

“The Joy of Asparagus: Incorporating the Other in Hegel”

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Introduction

This may seem like a strange title. I’m reasonably sure that “asparagus” and “Hegel” have never been linked together before. I did a search on PhilPapers.org and found two papers mentioning asparagus, one in the context of etiquette (eating with your fork is apparently wrong; there’s also a question about having a napkin on your lap).¹

The topic is chosen to fit with this year’s CSWIP conference on eating and food, obviously. I don’t normally do much philosophical work on this, but, when I thought about it, there was one thing that I thought might be worth exploring, especially since it’s a favourite topic of conversation amongst my stitch & bitch knitting friends.

Women’s eating and food choices are often heavily value-laden: food is often carefully monitored, carefully chosen, carefully justified, and so forth. Even trying *not* to do this often feels like a political act of resistance. Quite often our relationship to our food is one of trying to achieve very particular ends.

Asparagus is funny in this regard: it’s quite good for you, and it’s sad when it’s not in season (it becomes quite expensive) – but aside from any locavore politics, one of its most notable features is the way it affects the smell of urine afterward (often hours and hours afterward).

It seems, from the research, that some people produce asparagus-smelling pee (i.e., their system possesses the chemical enzyme that interacts with asparagus in such & such a way); others can smell the result; and others both make it and smell it. For those who are familiar with the smell: it’s

¹ Michael Morreau, “Prima facie and seeming duties,” *Studia Logica* 57 (1): 47-71 (1996), and Andy Egan and Brian Weatherson, “Prankster’s ethics,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (1): 45-52 (2004).

unmistakeable. For those who've never smelled it and have no idea what I'm talking about, just trust me and the folks you see smiling & nodding that it is quite distinctive smell.

This smell is an odd quirk of life, with our food and our digestive system, that we don't really try to control or carefully monitor. It seems *completely* trivial, until you remember how rare this kind of triviality is when we talk about our food choices, and their results on our body.

I'm going to come back to this point later, after I've laid some other things on the table (the Hegel part of the things), so that we can examine this relationship we have to asparagus urine in the context of our relationship to vulnerability and control, and what this means in the context of our relationship to the Other – i.e., is it necessarily hostile? Or assimilating? – I just wanted to make sure the hook of the paper was clear before I wandered into the Hegelian woods.

Hegel and the Other in the *Phenomenology*

The secret, real purpose of the paper is less about asparagus and more about rehabilitating Hegel.

Hegel is often characterized as a prime example of a philosopher whose system assimilates the other to the same, erasing any difference (Kierkegaard and Lévinas, I'm looking at you). Hegel's account of the hostile encounter with the Other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which leads to the battle to the death and the master/slave relationship seems to suggest that our encounter with difference can only lead to trying to overcome it.

As a quick refresher, the account goes as follows: The *Phenomenology of Spirit* traces the development of Spirit, or consciousness, as it passes from one form of life to another, gradually becoming more self-conscious and self-reflective. The transition to self-consciousness is one of the most famous parts of the text. In this transition, self-consciousness in its very beginnings is simply outward-focused desire, which seeks to satisfy itself in external objects. It reaches out of itself, desiring the other, but in consuming the other, that other's difference from it is immediately overcome (PhS §167).

At this stage, its relation to the objects it comes across is thus destructive, and it is just seeking gratification (PhS §175, EPM §428). Hegel suggests that destroying and consuming the object encountered helps the self be more sure of itself in its distinction from the thing destroyed (§174). It's not satisfying though, because as soon as it has destroyed the object, that object is no longer there to help establish the self as something separate from the object.

When the self encounters another self, which it is then unable to consume and assimilate, it becomes confused. It sees itself in the other, and so its own sense of self is disturbed, because the other is *like* it but is not it (PhS §§ 178-181). Meanwhile, the other is having the same, reciprocal reaction (PhS §§182-183). As Hegel writes, “they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another” (PhS §184). At this stage, since neither self adequately recognizes its relation to the whole of humanity, and thus the true nature of their relationship, the other seems to represent an obstacle.

The two proceed to a struggle for recognition, which is initially a battle to the death (PhS §187), until one of the selves proceeds to realize that it would rather give up the struggle in order to save its life – this then becomes the slave (or bondsman), and the other becomes the master (or lord) (§§PhS 178-189, EPM §§431-433). This is not as satisfying to the master as it could be, since the master really wanted recognition in order to bolster & define his sense of self, but by reducing the other to a slave, the recognition is inadequate. Meanwhile, the slave, in beginning to work for the master, learns the value of working and of deferred gratification (PhS §§190-196, EPM §§434-5). The story then goes on from there.

Note carefully that this is a story about expressing control over the world around us – of shoring up our own certainty of ourselves by overcoming our surroundings. [this will be important]

Even though the whole point of the location of this encounter within the *Phenomenology* is that humanity goes on to develop better forms of recognition, the emphasis on this account within much social theory means that this view – that our encounter with the Other is a necessarily hostile one – is often taken to be Hegel's primary word on the subject. As Linda Alcoff writes, “Hegel's fear of otherness [as expressed in the lordship/bondage chapter] has had a stronger influence than his subsequent embrace of the holistic model of the self” (Alcoff 2006, 63).

There's a more interesting story to be told, however, and more interesting conceptual tools to draw from Hegel. After all, throughout his system he argues for the union of identity and difference, so that we understand them both together. What, then, are ways to examine the role of difference within identity in Hegel's philosophy, that might help in interpretation of our encounter with the other?

Some Hegel scholars might point to the need to look at the whole *Phenomenology* in order to better contextualize the early encounter with the other with the later development of community and ethical life. I don't *disagree* with this, but the *Phenomenology* paints a very particular picture of the development of consciousness, and it's nice to have a little more room for philosophical manoeuvring.

Are there other models in Hegel's thought for encounters with the other?

The *Philosophy of Nature* and assimilation

Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* has often been dismissed and ignored even by Hegel scholars. Amongst other criticisms, it is often deemed irrelevant on the grounds of the empirical science that Hegel includes; while Hegel was often reasonably accurate in his reporting of the science of the day, this science has generally been either disproven or superseded by more contemporary theories. Consequently, his account of the science of the day is often seen as of purely historical interest. If this is so, then Hegel's argument that this science reveals the unconscious working of Spirit in the natural world would seem to be false: if this is not how the natural world works, then the conclusions about Spirit are not correct for us today.

On the other hand, given Hegel's systematicity, the *Philosophy of Nature* can provide insights for interpreting claims elsewhere in his works. Given that Hegel regularly uses examples drawn from nature in the rest of his system, and regularly compares natural processes to logical or social ones within the *Philosophy of Nature*, it is clear that this sort of cross-interpretive work is warranted. This kind of work does not depend on the scientific accuracy of Hegel's knowledge of biology, but on what we can glean through working with his texts. Alison Stone has argued that Hegel's argument,

while not entirely successful on its own terms, still opens up the possibility for a kind of philosophy that can take the rationality and intrinsic value of nature seriously.²

So: maybe exploring Hegel's account of digestion can open up the opportunity to reflect on the mutual transformations that occur as we interact with our lived environment, and to consider the kind of stance we take toward that which we encounter.

Back to our question then: What are ways to examine the role of difference within identity in Hegel's philosophy, that might help in interpretations of our encounter with the Other?

An example of assimilation which need not be ethically or politically problematic is eating and digestion. This is treated at some length in the main text of the *Philosophy of Nature*, and in the additions added posthumously from Hegel's lectures and notes by the editor, Michelet. Hegel draws from many of the scientific studies of eating and digestion of his time, and makes comparisons across several different animal species.

Hegel talks about digestion in the context of his discussion of animals (which includes humans, considered in their biological makeup). No animal is completely self-sufficient on its own; all finite things are marked by a lack. This lack helps propel them through their development, and also serves to connect them with the world around them – recall that for Hegel the whole world is an interconnected whole. The process of eating begins with acquiring the object to be eaten; the crucial goal of eating is to bring the food and the animal into “living, absolute unity” – “*assimilation* itself is the conversion of the externality into the self-like unity” (PN §363). It is not a mechanical or chemical process, in which the substances remain external to each other (PN §363Z and also 365Z[398]).³

² Alison Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).

³ “Assimilation cannot be a chemical process either, because in the living being we have a subject which preserves itself and negates the specific quality of the other, whereas in the chemical process, each of the substances taking part, acid and alkali, loses its quality and is lost in the neutral product of the salt or returns to an abstract radical. There the activity is extinguished, but the animal, on the contrary, is a lasting unrest in its self-relation” (PN §363Z [394]).

Hegel characterizes assimilation as: “first, the *immediate* fusion of the ingested material with animality ... Secondly, as *mediation*, assimilation is *digestion* – opposition of the subject to the outer world” (PN §364).

The relationship to the external object about to be eaten resembles my initial attitude to the Other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Hegel says, “Here the alimentary process is the main thing; the organism is in a state of tension with its non-organic nature, negates it and makes it identical with itself” (PN §365Z [397]).⁴

The animal wants to reaffirm and establish itself in this tension. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we saw the explicitly hostile encounter (recall there that the Other is also sizing us up). Something *slightly* different occurs here. Hegel points out, “If the organism were actively hostile to the non-organic, it would not come into its own, for the organism is precisely the mediation which consists in involving itself with the non-organic and yet returning into itself” (PN §365Z [404]). [Note – ‘non-organic’ here just means that which is in opposition to the organism; Hegel recognizes that food is, actually, organic in origin].

In other words, the animal displays a certain kind of openness to what it is about to encounter, even though its priority is to assimilate that other into itself.

“Through this process of assimilation, therefore, the animal becomes in a real way *for itself*; for by particularizing itself into the main differences of animal lymph and bile in its behaviour towards the individual thing itself it has proved itself to be an animal individual; and by the negation of its other, it has posited itself as subjectivity, as real being-for-itself” (PN §365Z [404]).

The logic of this is consonant with the logic of the encounter with the Other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. [highlight self-control, self-confidence] Here, our openness to what we were going to encounter has been rewarded in the successful negation of that other as it is brought under our control, assimilated by us, and we have been justified as active agents in the world.

⁴ Around here in the text Hegel also makes an interesting comparison of digestion to infection, and then goes on to similarly comparing reason (and the persuasive force of reasons-giving) to infection as well.

Asparagus and its ‘special odour’

But does asparagus throw a wrench in this? With asparagus, the work of assimilation isn’t wholly complete for some time – it imparts its smell to our urine for quite some time. And yet, this doesn’t provoke hostility or uncertainty in us.

Here’s Hegel’s description of the phenomenon:

“There is a fund of experience on this subject ... Asparagus imparts a special odour to the urine only a few minutes after digestion; this is the effect of immediate assimilation by the cellular tissue. Afterwards the smell passes off and does not reappear until eight to twelve hours later when digestion proper and the discharge of excrements is completed” (PN §365Z [401-2]).

Recall that Hegel generally characterizes digestion as framed by a hostility toward the external, but note carefully here that his description of asparagus urine is completely neutral, in contrast with the negative descriptions offered by other authors (Benjamin Franklin, for instance, refers to its “a disagreeable Odour”⁵).

Let’s explore how this experience works in terms of our self-confidence and sense of ourselves.

As I mentioned at the outset, there is something quite distinctive about our relationship to asparagus and asparagus-affected urine. The smell is unique and recognizable. One comment, found in a popular article about the chemical process that creates the smell, illustrates it well: “I always smile and giggle a little bit when I visit the restroom a few hours after eating asparagus. The smell reminds me to not take life so seriously.”⁶ It is striking that we seem to accept this smell – for the most part, we don’t tend to try to control it. In other words, though eating is the paradigmatic example of completely assimilating an other, we have instances of an effect which is not subject to our mastery but preserves the other’s distinctiveness; we allow it to transform us, even though it was not the particular effect – i.e., nutrition or taste – that we were seeking.⁷

⁵ Benjamin Franklin, “Letter to the Royal Academy of Brussels,” in *Early Americas Digital Archive*.
http://mith.umd.edu/eada/html/display.php?docs=franklin_bagatelle2.xml

⁶ Bill Briggs, “Psst: asparagus pee. Are you in the club?” *The Body Odd* blog. 29 June 2012.
http://bodyodd.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/06/29/12463697-psst-asparagus-pee-are-you-in-the-club.

⁷ Robbie Moser wonders whether this is such a unique property of asparagus. “I’m just a little unsure about the special distinction of asparagus here. Is the distinction of asparagus (apart from its distinctive odour, which same might be said

While, as we have seen, Hegel's own emphasis within his account of digestion is on the overcoming of the food and the preservation of the self-identity of the eater, the lingering effects of asparagus point to the ongoing transformation that occurs within us that exceeds our planned purposes. Our accepting attitude toward the effects of asparagus model a promising stance toward the external. It's beyond our control, yet it is not a threat to our self-confidence. This seemingly frivolous example, in other words, complicates the story of our assimilation – and reminds us that we are both changed in making food over into part of ourselves, making the food & us into one organic unity.

“Not taking life so seriously” in the case of asparagus pee is a kind of very preliminary and basic form of accepting our vulnerability in the face of the external world. We seem to be self-assured grown-up types, and yet this particular vegetable exerts its slightly ridiculous effect on us.

Note that this relaxed attitude is not one that is *denying* the effects of asparagus – to recommend “not taking life so seriously” here is not to deny that various foods do have an effect on us, do affect our bodies in various ways, and that by and large it's probably a good thing that we have a concern for our health, more or less. The kind of “not taking life so seriously” involved here is in fact *noticing* a very particular effect a food has had on us, but not letting it undermine our sense of selves, because it reminds us that in truth we *are* the sort of being that can have smelly pee. Finite, vulnerable, a little messy.

What would this mean for Hegel's account of assimilation?

It means that right in the paradigm case of negating an other, we have a lingering effect of that other that exceeds our control, and that this doesn't bother us. Does this change our mental image of assimilation? Does this remind us that we change in response to our encounters with what we take in?

of beans, or eggs, or chilis) that it is "our accepting attitude" toward it, as opposed to the smell of our feces or farts? But who is the "our" here? Maybe it is "not a threat to the self-confidence" of Dryden and some others, but I know several people who are quite embarrassed by the smell of their asparagus pee (I am one of them). And, conversely, I know lots of Dude-Bros who are (outwardly) proud and boisterous about the rankness of the smell of their feces. i.e. Couldn't we make this point about excrement in general, no matter what has been eaten? Almost everyone agrees that feces has a bad smell, and so it isn't just asparagus but most food that I eat which, upon digestion, leaves a disagreeable trace of its otherness. The foul smell of our excrement 'exceeds our planned purposes'. (In fact, it occurs to me that excretion in general might be cast as an act of 're-othering' the assimilated.)”

Remember that the context for Hegel's discussion of digestion and assimilation is within a philosophical system that recognizes all living beings as finite, and therefore as lacking, as needing to reach out into the world. We're essentially vulnerable. The other forms of vulnerability that Hegel discusses in the *Philosophy of Nature*, that we are to reconcile ourselves to as part of our *nature*, are somewhat more serious: he discusses the inevitability of both death and illness (Hegel notes that while the particular diseases which strike us are contingent, the fact that we will become ill at various points in our life is not).

We're used to thinking about those philosophically (illness, less so; but death, I think we've got.) But the tiny everyday experiences, the every day gaps in our armour, the slight absurdities and frivolities of noticing the distinct smells of our bodies – these are worth exploring.