell
University of Pittsburgh

1. Kant, strongly influenced by Rousseau, conceives freedom as autonomy, in a sense that needs to be understood in a normative framework. Hegel follows Kant in conceiving freedom as autonomy, but he insists that autonomy can be understood only in the context of an idea of community.

That condenses Brandom's reading of some central themes in the German Idealist tradition into a couple of sentences, organized around the notes he sounds in the title "Autonomy, Community, and Freedom". At this level of abstraction Brandom's story surely cannot be faulted. But I want to express some doubts about the details.

2. Autonomy is self-government, self-determination. I think the Kantian conception of autonomy can be summarized like this: one is self-determining when one's thinking and acting are determined by reasons that one recognizes as such. We can think of "autonomy" as labelling a capacity, the capacity to appreciate the force of reasons and respond to it. But determining oneself is actually exercising that capacity. That is what it is to be in control of one's own life.

If we approach the idea of autonomy in this way, we are indeed placing it in a normative framework. This account centres on a normative concept, the concept of the *authority* of reasons: their force, in the natural metaphor I have already used. To exercise autonomy is to subject oneself to the normative force of reasons. That is a self-subjection that is at the same time a self-determination. If one conforms to the authority of a reason one appreciates as such, one's thought or action is determined by the power in one by virtue of which one is able to recognize that authority and think or act accordingly. And it is in exercising that power that one is truly oneself. This is the content of the image Kant adapts from Rousseau, in which freedom is obedience to a self-legislated law. If

one recognizes a consideration as having the authority that belongs to a reason, one sees conforming to it not as obedience to a requirement imposed on one from outside, but as precisely what is required for one's thought or action to be one's own.

I have spoken of *recognizing* the authority of reasons. This talk of recognition presupposes that what one recognizes is something one might also be wrong, or just ignorant, about. Suppose someone takes herself to have a compelling reason for thinking or acting in a certain way, and thinks or acts accordingly. That does not yet imply that she is exercising autonomy — though such a description can get a grip only on someone who is autonomous in the sense of being *capable* of exercising autonomy. Suppose our subject's conforming her thought or action to a putative reason reflects her believing race or gender settles one's proper station in life. In that case what explains her thought or action is not the force of a reason recognized as such; what we have here is only the illusion of an instance of that. The explanatory weight falls through the putative reason to whatever explains her taking it to be a reason. That is not how things are with exercises of autonomy, where understanding can find firm ground in a reason that the subject appreciates for what it is.

This raises a question about Brandom's play with attitude-dependence. It is true that the normative status of being subject to the authority of a reason was not a feature of the pre-human world, to echo something Brandom says in this context. There could not have been instances of that status until there were rational animals, able to have normative attitudes that consisted in taking themselves to be subject to the authority of reasons. But if we apply what Brandom says about attitude-dependence to that status, we get the claim that the human world's special characteristic — its being inhabited by individuals who are subject to the authority of reasons, as the rational animals they are — is *instituted* by those attitudes. And this is not, as Brandom implies, just another way of expressing the obvious thought that the status was absent from the pre-human world. Moreover, this picture does not accommodate the distinction I urged between the thin explanatory power of considerations wrongly taken to be reasons and the robust explanatory power of reasons appreciated for what they are.

Rationality made its appearance in the world when our ancestors came to have a capacity to recognize the authority of reasons. The authority of reasons had to be there to

be recognized, and hence possibly misrecognized, as soon as anyone had a capacity to recognize it. (No sooner, by all means; that is the application to this case of Brandom's point about the pre-human world.) In its first incarnation, even more than at later stages in its development (including ours), the capacity could yield knowledge of the layout of only some regions of the space of reasons, with other regions only distortedly in view or not in view at all. Like any human capacity to know, this capacity is partial and fallible. And knowing it to be partial and fallible is part of what it is to have it at all. Even at the dawn of rationality, those who had the capacity to recognize the authority of reasons already knew that what is a reason for what was something they and their fellows could be ignorant or wrong about, not a subject matter that simply reflected, because it was instituted by, the subjective stances that presented themselves as views of it.

Brandom sets the idea that norms are instituted by attitudes against the traditional objectivist view, which he describes as one in which "the norms that determine what is 'fitting' in the way of human conduct are to be read off of features of the non-human world that are independent of the attitudes of those subject to the norms". I am resisting the idea that the authority of reasons is instituted by attitudes, and there is objectivism in the picture I am recommending we should replace it with. It would be wrong to think that commits me, for this normative concept, to the idea that one could read off the normative force of reasons from features of the non-human world. The authority of reasons is a feature of the world of rational animals, the human world. The human world came into being when our ancestors started taking themselves to be subject to the authority of reasons. Those takings did not institute the normative force of reasons; they were products of the first actualization of a capacity, open to improvement then and still, to discern instances of an authority that was already known by the first possessors of the capacity to outrun anyone's putative discernments of it.

3. I have glossed autonomy in terms of responsiveness to the normative force of reasons. And I have been drawing out a consequence of a contrast between this gloss and a feature of Brandom's picture. Brandom brings rationality into play only at a second stage of his story, on the back of the idea of a capacity for normative statuses in general, of which his first example is legal majority. He notes that rationality as he invokes it "does not consist

in knowers and agents generally, or even often, having good reasons for what they believe and do". Rationality as he invokes it is not an ability to discriminate genuine cases of the force of reason from impostors. Rationality figures in his picture only as a requirement for being able to situate oneself in normatively shaped spaces of a kind whose governing norms we can without strain see as instituted, by practices if not by attitudes, simply because they are institutional, as is the normative space in which the idea of legal majority has its home.

Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" centres on an image of growing up. It is in this context that Brandom offers legal majority as a model for the normative character of the Kantian conception of autonomy. I think this pretty much ensures that Kant's point goes missing. When one reaches the age of majority, one becomes (suddenly, as Brandom notes) empowered to bind oneself in certain ways, for instance by signing contracts. Now suppose someone who is legally an adult signs a contract and so binds herself in a certain way in the eyes of the law, but without thinking through for herself what grounds there are for or against doing so. Perhaps she is just doing what she has been told to do by her parents or her priest. This is exactly not a case of the maturity that figures in Kant's account of enlightenment. Kant's concern is the capacity to think for oneself about grounds and determine one's thought or action accordingly. That capacity does not kick in suddenly, on a specific birthday. The potential for it is actualized only gradually in a decent upbringing. For some purposes, perhaps, legal majority might be a helpful model for Kantian autonomy. But, as usual with models, the model would require a commentary, and just about the first thing the commentary would need to play down in the model is its institutional character.

Brandom cites social contract theories of political obligation to exemplify the idea that normative statuses are instituted by attitudes. This fits the social contract idea as it figures in empiricist political philosophy, where the authority of actual governments is explained in terms of consent, possibly only implicit, on the part of the governed. But Rousseau's use of the idea, which is what resonates with Kant, is different. Rousseau's social contract is an imagined institutional context in which, if the institutions he envisages could be realized (something he thinks could happen, if at all, only in highly constrained conditions), individuals might achieve a freedom that would consist in having

their action determined by a rational will. Kant is struck by this conception of freedom, and he rescues a version of it from Rousseau's pessimism about its being realized. In doing that, he detaches the relevant sort of freedom from political arrangements whose possibility of actualization might be an issue, as it is for Rousseau. The kingdom of ends is an institution at most metaphorically — not even notionally, like Rousseau's ideal polity. In Kant, Rousseau's idea of a freedom that would consist in obedience to the results of legislative acts of one's own becomes a vivid metaphor, a way of capturing the sense in which conforming one's thought and action to the authority of reasons is the very reverse of abdicating control over one's life to an alien power.

4. In learning to talk, one becomes able to adopt certain normative statuses. For instance, to make a claim is to undertake a commitment of a certain kind. In Brandom's story this power to adopt normative statuses serves as a paradigm instance of the positive freedom that autonomy is.

But if we explain autonomy as responsiveness to reasons recognized as such, as I have urged, this does not look like the right way to relate autonomy to language, for reasons like the one I gave against legal majority as a model for autonomy. Suppose that in undertaking a commitment by making a claim, I am following the party line, not giving expression to something I have thought through for myself. In that case, though my commitment is actual, I am not exercising autonomy in undertaking it.

Language does deserve a central place in the picture. But this is not because language enables one to adopt normative statuses. The point lies, rather, in a connection between the ability to talk and the capacity to recognize and respond to reasons as such. Language enables one to capture a consideration in words, for instance a feature of one's situation that tends to move one in a certain direction. Now one can distance oneself from the consideration, rather than being simply immersed in the predicament of which it is a feature. One can hold the consideration at arm's length and reflect on whether one should let it move one as it is tending to do. And that is an elementary case of thinking about the normative force of a putative reason. As Hegel says, "when the content of the interest in which one is absorbed is drawn out of its immediate unity with oneself and

becomes an independent object of one's thinking, then it is that spirit begins to be free …" (*Science of Logic*, 37).

Of course I do not dispute that a particular language, say English, is well conceived as a norm-governed practice. But the connection between language and autonomy lies in the way language enables considerations to become independent objects of one's thinking. And to register that role for language, we do not need to focus on the norm-governed character of linguistic performances.

5. Brandom offers an account of how what is distinctive in Hegel's thinking emerges in response to Hegel's reading of Kant. According to Brandom, Hegel's starting-point for his divergence from Kant is that he "sees Kant as having been uncharacteristically and culpably uncritical about the origin and nature of the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts".

Now I have just urged that the connection between language and autonomy lies not in the norm-governed character of linguistic practice, but in how language makes possible a distanced orientation towards considerations that are thereby enabled to be putative reasons for one. If that is right, issues about the origin and nature of some of the norms that govern a linguistic practice — specifically, those that are constitutive of the determinate significance of empirical expressions — are not a promising context for understanding a transition from Kantian to Hegelian thinking *about autonomy*.

But we can put that on one side. Brandom describes a divergence between Kant and Hegel in terms of a correction he says Hegel makes for a defect in Kant's approach to the semantics of empirical concepts. And we can consider that in its own right. It need not matter how closely it connects with the theme of autonomy.

Brandom's story about this divergence between Hegel and Kant goes like this.

In the background is a requirement that we understand the force of a normative status, for instance a commitment, separately from its content, in that case what one is committed to. *Whether* one commits oneself is up to one. *What* one is committing oneself to cannot be up to one, at least not in the same way. Otherwise we would be stuck with holding that "whatever seems right to us is right". And as Wittgenstein points out, in the context from which Brandom adapts those words (*Philosophical*

Investigations, §258), that would mean we could not talk about right at all; our talk of normativity would stand revealed as a pretence.

In the case of empirical judgments Kant secures this necessary separation by entrusting content to concepts, which accordingly must for him be determinate in advance of their application in the empirical activity of adopting commitments of the kind that judgments are. This confronts Kant with the question where these antecedently determinate empirical concepts come from. And the question is especially urgent in the context of the thought that norms in general, which should include the norms that fix the content of concepts, are attitude-dependent.

Brandom's Hegel thinks Kant has no satisfactory answer to that question. And he fills that gap in Kant's thinking by bringing into the picture, as contributing to the instituting of the relevant norms, not just, as in Kant, the normative attitude of acknowledging a judgmental commitment, but also the normative attitude of holding a judger responsible for her commitment. The content of an empirical judgment emerges out of an interplay of normative attitudes on the part of the subject who makes the judgment and other members of her community, all of them recognizing one another as authoritative in relevant ways. In Brandom's account, such a picture of the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts, put forward in self-conscious opposition to Kant, is the original setting for the distinctively Hegelian invocation of community.

Now it is surely true that we can make sense of much in Hegel's thinking as the upshot of his engagement with Kant. But I do not believe the story I have just rehearsed from Brandom makes contact with any problem that arises for Kant in his treatment of what Hegel calls "the Concept". And I think Hegel is a perceptive, if sometimes uncharitable, reader of Kant. So I am bound to think the story is on the wrong track about Hegel also.

As I noted, Brandom's story has it that the question where the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts comes from is especially urgent in the context of the thesis that norms in general are attitude-dependent. I have expressed a scepticism about the general thesis, and I think its application to the norms of languages is especially off key. It is true, of course, that the practice of speaking a language is sustained by people who participate in it. It is also true that the sustaining participation allows for the

practice, and so its norms, to be modified over time. But that is not to say the norms that define the practice are instituted by the sustaining participation. As soon as there are participants, their attitudes and practice are already informed by the norms, and this does not cohere with the idea that the attitudes and practice confer authority on the norms.

But I am going to set that on one side also. What I want to focus on is this: the defect Brandom's Hegel finds in Kant is about the determinate contentfulness of *empirical* concepts. I do not believe Kant's treatment of "the Concept" is subject to a difficulty in that area, and I think Hegel is a better reader of Kant than to suppose it is.

6. The closest Kant himself comes to something that might be expressed by asking "Where do such-and-such concepts come from?" is a concern with the source of our entitlement to suppose, in connection with the relevant concepts (or putative concepts, if the entitlement is in suspense), that we have content — relatedness to the objective — in view at all. And, though one would not gather this from Brandom's story, for empirical concepts in general Kant identifies the source of this entitlement as experience. In the only interpretation of the question "Where do empirical concepts come from?" that corresponds to a concern of Kant's, empirical concepts come from experience.

It is true that for Kant it is only because experience is already informed by the forms of thought that its content is of a kind that can be content for concepts. And Kant surely would not suggest we master the forms of thought in advance of having any determinate empirical content to work with, and only subsequently derive content for empirical concepts from what is now, thanks to that supposedly prior mastery of the forms of thought, experience in the relevant sense.

But that does not imply, as Brandom suggests, that for Kant there must be determinate empirical concepts in place in advance of any empirical judging. If we want a story about the genesis of empirical conceptual capacities in an individual subject, it must be in terms of light dawning *together* over all the elements of a whole — a whole that includes, first, a capacity to judge; second, thanks to operations of that capacity, some experience, in the sense in which experience can ground the "objective validity" of empirical concepts; and, third, some specific empirical conceptual capacities. There is no conceptual difficulty here, any more than there is for Sellars in a somewhat parallel

context, where he envisages a transition in which acquired dispositions to make uncomprehending vocal responses to environmental circumstances give way to an ability to make observational reports about them. ("Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", §37.) Sellars is responding to the question whether his picture of observational knowledge, which is deeply Kantian, implies, self-defeatingly, that subjects would need to have conceptual capacities already, in order to acquire the capacity for concept-involving empirical knowledge. He needs only a few sentences to show that the apparent problem is merely apparent. Kant is no worse off.

7. So far I have not considered the role of *determinacy of content* in the objection Brandom's Hegel makes against Kant. Brandom's Hegel does not complain about Kant's appeal to experience as the source of our entitlement to suppose, in connection with empirical concepts *in general*, that they embody a mode of relatedness to the objective. Brandom's Hegel points to a question one can raise about a *particular* empirical concept: granting that its content derives from experience, what determines which element, in the region of reality an experience brings into view, is the element of the objective to which the concept's determinate content relates it?

I do not believe Kant shows any interest in this kind of question in the first *Critique*. And I see no ground to suppose this absence is a problem for his project there, which centres not on empirical concepts but on the pure concepts of the understanding. (I shall come back to this.) About empirical concepts, Kant's project requires no more than the generic idea that experience, thanks to its being informed by the forms of thought, has content of a sort that is suitable for concepts. For his purposes in the *Critique*, Kant has no need to address questions about how determinate content for particular concepts might be carved out from the content available in experience. This casts doubt on the relevance to Kant's project of the complaint Brandom attributes to Hegel.

Elsewhere, for instance in his logic lectures, Kant does consider how it is determined which of the content available in an experience, or a series of experiences, is the content of a particular concept. What he says is, up to a point, reminiscent of the empiricists: we home in on specific elements of content by comparison, reflection, and abstraction. And here it is fair to remark that the issue would be sharpened if the question

were raised in this shape: how can experience figure in an explanation that attaches a determinate significance to a bit of language? This would be to frame the topic as the one Wittgenstein addresses under the head of ostensive definition.

I stress again that the absence of anything of this sort from the first *Critique* is not something a good reader, such as Hegel is, might identify as a defect in Kant's execution of his project there.

And anyway there is no opening here into the specific story about the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts that Brandom finds in Hegel.

Wittgenstein's point about ostensive definition has the obviousness that befits a reminder, the kind of thing he thinks philosophy calls for (*Philosophical Investigations*, §127). The obvious, though easily forgotten, point is this: one can explain the meaning of a word by pointing at something given in experience only if the sort of use the word is to have — for instance that it is to be a word for a colour — is independently settled. Without such a context it is not determined what one is pointing at.

The concept of a practice does some work here, in the guise of the practice of using a word as one has to for it to be, say, a word for a colour. There is no ground for supposing the concept of a practice can do the work it does, in discouraging superstitious conceptions of how ostensive definition works, only if we cash it out in terms of something like Brandom's story about mutual recognition of authority. Wittgenstein's reminder does not turn on the shared character of the practice it invokes, let alone anything like the complex social structure that figures in Brandom's story. Worse: bringing in Brandom's story would positively spoil Wittgenstein's reminder, by taking us at least to the brink of an unnecessary new puzzlement, about the rationality of adopting commitments. How can it be rational to commit oneself if it is up to others to determine what one has committed oneself to? If someone else gets to say what I have promised to do when I bind myself by a promise, how can binding myself not be just putting myself at someone else's mercy?

What about Wittgenstein's "Whatever seems right to me is right"? Brandom lifts this out of its context, Wittgenstein's treatment of the supposed possibility of private ostensive definition. "Private", in the specification of this supposed idea, marks it as an illusion. But we need to be careful about how. Wittgenstein's point is not that the

supposition has a defect that would be fixed if we could bring a community into the picture, as if that would provide for determinacy in the content supposedly being introduced. What Wittgenstein unmasks as illusory is an idea on these lines: in sensation one stands to items in one's inner world in a relation like the relation one stands in to items in one's environment in perceptual experience. In the grip of that illusion, one supposes one can ostensively equip oneself with a concept whose content relates it to an element of that supposed inner experience. But the supposed ostensive definition is mere show, in a way Wittgenstein emphasizes with "Whatever seems right to me is right". His point is not that one's attempt to isolate a determinate content would have worked if one had been able to give others authority over the boundaries of the concept one means to be introducing. It is not that one's experience contains material for conceptual content, in the way one is imagining, but one has failed to make a determinate selection from that material by trying to do it unilaterally — with the failure perhaps inevitable, because with this material one cannot get others to help effect determinacy. There is only an illusion of potential conceptual content given in experience in the way one is imagining.

8. I have been urging that Kant's treatment of "the Concept" involves only a generic role for empirical concepts. Their "objective validity" comes from experience, and the first *Critique* does not need even the sketch of the details of this derivation that Kant offers in the logic lectures. Hegel is a better reader of Kant than to find Kant's treatment of "the Concept" wanting because it lacks a satisfactory answer to a question that need not even arise for Kant there.

Hegel's problem with Kant is elsewhere. It relates to a part of Kant's picture of "the Concept" that Brandom, astonishingly, does not even mention (in this context): the categories, the pure concepts of the understanding. A category in Kant's usage is a concept of an object *überhaupt*. The content of a category is specified by describing a way sensory material can be unified in intuitions, which are thereby enabled to be immediate presentations of objects. And the unity of intuitions reflects an operation of the same intellectual capacity that produces the unity of judgments. This gives Kant a clue for arriving at his list of categories: the way to do that is to adapt the list of modes of unity in judgment that lies ready to hand in the work of logicians. Equipped on that basis

with a list of pure concepts of the understanding, Kant needs to establish their "objective validity", by establishing their capacity to enable intuitions to be of objects. He needs to do that if he is to be entitled to take empirical concepts in stride as he does. It is only because the pure concepts have "objective validity" that experience is of objects, and so can be the source of "objective validity" for empirical concepts. Since the "objective validity" of the pure concepts is thus presupposed by the very possibility of concepts that come from experience, it cannot itself come from experience. The "objective validity" of the pure concepts has to be demonstrated *a priori*, and that is the task of the Transcendental Deduction, a section of the first *Critique* in relation to which Hegel takes pains to locate his own thinking.

The most straightforward strand in Hegel's objection to all this is that it is uncritical to take over a catalogue of forms of thought from the existing practice of logic. The pure forms of thought should emerge with an internal necessity, in a self-unfolding by the power of thought itself.

That line of objection may not be fair to Kant. But in any case there is a point on which Hegel diverges more radically from Kant. If we assign to logic the task of disclosing the pure forms of thought, calling them "pure" can no longer mean what it means in Kant.

Kant has his problem about the categories because they have their source in the understanding, independently of sensibility, whereas objects are given for our knowledge only through sensibility. That is why the Transcendental Deduction is a task for him. He needs to argue that it is only because intuitions are informed by the pure concepts of the understanding that they present objects to us. This responds to a question that arises for him because he separates our powers of thought from something he conceives as quite other than them, sensibility, which is supposed to be requisite for them to be provided with objects.

By Hegel's lights the question itself already reflects an untenable dualism, before we even consider Kant's response to it. In Hegel's view it betrays a failure of nerve about our powers of thought to accept that our thinking is essentially beholden to something external to it for its objects. So if we conceive Hegel's logic as the self-unfolding of the pure forms of thought, we must no longer understand their purity in

terms of their being able to come into view in abstraction from any directedness at objects. To borrow a Kantian term, logic for Hegel is, just as such and from the beginning, transcendental logic, logic concerned with thought as object-directed. Logic does not need to have a transcendental character constructively conferred on it, as in Kant, by way of our processing, through something on the lines of the Transcendental Deduction and the Schematism, what first come into view as forms belonging to a general logic, a logic that abstracts from the object-directedness of thought.

Of course that sketch of a Hegelian reaction to Kant is only programmatic. But I think it contains enough for a recognizable fit with Hegel's explicit pronouncements about Kant's treatment of "the Concept". And it should be clear that this bone of contention between Hegel and Kant relates to Kant's explanation of how thinking has objective purport at all, not to a Kantian account, or a Kantian failure to have an account, of the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts.

This may make it tempting to propose reframing Brandom's story about mutually recognitive communities as an explanation of the object-directedness of thinking in general, rather than the determinate contentfulness of empirical concepts in particular.

Brandom's story makes a certain sense as an account of how an empirical concept might come to have one determinate content rather than others that are candidates to be its content; though, as I have urged, Brandom's machinery is excessive if our eyes are on Wittgenstein's issue about ostensive definition. But even if we set aside the point that the machinery is excessive, it is not at all clear how the story might be transformed into a counterpart to the Transcendental Deduction.

And anyway, what Hegelian problem would the supposed counterpart respond to? For Kant the question "How is it possible that the pure concepts of the understanding have objective validity?" arises because he holds that our thought owes its having a subject matter at all to something external to our powers of thinking. That is just where Hegel says he goes wrong. So what would give urgency to a Hegelian descendant of Kant's question? I think the answer is "Nothing". For Hegel logic is, as I said, transcendental just as such. Kant's constructive account of how pure thinking can be object-directed falls away, not as a bad response to a good question, but as a response to a question that would not even seem to arise were it not for Kant's timid deference to

sensibility. And Hegel has no successor problem that would require a different constructive account. I see no ground to suppose he aims at any such thing.

9. Everyone has to acknowledge that the idea of community is fundamental to Hegel's thinking. So what is its role there, if not in the kind of account Brandom favours for the determinate significance of empirical concepts? Or — the option I have just rejected — in a Hegelian counterpart to the Transcendental Deduction? Obviously I cannot give this question its due at this stage of this talk. But I want to expand a bit on something I have already implicitly suggested.

The idea of a linguistic community is indeed central. Brandom cites Hegel saying that language is the *Dasein* of *Geist* (*Phenomenology*, ¶652). For any individual embodiment of *Geist*, language is, to begin with, *a* language, say English: a possession of many, who are a *we* for any relevant *I*. I said "to begin with": I can contemplate expanding a *we* that embraces English-speakers into a *we* that would embrace all of humanity. And those whom I can speak of, and for, in the first person plural are bound together with me in a network of potential mutual recognition.

What does it mean to say language is the *Dasein* of *Geist*? After noting (in one of the prefaces to the *Logic*) that "the forms of thought are, in the first instance, displayed and stored in human *language*", Hegel says:

> Nowadays we cannot be too often reminded that it is *thinking* which distinguishes men from the beasts. Into all that becomes something inward for men, an image or conception as such, into all that he makes his own, language has penetrated … If nature as such, as the physical world, is contrasted with the spiritual sphere, then logic must certainly be said to be the supernatural element which permeates every relationship of man to nature, his sensation, intuition, desire, need, instinct, and simply by so doing transforms it into something human … (*Science of Logic*, 31-2).

Command of language does not figure here as one *instance*, not even a paradigmatic instance, of a kind of positive freedom, a freedom to adopt normative statuses, which one

might cite as compensation for a loss of negative freedom involved in subjecting oneself to norms. In this passage language is the vector of a "supernatural element which permeates every relationship of man to nature". Language-using animals are metaphysically special throughout their lives.

In a nearby passage that I quoted earlier, Hegel implies that with command of language, the content of an interest one is absorbed in can become an object for one, and then "spirit begins to be free". No doubt one can explicitly make the content an object for one by formulating it as the content of a discursive commitment. But it can be an object for one, language-using creature that one is, whether or not one actually expresses it in a discursive commitment. And it is its being an object for one, not one's making it explicit, that marks a distinctively human relationship to it. Commitments, in particular discursive commitments, and normative statuses in general are not to the point here. The relevant role for normativity is in its guise as the force of reasons, responsiveness to which is what characterizes a distinctively human life.

Mastery of language, in respect of which an *I* belongs to a mutually recognitive *we*, helps make intelligible an actualizing of a potential for autonomy that normal individuals of our species are born with. More generally, it is by being initiated into a community, bound together in more ways than just sharing a language, that human beings become the rational animals they have it in them to be. This connection of autonomy with community need not open into Brandom's project of invoking scorekeeping to account for the objective purport of speech and thought. I do not believe that project is Hegel's. The normativity that matters for Hegel is, as I said, the normativity implicit in talk of the force of reasons. I see no ground to suppose a less restricted idea of normativity serves for Hegel as a foundation for a constructive account of objective purport in general, or of determinate empirical significance in particular.

Let me end by putting this in a wider context. Recall Rousseau's idea that if his social contract could be realized there would emerge a metaphysically new kind of being, the autonomous citizen. Kant thinks the world already contains autonomous rational individuals, in a conception that generalizes the one he finds in Rousseau. The generalization removes Rousseau's conception from its specifically political setting. And

Kant makes a mere metaphor out of what, in Rousseau, is a social context whose actuality would be required for the metaphysical novelty to come into being.

Now Hegel, for his part, follows Kant in generalizing Rousseau's conception away from an exclusively political setting; like Kant, he does not identify autonomy with citizenship. But in another way Hegel reverts to Rousseau; for Hegel, it is only in an actual social context — the *Dasein* of *Geist* — that we can make sense of the emergence of this metaphysically special kind of being, the autonomous individual. In general terms, that is why actual social contexts matter to Hegel. And since, as is obvious, autonomy did not come on the scene fully formed when our ancestors began to be human, this yields a frame in which to place Hegel's concern with the history of realizations of *Geist*.