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HEGEL AND HUSSERL ON PERCEPTION  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL DISPUTE

Abstract

In this paper I stage a phenomenological dispute between Hegel and Husserl on the essence of perception. I argue that Hegel's dialectical reconstruction of perceptual experience in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* hinges on two problematic assumptions: (1) the properties of perceptual objects are universals; (2) the way in which sensory properties determine perceptual objects is a kind of negation. I challenge both assumptions drawing on Husserl analysis of perception in *Experience and Judgment*. On Husserl's account perceptual objects are not originally experienced as "things-of-multiple-properties", as Hegel would have it, but rather as inarticulate perceptual wholes. Only through explicative contemplation do perceptual properties become salient and when they do so, they do not negate each other or the object but are rather taken up in a special kind of synthesis of partial coincidence. I conclude with a recapitulation and point toward the relevance of the disagreement between Hegel and Husserl for any future discussion of conceptualism and non-conceptualism in the philosophy of perception.

*Keywords:* Conceptualism/Non-Conceptualism, Hegel, Husserl, Perception, Phenomenology

In the present paper I stage a dispute between Hegel and Husserl on the proper way to describe perception phenomenologically. More specifically, I will argue that Hegel's account of perception in the *Consciousness* section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>1</sup> (1807) imposes on perceptual experience a strongly rationalist metaphysical principle, i.e., Spinoza's *omnis determinatio est negatio* [every determination is negation], in order to be able to characterize perception as a dialectically unstable and ultimately un-true shape of consciousness. Simple perception, however, does not operate on the basis of that principle, for reasons that will become clear following Husserl's account of pre-predicative perceptual experience in the section on simple explication of his posthumous work *Experience and Judgment*<sup>2</sup>. Borrowing Husserlian vocabulary, one could argue that Hegel unduly confuses the high-level [*hochstufig*] phenomena of contradictoriness and negation in logical thinking and the low-level [*niederstufig*] way in which the various determinations of a sensory object emerge in the wake of attentive perceptual exploration; however, if Husserl's account is correct, then *pace* Hegel *perceptual experience lacks nothing to do what it claims to do, namely, reliably present us with sensory objects in both their unity and their multiplicity*.

After some additional foregrounding (section I), I will turn to Hegel's analysis of perception in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (section II) and then to Husserl's alternative analysis in *Experience and Judgment* (section III). I will then conclude with some remarks on the philosophical import of the absoluteness of perception.

1.

Before we look at Hegel's and Husserl's respective accounts of perception, it is wise to dispel a couple of potential worries and clarify why I take such a dispute to matter. First, the present paper is not meant to be a direct contribution to Hegelian scholarship. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is probably one of the most commented-on and controversial texts in post-Kantian philosophy and Hegelian scholars have developed highly technical debates on its structure and meaning. In what follows I will more or less ignore debates in Hegelian scholarship and return to the text itself, as it were. My only goal is to extract directly from

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel (2019) [1807].

<sup>2</sup> Husserl (1973) [1939].

the text what Hegel takes to be problematic about perception and test his claim that dialectical tensions in perception emerge by themselves simply on account of perception trying to present itself as a claim to know the whole truth<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, it is clear that for Hegel the analysis of perception, as a shape of what he calls consciousness, is not a stand-alone piece, but rather a stepping-stone to eventually reach the more mature shapes of *self-consciousness*, where the spirit begins to properly experience itself in the transition from the I of sensory experience to the We of communal and ultimately historical existence. In what follows, however, I will not only bracket debates in the existing scholarship, but also the rest of Hegel's book, as it were. I am not interested in the role that perception plays in Hegel's broader philosophical project, and it would certainly be a fair criticism to say that my reconstruction misses the big picture; however, since Hegel's chapter is about perception and, as per Hegel's *Introduction*, it claims not to apply any external criteria to this basic shape of consciousness but merely to tease out its inherent contradiction by means of a phenomenological examination<sup>4</sup>, it seems fair to ask whether Hegel's analysis actually fits the bill. In other words, my question is not about the significance of Hegel's analysis of perception in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* but rather about the plausibility of Hegel's analysis of perception for perception itself and in light of Hegel's self-professed phenomenological standards.

Another potential worry could come from the Husserlian camp. While there are reading marks in Husserl's copies of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is questionable that he really had a deep grasp of Hegel and he clearly never considered him a thinker worthy of direct philosophical engagement. Isn't Hegel just using the word "phenomenology" in a completely different sense than Husserl, which means that the two might simply be talking past each other when dealing with perception? Is there a real dispute to be had here? Clearly Husserl and Hegel are two vastly different thinkers and despite some recent conciliatory approaches<sup>5</sup>, their views on philosophy are not easily harmonized. On the other hand, however, to the extent that both Hegel and Husserl claim to be describing perception, there has to be a common standard to evaluate what they have to say about it regardless of their larger philosophical commitments and conceptual differences. If a claim purports to be about perception, once it is properly understood, it should also be possible to evaluate it just with respect to how well it captures what it purports to be about, i.e., in this case, perception itself, the familiar experience we have every waking moment of our life<sup>6</sup>.

This leads me to the last point of this introductory section: why does it matter? I understand the dispute on perception between Hegel and Husserl to represent a particularly interesting case in what we could label *phenomenological argumentation*, which unlike other forms of argumentation has not received the attention it deserves. By *phenomenological argumentation* I mean a kind of argumentation that makes claims about

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<sup>3</sup> I owe the characterization of shapes of consciousness in Hegel as claims to know to Peter Kalkavage's illuminating book *The Desire to Know* (2007). My reading of Hegel's view on perception is largely influenced by Kalkavage, to whom I will occasionally refer in what follows.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel (2019), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> See Filieri (2015); Manca (2016); Staehler (2017).

<sup>6</sup> In his informative commentary on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Stephen Houlgate writes that Hegel's reconstruction of perception «is not the empirical experience that people may have in their everyday lives» (Houlgate, 2013, pp. 48-49). This is problematic. Certainly, a philosophical theory might legitimately claim that we are all wrong all the time when we take perception to be a certain way (whether this is Hegel's intention, is another matter). Nonetheless, if that philosophical theory is about "perception" and not about some other thing, it must still be possible to trace it back to precisely the familiar experience that people have in their everyday lives and that our ordinary language calls "perception". If two rival philosophical theories claim to be about perception, it has to be possible to choose the better theory by looking at perception itself, the empirical experience that people have in their everyday lives, and assess which theory better illuminates it. Otherwise, every philosophical theory that talks about perception could simply reinvent what perception is based on whatever assumptions the theory happens to favor and there would be no point in asking which theory is better. Philosophical theories, then, would become like works of art which we can only appreciate for their ingenuity and the ability of their makers, but not endorse or reject based on how well they capture the reality which they purport to illuminate.

the essential features of various kinds of experience and does so primarily by way of providing *descriptions*. In this regard, phenomenological argumentation has little to do with the way the word “phenomenology” is used in much contemporary philosophy, i.e., the “what it is like” quality or first-personal feel of a particular kind of experience. If such first-personal feels exist, then they are likely to be indescribable, only experienced. *Phenomenological arguments* in the sense I invoke here, by contrast, involve descriptions that disputants are supposed to evaluate by looking at how the corresponding experience actually is like and eventually revise or improve their descriptions on the basis of a direct engagement with the kind of experience that they want to describe. When you and I, or, for that matter, Hegel and Husserl, disagree on how to describe perception, it’s not just your word against mine. One description can be better than another description, if it lets the essential features of the experience it describes come to light more clearly and distinctly. There is no need to belabor this point further, but in general, it seems philosophically important to distinguish between forms of argumentation that merely revolve around the internal consistency of an argument or the plausibility of its premises, and forms of argumentation that revolve around the effectiveness of descriptions in bringing to light essential features. If this is acceptable, then the rest of this paper aims at providing an example of precisely this kind of phenomenological argumentation, drawing on the work of two major thinkers in the field.

2.

In the section on *Perception* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel often alludes to the etymology of the German word for perception, i.e., *Wahrnehmung*, which literally means truth-taking. As its very name suggests, perception thus consists of two interrelated aspects, or moments, one pertaining to its object, i.e., the truth which it claims to possess, and one pertaining to its comportment toward that object, i.e., the way in which it possesses the truth. The truth as perception conceives of it is a sensuous «thing of multiple properties»<sup>7</sup>, and perception’s self-professed comportment towards its truth, the *Wahr*, is a simple *Nehmung*, a taking-in of the properties that the senses offer to the perceiving subject. In Hegel’s words, perception «need only take this object and conduct itself as pure apprehending... Were it to do anything actively while assimilating its object, it would, by whatever it thus added or deleted, alter the truth»<sup>8</sup>. The perceiving subject is self-effacing at first. It lets the thing take center stage as a unity that persists as one and the same regardless of the perceiver’s activity. At later stages of perception’s articulation, the perceiving subject will take a more active role. But to get Hegel’s argument off the ground, first one question is key: How is this unity-in-multiplicity to be understood and how does consciousness experience it?

It bears recalling that the shape of consciousness called “perception” emerges from a previous, more rudimentary shape of consciousness called sense-certainty. As various commentators have pointed-out<sup>9</sup>, Hegel does not consider sense-certainty a shape of consciousness in its own right. It is rather an initial and naïve avatar of perception, i.e., perception trying to remove *universality* from its object. Sense-certainty took as its truth the raw individual sensation as tentatively expressed by words like “here” and “now” and in so doing it had to face the fact that these words express universals. They apply to *any* here or now and thus uttering them does not give us access to the here or now we originally meant to target when we formed the intention to utter them. If sense-certainty conceives of its object as a point-like sensation that exists in a point-like here and now, then every time it avails itself of these words (as it has to if it intends to claim anything at all), it fails to deliver on its initial promise. It does not possess its allegedly particular truth immediately, but only via the mediation of universals, such as “here” and “now”.

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel (2019), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Westphal (1973).

Universality thus emerges as «perception's principle»<sup>10</sup>. Once universality is admitted in the picture, however, there is no reason to limit it to minimalistic notions such as “this”, “here”, and “now”. Perception is entitled to draw upon the whole palette of sensory adjectives in our ordinary language and describe the thing as a unity of multiple properties.

At first, perception does not see any particular problem in doing so. It views universality in terms of the thing's properties that «are in play simultaneously... <but> have no bearing on the others, with each then existing by itself independently of the other»<sup>11</sup>. The thing's properties are said to co-exist in a kind of universal medium, thinghood, which functions as a passive receptacle for the properties without contributing anything to their specificity. This becomes clear from Hegel's famous example of a cube of salt<sup>12</sup>:

This salt is a here that's at once simple and complex: it is white, and also tangy, and also cubical in shape, and also has a certain density, and so on. These properties all exist in one simplex here, in which they accordingly interpenetrate; the here of each is no different from the here of any other, each being at all points in the same here as the others. At the same time, while not kept apart in diverse heres, they don't affect each other as they interpenetrate: the whiteness doesn't affect or alter the cubical shape, and neither of these affects the tanginess, and so on<sup>13</sup>.

At this stage, the word “also” is key to determine the status of thinghood as the medium in which the properties inhere. If we actively enumerate the properties of the cube of salt, every time we seize upon one property it is as if it took the whole stage for itself. Only in the transition from one property to the next, which is signaled by the word “also”, do we catch a glimpse of that something-I-know-not-what, as Locke famously calls it, which is thinghood, i.e., the substance *of which* the properties are attributes. According to Hegel, however, if this were the whole story, it would be incomprehensible how the universals involved in perception can be the properties of a *particular* thing, such as this particular cube of salt, as opposed to just any cube of salt having the same properties. If the essence of perception is universality, how does perception manage to grasp particularity, as it claims to be able to do? In Hegel's words: «If each of these specific properties related only to itself and had nothing to do with the others, none of them would in fact be determined [*bestimmt*]; for they're determined [*bestimmt*] only insofar as they're at once distinct from other properties and relate to them as contraries»<sup>14</sup>.

In order to account for the thing's particularity, universality can no longer be conceived as *simple*. The properties now have to be seen as *excluding* each other, i.e., as negating each other in an exclusive way. We have to conceive of each property as actively attempting to push the other properties out of the picture and of thinghood as more than a passive receptacle, an “also”. Thinghood must itself be standing in contrast to the properties that are attributed to it: «Their medium is no longer just an “also”, an indifferent unity, but is a “one” as well, a manner of unity that excludes»<sup>15</sup>.

Once the properties are no longer considered as mutually indifferent, but rather as negating one another, the underlying thinghood in which they inhere is no longer just an “also”, but rather a robust one, which is responsible for keeping all the properties together while distinguishing itself from them. The original ‘also’, however, does not disappear completely: the salt continues to be white, and also tangy, and also cubical, etc. but once we realize that these properties negate each other, thinghood is no longer something we just glimpse through enumeration, but a robust substrate in its own right, which stands over against its own properties. The “also” and the “One” are not two alternative

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<sup>10</sup> Hegel (2019), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> A cube of salt seems like a pretty strange item, as we are more familiar with sugar cubes. Perhaps Hegel was thinking of the salt blocks that are used for horses or cattle to integrate their otherwise low-sodium diet.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel (2019), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 57, translation modified.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

conceptions of thinghood, but rather two ways in which the same thinghood is manifested, once when the properties are viewed as simple indifferent universals, and then when the negation which makes otherwise non-specific universals into properties is taken into account.

After presenting perception's truth, Hegel goes on to examine how consciousness experiences this truth and he states that in doing so he will limit himself to «merely unpacking the contradictions present therein»<sup>16</sup>. The first contradiction that perceptual consciousness has to face is that its commitment to its object being one seems threatened by the fact that «any property that I'm aware of within it is universal, thereby extending beyond it in its singularity»<sup>17</sup>. This is a major claim, which, as we will see distinguishes Hegel's account radically from Husserl's. Consciousness is then tempted to give up its initial claim and «rather reinterpret the object's essence as a community»<sup>18</sup>. If the "red" which qualifies this thing as red is a universal shared by all red things, then the thing's being red would make it part of a continuum that includes all red things. Consciousness, however, cannot accept this conclusion in view of the properties' determinateness. The properties, *qua* determinacies of *this one* perceptual object exclude other objects, they cannot be the principle of a community of objects. The only community that the object can tolerate is the self-enclosed and exclusive community of the properties that inhere in *one* object, which now presents itself as a *gemeinschaftliches Medium*, i.e. a communitarian medium (and not just a "common medium", as the English translators misleadingly write) where the properties can remain indifferent to one another while simultaneously excluding all the properties that don't belong to their community.

This scenario, however, creates another problem. If we bracket the negativity involved in excluding other properties and just focus on the properties' peaceful communal co-existence in the medium of the One object, then what actually takes center stage are the properties themselves, which now dangerously resemble the raw sensory material that characterized sense-certainty, only now endowed with the mark of *überhaupt*, in general<sup>19</sup>. If the properties are viewed as excluding other properties, then otherness is involved and the truth seems to veer away from the initial object. If the properties are viewed as a peaceful community within one object as separated from everything else, then they return to their simple universal mode, which does not account for the object's particularity, and rather lets the object evaporate. Consciousness, as Hegel puts it, «is thrown back to the beginning»<sup>20</sup>, i.e., to a version of sense-certainty, which is not acceptable.

In order to salvage the thing's oneness, perception now makes a different attempt. It takes responsibility for the thing's manifoldness, declaring that it is not the object's essence, but just an effect of the interaction with consciousness:

So actually a thing is white only to our eyes, and also tangy to our tongue, and also cubical to our touch, and so on. The utter disjointedness of these aspects is due to us,

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<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> The German text reads «Ich muß um der *Allgemeinheit* der Eigenschaft willen das gegenständliche Wesen vielmehr als eine *Gemeinschaft* überhaupt nehmen». The English translators suggest that the *Gemeinschaft* in question is the community of the object and its properties by inserting an interpolation in square brackets: «Due to the universality of the property, I have to reinterpret the object as a kind of 'community' [of it and its properties]» (Hegel, 2019, p. 58). This is an odd decision, which, I suspect, is a consequence of the infelicitous translation of *das gegenständliche Wesen* simply as "object". What Hegel is saying here, by contrast, is that already by facing this first contradiction consciousness gets a precis of what will turn out to be the truth at the end of the chapter, namely, that the *essence of objects* of perception (*das gegenständliche Wesen*) is their being a community and not a loose plurality of scattered Ones. Nothing in this passage or, for that matter, in any other passage of the chapter suggests that Hegel wants us to apply the notion of community to the relationship between the object and its properties, which would be paradoxical given that community involves otherness while the initial truth of perception is the object viewed as a «fortress of self-containment» (Kalkavage, 2007, p. 41).

<sup>19</sup> See Hegel (2019), p. 58. Again, the English translation here does not help, hence my decision to opt for a free paraphrase that better renders the actual content of the German original.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

not the thing; they dis-integrate in us – for example, on our tongue, where the thing is wholly different from what it is in our eyes, and so on<sup>21</sup>.

Again, however, consciousness has to face a problem. If the properties are the effect of our perceiving and the thing as it is itself is a propertyless One, then it is unclear how it can stay determinate and, hence, particular: «...a given thing doesn't exclude others simply insofar as it's one, since to be one is to be in every respect self-related; its being one rather [*vielmehr*] makes it like all others»<sup>22</sup>. The properties have to belong to the thing's essence, otherwise its particularity remains inexplicable. Consciousness' next move, then, is to take the diametrically opposed view. The plurality of the properties must pertain to the thing, because it's the component that makes it particular, whereas its being One must be the work of consciousness, whose synthetizing power is responsible for keeping the properties together without letting them negate, and hence exclude each other *in the thing*: «So one might say of a thing: it indeed is white and also cubical and also tangy, and so on – but insofar as it's white, it's not cubical, and insofar as it's cubical and also white, it isn't tangy, and so on. Unifying these properties takes place only within consciousness»<sup>23</sup>. On this account, then, it is the work of consciousness to synthetize together properties that would otherwise exclude each other, like all universals do, and thus disrupt the unity of the thing.

In this third experience, consciousness learns that things have a way of being 'in themselves' that is different from the way they show up for consciousness. There is, then, a kind of unity that the thing possesses when it is for itself, which does not coincide with the unity that consciousness imposes on the many properties. Ultimately, the thing is one, not so much in its relationship to consciousness, but rather in its relation to other things from which it distinguishes itself. One could also argue that the intrinsic negative power that inheres in the properties qua universals must be turned toward something «outside the context of their also»<sup>24</sup>, in order to both grant particularity to the thing without disrupting its unity. Then, for Hegel, ultimately perception must give up its claim of self-sameness and accept that things are what they are only to the extent that they partake in a community of things, one that can only be properly theorized with the aid of the non-perceptual concepts of physical science, as the following chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* goes on to argue.

Rather than following the intricacies of Hegel's analysis further, we must now pause and take stock before we turn to Husserl. The key thing to ask here, is whether Hegel's analysis really follows the principle that he provided in the *Introduction*, namely: «Consciousness provides its criterion from within, and so the investigation will consist in consciousness comparing itself with itself»<sup>25</sup>. The principle, as we pointed out, is reiterated in the chapter on perception when Hegel states that he will limit himself to expose the contradictions that perception encounters when it sets out to articulate itself as a claim to absolute truth. Is that really so? Robert Brandom, in his monumental exegetical work on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, comments on Hegel's section on perception as follows: «The master idea here is the Spinozist scholastic principle *Omnis determinatio est negatio*; all determination is negation. The idea is that being determinate requires some limitation, contrast, or exclusion»<sup>26</sup>.

But is the Spinozist scholastic principle *Omnis determinatio est negatio* really that self-evident? Shouldn't a *genuine* phenomenological analysis of perception avoid taking metaphysical principles for granted? Hegel's entire argument about the inherent contradictoriness of perception hinges on two major assumptions: (1) that the properties

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, translation modified. The English translation renders "vielmehr" as "sooner", which is quite baffling.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Brandom (2019), p. 137; see also Kalkavage (2007), p. 44.

we encounter in perceptual things are, from the very start, universals; (2) that to the extent that they *determine* an object, perceptual properties must negate other perceptual properties. In the next section I set out to show, following Husserl, that both assumptions are unwarranted and that *Omnis determinatio est negatio* does not hold for simple sensory perception.

3.

In one of the few existing studies bringing Husserl and Hegel into a dialogue Tanja Staehler writes: «Both Hegel and Husserl regarded the tension between unity and manifold an essential feature of perception [*sic!*]. However, the character of this manifold nature of perception shows up in different ways: Hegel examines the properties of the object, while Husserl thematizes its modes of appearance»<sup>27</sup>. This characterization is slightly misleading because it might be taken as suggesting that Husserl does not thematize the properties of perceptual objects or that he considers an object's modes of appearance as distinct from its properties. Staehler states as much a few pages later, in a passage worth quoting in full:

We have to keep in mind, however, that the object's modes of appearance in Husserl cannot be identified with the thing's properties in Hegel. There is a similarity as far as the character of manifold is concerned. Yet the properties in Hegel are determinacies that already involve more thoughts, so to speak. In other words, they are more general and more abstract than the modes of appearance in Husserl. The front side of this cup, although it is indeed one of the many aspects of the cup, belongs to this particular cup only. The salt's whiteness, on the other hand, is that which the salt shares with the snow, for example, and yet the whiteness of the salt is not exactly the whiteness of the snow and certainly not what we call whiteness in general<sup>28</sup>.

Two points are problematic in this passage. First of all, the concept of "side" as in "the front side of this object" is reducible to the concept of actually perceived properties, or determinacies, of the object. Already in his widely read 1905 lecture on the theory of knowledge Husserl states that «the phrase "perceived side of the thing" [...] encompasses the totality of the actually presented determinacies and it characterizes them as an intuitively and, more precisely, perceptually [*perzeptiv*] given whole»<sup>29</sup>. Talk of "the front side of this cup", then, is nothing but shorthand for the totality of the cup's actually perceived properties viewed as a unity. *Pace* Staehler, then, when Husserl thematizes the object's modes of appearance, he is from the very start thematizing nothing but the object's properties or determinacies.

Second, what Staehler presents as a matter of superficial similarity and underlying difference in Hegel's and Husserl's respective conceptions of properties is actually the major point of contention between the two, which we should try to adjudicate in what follows. When I attentively look at a cube of salt, is the actually perceived property "white" from the very beginning the universal property "whiteness", which as such spills over from salt to snow or paper, too? Or is our first perceptual encounter with a thing's property better described in a different manner? Hegel's position is clear: since universals are involved from the very beginning in the perceptual process, the alleged unity and self-sameness of the thing is threatened. This is because universals are shared by several things and as such they cannot be responsible for the particularity of *this* thing. In trying to pin down the principle underlying the thing's unity and particularity while holding fast to its multiple properties, perception initiates a dialectical process that eventually leads to its disruption and sublation. In their capacity as *determinacies* of the thing universals negate both one another and thinghood as the One in which they are said to inhere. As

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<sup>27</sup> Staehler (2017), pp. 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Husserl (2004), p. 29.

Tom Rockmore effectively summarizes Hegel's view: «Perception consists in saying what something is by identifying its qualities or predicates. In identifying the various predicates, the unity of the cognitive object, which is present for sensation, disappears in perception»<sup>30</sup>. But is that true? Are the properties that we experience when we engage attentively in the perceptual exploration of a thing from the very beginning universals? Are their mutual relationship and their relationship to the thing that they are said to determine plausibly described as negation? The answer to these questions cannot be just a matter of philosophical stipulation. Hegel and Husserl cannot both be right.

Let us then turn to Husserl's analyses of perception and, in particular, of the relationship between a thing's unity and its manifold properties. For the sake of space, I will limit my discussion to Husserl's posthumous work *Experience and Judgment*, which represents his most mature formulation of a phenomenological description of perceptual experience. Perception in the strictest sense of the term begins when a subject is affected by a sensory salience in his experiential field and turns toward it, apprehending it as the manifestation of object. For instance, while I am contemplating the blue sky I might be affected by a sensory salience in the upper left part of my visual field, a dot moving toward the right, turn my attention to it and apprehend it as the manifestation of a distant airplane. To be sure, the blue sky in the background is perceived, too, and so are the clouds in another part of my visual field that I am momentarily ignoring, but the active and attentive aiming at the dot as well as the corresponding apprehension constitute perception in a narrow and particularly important sense. On closer inspection I could realize that it is actually no manifestation at all, but just an annoying eye-floater and thus revoke my foregoing apprehension as the manifestation of a plane; however, in order for that to happen I must first have turned my attention explicitly toward the dot. In *Experience and Judgment* Husserl calls this kind of attentive, aiming and apprehending type of perception "contemplative perception" and he distinguishes two levels in it:

1. The contemplative intuition which *precedes* all explication, the intuition which is directed toward the object taken as a whole. This simple apprehension and contemplation is the lowest level of common objectifying activity, the lowest level of the unobstructed exercise of perceptual interest
2. The *higher level* of the exercise of this interest is the true *explicative contemplation* of the object<sup>31</sup>.

According to this description, the most elementary mode of encounter with a perceptual object does not feature a "thing of multiple properties" but a thing "taken as a whole", in which no property has become salient yet. The dot that caught my attention against the background of the blue sky is fully perceived when I turn my attention toward it, and thus more than a simple episode of un-objectified sensory awareness, but none of its properties is salient. We could imagine another example. If I can't find my car-keys but I know they must be somewhere on my messy desk, I will likely initiate an abundance of genuine perceptual experiences as I move around a bunch of empty coffee-cups, books, paper sheets, pens, etc. but I do not turn my attention toward any of these objects in specific and focused way. I have a series of what Husserl calls *Gesamtwahrnehmungen*, i.e., total or global perceptions in which none of the properties of the corresponding objects comes to light. The potential objection that all these objects might very well be "things of multiple properties" while I am subjectively unaware of these properties would be a moot point here. To be sure, once I transition to the second mode of contemplative perception and engage in *explicative* contemplation, I do not experience the object's properties as something that my explicative activity *creates*, therefore they must have been there already before I started explicating them. This experience, however, is part of the explicative, not the simple contemplative stage and hence it cannot be simply projected back onto it. The "object taken

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<sup>30</sup> Rockmore (2010), p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> Husserl (1973), p. 104.

as a whole” is prior to the “thing of many properties” even if the thing of many properties is not a second object or the result of some arbitrary refurbishment of the object taken as a whole.

Normally, however, absolutely simple apprehension and contemplation are just an ideal limit-case. The moment a sensory salience catches our attention, we turn toward and apprehend it as the manifestation of a perceptual object, we simultaneously evoke a *type* under which the object falls and types awaken in us a set of expectations. If the dot that moves in the blue sky is apprehended under the type “airplane”, then I expect it, say, to have wings and to move at a constant speed following a straight trajectory. I might, for instance, squint to try and see the outline of the wings in order to figure out whether what I see actually is an airplane, or rather just an eye-floater. Or I might accidentally find an old postcard on my desk that makes me forget about the car-keys and fully absorbs my attention. The simple apprehension and contemplation of the postcard as a whole immediately transitions to explicative contemplation when, for instance, I am struck by the postcard’s scalloped edge, which emerges as salient in contrast to the expectation of a regular rectangular edge normally associated with the type “postcard”.

The key point in order to adjudicate the dispute between Hegel and Husserl on the status of the “thing of multiple properties” is the nature of the relation obtaining between the thing’s property that just became salient (in our example, the postcard’s scalloped rectangular shape) and the thing taken as a whole that characterized the previous stage of simple apprehension and contemplation. Hegel’s answer is clear: the relation obtaining here is negation. The property “scalloped-rectangular” is at the same time “non-triangular”, “non-circular”, etc. and it is also not the One thing, which stands in contrast, as a unity, to the multiplicity of the properties. As we have seen, for Hegel, perception does not have the resources to handle the complexity of this network of negations and thus it has to renounce its original claim of self-sameness and independence for its object. Husserl, by contrast, characterizes the relation obtaining here as a one of *synthesis*, more specifically, there are multiple *syntheses* at work when one engages in perceptual explication. Negation is not fundamental here. It is a possibility that presupposes a number of shifts and redirections of one’s intentionality, but it does not contribute directly to the very articulation of the explicated perceptual object as a “thing of multiple properties”.

The first kind of synthesis already occurs at the level of simple apprehension and contemplation when I remain focused on an enduring object for a certain amount of time. Husserl gives the example of «hearing the continuous ringing of a sound»<sup>32</sup>. Since the sound endures in time, it is constituted by a multiplicity of phases that are connected according to the famous structure retention – original impression – protention. Each “now” in the temporal duration fades away to make room to the next now, but it doesn’t simply disappear: it is retained in a modified way that is at the origin of our awareness of temporal duration. But when we are actively contemplating the sound, there is more than mere temporal retention going on. Husserl calls the synthetic activity involved here «holding in grasp» [*im Griff halten*]. While the temporal phases elapse, if I am actively contemplating the sound, I am focused on *the sound* that endures, i.e., the unity that is manifested in the multiple phases but does not coincide with them. I can still hold in grasp the sound even when I turn my attention toward something else, for instance, toward another sound in order to then compare it with the first, or even when the original sound stops ringing, but I continue to focus on it trying to figure out what sound it is. The phenomenon of still-holding-in-grasp as a kind of active comportment toward a perceived object of contemplation proves extremely important to understand correctly what happens when *explicative* perception occurs and how unity in the multiplicity is preserved without ensuing in any kind of negation or contradiction.

Let us return to our example of a scalloped-edged postcard and imagine that, after having noticed its shape, our attention moves on to its faded colors, then its unusual size,

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<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 106.

and so on. What happens here? Do we encounter mutually indifferent universals, as per Hegel's first experience of perception, or else mutually negating universal, as per Hegel's second experience of perception, that stand in opposition to the underlying thinghood, eventually exploding its supposed unity? Husserl has a different and descriptively more persuasive account:

Let us take an object, call it S, and its internal determinations  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , ... ; the process set going by the interest in S does not simply give the series: apprehension of S, apprehension of  $\alpha$ , of  $\beta$ , etc., as if the apprehensions had nothing to do with one another, as if there had been a change of themes. On the contrary, in the whole process of individual acts which lead from the apprehension of S to the apprehension of  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , . . . we come to know S. This process is a developing contemplation, a unity of articulated contemplation. Through the entire process the S retains the character of theme; and while, step by step, we gain possession of the moments, the parts, one after the other— and each one of them is precisely a moment or part, i.e., what is generally called a property or determination— each is nothing in itself but something of the object S, coming from it and in it. In the apprehension of the properties we come to know it, and we come to know the properties only as belonging to it. In the development, the indeterminate theme S turns into the substrate of the properties which emerge, and they themselves are constituted in it as its determinations<sup>33</sup>.

This long quote entails a number of important points for the confrontation with Hegel. First, by stating that the object of perception is, from the start, the thing of multiple properties, Hegel is putting the cart before the horse, so to speak. The multiple properties emerge only in the wake of explicative perception and, crucially, when they become salient and are registered as determinations of the object, at first, *they are in no way universals*. They are, to reiterate: «nothing in itself but something of the object S, coming from it and in it»<sup>34</sup>. Since the object S is particular, the properties becoming salient are also particular. Hegel (who on this point is in good company) was misled by the fundamentally equivocal use of generic terms in ordinary language. The word “red” may refer, depending on context, on three different things, which stand in a kind of genetic relationship. (1) The particular, uniquely individual coloration of a perceptual object (as in “pass me that red pen, please!”); (2) the distinctive shade of red that colors the individual perceptual object but could occur on another object, too, and can be compared with other shades of red (as in “no, not the dark red pen, the light red pen, please!”); (3) the species “red”, the universal, of which the various shade of reds are said to partake (as in “red is a primary color”)<sup>35</sup>. As we will see in a moment, it is only when the whole genetic path from (1) to (3) has been traversed that we can imagine to set up the property against other properties and against the original substrate S. The properties need to be regarded as relative substrates in their own right, or ‘substratized’, before they can be taken as items in their own right that stand over against other items. In addition, it is important to note that the dyad characterizing Hegel's perception and functioning as the basis for simple perceptual judgments, i.e., the substrate S (the thing) and the property p are not readily at hand from the outset. They are a *product* rather than a presupposition of explicative perception. Simple contemplative perception of whole objects knows nothing of a dyad. It is only in the process of explication that two distinct aspects take shape in the perceptual thing and thus make it available for further, higher-level logical operations.

Before we discuss the substratization of properties and the place of negation, we have to characterize briefly the kind of synthesis that makes it possible for the emergence of a property to be experienced as an enrichment of the object, rather than a shift away from it. In the most general terms, we can say that when we shift from the object as a whole to

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<sup>33</sup> Ivi, pp. 113-114.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 113.

<sup>35</sup> The *locus classicus* for these distinctions is Husserl's second *Logical Investigation* (Husserl, 2001, pp. 235-313), which I cannot discuss here for reasons of space.

one of its emerging properties «a certain mental overlapping of the two apprehensions»<sup>36</sup>. The object continues to be apprehended as a whole (the postcard) while a new apprehension emerges (the scalloped edge), but the two apprehensions overlap in a distinctive way, which falls in the distinctive category of an identifying synthesis of coincidence, which we could characterize as follows: the postcard and the scalloped-edged postcard are one and the same. The most common kind of identifying synthesis is the synthesis of *total* identification that occurs, for instance, when we look at the same object from different perspectives or look at the same object again after looking away. The postcard I see now is *totally* the same postcard I was saw three minutes ago. The scalloped-edged postcard, however, is not the whole postcard, but only the postcard as apprehended from the point of view of its scalloped-edgedness, so to speak. In this case, we have a *partial* synthesis of coincidence, which is still a kind of identification, but whose result is not not totally coincident with the object that was given at first. Partial coincidence is, in a sense, that which keeps the possibility of further explication open. Husserl summarizes the synthesis at work here as follows: «In every explicative determination of S, S is present in one of its particularities; and in the different determinations which appear in the form of explicates, it remains the same, but in conformity with the different particularities which are its properties»<sup>37</sup>.

The mode of S's being present when we shift our attention to  $\alpha$ , to reiterate the language from Husserl's previous quote, is that of being «still-held-in-grasp»<sup>38</sup>. It is precisely because, as we have established, something can remain the primary theme of our perceptual interest even when the original apprehension directed toward it is overwritten by a number of other active apprehensions that momentarily take center stage. Moreover, when we move on in the explication and let other properties emerge, the previously explicated properties do not simply disappear from sight, even if they are not held-in-grasp the way the original substrate is. Rather, by virtue of the explicative synthesis of partial coincidence previously described, the explicated properties are built into, the original substrate, so to speak, as persistent sedimentations<sup>39</sup>. Here is a formal characterization of the process of explication:

$$S \rightarrow \alpha \rightarrow S_{\alpha} \rightarrow \beta \rightarrow (S_{\alpha})_{\beta} \rightarrow \gamma \rightarrow [(S_{\alpha})_{\beta}]_{\gamma} \rightarrow \delta \rightarrow \{[(S_{\alpha})_{\beta}]_{\gamma}\}_{\delta} \rightarrow \dots$$

The case formalized by the foregoing sequence presupposes a linear development in the object's explication; however, more complex cases are possible, one of which is particularly important for the aforementioned possibility of substratization of a property. In the transition from S to  $\alpha$ , some property *of*  $\alpha$ , i.e., a sub-property, so to speak, can catch my attention, thus inaugurating a new line of explication, which can continue while maintaining the original substrate, the S, as the main theme. We would then have a formalization that looks as follows:

$$S \rightarrow \alpha \rightarrow S_{\alpha \rightarrow \pi} \rightarrow S_{\alpha \pi} \rightarrow S_{(\alpha)_{\pi} \rightarrow \rho} \rightarrow S_{[(\alpha)_{\pi}]_{\rho}} \rightarrow \dots$$

If such a bifurcation takes place, what happens is that the property  $\alpha$  starts to be treated as a substrate, even if originally it came on the scene as a non-independent property of S and at any time can go back to being viewed as such. As a result: «The distinction between substrate and determination thus shows itself at first as purely relative. Everything that affects and is objective can just as well play the role of object-substrate as that of object-determination or explicate»<sup>40</sup>. Eventually my interest can become fully absorbed in  $\alpha$  and the original substrate S can cease to be the main theme of my perceptual explication. When

<sup>36</sup> Husserl (1973), p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> See ivi, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 132.

my perceptual interest turns to a property and substratizes it, instead of letting the explicative synthesis of partial coincidence register it as a determination of S, the original dynamics of the awakening of types is repeated. So, for example, if I become fully engrossed in the contemplation and then explication of an object's color-property, I simultaneously evoke the type "color" and awaken the corresponding expectations about the particular color under perceptual scrutiny. This move is at the origin of our possible redirection of attention toward universals. It explains why sensuous properties *can be viewed* at any time as instantiations of universals, even if in their first appearance in the context of explicative perception they were most emphatically NOT universals. The red that is a "non-green" or a "non-shiny", which led Hegel to place negation at the origin of perceptual determination, is not the explicated property in its capacity as a determination of the object, but rather the explicated property as substratized and viewed as an instance of an object in its own right, the universal "red", which, of course, is distinct from the universal "green" and the universal "shiny" and can be meaningfully counterposed to them.

Spinoza, then, was wrong and Hegel was misled by the fascination with the metaphysical principle *omnis determinatio est negatio* in his analysis of perception. The determination of an object that happens in an unobstructed line of perceptual explication is usually the enrichment of that object as substrate and not a negation. When it comes to perception the Spinozist principle should be reformulated as:

*most determinations are enrichments*

There are, of course, cases of determinations that come directly onto the scene as negations, such that the full reformulation of the Spinozist principle should be:

*most determinations are enrichments and some determinations are negations*

The only determinations that come forward from the beginning as negations are the ones that follow an *obstruction* or *disappointment* in the process of explication. Suppose that, given the set of expectations awakened by type of object I am perceiving, I expected it to be, for instance, uniformly colored. While I turn the object around, I therefore expect the back to be red like the front, but to my surprise, it turns out to be actually green. The green will then be explicated from the start as "non-red", but this is just because I expected to see red in the first place. At this level, being "non-red" is by no means an essential property of being green, but just a contingent additional layer of sense that pertains contingently to my subjective, individual experience as someone who expected to see red. My friend who is not familiar with objects of that kind and did not expect to see any particular color on the object's back, will not experience the green as non-red. Determinations are negations only when they replace other determinations that were wrongly ascribed to them. If no definite anticipatory grasp was directed at the back side of the object, the property that explicative perception will reveal is not originally connected, be it negatively or positively, with any other property, even if the *possibility* of explicating ever-new properties is bound up with the explication of every single property.

Despite the relativization of the distinction of substrate and property in the wake of bifurcating perceptual interest and the ensuing substratization of properties, Husserl points out that we must upkeep a non-relative, and hence absolute sense of this distinction. Not all substrates can result from the substratization of a property, there have to be ultimate substrates that have never been properties and properties that can only *become* relative substrate but do not come forward originally as substrates. This is how Husserl defines absolute substrates:

An absolute substrate, therefore, is distinguished in this way, that it is simply and directly experienceable, that it is immediately apprehensible, and that its explication can be immediately brought into play. Individual objects of external sensuous perception, that is, bodies, are above all what is immediately apprehensible and are therefore substrates

in an exemplary sense. Therein is found one of the decisive prerogatives of external perception as that which pre-gives the most original substrates of both the activities of experience and the activities of explication<sup>41</sup>.

Perceptual objects, then are paradigmatic examples of absolute substrates, they are independent and they can be directly experienced, while perceptual properties are paradigmatic examples of absolute determinations. Perceptual objects do not lose their self-identity in the wake of explicative perception, since there are continuously held in grasp and enriched as new properties become salient. Moreover, one could imagine an indefinite continuation of a process of perceptual explication that remains entirely within the confines of the object's so-called *internal horizon*, i.e., of the properties inhering in it without considering any other object. As for the object's *external horizon* and the *relational properties* that it reveals (such as "being greater or smaller than...", "being near to or far from..."), they presuppose the turning toward another object or set of objects, which is never strictly necessitated by the explication of an object's internal horizon.

Nonetheless, Husserl is aware that absolute substrates in the fundamental sense exemplified by individual perceptual objects never exist in isolation. They can be viewed as parts or broader objectual wholes, of which they, then become determinations. Ultimately, every perceptual object belongs as a relative substrate in the all-encompassing absolute substrate of physical nature, which is the far-reaching thematic horizon of every particular perceptual exploration. Husserl points out:

No individual body which we bring to givenness in experience is isolated and for itself. Each is a body in a unitary context which, finally and universally understood, is that of the world. Thus universal sensuous experience, conceived as proceeding in universal accord, has a unity of being, a unity of a higher order; the existent of this universal experience is the totality of nature, the universe of all material bodies. [...] Thus, all substrates are connected together; if we move about in the world qua universe, none of them is without "real" relation to others, and to all others, mediately or immediately<sup>42</sup>.

There was, then, something right, after all, in Hegel's focus on the community of things as the truth of perception, even though it was incorrect to suggest that such community only emerges in the wake of perception's inability to uphold its commitment to "the thing of multiple properties" as a self-sufficient unit. As soon as the absolute substrate "perceptual thing", explicated in its absolute determinations "perceptual properties", is connected with other absolute substrates and recognized as belonging in an overarching absolute substrate, called nature, we have to recognize that talk of "absoluteness" has to be «understood, to be sure, with a certain restriction»<sup>43</sup> when it refers to individual things. However, crucially, for Husserl the thematization of the community of things within the broader whole of nature as the absolute substrate in the most complete sense, *by no means implies a departure from the world of sensory perception*. Unlike Hegel, who believes that adequate thematization of the communal existence of things in nature necessarily leads beyond the sphere of perception and toward the un-perceivable world of the intellect, i.e., the unseen world of physics, Husserl can address the totality of nature and yet remain firmly within the scope of perception:

To be sure, the world in the sense of the totality of nature is not encountered as substrate in a simple experience; its experience is therefore not a matter of something being simply displayed in substrate moments, in "properties." On the contrary, the experience of the totality of nature is founded in the prior experiences of individual bodies. But the totality of nature is also "experienced"; we can also direct our attention toward it – even as we

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<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, pp. 137-138.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 137.

experience individual bodies – and also explicate it in its particularities, in which its being is revealed<sup>44</sup>.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have staged a phenomenological dispute between Hegel and Husserl on the essence of perception. I have argued that Hegel's dialectical reconstruction of perceptual experience, which diagnoses a tension between the unity and the multiplicity inherent in the perceptual object, is problematic. It hinges on two assumptions that can be questioned, namely, that the properties of perceptual objects are *themselves* universals and that the way in which they determine the perceptual object as this particular thing is by way of negating each other and excluding other things. Both assumptions can be challenged. Husserl's analysis of perception in *Experience and Judgment* offers an exemplary analysis for this purpose. Following Husserl we must distinguish between the properties of perceptual object *viewed as such*, which are from the beginning as particular as the objects in which they inhere, and the same properties viewed as instantiations of universals. The fact that we name the particular properties of particular objects using words whose meanings are universal, does not necessarily entail that *the properties to which they refer are as such universal*. We can use universal word-meanings to refer to particular properties, or we can use them to redirect our gaze from particular properties to universals. These are two different operations, which must be kept distinct. Moreover, if we drop the assumption that the properties of objects are universals, we can offer a different analysis of the structure of perceptual experience. The logically most simple encounter with a perceptual object does not feature a 'thing-of-multiple-properties', but rather a 'thing-as-a-whole', which only becomes a substrate of multiple properties in the wake of perceptual explication. To explicate the perceptual properties of an object does not automatically involve negation, unless a foregoing expectation is disappointed and the salient property that comes to light turns out not to be what we anticipated. Determination is not negation, after all, at least not in perception.

A broader elaboration on the disagreement between Husserl and Hegel would have to lead to a discussion of the role of concepts in perception and to a more direct engagement of so-called conceptualism. The present paper intended to offer no more than a preliminary stage-setting for any future discussion of conceptualism and non-conceptualism in phenomenology and to counterbalance a recent tendency to reconcile two approaches whose fruitfulness, I believe, actually resides in their irreconcilable difference.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*. A full discussion of this point would far exceed the scope of this paper, but Husserl states his position clearly in *Ideas I*, where he writes: «in the method of physical science the perceived thing itself, always and in principle, is exactly the thing that the physicist investigates and scientifically determines» (Husserl, 2014, p. 95). Thus, the world of physics is not another world, beyond, or behind, the world of sense and governed by completely different relations and laws. When we say things like: "this table is actually made of atoms and molecules" we are talking about precisely this table and attributing a property to it, namely, being made of atoms and molecules. On Husserl's account natural-scientific discourse does not aim at replacing our ontology and in no way does it reveal an alleged illusoriness of our sensory experience. Rather, natural-scientific discourse adds a further and more fundamental layer of determinations to our everyday discourse, where perception fixes the reference to the things that we then set out to determine more exactly when we do physical science.

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