Abstract:

In this article I try to offer a new reading of "Sense Certainty" in Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind. Especially, I try to show that the primary thrust of Hegel's analysis is directed against a view which takes language to be private and private experience to be incorrigible or certain. Hegel plays a number of games with the sense-certain consciousness in order to reveal the social character of language, as well as the role of concepts in experience.

I also attempt to show, against Ivan Soll's reading, that Hegel's apparent claims concerning language must be carefully interpreted and that Hegel is not saying that it is impossible to refer in language, to particulars, but, rather, that such reference requires universal conceptual frameworks.

Finally, I briefly examine Hegel's position toward ordinary language as well as some further implications of the notion of private language which Hegel suggests in the Science of Logic.
Hegel on Private Experience

Hegel's phenomenological description of the sense-certain consciousness has been discussed by a number of commentators. My purpose is not to quarrel with previous readings; rather, I want to offer a reading which places the dialectic of the sense-certain consciousness in a perspective which, to my knowledge, has so far passed unnoticed. However, I do want to respond to some of Ivan Soll's remarks concerning Hegel's view of language.

1After completing the article, I read Charles Taylor's article, "The Opening Arguments of the Phenomenology," (in Hegel, ed. by Alasdair MacIntyre, Anchor Books, 1972, New York, pp. 151-187.) Professor Taylor has developed a view which is in some ways similar to my own, although Taylor places more emphasis on the assumed stance of pure receptivity on the part of the sense-certain consciousness than on its implicit claims to the certainty and truth of private experience, which I try to develop in this article. I think Hegel wants to show that the claim of pure receptivity is a disguise for the attempt of consciousness to privately appropriate experience. Certainly, I agree with Taylor that Hegel anticipates Wittgenstein's treatment of ostensive definition; as I try to show in this paper, Hegel, like Wittgenstein, rejects the notion that words like "this" can be understood in isolation from a context. But, further, Hegel would agree with Wittgenstein that language presupposes shared and shareable experiences. The sense-certain consciousness, in contrast, views particular experiences as unique bearers of names which need have only private meaning. Its knowledge claims are inseparably tied to a certain view of both experience and language, which ignores the role of concepts in the description of particulars.

In the "Preface" to the Phenomenology of Mind Hegel tells us that the Phenomenology is the education of natural consciousness toward Wissenschaft and that the first stage or most primitive orientation of natural consciousness is sense-certainty. Consequently, although sense-certain consciousness shares some claims with British Empiricist philosophy it is primarily naïve, non-philosophical consciousness which Hegel describes and sets in dialectical motion. Although the sense-certain consciousness takes the objects of sensation to be ultimate and the limits of knowledge, this is an orientation which it appropriates instinctively or non-reflectively. As a result, the reader who looks for a systematic critique of the empiricist position will be either puzzled or appalled, and conclude that Hegel has little that is decisive to say about Locke or Berkeley or Hume. Certainly, Hegel is concerned to show that sensation is not tantamount to knowledge. Yet, it is the ordinary, non-philosophical claim that sensation and individual experience is concrete and concepts abstract that Hegel develops in the section on "Sense-Certainty." 

3Phenomenology of Mind, tr. Baillie, p. 88.

Hegel clearly has empiricist philosophy in mind, however, when he expresses surprise that the orientation of sense-certainty is accepted "even as a philosophical doctrine." (Phenomenology, p. 158.) However, the fact that Hegel reserves this comment for the end of the section, as well as the fact that it is delivered as a peripheral remark, suggest that Hegel is not attempting a systematic attack of empiricist philosophy in the section on "Sense-Certainty." The sense-certain consciousness does not experience or attempt to reduce experiences to "ideas" or "impressions." It insists on the certainty of its experience, whether this be the experience of a pain or a tree. In short, the sense-certain consciousness does not champion the notion of sense data and the necessity for the analysis of concepts into ideas of sense-data, as did the empiricists; rather, the naïve sense-certain consciousness simply rejects the role of concepts altogether.

Hegel's title, as typically translated, is misleading; Charles Taylor's rendering, "Sensible certainty" (in "The Opening Arguments of the Phenomenology," in Hegel, ed. MacIntyre, p. 161) is preferable, I think, because it does not suggest that empiricist epistemologies are the primary referents of Hegel's analysis.

5Hegelian usage of the terms 'concrete' and 'abstract' directly opposes ordinary usage. Concepts are concrete, for Hegel, if they articualte the development and structure of
Further, although the section on "Sense-Certainty" reads superficially like a series of games, it is misleading to suppose that this is a position which Hegel merely ridicules and does not take seriously. Hegel plays games with this consciousness because, perhaps, this consciousness is the least open to cultural, intersubjective development, and, consequently, to Geist and Wissenschaft. As a result, Hegel can deal with this consciousness only within the context of a rudimentary form of social interaction, viz. the game. Much like Wittgenstein, Hegel uses games to illuminate language as social behavior, but more importantly, the sequence of games exposes what I take to be the fundamental, although implicit, claim of the sense-certain consciousness; viz., that what is private to its consciousness is unassailable and the most authentic sort of experience.

I think the following passage (from the "Preface") reveals Hegel's central worry about the sense-certain consciousness and places the dialectic as a whole in the most adequate perspective.

Since the man of common sense appeals to his feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is done with anyone who does not agree. He has just to explain that he has no more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same as himself. In other words, he tramples the roots of humanity underfoot. For the nature of humanity is to impel men to agree with one another, and its very existence lies simply in the explicit realization of a community of conscious life. What is anti-human, the condition of mere animals, consists in keeping within the sphere of feeling pure and simple, and in being able to communicate only by way of feeling-states.6

I think that it is precisely the "community of conscious life" which the sense-certain consciousness actively, yet naively, rejects. I want to show in some detail, by tracing the dialectic of sense-certainty, that this consciousness operates uncritically from a private perspective and with the notion of a private language.

what exists. Sensations are always abstract because they are transient, isolated, and comparatively empty in terms of content.

6Phenomenology, p. 127.
The sense-certain consciousness takes itself to be completely free from the contamination of abstractions and conceptual distortions. Its material, the whole of experience, is seemingly unlimited and knowledge appears to be merely a matter of taking in, as it were, all of this wealth. However, Hegel wants to show that this consciousness is actively isolating its object of experience in a number of ways, and further, that it does so purely on the basis of its own private perspective.

First, sense-certainty claims that it knows what is, but further, that it knows what is in the most determinate manner. It knows particulars. However, Hegel implies that this consciousness has no criteria for the determination of a particular; i.e., it has no criteria for making distinctions between a "this" and a "that." Since it rejects any conceptual framework which might be used to sort its experience, all it can legitimately claim is that there is a field before it, not that there is a particular "this" as opposed to a "that." Yet this consciousness does claim to have a particular "this" before it; hence, it is this consciousness which arbitrarily decides from its own point of view what is to be a "this." Again, the decision is arbitrary because no appeal is even implicitly made to inter-subjective conceptual distinctions. I think that Hegel suggests this, especially, when he says:

Amongst the innumerable distinctions that here come to light, we find in all cases the fundamental difference—viz. that in sense-experience pure being at once breaks up into the two "thises," as we have called them, one this as I, and one as object. When we reflect on this distinction, it is seen that neither the one nor the other is merely immediate, merely is in sense-certainty, but is at the same time mediated: I have the certainty through the other, viz. through the actual fact; and this, again, exists in that certainty through an other, viz., through the I.7

Hegel continues to develop this position until it is fully revealed that truth for sense-certainty lies in its own object.8

Secondly, consciousness rejects the relational character of intersubjective experience by refusing to acknowledge the public character of the language in which it attempts to describe its experience, as well as by rejecting change and

7Phenomenology, p. 150. (Italics removed.)

8Phenomenology, p. 153.
multiplicity of perspective. Hegel forces this consciousness to make the privacy of its experience explicit through a number of games involving the demonstrative pronoun 'this,' which Hegel allows to be analyzed into "this here" and "this now." It is no doubt significant that the first game involves writing the term 'now' on a piece of paper. The sense-certain consciousness is thus forced to confront the public character of written language and, revealingly, rejects it. Rather than simply acknowledging that the term 'now' is ambiguous when taken out of context, consciousness insists on the autonomy of its own private meaning, or its "intended" meaning. Hegel comments:

If we compare the relation in which knowledge and the object first stood with the relation they have come to assume in this result, it is found to be just the reverse of what first appeared. The object, which professed to be the essential reality, is now the non-essential element of sense-certainty... Its truth lies in the object as my (meinem) object, or lies in the "meaning" (Meinen),9 in what I "mean". . .10

Consciousness views language as an exclusively personal activity of baptism. It implicitly supposes that 'this' is a special sort of proper name and is confounded when the referent is found to be continually ambiguous; its intended "now" shifts in meaning with the flow of time. Again implicitly, it assumes that it alone is in a position to dictate the referent of its term and that its awareness of the object is tantamount to precise usage of language; yet, its use of 'now,' which is allegedly incorrigible, becomes less precise with every passing moment.

9Hegel exploits the multiple meanings of meinen: 'to think,' 'to believe,' 'to be of the opinion,' 'to say,' 'to assert,' 'to mean,' 'to have in view,' 'to intend.' This consciousness intends to have meaning depend on its own view of the object, and Hegel no doubt wants his description of the sense-certain consciousness to extend to all positions which appeal to and extol opinion. In the Philosophy of Right Hegel says: "the more peculiarly one's own an opinion may be the worse its content is, because the bad is that which is wholly private and personal in its content..." (Sec. 317).

10Phenomenology, p. 153.
Further, Hegel tries to teach consciousness the consequence of supposing that meaning is a matter of the correspondence between a term and a particular object. Consciousness discovers that the "this" that was "here" (a tree, for example) is now, since the object of consciousness changes, a quite different "here" (for example, a house). Once again, rather than abandoning the notion that reference to particulars is a matter of private perspective, consciousness withdraws wholly within itself. Ultimately, it rejects even ostensive definition; it is the philosophical observer who must do the pointing out of the "this." Consciousness denies even the experience of internal change as it constitutes its own private frozen universe.

Although the sense-certain consciousness can hardly be credited with maintaining the relatively sophisticated philosophical position of solipsism, consciousness experiences what Kenley Dove—following Santayana—has called "the solipsism of the present moment." Since consciousness has failed to keep experience private and static, it imprisons itself. However, Hegel finds an important way of releasing consciousness from itself; viz. Hegel exploits ostensive definition in such a way that consciousness learns that it is only when private perspective is integrated with an intersubjective framework that particular reference can be made. That is, its private "now" is particular only within the context of a sequence of "nows;" its private "here" has a determinate meaning only in a "complex of many heres," i.e., before and behind, above and below, right and left. Hegel's point, I take it, is that reference to a particular is the result of a process of systematic exclusion or "mediated" negation. The sense-certain consciousness previously failed to particularize its object because its insistence that the object be its own, and exclusively so, precluded mediation, as did its rejection of concepts in favor of sensation.

It is the above dialectical result which, I think, Ivan Soll has overlooked, with the consequence that he takes Hegel to be maintaining a very radical view of language. Soll


12Phenomenology, p. 157.
thinks that Hegel in "Sense-Certainty" is arguing for all of the following theses:

1) language expresses only what is universal

2) language cannot be used, at all, to refer to particulars

3) that which is expressible is "more excellent, real, and true"13

Soll concludes that Hegel is "thus attacking the foundation of any empiricism which views one of the most fundamental and unproblematic functions of language to be the reporting of the individual data of sensation."14 There are places in the Phenomenology, and elsewhere,15 where Hegel might very plausibly be thought to be maintaining the view which Soll ascribes to him. In the section I have been considering, Hegel says:

It is as a universal, too, that we give utterance to sensuous fact. What we say is: "This," i.e. the universal this; or we say: "it is," i.e. being in general. Of course we do not present before our mind in saying so the universal this, or being in general, but we utter what is universal; in other words, we do not actually and absolutely say what in this sense-certainty we really mean. Language, however, as we see, is the more truthful; in it we ourselves refute directly and at once our own "meaning;" and since universality is the real truth of sense-certainty, and language merely expresses this truth, it is not possible at all for us even to express in words any sensuous existence which we "mean."16

Hegel's first statement, above, is especially misleading. He seems to be saying quite clearly that no matter what particular thing we have in mind and want to refer to in language, we shall always end by referring to a universal and cannot refer to particulars at all in language. However, I have tried to point out that Hegel's view is significantly different; he allows the sense-certain consciousness to refer

13Soll, p. 108.
14Ibid., p. 102
15See Encycl., Subjective Logic, section 20, especially.
16Phenomenology, p. 152.
to its particular "now" and "here," but only within the context of intersubjective temporal and spatial frameworks and with the operation of mediation. But further, if the central thrust of the description of sense-certainty, which I have traced, is kept in mind, I think that the above passage can be read as saying that private meaning is doomed to point beyond itself, our private experience invariably loses its private character once expressed, and that neither private experience nor private language can escape the "community of experience."

Simply, there is no way for us to refer to what we have in mind, as we have it in mind; i.e., from our own particular perspective. The language we use is social and not continually recreated to refer to individual experience. But again, I do not think that Hegel is committed to saying that we cannot appropriate language in individual ways, which are communicable despite the individual synthesis. The sense-certain consciousness wants to express the absolutely particular, i.e., it wants to isolate its experience from absolutely everything else and every other consciousness. It is this particular use of language which Hegel rejects. As I have tried to show, the sense-certain consciousness unwittingly tries to work with a language in which a term could be used only once and for only a single moment.

In short, Hegel is not contrasting a language which refers to universals with a language which refers to particulars (and claiming that the latter is impossible). Rather, he is contrasting universal, repeatable, intersubjective language with private language. Further, throughout the whole of "Sense-Certainty," he wants to show that any notion of private language (and meaning) has deeper roots in the notion of the primacy of personal and private perspective, i.e., Hegel exposes the "intention" which motivates the sense-certain consciousness.

Finally, I do not think that Hegel can be maintaining that what is expressible is "more excellent, real, and true" for the simple reason that the inexpressible has no determinable referent. There is, simply, no basis for comparison: "consequently, what is called unspeakable is nothing else than what is untrue, irrational, something barely and simply 'meant'." Only that which is expressed is open to development and capable of becoming an element in the community of Geist. Although it is inconsistent for Hegel to assert that the "unspeakable" is "untrue," since strictly a truth value cannot be assigned to it, his point, I take it, is that there is simply no question of testing the truth of the "unspeakable" since any appeal to the ineffable is an implicit rejection of truth criteria.
The acceptance of intersubjective criteria for testing knowledge claims is a necessary condition for Wissenschaft, but it is not sufficient; the criteria, which are embodied in the language and judgements of a particular society may indeed fall short of universal truth, for Hegel. Ordinary language requires philosophical analysis and truth, for Hegel, is a function of historical development. However, the notion of a private language and private experience imply the following for Hegel: 1) the acceptance of the "merely posited and arbitrary," which includes the acceptance of arbitrary assumptions, and the absence of criteria, and, 2) the rejection of culture, which is the expression of the ways in which a people organizes, comprehends, and evaluates its environment and social experience.

Hegel might claim that experiences which could not be shared are "meaningless" for the same reasons that he considers proper names to be "meaningless." Proper names do not describe or explain sets of phenomena. They do not, in themselves, contribute to Wissenschaft. For the same reason Hegel unjustifiably assumes that we must reject any interest in unshareable experience, or experience which is not universalizable, as "irrational," and his corresponding claim that a private language is necessarily "irrational," indeed, he seems to want to claim it is impossible, equally begs the question.

 Nonetheless, Hegel's analysis of the sense-certain consciousness exposes the deficiencies and errors of the common-sense view which ignores the role of concepts in everyday experience as well as in language. Further, his analysis of ostensive definition shows that Hegel, despite his notoriously idiosyncratic use of language, was, nonetheless, an unusually subtle student of ordinary language.


Science of Logic, p. 117

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