

# CONFLUENCE

## VOLUME 2

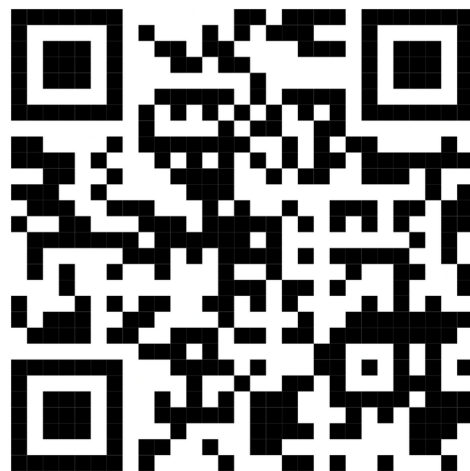


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# “Section A. Consciousness” of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: Sections 90 - 165

By: Jack Hardacre

## The First Chamber

One day a young prince sits in his room, his father walks in and tells the boy “If you wish to inherit my kingdom you must pass through the family crypt.” With this vague instruction the youth makes his way down to the lowest chamber of the castle and takes a step through a large golden door. Inside the prince finds himself confronted by a man in a robe, the man, without speaking, leads him to an empty room, bare in its decoration, with a candle in the middle placed upon an altar. The candle flickers, it dances and casts its shadow on the gray wall behind. The robed man says “Young Prince, what is this in the center of the room? Describe it to me using only your senses, without interpretation, let it describe itself to you.” The boy walks forward, the air currents which his steps produce threatening to extinguish the delicate flame. He grasps the candle, observes the fire, studies it, and after some time the prince says “Well it is hot, it is orange, it is blue in the center, it flickers, it is above a white cylinder, it is waxy in texture.” The robed man nods as he records the prince’s description. When he has finished, the robed man places the tablet next to the candle and extinguishes the flame with his fingers. He then asks the prince to read back his description of the candle. It is nonsense now, the description has lost any explanatory power.

The prince shakes his head and says “Well of course, describing the flame in that way only describes it for the moment, it cannot go beyond that.” The robed man replies “Well you have a point, then describe it for me again, in whatever manner you please.” The prince, now understanding his primacy over the candle says “Well it is a candle, it had a flame before but now it does not.” The prince looks to the robed man expectantly, clearly pleased with himself. The robed man simply replies “I disagree, what you have there is not a candle but a donkey.” The prince, who is flabbergasted at this silly assertion retorts “What do you mean? I see the candle right there, you’re lying to me.” The robed man says “Well then prove to me it is a candle, I only see a donkey.” The prince attempts to explain himself, he describes the candle gesticulating wildly. The robed man does not budge though and simply asserts his own thought over the prince’s

The prince then walks over to the candle and grabs it, he brings it over to the tutor and makes him feel the wax, feel the wick, look closely at the candle itself. The prince says “just feel the wick, feel the wax.” The robed man takes his time as the prince engages with every abstract property of the candle in order to explain that the object is in fact a candle. Finally the robed man relents and says “Ah I see what you mean now, it seems you were right.” He then blows on the

candle, not enough to put it out, just enough to thin the flame. “Now what is this?” Says the robed man.

The prince, looking befuddled is unsure. He thinks for a long time, he watches the flame as it flickers. He watches as the flame goes out. He watches as the flame melts the candle half way down. The prince finally says “It is still a candle.”

## Sense Certainty

In order to understand the evolution of consciousness which Hegel seeks to describe in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* we must begin with the absolute most basic mode of consciousness, this being Sense-Certainty. Sense-Certainty in its initial form attempts to understand the object through what it believes to be absolute, immediate, unmediated perception. This is done through the senses without interpretation from higher faculties, without abstraction (or so Sense-Certainty believes). Sense-Certainty regards the object as the superior element to itself as it only exists in so far as it is able to observe the object, thus object is raised above subject. Despite its lofty claims, Sense-Certainty immediately falls flat when it attempts to record its knowledge of the object, or to communicate it. If you attempt to describe a thing and you do so using only immediate, unmediated properties, when those properties change your recorded description immediately becomes nonsense. This is the first of many dialectical/alchemical negations which we (the phenomenological observer) will recognize within consciousness and which will lead to our ascent up the ladder as consciousness transmutes itself.

It is at this point that consciousness comes to understand that in order to describe an object we must engage in some level of abstraction, we must, through language, render the object a universal. A candle retains its status as a candle whether it is lit or not, but to understand this we have already moved beyond immediate sense perception and have moved into abstraction. This understanding gives consciousness the new illusion that it is actually superior to the object and is able to dictate the object's nature. This conception is in turn negated when consciousness is confronted with the fact that it is not the sole observer of an object. In fact, there are many I's all observing objects and positing themselves as the arbiter of what this object is. The I stands in opposition to other I's and the the object's nature now cannot be deduced.

Consciousness now finally comes to the realization that in order to have any kind of understanding of the object it must not regard itself as superior to it, but instead it must recognize that the act of perceiving an object is not fully done in the object, nor in the subject; immediacy in Sense-Certainty is instead the overall structure and relationship between the two. The I relies on the object just as the object relies on the subject to interpret it. Thus, we have already made the fundamental move from an understanding of subject and object as separate entities, unable to participate in each other, to a fundamentally Hegelian, dialectical relationship. This moment, the realization that the subject and object are connected in an orbiting dialectical relationship is the first transmutation of the *Phenomenology*, the first revelation that reveals to consciousness that it

is not simply a thing standing on its own, but a thing which is fundamentally and inextricably connected to the object with which it interacts.

However, this new arrangement, though much better than what we had before, runs into a new problem. It now treats the object, as well as itself, as solid, unitary entities. This is shown to be insufficient as the object can change as time goes on in any number of ways, while still being the same universal. A half melted candle is still a candle after all. The object fractures into an unending array of here's and now's. In order to remedy this consciousness must understand the object as a universal which contains properties within itself, not as a static thing. It must come to understand that the dialectical movement it is engaging with the object in is not the end all be all. Within the object itself are contained a collection of properties which are themselves universals independent of the object. This is the fundamental turn which leads us out of pure Sense-Certainty and into Perception.

## The Second Chamber

The robed man now leads the prince into a new room, this room is more decorated with some furniture and accoutrements. In the middle of this room sits a simple glass jar with what looks to be silver powder inside. The robed man says "Describe for me this new object." The prince studies it once again, takes the jar in his hands, and says "It is a jar of silver." He then lists off the properties of the silver; "It is bright, it is also metallic, it is also fine." The robed man listens, again writing down the prince's observations. The robed man then challenges the prince "But look here, the powder on the bottom of the jar where the light does not shine is dull, and when I jostle the jar parts clump together while others flow freely. This silver powder clearly does not only contain your properties, but also their opposite." The prince looks befuddled once again, he struggles to grasp the significance. He attempts to nail down the true nature of the powder, yet each attempt yields only another opposite.

After a long while the prince finally relents and stops to think about the nature of these properties themselves instead of the nature of the silver as a whole. The robed man says "Do you not see? There is no way that powder could be consistently shiny no matter what. It can only be shiny in so far as it is not dull at the moment, without the opposite these words are meaningless." The prince tries to make sense of this but becomes only more confused, he stares at the jar and says "Then what is this jar? How can it house opposites in this way?" He pauses, "It must be my fault, I must be simply observing incorrectly."

The robed man replies "Or maybe you have fundamentally misunderstood this jar." The prince grasps the jar more tightly, attempting to hold on to its oneness, but the harder he grasps, the more dizzying is the realization that the oppositions held within are impossible to ignore. He goes back and forth, attempting to reconcile the two opposing principles, the oneness of the object, and the opposing principles which it contains within. Try as he may he cannot, the prince begins to sweat, his vision blurs, and in this nauseous state he watches the jar as its edges blur, as it oscillates in his hands. He watches as his vision comes close to failing, and it is at that

moment, as he watches the jar melt into a blur, that the prince realizes the motion of the silver, that the door to the next room opens.

## Perception

In order to move past Sense-Certainty, it was necessary to come to an understanding of the object not as a simple monadic entity, but as a container holding a bundle of properties within. However, the core issue with this conception of the object is that, in order for the properties to have meaning, they must be determinate, if the property is not determinate, does not exist in opposition to its negation, then it is meaningless. If the properties contained within an object are indifferent to each other, then you have nothing at all, simply a gray sludge of meaninglessness. However, when you give the properties determinateness, you compromise the nature of the object as the determinate container within which the properties exist. After all, you cannot have the exclusionary, determinate container, be then excluded from the bundle of properties it contains. This is the fundamental conflict within Perception, though it has come further than Sense-Certainty, consciousness still cannot grasp the nature of the object beyond this contradiction.

Perception fundamentally cannot withstand this conflict and begins to falter. It attempts to save itself by asserting that the error must be on its own part, there must be a lapse in its perception of the object. Consciousness attempts to now posit itself as the universal medium which holds different properties (universals) apart. In other words, the object is unitary, and we simply impose the abstract category of “properties” upon it. This however once again collapses into itself because if all objects were truly unitary and without properties, then they would be impossible to distinguish from each other. Now we are at the other end of the extreme, maybe the object is simply a collection of determinate universals, and we construct the one, the container, within our own minds and attempt to project this unity where there is none. The properties simply exist and we construct an object to make sense of them. This of course also fails as then there would be no way to come to any kind of consensus among observers about where one thing ends and the other begins.

So, we come back to the hard truth that the object must really somehow contain both opposing natures within itself. The thing now becomes the prime mover in consciousness’ perception of it. The thing presents itself a certain way and consciousness simply reflects it back into itself, and then allows it’s opposing principles to interact. The object only becomes this dialectical disunity because it is interacting with the observer, as well as other objects. However, this doesn’t add up either, it doesn’t make sense for a uniformity to diversify internally due to interaction with other uniformities (other objects), the diversity must have been present before. The object must have an internal distinctiveness which prevents the determinate properties from taking over, and an external diversity which prevents the object’s monadic nature from doing the same. The object must have an internal nature as well as a nature which manifests when it interacts with other objects.

It is simply impossible for consciousness to discern the difference between these two natures though as it is impossible to observe an object in a vacuum. So, we continue on with the oscillation between the two principles which defines Perception. However, it is through this oscillation that consciousness realizes that the dialectical conflict is in fact nothing less than what the object is in itself. The ceaseless motion of the two natures, the two principles orbiting each other is the actual embodiment of the object. Consciousness realizes that it is not just subject and object engaging in a dynamic, dialectical movement, but the object itself engaging in its own, even more basal dialectical movement as well.

It is with Perception that the Phenomenology begins in earnest fully engaging with a Hermetic method of deduction. Nicholas of Cusa would describe the dialectical/alchemical movement which we just engaged in as “Coincidentia Oppositorum”. This is the concept of contradictory forces, opposing principles, reaching a higher unity in the realm of the divine. It is important to note that ultimately, Hegel’s innovation, as talked about in the Preface and in my previous commentary on the preface, is combining the schools of logic and that of people like Cusa. In many ways Hegel’s system is itself a dialectical movement between the two seemingly opposing fields. But we are still taking the two opposing principles and positing them as elements of a dialectical movement which our eventual goal will be to sublimate into each other in order to reach a higher unity, just like the Coincidentia Oppositorum. Additionally, it echoes the Hermetic principle of Correspondence in that the dialectical process above (subject and object), is mirrored below (determinate properties and unitary thing). We have now taken the first real step beyond the Nigredo of Sense-Certainty, we have enlightened the object with the light of the Albedo, we have watched it reflect into itself, and we have recognized the movement within. The object is no longer a thing containing principles, it is the dialectical oscillation of opposites, and this is the realization which leads us into Force.

## The Third Chamber

Following his near fainting, the prince composes himself and enters the third chamber, this chamber is far more ornate with gold leaf on the furniture and beautiful artwork. In the center of the room is a table with a pile of metallic shavings on it. The robed man hands the prince a metal bar and says “Run this over the shavings.” The prince moves this metal bar over the shavings and they rearrange themselves, lining up into rows. Where there was before only an indeterminate pile, now lies a branching geometric organization. The prince removes the magnet and the filings collapse back into an indeterminate pile. The prince flips the magnet over and runs it over the shavings again. The shavings once again arrange themselves but this time the pattern is reversed. The prince stands there, unable to grasp the significance of this. The prince says “So when I move the magnet over the shavings they move. What’s the point?” The robed man allows the prince to think for a while before saying “What is the relationship between the magnet and the filings?”

The prince replies “Well the magnet clearly has power over the filings, it solicits their movement.” The robed man then puts the magnet on a separate table, he says “Now what? The magnet which was previously so supreme is now inert and unmoving.” The prince takes some time to think. He says “I see, the two poles require each other to exist in active movement. Their opposition is not complete, they are in fact both participants in a deeper unity. Magnetism, in order to exist as a unitary principle must contain both seemingly opposite principles within itself.” The robed man then brings out a second magnet and the prince watches as the two magnets seemingly battle each other for control over the shavings as they move this way and that. The prince says “So what? The two competing magnets switch off depending on which is closer to the shavings.” The robed man cracks a smile and says “You’re almost there my boy.” He then reaches out and touches the prince’s forehead with his finger. The prince falls unconscious.

When the prince awakes he finds himself in the same room he was before, but this time he finds himself back in the room but everything seems several shades grayer than before. In any event the robed man says to him “Watch the magnets again.” This time when the prince moves the magnet over the shavings a bright burst of light comes through the grayness of the room, modelling out the magnetic force which animates the shavings. When the robed man moves the other magnet over the shavings, what once looked to be a battle between the two magnets now creates a beautiful dispersion of light connecting both the magnets as well as the shavings. The robed man says “So do you now see?” The prince stares at the beautiful display of light before him and understands.

The robed man switches the magnets and the pattern of course reverses, he continues this for a while and eventually the prince drops his magnet into the pile of shavings. When he does so the shavings cling to all sides of the magnet, obscuring the bar of metal so it appears to be simply composed of shavings. He watches this and takes the other magnet from the robed man, and runs it over this new bar of shavings, when he does so a flash brighter than any the prince has ever seen emerges from the bar, it is as if lightning has struck right there in the center of this chamber. The prince stumbles back, his vision completely obliterated for the moment. After a few minutes when his vision begins to return he looks forward and the magnet, the shavings, even the robed man are gone. He walks forward and emerges from the chamber into the light of the sun.

## Force and Verstand

What Perception has left us with is the understanding of the object as Notion. What Hegel means by Notion is basically a thing which is composed of dialectical movement as opposed to dead inert matter. Perception has made the leap from the dissolving, impersonal Nigredo, to the lively investigation of the Albedo. This realization is what brought us to the point where consciousness can overcome Perception. However, as phenomenological observers we can see that Perception is still insufficient in that consciousness continues to regard itself as separate from this dialectical movement, this is the conflict consciousness grapples with within Force.

The nature of the object at this time is dual, it is both a being for itself, as well as a being for others. In other words it is both a unitary, self same entity which contains itself within itself, as well as a diversity of determinate properties which exist within this container. Of course we realized in Perception that the nature of the object itself is the interplay and constant oscillation of these two natures. This process, the constant oscillation inherent to objects, is what we call Force. Force is the process by which independent elements emerge from a unity and again reintegrate into that unity, in other words Force is the movement which comes from transition between unity and dispersed plurality. Thus, Force appears to be a movement composed of two separate actors/principles playing on each other.

However, the issue with this conception of Force is that the distinction between these two parts of Force is in fact only real for the observer, only for consciousness. In reality, though Force requires a distinction in order to exist as an active Notion, it still remains the case that the Forces existence as separate essences only can continue so long as their interplay with each other continues. In other words neither can actually have an independent existence without the other, and so they are not truly independent essences, but of course simply projections of a higher unity.

Consciousness watches this process, it looks to the Notional nature behind Force and it sees the constant appearance, vanishing, sublation, etc. It sees this seemingly chaotic state of affairs and seeks to further extricate itself, to do this it retreats to the stable inner world where it believes it can remain separate from dialectical movement. It conceives of the inner world, as being contained within itself, this world is permanent and true to consciousness. It is from this position that Verstand looks to the Law behind the Notional Force. It believes that behind all the movement, behind the chaos, there is a stable law. For example, motion is the Law behind the obscuring interplay of time and space. Likewise positive and negative electrical current conceal the Law of electricity, North pole and South pole obscuring magnetism. Verstand believes it has penetrated beneath Force and has cracked the code so to speak. This is an advancement from Verstand's previous stance which saw all matter a dead and inert.

What Verstand creates here is a world of Laws, calm Laws to be exact, which it can sit with, be happy about, and regard as the completed, highest unity possible. It even goes so far as to look beyond these laws and conceive of them as simply an expression of one singular Law which the diversity of Laws proceeds from. It is a fundamentally Albedo way of thinking and bears many similarities to the Neoplatonic conception of the One as the monadic, unchanging principle from which all else exists as its procession. However, this arrangement produces a nagging question. Even if we accept that all difference simply comes down to appearance and the Law beneath it is unitary, how do we explain where the appearance of difference comes from? It doesn't really make sense for something unitary to be able to produce difference, even if it is just the appearance of difference. There must be some internal difference within Law in order for it to generate the appearance of difference. The very thing that is supposed to be monadic shows itself to in fact produce difference from within itself. Further, this difference is once again what actually constitutes the Law itself. Just like the object only exists as the dialectical movement known as Force, so must Law only exist as its own dialectical oscillation.

So, this forces *Verstand* to accept that in fact Law also has its opposite which it engages with, but consciousness initially conceives of this state of affairs as an opposition between the true world in which exist the Laws, and an inverted world in which their opposites exist. Interplay between the true world and the inverted world must constitute law itself. Hegel describes the inverted world as a place where what is sweet is sour, what is hot is cold, etc. It is a place where all sensuous interpretation is reversed. However, when we think back to our revelations during the previous sections, we remember that in order for properties like sourness and coldness to have a determinate quality, they must exist in opposition to something else. That which is sour is not sweet, that which is cold is not hot. So, these properties again contain their opposites within themselves, this means that the inverted world in fact shows itself to be indistinguishable from the true world, only differing in appearance yet containing the same properties, Laws, and principles within it. The two worlds are once again shown to simply be expressions of a higher unity, self opposition sublated into a higher form. J.N. Findlay in his analysis of the *Phenomenology* likens this concept to a quote from Plotinus: "Everything that is yonder is also here." That is to say, what we believed to be opposition proves itself to constitute a higher unity.

## Infinity

This revelation which leads us out of Force and the *Verstand* is referred to by Hegel as Infinity. Infinity is essentially the realization that within a unitary nature exists distinct interconnected factors whose movement constitutes, and overcomes itself in their common unity. It is described as a lightning flash, the true revelation of this section of the *Phenomenology*. It is the moment in which consciousness comes to understand that the movement which it believed to be chaotic and unstable and which it tried to avoid; is in fact the essential nature of Law and by extension reality itself. The revelation is that there is actually no issue with the idea of an absolute, monadic unity dirempting itself. In fact, it can only be an absolute unity insofar as it does dirempt itself and engages with itself on that level. If it did not, and simply stood as diametrically opposed to the principle of diremption, it would then be sublated by this diremption, not able to exist for itself.

The lightning flash of Infinity now understood, consciousness is left staring into a world which it now recognizes more accurately, but which it still regards as other and separate from itself. Unbeknownst to consciousness though, and only ascertained by us as the phenomenological observers, is the fact that all these vanishings and conflicts which lead us to this point are not actually the Understanding observing processes in the natural world, but instead simply consciousness engaging with itself as it grapples with its ability to interpret that which it gazes upon. This is not to say consciousness constructs the natural world, nor that objects do not contain dialectical motion within themselves, but simply to say that up until now consciousness has been unable to actually engage with the other, simply being stuck battling itself, engaging in the same dialectical movement it "observed" outside of itself, with itself.

So, at this point the Understanding has about reached its limit, it has engaged in this self-diremption, this dialectical movement, and it has come out of it as a higher unity, with the lightning flash of Infinity it has completed, on some level, a process of dialectical transmutation and has reached the initial Rubedo. However, this simply means that now the unitary Verstand stares into the world of essences which it has supposedly been engaging with this whole time, and finally is able to meaningfully see them, entering into a new dialectical interplay between itself and the objective world outside itself. Spirit realizes that it must in fact exist as an active part of the world outside itself instead of simply an observer.

# Georges Sorel's Meditations on Progress

By: Jack Hardacre

## Progress

As a historiographical school of thought, progress presents itself as not just the structure behind history, but the actual goal of history itself. Progress presents itself as a law of nature, something which moves along a predetermined path, reaching forward toward a final state which we may or may not be able to ascertain. Progress in these terms is akin to wyrd, an eternal, unchangeable fate which, no matter how many setbacks history suffers, will continue to move forward toward its goal. Taken in these terms it not only makes for a comforting story, but also gives a plausible explanation for the ceaseless entropy which undoes all empires, all eras, all philosophical systems, all peoples. It conceives of this coming to be and passing away of history as simply successive steps forward, out with the old and in with the new in the pursuit of that which we may not be able to fully see.

On closer examination though, progress reveals its conceit to be, far from an honest engagement with the motion of history, actually an artificial deadening of an active process. It renders historical movement simply a function of unchanging principles, just a projection of a process which has already been predetermined. It is a quintessentially Nigredo conception as it renders that which is alive and endlessly changing, dead and predetermined. It is *Verstand* freezing the dialectical movement of the world and breaking it down into inert substance. This conception of eternal progress is in fact the opposite of its promised explanation of historical entropy, reducing it to an object at the whims of the Law behind it. It makes the same fundamental mistake as Hegel's Perception in assuming that there must be a stable, unitary Law behind the chaos, instead of understanding that the object itself exists because of the dialectical conflict which it contains. It is only with the lightning flash of Infinity, with the light of the Albedo shining down, that we can move past this immature and half baked conception of history, toward a recognition of the fundamentally active alchemical/dialectically motion which constitutes history not as substance but as an organism unto itself, as subject. This is precisely the image of history which Geroges Sorel presents in "The Illusions of Progress".

## Sorel's Diagnosis

Sorel, in "The Illusions of Progress" charts the development of the ideology of historical progress from its origins in the explosion of Cartesian thought among the French aristocracy, as well as the concurrent softening of aristocratic life during the reign of Louis the XIV, which brought not just prosperity, but security to aristocratic society. The constant force of the royals which had become all encompassing under the reign of Le Roi Soleil, gave the illusion to the

aristocracy that constant, indefinite improvement across generations was not just possible, but in fact inevitable. Descartes' ideas fit perfectly with what these aristocrats wanted to hear in the moment as it in many ways reduces that which is outside consciousness to mechanical, inert matter. This idea of reducing the physical world to dead matter, and attempting to deduce an ultimate cause from this world of dead substance lends itself to the idea of an ultimate goal for the mechanistic process of history which progress proposes. It is from this milieu that progress emerges as a real force and from here it is expanded upon and updated by those like Marquis de Condorcet, Denis Diderot, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. Sorel dissects these thinkers and points out how historical progress developed not out of an actual engagement with the reality of history, but out of the specific conditions of the French aristocracy at the time, especially in the period during and directly after the revolution.

It should of course be noted that Sorel is not an impartial commentator here, he was a socialist and so had a vested interest in undermining the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie of his time. Though it should also be noted that Sorel was not a Marxist, he rejected many facets of Marxism, instead developing and becoming the chief theorist of the Revolutionary Syndicalist movement. Syndicalism drew more from the tradition of those like Pierre Joseph Proudhon than from Marx, thus Sorel's thought, though being decidedly Socialist is not identical, nor even in accordance with Marxism. This is further evidenced from the fact that Sorel's writings inspired the Italian fascists just as much as the Spanish anarchists. So, taking all this into account we can see why Sorel might be inclined to criticize what he saw as the Bourgeois notion of progress, since he saw it as a tool used to suppress Syndicalism and the revolutionary potential of the working class. In any event, this article is certainly not of a political nature, and we will be engaging with "The Illusions of Progress" and its criticisms of progress, which are fundamentally compelling and very much consistent with our Hegelian/Hermetic frame, while disregarding the political implications of the criticism, as it is not the aim of this project, nor as fundamentally important as the deeper development of history as an active, living organism which is of interest to us as readers of Hegel.

## Marquis de Condorcet

It is important to understand that Sorel does not necessarily think that everything following Descartes is useless or that the well of philosophy has been poisoned by him, in fact quite the opposite as he sees Cartesianism and its outgrowths as necessary for the continued development of thought. However, what he mostly has a problem with is what he sees as the attempt by those who provided the ideology for the French Revolution, as well as those seeking to defend it afterward, as naively attempting to cling to the now defunct Age of Enlightenment. Those who attempt to continuously hold up the ideology of progress post-revolution are the issue. However, in order to undermine the current proponents of progress, it is necessary to go for the foundation. So, he turns his ire toward Marquis de Condorcet, a man whose thought

embodies the Enlightenment perhaps better than any other, and who Sorel sees as representing the illusory nature of this school.

The core assertion of Condorcet's thought which Sorel takes issue with is the idea that humanity is infinitely perfectible, and this infinite perfectibility can be brought about through education. What this means in practice is that, to Condorcet, humanity can continue indefinitely on an upward trajectory with scientific knowledge, technology, and moral virtue climbing up higher and higher as time goes on. This state of affairs can be guaranteed so long as those in the know (followers of him and the Encyclopedists) expound their philosophy and transmit their ideas to the masses who, through taking in these enlightenment ideas by schooling or publications, will be raised in both knowledge and in morals. In Condorcet's "Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind", he says "Nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; ... the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite."

Sorel's main criticism of Condorcet here is that his vision for the infinite uplifting of humanity is not any kind of natural progression, but instead an attempt to place people onto a set of pre-built train tracks, a path determined not by a higher power nor by the laws of nature, but by men of a specific time and place. In this case the milieu which surrounded the Salons of the pre-revolutionary era where people like Condorcet and Diderot would discuss enlightenment principles. Who is Condorcet, or anybody else for that matter, to determine the path for mankind? Why should it follow that the ideals of the enlightenment are the end all for the rest of history? Sorel describes Condorcet's educational plans as attempting to make everybody on Earth into a "Man of Letters" (those who went to the Salons and participated in that milieu). Aside from the specific goal, it also is just fundamentally unnatural as it does not allow for the natural movement and oscillation which is characteristic of reality. It attempts to force things down a specific path when, as can be seen from the history of life on Earth where radical divergences, setbacks, resets, happen all the time. It is the Verstand attempting to once again turn history into a mechanistic endeavour instead of the living organism it should be regarded as. It attempts to turn the chaotic, living environment of history into an inert and predictable classroom a total freezing of the motion of reality, quintessential Nigredo disguised as an uplifting clarity; in the same way that Perception presents itself as the highest truth while ignoring the fundamental motion behind the object.

## Denis Diderot

Much like Condorcet, Denis Diderot embodied the enlightenment in France. He was one of the founders of the Encyclopedie, the most important journal within that scene and one of the earliest attempts to actually enact Condorcet's plan to transmit the wisdom of the Salons to the common man, to the middle class specifically. Thus, Sorel's criticisms of Diderot mostly relate to the methods of the Encyclopedie specifically as opposed to Diderot's specific positions, though in many ways the Encyclopedie was a very personal projection of Diderot's thought. The Encyclopedie was essentially a compilation of articles on a wide range of topics, the contributors

were essentially all French enlightenment philosophes, and the journal was aimed at a wider audience than usual philosophical tracts. Another important conceit of the Encyclopedie was its fusion between science and philosophy, a sort of polymath journal. It was an extraordinarily ambitious project which attempted to do nothing less than index the sum total of enlightenment knowledge which the philosophes had accumulated, and to transmit this knowledge down to the next rung of society.

However, to Sorel, the Encyclopedie, and Diderot by extension, fell into the same trap which awaits all adherents of progress; by attempting to index and transmit the entirety of enlightenment wisdom in this way you end up once again turning what is a natural, chaotic, and living process into something inert, frozen and mechanistic. The Encyclopedie became the perfect representation of geist fundamentally trapped within the grip of Verstand, a consciousness which has still not made the leap to recognize substance as subject. Like Verstand the Encyclopedie also seeks to take in endless knowledge and assimilate it into itself as object. The chaotic world where entropy reigns supreme is stabilized and essentially killed in order to fit into the index. This is the fundamentally Nigredo conception of reality at its most seductive, it appears to be the active gathering of the disparate subjects of the universe into one place where they can be examined and developed, however what it really ends up doing is dissecting these subjects, killing them, and finally filing them away preventing any natural development through dialectical motion.

Sorel also says that the Encyclopedie is really nothing more than a conversation between those already within the enlightenment framework of the salons, thus it is unable to meaningfully engage with active processes as it is emerging from a very specific, very close knit slice of time and space. So, despite its pretensions of capturing the sum total of human learning, it is really just transmitting the "Science of the boudoir". This is not to mention the other issue of attempting to once again transmit this specific worldview to the masses, in a manner which really just constitutes people leafing through the field of philosophy, accumulating some trivia facts, and then letting that surface level, inactive understanding of reality, and feeling like you have come to understand everything. It is once again a naive attempt to subvert the active organism of history into a pre-programmed machine.

Additionally, this way of engaging with the fundamental makeup of reality renders you unable to engage with anything beyond that which you can grasp as object. We understand that Verstand operating in this way is unable to penetrate beyond appearance, it cannot engage directly with the living principles behind both material and metaphysical reality. The Verstand is fundamentally incapable of communicating with the Realm of Forms, of penetrating the veil hiding Olympus and touching the gods. Engagement with first principles becomes entirely impossible when operating within that Nigredo framework. It again takes the Albedo's transformation, the recognition of an object's fundamental motion and existence as its own self contained subject.

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

While Condorcet contributes to the myth of progress a framework for its transmission, and Diderot contributes its method of catalogue, Rousseau gives something far more vital; his Nigredo objectification of human nature, societal structure, and chiefly of history, is what allowed for the science of the salons to break out and topple the Ancien regime. What Rousseau does with his idea of the social contract is once again apply a specifically enlightenment model of reality, to that which extends far behind and far beyond the specificity of any one point in time, and certainly of any one school of thought. According to Sorel, by conceiving of the complex, chaotic, unceasing development of society as a “contract”, you are once again attempting to neutralize and assimilate an active process. In doing so Rousseau also reduces both the past and the future to things which can be predetermined and moved along simply by force of will and abstract principles.

Rousseau’s imposition on dialectical reality is unique though, the idea of recontextualizing the genesis of society as being done from principle, as opposed to active movement, opens the door for the idea that society can then be progressively “refounded”, based on inert principles, and that these refoundings are simply steps up the stairway of progress toward ultimate enlightenment. This abstraction is once again an expression of the Verstand/Nigredo thought process of the enlightenment philosophers, and it falls into the same issues. It renders society an artifact which can be shaped along the lines of those who believe they understand where it should go, instead of the ever moving organism which it is.

It is through Rousseau that the entire myth of progress is justified as he turns the mover of history (human nature) into a motionless object as well. When the nature of man himself is no longer in dialectical motion, then neither is history. The march of time continues on and things gradually move forward, up and up indefinitely. The infinite perfectibility which Condorcet describes to us is thus justified, and so is Diderot’s approach of cataloging. What we have laid out with these three philosophers of the Verstand, is a complete stasis imposed on reality, one which can only be moved forward through the dissemination of the science of the salons, and the will of the Encyclopedists. Progress’ construction is complete, it is guaranteed, it is unchanging, and it has sufficed to lull its adherents into a sense of sweet, optimistic, stability.

## Proclus’ Protest

Beyond the conception of history, what the men of letters are really positing is a claim about the nature of the temporal in our reality. In order for the idea of progress to work, time itself must also be of a linear, forward moving nature. If time did not work this way then the notion of enlightenment progress as applied to history would make no sense, it requires things to move linearly and predictably. Thus, even the concept of time is flattened and turned into an inert machine. Though the idea of enlightenment historical progress has lost favor in our times,

especially with the resurgence of the idea of cyclical history in continental philosophy during the last 19th and early 20th century with figures like Heidegger, Spengler, and Nietzsche, the idea of time as linear still holds much sway and is the default viewpoint. In a lot of ways time is the final frontier for those who attempt to ascertain the motion behind things, imagining time as anything other than the linear model we usually think of is quite confusing and hard to do.

According to Proclus the Successor, time is composed of a triadic process which is ongoing for all things in reality at all time; infinite layers of triadic cycles building upon each other in order to construct our reality. This triad is composed of Mone, Proodos, and Epistrophe, or remaining, procession, and reversion. To him and the Neoplatonists, all of reality, both material reality and higher planes, emanates out from the One as its procession. This is Proodos, the eternal procession of all things out from their begetter as they move further down the ladder of reality. This concept is necessitated by reality as that which is superior “overflows” and emanates lesser beings as its procession. Epistrophe or reversion then becomes necessary as the entity which proceeds from its cause now relies on that cause for its existence. It cannot be what it is without the cause; the Form of Justice is the cause of justice on Earth and justice on Earth could not exist without the existence of the abstract principle or Form of Justice. Thus, that which proceeds from a cause must be able to, and inevitably will, revert back into its cause. Finally, Mone is necessary as without it there could be no stable existence, nor could there be a procession if it simply reverted immediately back to its cause. Thus, time becomes not a linear movement from the past to the present, but instead an endless quilt of cycles contained within other cycles contained within the cycle of the One’s procession.

If we apply this to history we get an image far different to the linear conception of enlightenment progress. We get civilizations proceeding out from themselves, delving into multiplicity, their procession reverting back into its cause, that cause reverting back into its original cause, etc. It becomes a messy picture of cyclical movement which in many ways actually completely bars any notion of progress since everything that proceeds out from humanity in terms of civilization, culture, science, will eventually revert back into its cause. There is no permanence in the way necessitated by the notion of progress. This conception of time is one which is fundamentally linked with the alchemical Albedo, as well as the Hegelian stage of substance becoming subject. Proclus perfectly grasps the fundamental and eternal motion behind reality, not just of objects but of the metaphysical as well. However, it still posits a monadic, unchanging, motionless principle behind all of this motion in the cosmos. This is why you get a closed loop as opposed to a branching dialectical movement. Substance is indeed recognized as moving subject, but the ultimate movement of the fundamental cause is still not grasped. It still sees a Law behind the motion of the object’s appearance.

Sorel points out that Socialists of his day enjoyed attempting to synthesize this Greek concept of eternal return with the enlightenment progress myth which they could not let go of. This resulted in a lot of assertions of an eternal rhyming where civilizations echo each other but are able to improve in certain ways which they carry over. Thus, you get a sort of spiral instead of the closed loop typical of the Albedo thinking of Neoplatonism. However, this still posits

some kind of predetermined path which history is able to progress on. It still presumes linearity of time just with some caveats. It is only with a final casting off of this framework, with the recognition of the absence of a monadic cause behind reality, that we can come to a more holistic conception of history as an organism with its own movement, with its own prerogatives, moving along a path determined solely by its own self negation and sublation.

# Bertran de Born and Overcoming Verstand

By: Jack Hardacre

## Wandering Through Occitania

Walking through a dimly lit, barren landscape, consciousness gazes upon the fruits of its labor and regards them with the exacting disinterest that you would some kind of rock. Through vast gardens, through deep valleys, through the vast libraries of its own construction, through fields where the sun threatens to blind it. Yet despite it all Verstand remains unmoved, gazing upon its dissected trinkets and only feeling cold detachment from that which it has assimilated. Time has been reduced to a steady movement up the slope, stacking Verstand's possession, one on top of the other, until its library is overflowing with the rent bits of its past dissections. Verstand believes itself to be the master of reality, to have penetrated to the bottom of the very fabric of existence, to have ground down object until its basal nature is revealed. But it is in this state, in this freezing gray world where all things sit inert and obedient in their designated storage container, where consciousness creates the conditions for its own revelation.

**“I like a crowd of shields painted white and blue,  
Banners and pennons of many colors,  
Breaking lances, piercing shields,  
And laying out dead men on the ground.”**

- Ar ven la coindeta sazos (Bertran de Born)

Through the dreary world of Geist's own creation, no light may pass, no heat, no motion may come into view. In Verstand's estimation it has reached the heights of its powers, there is no more to assimilate, no more to break down, thus even that which most embodies the entropic motion of existence, death itself, is regarded with detached scrutiny. A man's blood and entrails spilling out of his abdomen does nothing more for the consciousness stuck in Nigredo than would a weevil crawling across a leaf. Motionless, alone, haughty; Verstand sits atop its encyclopedic collection.

## Of the House Toulouse

In the year 1181 Occitania was on the verge of boiling over. Tensions between Raymond V of Toulouse and Alfonso II of Aragon were worse than ever before. An associate of Raymond had just killed Alfonso's brother; to avenge this Alfonso had besieged and destroyed the town of Murviel near Montpellier. Occitania looked to be on the brink of chaos as Raymond could not let this siege go unanswered, and Alfonso saw no reason to back down. Thus, Raymond sought to rally the barons of Aquitaine to his side; to do so he called upon the troubadour Bertran de Born. A man of motion, like the flash of steel which accompanies a halberd as it collides with a

knight's helmet. A man whose words themselves could animate armies with the orbital motion necessary to do battle.

**“And as soon as we arrive, the tourney will start all over the field, and the Catalan and the Aragonese will fall fast and thick, for their saddlebows can't hold them up - we'll hit 'em damned hard, me and my mates! And nothing will keep splinters from flying to the sky, or taffeta and brocade and samite from ripping, and ropes and tents and stakes and shelters and high-pitched pavilions.”**

- Lo coms m'a mandat e mogut (Bertran de Born)

Like a lightning bolt, his words shatter any illusion of the encyclopedia, any notion of mastery over reality, of the capture of object. Verstand sits stupified as the troubadour's words start some sort of rattling within the sealed drawers of its collection, as it watches the specimens it has preserved so carefully in formaldehyde start to blink, as a peculiar scratching sound emits from its prized taxidermy cabinet. Verstand looks down and watches as the Catalan pitch their tents, as they don their armor and take up their arms. Muted color begins to come into view, the standards of Raymond's army, the crests adorning the champions of Aragon. Doubt begins to spread within Verstand, a disruption to its kingdom of peace and unchanging stability. His words echo with the force of an arrow, with the audacious brigandry of a raubritter, his words themselves disrupt any notion of tranquility imagined by consciousness.

**“A court is never complete without joking and laughter; a court without gifts is a mere mockery of barons! And the boredom and vulgarity of Argentan nearly killed me, but the noble, lovable body and sweet, mild face and good companionship and conversation of the Saxon lady protected me”**

- Casutz sui de mal en pena (Betran de Born)

Peace, the much vaunted pinnacle of human existence. The ultimate goal of all sensible men, the function of effective governance according to Hobbes, the endless pursuit of an existence without difficulty, without struggle, and without motion. To this the troubadour turns up his nose, an existence like this, without change, without excitement, trapped in a permanent peaceful stasis, is entirely intolerable. What is an existence lived in peace? It is one which fundamentally cannot undergo the process of alchemical transmutation which allows for the advancement of existent things. Without motion there is no negation, no oscillation, it is the dream land of Verstand's own imagining, a flight of fancy which is clearly neither possible nor tolerable. A motionless world is one in stasis, one which cannot move forward, which cannot engage in the dialectical movement which characterizes transmutation, a world stuck in eternal Nigredo, unable to reach the lightning nor the reddening which it needs.

## **The Angevins**

In 1183, Richard the Duke of Aquitaine (later to become Richard I King of England), sought to reign in his unruly barons in Gascony and Occitania, one of whom was none other than Bertran de Born. The Southern French barons had been used to a high degree of autonomy, especially as compared to the other barons within the Angevin realm in England and Normandy. Thus, these efforts by Richard were met with fierce resistance from Bertran de Born and several other barons whom he gathered into a league to oppose Richard. On the eve of war the barons prepared to defend themselves against those who sought to impose stillness upon them, to imprison them and trap them in amber.

**“Since Ventadour and Comborn with Segur and Turenne and Montfort with Gourdon have made an agreement with Perigeux and sworn an oath, and the burghers are enclosing themselves with walls all around, it pleases me to sing and join in with a sirventes to strengthen the lot.”**

- Pois Venteforns e Comborns ab Segur (Bertran de Born)

In many ways joy, the emotion of joy is what must be felt by those embodying alchemical motion. Joy is a fundamentally exciting, active, and oscillating emotion, as opposed to sadness or apathy which embody inert stasis. Thus, as the barons organize themselves to preserve their freedom in the face of Angevin tyranny, their feelings must be of overwhelming joy. Just as that joy must carry over onto the battlefield itself, and as bone splinters, as blood spills all around them, the warrior must remain fundamentally joyful so as to remain in motion. As the blackened metal is washed and rid of impurities, as it is bleached and relightens, it begins to reclaim at least a part of its movement. For the Troubadours it was this joy which facilitated their cavalier attitude toward warfare, toward love, and toward death. It is a similar feeling which animates the object in Albedo, when it is able to reassert itself over Verstand’s imposition of sterility, when the object looks back at the subject after so long, I believe it must be joy it is feeling.

## **The Revolt of 1183**

Henry the Young King now engaged in open hostilities with his father as well as against Richard. Bertran de Born and his league of barons had rallied to Henry’s side, and the preparations had finished, now was the time for action, for the potential energy within these barons to become kinetic.

**“When the battle is joined, each man must be ready to follow him with pleasure, for no one is respected until he has taken and given many blows.”**

- Be m plai lo gais temps de pascor (Bertran de Born)

Here, with the beginning of battle, with the beginning of true motion, substance seizes its chance to show itself as subject. Verstand, having spent an indefinite amount of time staring at its

frozen substances, examining its bottles of formaldehyde preserved organs, finally goes to examine the rattling which the Troubadour's words have ignited. When consciousness finally makes its way over to the cabinet, and opens the drawer emitting the sound, it is stupefied to see the taxidermied rat which it had stored in there is in fact scurrying around. At the same time the jars lining the shelves of its study begin bursting apart, fish and insects begin flopping and crawling around on the floor. Finally even the wide array of minerals, beautiful crystals, geodes, samples of every rock you could find on Earth; even these begin to vibrate, changing color, breaking apart, imbued with that same movement. The motion of war, the beating of hooves riding across a muddy battlefield. A crack as metal meets metal, as armor bends and breaks, as abdomens are pierced, hands broken, this is the world of movement, of sublation, of activity. To Verstand this is the lightning flash of infinity, it is the moment it is pulled out of its comfortable world of laws and it is laid bare in front of the overwhelming chaos of reality. A place where all that it observes observes back, where the trees and the rocks and the very atoms which make them up have their own eyes with which they take note of Verstand's behavior. This revelation is shocking, it is sudden, and it is irreversible.

Warfare breaks down the false stability of the world of laws, of Verstand's collection, of Richard the Lionheart's Normandy; it is through the motion of warfare that the false Nigredo is broken and the lightening of the Albedo shines through. Paradoxically, it is through the chaos of warfare, the tumultuous rushing of thousands of armed men running up against each other, that gives way to the ordered dualism which characterizes an Albedo conception of reality. Warfare, and motion in general, becomes the actual engine with which the entire process of dialectical sublation is powered, the reordering flame which transmutes the alchemist's minerals and leaves the prima materia in an unrecognizable state from where it began.

## **The Nature of the Albedo Weltanschauung**

Following the inert false stability of the Nigredo, and the lightning flash of infinity, the re-emergence of motion, you are left with a new conception of reality. The Albedo worldview is one which is characterized by a profound sense of harmony which is fostered through the correspondence of several layers of reality interacting with each other, the division of reality into competing opposite principles of order and chaos, as well as a monadic first principle which remains stable and unchanging. These are, in my opinion, the three principles which identify something as being contained within this stage of consciousness' development. For Hegel this takes the form of consciousness which had come to recognize that the competing dialectical natures of objects are in constant motion, and that this motion is in fact what makes up the object. No longer is it searching for stability behind the motion, it accepts this motion as embodying. To Bertran de Born the state which most corresponds to this worldview is nothing other than warfare itself. It is in war that two competing warriors come to blows, the motion of their confrontation embodies their being and the object they represent has life breathed into it through the oscillation of their duel. As blood spills and bone shatters, that which was substance

becomes fully subject and the battle itself gains its own distinct existence apart from its participants.

To see the prototypical Albedo worldview one needs look no further than Plato himself, as well as the Christian schools he inspired. A single unmoved god above all else from whom all of reality proceeds, the existence of a fundamentally opposed counter principle which attempts to antagonize the principle of order, and a fundamental link between levels of reality as that which is below flows out of that which is above. This universe shows itself to be one which, despite the seemingly chaotic motion of good against evil, order against chaos, still constitutes a fundamental, universal harmony. This harmony extends up to the highest level as well as down to the lowest. Look at the humble atom, take a hydrogen atom with its single proton and single electron. The oppositely charged particles engage each other in motion as the electron orbits around the proton, they are nothing but two opposing principles engaging each other, and the atom is nothing else but the motion of these two particles. There is no secret behind this motion which embodies the atom behind the motion, the atom is simply the harmony produced by the motion of opposites contained within it. Likewise, the intellectual Forms themselves are not monadic, they contain activity within themselves, in order to distinguish themselves from each other the Forms must have some sort of internal distinction; thus, they must engage in the same dialectical process which all objects do in Hegelian thought where the opposing natures of internal distinctiveness, and external diversity. Thus, even the mighty forms are still a part of the One's procession and so are still subject to the dialectical motion characteristic of reality.

However, where Platonism, and all Albedo conceptions of reality fall short, is in their conception of first principles. In order to justify the ladder of procession down through embodied existence, there must be a monadic, unchanging first principle which gives rise to all of this. This function is fulfilled today in some interpretations of physics by the big bang which emerges out of a single infinitely miniscule point from which proceeds the multiplicity we call the universe. This fundamental need for a beginning to things, for a creator, for a single principle from which all else emerges, is where the Albedo conception reaches its limits.

## The End of the Battle

**“Behold, before you lie war and peace, and while a man scurries about without choosing, his merit can be neither noble nor true.”**

- Ges de disnar non for' oimais maitis (Betran de Born)

What comes after the battle? After the two sides battle it out, after the battlefield is littered with corpses, after the white flag goes up, after prisoners are paraded through your streets, after the enemy duke is broken on the rack and ransomed back to his family. But the newfound peace is fundamentally different from the illusory one which had precipitated the conflict, it is of a higher character, one earned through the active combat which its oppositions

engaged in. A peace treaty in this context, one which comes about through the military defeat of one side, represents nothing less than the recognition of a sublation of one principle into the other, and the transmutation of these oppositions into a novel and more perfect state of affairs. The question of how to come to that point though, to the reddening, remains open for now.