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Dialectics Between Suspicion and Trust

Ray Brassier

American University of Beirut

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Abstract

Suspicion toward reason is integral to much contemporary critical theory. The proximate source for this spirit of suspicion is undoubtedly Nietzsche's genealogical unmasking of the will to truth as will to power. Robert Brandom summarizes this development as follows: Where the Enlightenment disenchanted the world through reason, genealogy is disillusionment with reason. Genealogy is the skeptical exacerbation of critique, the point at which it becomes suspicious of its own residual rationalism. The move from critique to genealogy marks the shift from the rational demarcation of reason's limits to the skeptical destitution of reason's authority. But reason is dialectical precisely to the extent that disenchantment presupposes an underlying trust in the capacities of conceptual rationality. Without such trust, the absolutization of genealogical suspicion lapses into metaphysical credulity toward an ultimately theological "other" of reason.

Keywords

Brandom, critique, dialectics, Freud, genealogy, Hegel, hermeneutics of suspicion

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Paul Ricoeur famously described Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as “the masters of suspicion” (1970: 32). What unites these thinkers, according to Ricoeur, is “the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness” (1970: 33). This is to say that all three introduce a fundamental discrepancy between what we think we mean, believe, intend, or desire, and the *real* forces that actually condition what we mean, believe, intend, or desire. These forces—class antagonism, will to power, sexual repression—operate behind the back of our everyday awareness, such that our own consciousness misleads us not only about *what* we really believe, intend, or desire (which is to say, about the veritable *contents* of our beliefs, desires, and intentions), but also about *why* we believe, intend, or desire the things we do—in other words, the real causal factors (economic, cultural, psychical) at work behind or beneath the surface of consciousness.

Of course, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud each in their own way challenged the kinds of mechanistic explanation proffered by empiricist economists, Darwinian psychologists, and neurological reductionists, favoring instead explanations couched in terms of dialectical contradiction, *resentiment*, or the vicissitudes of libidinal drives. Yet even if these cannot be called mechanical causes in the sense favored by nineteenth century physical science, it is important to note that the appeal to forces, whether socioeconomic, cultural, or libidinal, remains causal. The class struggle, the will to power, and the unconscious all produce *effects*: the rise of the bourgeoisie, the triumph of Christianity, traumatic neurosis, and so on. But what is peculiar about these effects is that they have a symptomatic character: their proper description is at the same time an interpretation. They are meaningful phenomena whose proper interpretation exceeds the interpretative resources available to ordinary consciousness. Their observation is inseparable from their interpretation. This is why the modes of explanation inaugurated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud operate in the interzone between explanations couched in terms of reasons, which involve subjective beliefs and desires, and explanations couched in terms of physical causes, which do not.

This distinction can be illuminated as follows. Andrew Wiles’s desire to prove Fermat’s last theorem can be explained in terms of his belief that doing so would advance mathematical knowledge, together with his desire to contribute to this advancement. For this explanation to succeed, I have to be right that this is indeed what Wiles believed and desired (perhaps he believed his proof would effectively terminate mathematics and this is what he desired). But his achievement might also be explained (at least hypothetically) in terms of the enormously complex series of neurophysiological states he went through in pursuing, executing, and realizing

his proof. This latter sort of explanation makes no mention of what Wiles believed or desired. His beliefs and desires are (supposedly) explained by his neurophysiological states. What is required for this sort of explanation to succeed is the correct identification of Wiles's actual neurophysiological states. Crucially, none of these states *means* anything.

Now, to say that the forms of explanation inaugurated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud operate in the hinter-zone between reasons and causes is to say two things. First, it is to say that they identify effects that are *meaning-laden* but whose meaningfulness is not constituted by consciousness: it transcends the varieties of belief and desire commensurate with our own understanding of our individual experience. In other words, the meaningfulness of these unconscious beliefs and desires (e.g., class interests, slave morality, the Oedipus complex) differs in kind from that ascribed to psychological states. Second, it is to say that the proper identification of the salient causal factors operating behind the back of consciousness is not "objective" in the sense where the identification of causes in a physical explanation can be characterized as "objective." In other words, there is a different kind of subjectivity implicated in the explanations proposed by historical materialism, genealogy, and psychoanalysis. The subjectivity in question is an impersonal subjectivity whose forms of understanding transcend the horizons of personal subjective experience.

It is the discovery that there is a kind of theoretical objectivity that is neither empirical, nor neutral, nor value-free, and that this objectivity is the correlate of a kind of subjectivity that is neither individual in the Cartesian sense, nor transcendental in the Kantian sense, nor universal in the Hegelian sense, that distinguishes the theoretical accomplishments of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud from those of empirical science as well as traditional philosophy. This is the theoretical discovery through which Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are widely held to have challenged the cognitive pretensions of Enlightenment rationalism, as represented by the philosophies of Kant and Hegel on one hand, and the successive development of empirical sciences like physics, chemistry, cosmology, biology, and psychology on the other. In the second half of the twentieth century this challenge gives rise to the variety of discourses associated with what is now known in the humanities as "theory." Its most radical and influential manifestation is the genealogical critique of reason, truth, and objectivity sketched by Nietzsche and later expanded by his poststructuralist heirs. But I want to say a little more about the basis of the distinction between philosophy and theory before considering the precise scope and nature of the genealogical challenge to rationality.

Philosophy and Theory

The peculiar challenge posed to philosophy by Marx and Freud is well characterized by Fredric Jameson. Here is Jameson on how the materialist dialectic initiated by Marx and Freud subverts the pretensions of traditional philosophy:

[T]he dialectic belongs to theory rather than philosophy: the latter is always haunted by the dream of some foolproof self-sufficient system, a set of interlocking concepts which are their own cause. This dream is of course the after-image of philosophy as an institution in the world, as a profession complicit with everything else in the status quo, in the fallen ontic realm of “what is.” *Theory, on the other hand, has no vested interests inasmuch as it never lays claim to an absolute system, a non-ideological formulation of itself and its “truths”; indeed, always itself complicit in the being of current language, it has only the vocation and never-finished task of undermining philosophy as such, by unraveling affirmative statements and propositions of all kinds.* We may put this another way by saying that the two great bodies of post-philosophical thought, marked by the names of Marx and Freud, are better characterized as unities of theory and practice: that is to say that their practical component always interrupts the “unity of theory” and prevents it from coming together in some satisfying philosophical system (Jameson 2006: 7; own emphasis added).

Why does Jameson insist that “the dialectic” belong to theory rather than philosophy? The philosopher who explicitly avows dialectics (or what Jameson here calls “the dialectic”) is of course Hegel. Indeed, for Hegel, philosophy *is* dialectics. Note that this is not the same as saying that philosophy is dialectical. To say that philosophy is dialectical implies that philosophy is just one among many discourses to which the adjective “dialectical” applies. Hegel’s claim is much more specific: philosophy *is* dialectics; to think dialectically is to think philosophically. Moreover, according to the Hegel legend, philosophy is capable of articulating a form of theoretical knowledge that is both complete and wholly consistent: “absolute knowledge.” Of course, the extent to which Hegel believed this is moot; and even if he did, how to understand what Hegel meant by “absolute knowledge” remains controversial. But this is at least the official version of what Hegel claimed for philosophy as dialectics.

What Jameson is challenging is the comprehensiveness Hegel claimed for philosophy as dialectics together with Hegel’s claim that philosophy has a proprietary relation to dialectics. For Jameson, dialectics belongs to theory rather than to philosophy to the extent that it is theory, not philosophy, which recognizes that reason can never become wholly transparent to itself. Theory recognizes the ways in which reality prevents

us from attaining an absolutely comprehensive knowledge of ourselves and our world. This discrepancy between theory and reality shows up in our practical failures. It is because we fail to do what we know we should that our knowledge is incomplete. Thus the peculiar privilege of theory in Jameson's sense is understanding what prevents us from knowing. So for Jameson, the recognition that the ambition of absolute comprehensiveness necessarily leaves something uncomprehended is supremely dialectical. It points to the need to separate dialectics from philosophy. Dialectics migrates from philosophy to the theory that identifies the *cause* of the constitutive incompleteness of every conceptual system. To understand how this works we have to understand how theory rearticulates reasons and causes in the wake of Kant.

Kant: Justification and Explanation

Kant's fundamental philosophical achievement is twofold. First, Kant sets out a non-metaphysical, which is to say non-theological, conception of human reason. Where the divine intellect is intuitive, immediately apprehending the infinite complexity of the particularity it has created, the human intellect is discursive because its intuition is sensible, not intelligible. Concepts are not representations but rules for connecting representations. Judgment is the basic unit of cognition and the conceptual functions exercised by judgment require a discursive framework. Fundamentally, for Kant, what distinguishes human rationality from divine reason is its *discursive* nature. Reason is neither some innate "natural light" nor the Creator's divine imprint upon his favorite creature. It consists in the capacity to judge and in being motivated by an obligation to justify one's assertions. For Kant, reason is linked to freedom insofar as acting according to a rule (i.e., deploying a concept in an act of judgment) is transcendently spontaneous, rendering us authors of our actions, as opposed to passive vehicles steered by the inclinations of our sensible natures.

Kant's second fundamental achievement consists in distinguishing the domain of rational justification from the realm of causation: thinking is a normative, rule-governed discursive activity, not a series of causally determined psychological mechanisms. Thoughts (i.e., judgments) may be correlated with systematically interlocking psychological states, but they cannot be identified with them. Mind is not a substance, whether material or immaterial, but the normative dimension instituted by the exercise of the conceptual. Thus there is a fundamental difference between rational justification and causal explanation.

Now, this Kantian demarcation of reasons from causes is arguably the culmination of the Modern revolt against Aristotle insofar as it marks the definitive revocation of their metaphysical fusion. Recall that for Aristotle, reasons *are* causes. More precisely, reasons cannot be dissociated

from causes because formal and final causes are inscribed together with their material and efficient counterparts into the substantial architecture of reality. This fusion of reasons with causes, whose guarantor is God, is the hallmark of the theological worldview.

How, then, may we situate Jameson's account within this schema? Two things are worthy of note. First, for Jameson, systematic philosophy is an avatar of theology as a discourse tending toward the fusion of reasons and causes, explanation and justification. This is what renders philosophy an apologia for the status quo at best, or a rationalization of oppression at worse. The philosophical pretention to truth is ideological. Justification is *always* suspect. Second, dialectical theory distinguishes itself from philosophical dialectics insofar as it registers practice's interruption of conceptual systematicity. "Practice" here names not just the interruption of the autonomy of the conceptual but also the non-conceptual conditioning of the conceptual. Where philosophy's privileging of conceptually circumscribed truth is congenitally idealist (i.e., theological), theory relays the materialist primacy of practice. But in order for materialist dialectics to countermand the idealist seclusion of dialectics within the intelligible order, that is to say, conceptual discourse, practice must give vent to the transcendence of the sensible insofar as it figures a *non-intelligible* transcendence puncturing the self-sufficiency of the intelligible order, that is, of conceptual discourse. Practice is the reactivation of the transcendence of the sensible against the latent hylomorphism of Kant's critical rationalism. It channels a dimension of experience that resists predetermination through the form of judgment.

It is this materialist dialectic of theory and practice that challenges the Platonic entwining of truth, justice, and justification. Since justification is discursive, theory lays claim to a radical emancipatory potency insofar as the transcendence of practice (however configured) disrupts the transitivity between justice and justification. What is just cannot simply be what is justifiable. This dissociation contests Kant's account of the interdependence between freedom and reason. If the "force of the better reason" can be shown to be a duplicitous alibi for the exercise of power, then rational authority can be identified with a form of coercion. The demand for justification becomes a more insidious instance of oppression. This is the genealogical move. Genealogy is the skeptical exacerbation of critique: the point at which it becomes suspicious of its own residual rationalism (Nietzsche against Marx and Freud). Where Marx and Freud radicalize Enlightenment by proposing theoretical explanations that critically delimit the purview of reason, Nietzschean genealogy exposes rationality as another form of domination. The move from critique to genealogy marks the shift from rational explanation—up to and including the critical demarcation of the limits and scope of rationality, that is, its heteronomy—to the *unmasking* of reason's explanatory pretensions.

The Genealogical Reduction

If the demarcation of reasons from causes consummates the break between the modern and the premodern, the global genealogical destitution of this Kantian distinction arguably inaugurates the postmodern era.¹ The genealogical radicalization of Critique consists of turning Kant's distinction against Kant by showing how reasons are caused by arational forces: class interests, libidinal drives, will to power, etc. But this is not enough. The global genealogical subversion of Kant's secularization of reason lies in the further insistence that reasons are not merely caused by non-rational forces but constituted by them. It is this further reduction of reasons to causes that subverts their justificatory force and hence their normative authority. By showing how reasons are "really" causes in disguise, global genealogical reduction contests the pretention to autonomy claimed by systematized propositional assertion. It challenges the authority of the *logos*.

At this juncture, it is important to note Jameson's insistence that theory's unraveling of philosophical assertion operates "through a complicity with the being of current language" (2006). This is what prevents theoretical subversion from relapsing into metaphysical assertion, whose tendential limit is the identification of a reason that would serve as the ultimate source or ground for the contingency of causes. Thus, the genealogical challenge to the authority of *logos* "should" (and the exact nature of this "should" is obviously problematic) unfold within the immanence of discourse, or what Jameson calls "the being of current language" (2006). The resources of discourse must be mobilized against their logical-philosophical overcoding. If this injunction is taken seriously, it is clear that the subversion of discursive authority must be carried out by diagnosing the effects of non-discursive, arational forces within the order of rational discourse. What, then, is the precise mechanism of discursive subversion? To identify it, we can use Robert Brandom's distinction between epistemic states, that is, *believings*, and their semantic contents, what the *believings* are about, that is, the *believed*. This distinction can be reformulated in discourse as the immanent distinction between *asserting* and *asserted*. Genealogy reduces reasons to causes by driving a causal wedge between believing and believed, asserting and asserted, severing the justificatory tie that connects the former to the latter. It establishes a causal etiology for acts of believing that eliminates justificatory factors. By eliminating justificatory factors in the etiology of beliefs (i.e., *believings*), it quarantines their semantic contents (i.e., the *believed*), stranding them in an

¹ The destitution is ambiguous: on one hand it marks the ultra-materialist reduction of reasons to causes; on the other their neo-Aristotelian reconnection. Both strands are visible in postmodern discourse.

epiphenomenal stratum of ideation. This stratum is the element of ideology. More simply, the propositional content of beliefs (what is believed) is shown to be caused by non-propositional factors, that is, by forces, whether libidinal, economic, or psychosomatic. Here is Brandom's formulation:

[G]enealogical explanations concern the relations between the act or state of *believing* and the content that is *believed*. A genealogy explains the advent of a belief, in the sense of a believing, an attitude, in terms of contingencies of its etiology, appealing exclusively to facts that are *not* evidence, that do *not* provide reasons or justifications, for the truth of what is believed (Brandom 2013: 4).

Note that this genealogical subversion attributes not only causally determining but constituting power to forces: this is the subversive force of the claim that the propositional content of beliefs is just an expression of class antagonism, libidinal drives, will to power, etc. Note also that the explanatory inference from effects to causes, that is, from believings to non-believings or forces, is *a priori* rather than empirical. The deduction, after all, unfolds within the order of discourse, the immanent "being of current language." Were this not so, the genealogical postulation of these extra-discursive forces would be straightforwardly metaphysical. Yet although resolutely antimetaphysical, the genealogical operation is also stridently anti-empiricist. We can call these genealogical postulates "superempirical." By "superempirical," I mean a force (or forces) that in Kantian parlance cannot be situated on either side of the divide between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, but whose effects can be tracked within a suitably enlarged (not to say equivocal) conception of "experience."

What, then, is the epistemic status of these superempirical forces? Why should we believe they're real? Global genealogy must dismiss this request for justification. For the wholesale reduction of reasons to causes is of a piece with the destitution of Kantian epistemology understood as a normative enterprise concerned with identifying conditions of justification for knowledge claims. The superempirical forces diagnosed by global genealogy are not objective factors discernible from an epistemically neutral standpoint; they are unconscious determinants whose identification presupposes the adoption of the genealogical standpoint. Yet note that the critical unmasking of (rational) justification as (ideological) rationalization continues to presuppose the intelligibility of justification, albeit as absent or unrealized. The exacerbation of suspicion presupposes the dereliction of an underlying trust.

This is the point at which it is necessary to mark the crucial divergence between the local and global variants of genealogical subversion. It is what separates enlightened demystification from the skeptical debunking of Enlightenment. It follows from two distinct approaches to the superempirical, which in turn entail two contrasting conceptions of the un-

conscious. Marx and Freud materialize the superempirical in terms of production and drive respectively. Metapsychology and the critique of political economy provide theoretical frameworks for explanatory symptomatology of unconscious processes, whether in terms of economic production or libidinal drives, and it is this explanatory function that renders the operations of the unconscious both cognitively and practically tractable—indeed, it is the condition for the interdependence of theory and practice which is so central for both Marxism and psychoanalysis. By way of contrast, Nietzsche’s hypostatization of will to power results in a metaphysics of forces manifesting qualitatively different types of will: healthy or sick, life-affirming or life-denying. The absolutization of will to power as both agent (i.e., subject) and patient (i.e., object) of interpretation turns Nietzschean genealogy into an *evaluative* symptomatology of the qualities of forces and types of will. For Marx and Freud, reason’s unconscious determinants are deciphered through an explanatory symptomatology elaborated in and through theory—theoretical self-consciousness renders unconscious determination conceptually tractable. For Nietzsche, however, the unconscious determinant is identified with a vital principle—life as such or will to power—and diagnosed according to a criterion of evaluation grounded in the normative opposition between health and sickness, an opposition that can only be affirmed precisely because it is not amenable to conceptual justification.

Ultimately, this is to say that Marx and Freud use reason to expose reason’s illusory self-sufficiency. They develop diagnostic frameworks that explain the mechanisms through which rational self-consciousness is systematically deformed by unconscious forces. Psychoanalysis and historical materialism propose local genealogies exposing determinate pathologies of reason, its congenital blindspots. They circumscribe rationality, but they do not pathologize it. By way of contrast, Nietzsche’s devalorization of rationality as the means through which the sick dominate the healthy together with his diagnosis of the will to truth as a symptom of the ascetic ideal entail a global pathologization of rationality: the sanctification of the will to truth is the symptom of an unhealthy will to power. This is a pathologization in the Kantian sense because it reduces rational motivation to psychosomatic inclination. This pathologization subsequently ramifies through critical theory via the confluence of Nietzsche’s proclamations about the ubiquity of will to power—reason is domination—with Bergson’s utilitarian demotion of the intellect—reason is manipulation—and Heidegger’s suggestion that idealization (i.e., conceptualization) is the forgetting of appearing (*phainesthai*)—reason is amnesia.

What I want to suggest is that the globalization of genealogical disillusionment turns into an illusory enchantment: the indiscriminate reduction of reason to power unwittingly reinstates the theological fusion of rationalization and causation in the form of what Jameson calls “practice” (or what Nietzsche called “affirmation”). Practical transcendence

becomes the reason that justifies the causal destitution of reason: a reason whose rightness or justice cannot be discursively justified. But the notion of unintelligible justice, of a rightness that refuses discursive justification, is ultimately theological. Theory's recourse to practical transcendence results in a theologization of the sensible as what lies beyond or beneath the jurisdiction of perceptual judgment. For Kantian rationalism, to be an object of possible experience is to be "judgeable," an intelligible content. This content has propositional form. The evocation of the "unjudgeable" in sensible experience becomes the default of justification that justifies the split between reasons and causes, between what we believe and why we believe it. The unfolding of this dialectic of reasons and causes—which is also the dialectic of suspicion and trust—leads us back to Hegel.

The Spirit of Trust

In his forthcoming *A Spirit of Trust*², Brandom credits Hegel with a dialectical rectification of Kant that preemptively neutralizes the global genealogical reduction of reasons to causes (2014). By embedding the Kantian contrast between belief and content within a discursive community, Brandom's Hegel recodes it in terms of a distinction between practical attitudes and normative statuses wherein each presupposes the other. There would be no normative statuses (truth or falsity at the level of assertion, rightness or wrongness in the domain of action) without practical attitudes that treat assertions and actions as correct or incorrect, right or wrong. By the same token, the notion of a practical attitude (a believing) that would not be an attitude *toward* some normative status (i.e., a belief *about* something), whether of assertion or action, is equally incoherent. The interdependence of practical attitudes and normative statuses entails that neither can be isolated from the other. Just as practical attitudes (i.e., beliefs) cannot be determined independently of normative statuses (semantic contents), these statuses cannot be determined independently of those attitudes. In Brandom's vocabulary this means that the *application* of a concept is indissociable from its practical *institution*. Thus, according to Brandom, Hegel's advance over Kant consists in the realization that it is impossible to characterize someone as believing without assuming that there is something that they believe, regardless of uncertainty in the fixation of the content of belief. To characterize someone as a believer is already to have conceded that one can be correct or incorrect in identifying what they believe. The upshot is that it is as impossible to describe belief independently of meaning as it is to describe meaning independently of belief.

² Available online in draft form in 2014. See Brandom (2014).

Hegel reads Kant as having a two-stage story: transcendental activity is the source of the conceptual norms that then govern empirical discursive activity. The empirical self accordingly always already finds itself with a stock of determinate concepts. The (transcendental) processes by which discursive norms are *instituted* are sharply distinguished from the (empirical) processes in which those discursive norms are *applied*. In the twentieth century, Rudolf Carnap (in this regard, as in others, showing the effects of his neo-Kantian antecedents) provides an index example of this Kantian two-stage semantic-epistemic explanatory strategy. In his version, the two stages correspond to beginning by fixing *meanings* and only then fixing *beliefs*. The first, semantic, stage is selecting a *language*. The second, epistemic, stage is selecting a *theory*: a set of sentences, couched in that language, that are taken to be true. His student Quine objected to Carnap that while this two-stage procedure makes perfect sense for formal or artificial languages, it makes no sense for natural languages. All speakers do is *use* the language—Kant would say, to make judgments. That use must somehow determine both what their expressions mean and which sentences they take to be true. In the vocabulary I used to talk about Kant, the use of language to express judgments must be understood as effecting *both* the institution of conceptual norms *and* their application (Brandom 2013: 9).

The assumption that it is possible to identify beliefs independently of meanings, or fix meanings independently of beliefs, is characterized by Brandom as “semantic naivety.” Semantic naivety comprises three closely related assumptions of increasing philosophical generality:

1. That the determination of semantic content is prior to, and independent of, the application of that content in the exercise of epistemic judgment.
2. That what things mean is independent of how things are.
3. That meaning (semantics) is independent of use (pragmatics).

Local genealogical reduction exposes a discrepancy between practical attitudes and normative statuses according to standards of assessment that are already implicit in current discursive practice. By rendering explicit in theory statuses that are implicit in practice, it challenges the statuses we espouse in the name of those we ought to espouse. It identifies pathological norms in the name of reasons that are theoretically accessible and hence acknowledgeable in principle. Thus, local genealogy reveals an incongruity between reality and appearance at the level of reason: it uses reason to disenchant rationality. By way of contrast, global genealogical reduction proclaims a wholesale diremption between normative statuses and the forces generating those statuses. It insists upon an absolute disjunction between practical attitudes and normative statuses, relegating the latter to the domain of illusion by reducing the former to forces devoid of rational purport. But this is to assume that it is

possible to identify practical attitudes (i.e., *believings*) without recourse to normative statuses (i.e., what is believed). Global genealogical reduction presumes that it is possible to describe someone as believing without committing oneself to the claim that there is something *that* they believe. Conversely, it assumes that we require no recourse to describing what someone believes in order to describe them as a believer. This presumes that one can reduce normative statuses to practical attitudes without presupposing that they are attitudes *toward* something. Thus on Brandom's account, global genealogical reduction lapses into incoherence.

[G]lobal genealogical reductive explaining away of norms in favor of attitudes presumes that it is intelligible for the contents of propositional attitudes to stay in place after normative reason-relations among their judgeable contents are relinquished. Otherwise what is being explained genealogically can no longer be understood as *believings*—as attitudes of taking things to be (representing them as) thus-and-so. If our attitudes were not genuinely conceptually contentful, then we would not even be *purporting* to represent things as being thus-and-so; things would not even *seem* to us to be thus-and-so. If disillusionment about the reality of norms of reasoning entails *semantic nihilism*, then it is self-defeating: the genealogist's claims would entail that her own claims are senseless (Brandom 2013: 10).

The problem with semantic nihilism is its inconsistency: it draws on semantic resources to describe the beliefs whose contents the description is supposed to render redundant. More significantly, the wholesale seclusion of reasons within a causally inert ideological sphere requires the postulate of forces which end up serving as the reasons for the intelligibility of the causes whose symptoms reasons are supposed to be. Thus the self-sufficient systematicity of the theological circle described by Jameson is regenerated by global genealogical reduction because it disavows the normative presuppositions of its own descriptions. The disavowal is predicated on the appeal to a reason that is not a reason: a determination of sensible experience, a consistency in the causal order, whose contentedness cannot be traced back either to constituting subjectivity or to practical attitudes. The attempt to describe and explain beliefs independently of meanings leads to a one-sided cognitive abstraction whose own grounding in the causal order it describes is transcendently guaranteed. As Brandom puts it:

Understanding genealogical analyses as undercutting the claims of reason (the rational bindingness of conceptual norms) depends on assessing the rationality of discursive practice solely on the basis of the extent to which applications of concepts, whose contents are construed as always already fully determinate, are responsive exclusively to evi-

dential concerns. Responsiveness of concept-application to any factors that are contingent relative to the conceptual norms already in force—the phenomenon genealogical diagnoses highlight—is accordingly identified as irrationality. But the idea that assessments of rationality are appropriately addressed only to the application of already fully determinate concepts is the product of a blinkered semantic naiveté. It ignores the fact that the very same discursive practice that is from one point of view the *application* of conceptual norms is from another point of view the *institution* of those norms and the *determination* of their contents. Only when discursive practice is viewed whole does its rationality emerge. If the semantogenic process by which conceptual contents are determined and developed is ignored, the distinctive way in which reason informs and infuses discursive practice remains invisible (Brandom 2013: 15).

For Brandom, then, the act through which a norm is applied is also the instituting act that determines its semantic content. Application, institution, and determination are woven together in an ongoing “semantogenic” process. Meaning is neither simply ready-made nor arbitrarily fabricated; it unfolds in the historical process through which the implicit, “unconscious” contours of a concept are retroactively rendered explicit for collective consciousness. Likening this process to jurisprudence, Brandom characterizes it as a “hermeneutics of magnanimity” in which we are obliged to reinterpret what our predecessors said in terms of what we think they by their own lights *ought* to have said had they been optimally consistent.

Brandom’s diagnosis of the semantic naivety vitiating the hermeneutics of suspicion has the following consequence. To accept one’s complicity with what Jameson calls “the being of current language” is to view discursive practice as a whole. This is to say that every critique of ideology must draw on ideological resources. Critical consciousness cannot be juxtaposed to ideology as its conceptually autonomous “other.” By the same token, ideology cannot be construed as wholly and irreparably delusional. If, according to Brandom’s Hegel, the true is the whole as codependence of the application, institution, and determination of beliefs and meanings, or reasons and causes, then ideology becomes an enabling condition of critique just as critique reconstitutes ideology. The false is constitutive of the true, as Hegel insisted. The question then is whether the holism which necessitates the indissociability of practical attitudes and normative statuses leads to a conservative homeostasis privileging the continuity of “forms of life” (this would be the liberal-reformist interpretation of Brandom’s account); or, alternatively, whether the innate conservatism of life-forms is precisely what needs to be overthrown by a revolutionary reason no longer beholden to theological transcendence.

Reason and Revolution

Once knowing has been equated with judgment and judgment pathologized as complicity with “the wrong state of things,” then the desire for revolution (but “revolution” now theologized in a manner anathema to Marx) becomes fatally complicit with the desire *not to know* as the condition of emancipation. This desire is both perennial and historically ramified (although I cannot provide a cogent historical account here). Its contemporary recurrence is historically conditioned even if its own self-image as completely disillusioned self-consciousness can be dialectically diagnosed as another instance of unselfconscious deception. Indeed, this is Brandom’s point: the pretension to complete disillusionment is a consequence of naivety, that is, of insufficient self-consciousness about the semantic conditions of conceptual intelligibility. In this regard, the global genealogical fusion of reasons and causes can only be an unwitting metaphysical relapse.

Nevertheless, Brandom’s diagnosis of semantic naivety invites an obvious genealogical rejoinder, which consists in denouncing the normative vocabulary of “recognition,” “statuses,” “responsibility,” “obligation,” etc., through which Brandom carries out his diagnosis as a thinly veiled transcendentalization of bourgeois property relations. The proper response to such a rejoinder is not to contest it but to concede it while reminding the genealogist that this is precisely Brandom’s Hegelian point: the fact that discursive self-consciousness (whether Socratic or Kantian) is causally anchored in prediscursive social structures (i.e., class and property relations) does not disqualify its rationality as discursive self-consciousness unless one is already committed to the genealogical claim that the irrationality of the cause vitiates the rationality of the reason; a claim whose subversive force relies precisely on the metaphysical identification of discursive reasons with their arational causes.

Ultimately, the standoff between philosophy and “theory” in the Jamesonian sense is the standoff between philosophical (which in this context means Hegelian) confidence in reason’s justificatory resources, such that the true qua justifiable can always be aligned with the good, and theory’s legitimate suspicion of this alignment of justice and justification—its exposure of a gap in reason such that what is right or just is precisely what remains unjustifiable. This gap is simply reason’s “other,” variously figured as the sensible, time, becoming, event, etc. But Hegel’s fundamental insight is that *reason takes time*, such that both the dogmatic rationalism that equates what is currently justifiable with justifiability tout court, and the theologized skepticism that inflates the shortfall between justice and justifiability into the ruin of justification fail to realize how it is the very failures of justification (its historical limitations, blindspots, aporias, etc.) that spurs the expansion of justificatory resources

such that reason is retrospectively compelled to acknowledge what it can only belatedly recognize as its own failure to render the resources of justification adequate to the demands of justice. This is why for Hegel the path of progress is indissociable from the “highway of despair.” This makes Hegel the thinker who preemptively supersedes the opposition between Enlightenment optimism and postmodern pessimism, or between hope and despair: we are rationally compelled to recognize that the history that subjects us is also the history that sets us free as subjects; but free only to recognize what must be borne in order for us to be free. Hegel is a sphinx: what is really wrong; but only what is really wrong can be retrospectively acknowledged as what was really right. There is no escape from the slaughter-bench of history. Perhaps this is what Bataille had in mind when he spoke of the expression of fathomless “horror” he detected in the aged Hegel’s painted countenance: the horror of having got to the bottom of everything and understood history in its necessarily *right-wrongness* and necessarily *wrong-rightness*. Dialectics’ grasp of the cunning of reason changes everything and yet leaves everything as it is. It is an accomplishment that undoes itself, an understanding that suffocates both hope and despair.³

But this suffocation forces a transformation. To acknowledge the necessarily equivocal or Janus-faced character of Hegelian reason is to enlarge our conception of what is revolutionary about rationality. This does not consist in overturning established norms and hierarchies—this would be revolution in the literal but philosophically conservative sense; nor in holding discourse accountable to some transcendent, supradiscursive absolute—this would be revolution according to the theological conception of reason. It consists rather in marrying the logic of explicitation, identified by Brandom as the compunction to extract reasons from causes, with the diagnosis of the unconscious blockages, whether social or sexual, impeding this labor of extraction. The call to combine rational explicitation with the disenchantment of reason is the call to reconstruct the form of life in which the pathologies of discursive and social practices have their common root.

³ “No doubt he had the tone of an annoying sanctifier, but on a portrait of him when he was aged, I seem to detect the exhaustion, the horror of having gotten to the bottom of everything, of being God” (Bataille 1988: 110, translation modified by author).

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