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Edited by Dean Moyar and Michael Quante

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CHAPTER I

*Substance, subject, system: the justification of science in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit**Dietmar H. Heidemann*

I INTRODUCTION

More than thirty years ago Dieter Henrich expressed the view that Hegel's philosophical intentions are still more or less obscure. This view has been very influential. Were it still true, then Robert Brandom's observation with regard to Hegel would be false, namely that "[t]raditions are lived forward but understood backward."¹ For in order to live or better to think the Hegelian tradition forward and to understand Hegel backward, it is necessary to make sense of his philosophical intentions. Fortunately, research has contributed a good deal of clarification to the situation so that nowadays Hegel is acknowledged as a contemporary interlocutor. The current appreciation of Hegel's thought goes especially for the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The "forward – backward" view might be regarded as the reason why discussion of the *Phenomenology* during past decades basically followed three lines of thought – a metaphysical, a transcendental, and a social one. Those following the metaphysical line mainly concentrated on the metaphysical conception of the *Phenomenology* as a systematic introduction to absolute idealism. Accordingly the work is seen as offering a new way of providing the possibility of metaphysics, which Hegel then develops in detail in the *Science of Logic*.² On the other side, those who advocated the transcendental line argued that Hegel's philosophical intentions in the *Phenomenology* should be understood from a broadly Kantian perspective, since the work furthers the Kantian program of criticizing human knowledge by going beyond the original Kantian scope. Crucial to the argument of the *Phenomenology* is the transcendental idea that reflection and self-consciousness fulfil the fundamental function of grounding

¹ Brandom (2002a), 45. Cf. Henrich (1971), 7.

² Taylor, for example, thinks the intention of the *Phenomenology* consists in "making the absolute 'apparent'." Cf. Taylor (1975), 128.

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knowledge.³ Followers of the social line argue that the *Phenomenology* aims to demonstrate the social grounding of human rationality by focussing, e.g., on the idea of the education and cultivation (“*Bildung*”) of the modern European subject.⁴

It is not clear whether these alternatives of a metaphysical, transcendental, and social interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* necessarily exclude each other. Whatever the case, in current research a fourth possibility, of approaching the *Phenomenology* epistemologically, has been favored. Most recent books point out that though the work cannot be reduced to epistemological questions, the *Phenomenology* contains valuable discussions of fundamental epistemological problems. In this respect one of the most instructive treatises is Michael N. Forster's comprehensive book *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (1998).⁵ Forster distinguishes between three fundamental tasks of the *Phenomenology*: a pedagogical, an epistemological, and a metaphysical one. The pedagogical task of the work is to teach “modern individuals to understand and accept Hegel's system.” By way of achieving its metaphysical task the *Phenomenology* develops the concept of absolute spirit in its different communal dimensions. The epistemological task, however, consists in (a) justifying Hegel's system, (b) defending it against the skeptical problem of “equipollence,” (c) defending it against the skeptical problem of “concept-instantiation,” and (d) providing a proof preferring it to all non-Hegelian positions.⁶ In this chapter I take this epistemological approach to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I will argue that the Preface as well as the Introduction of the *Phenomenology* provide a highly sophisticated analysis of fundamental epistemological problems, especially those concerning epistemic justification.

In order to understand the epistemological significance of the *Phenomenology*, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the general problem Hegel is dealing with. Thus in section 2 of this chapter I sketch the introductory function of the *Phenomenology* as an introduction to “true philosophical science.” The introductory function makes clear why, in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel sees himself confronted with the problem of epistemic justification and skepticism. In section 3 I analyze Hegel's central claims in the

³ Cf. Claesges (1981), 11. For the transcendental line, see especially Pippin's influential book, *Hegel's Idealism: “The satisfactions of Self-Consciousness”* (Pippin 1989). Cf. also Hartmann (1976).

⁴ Cf. among others Pinkard (1994). For more recent research on the *Phenomenology*, see the helpful annotated bibliography in Yovel (2005), 204–211.

⁵ Cf. also Westphal (2003), Rockmore (1997), and others; earlier epistemological interpretations of the *Phenomenology* have already been proposed by Habermas (1973) and Solomon (1983).

⁶ Forster (1998), 11, 126 ff.

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Preface to the *Phenomenology* against the backdrop of this original problem. His first claim is to have comprehended and expressed “the True not only as *Substance* but equally as *Subject*” (18, ¶17, all emphasis in the original). His second claim is that “knowledge” can be presented only as “Science or as system” (21, ¶24). The basic feature of these central claims is what can be called Hegel’s methodological anti-individualism, due to which the justification of knowledge cannot be accomplished by using the individual subject of epistemic certainty as a basic epistemic principle. Section 4 then discusses Hegel’s alternative arguments for a theory of epistemic justification in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*. Since Hegel thinks that knowledge cannot be justified independent of an epistemic standard, he develops two general arguments to solve the problem: The first is an anti-skeptical argument from the self-creation of the epistemic standard; the second is a constructive argument from the history of self-consciousness, that makes up the methodological frame for the entire *Phenomenology*. My thesis is that though open questions remain, Hegel’s solution to the problem of epistemic justification is a systematic epistemological conception that can contribute to the current debates in theoretical philosophy.

2 HEGEL’S PROBLEM

2.1 *Introducing science*

In order to grasp Hegel’s intentions in the Preface it is necessary to make at least some general remarks about the status of the *Phenomenology* in the development of his philosophical thinking. First of all, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel specifies his philosophical program in the following way: “To help to bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title “*love of knowing*” and be *actual knowing* – that is what I have set myself to do” (11, ¶5). This program of bringing philosophy closer to “the form of Science” is at first glance comparable to what in early modern philosophy Descartes, for example, undertakes in the *Meditations* when he attempts to renew philosophy’s foundations, or what Kant undertakes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by trying to set philosophy on “the secure course of a science.”⁷ However, in contrast to Descartes’ project of a *prima philosophia* or Kant’s critique of knowledge, Hegel’s program in the *Phenomenology* must be understood primarily from within

⁷ Cf. Kant (*CPR*), B VII ff. (Preface).

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the author's own intellectual development. Up to 1800 Hegel held a position according to which the finite human mind is not capable of acquiring knowledge of the absolute or God by philosophical reflection or reason, but only by means of religious faith. That is to say, philosophy itself is not the science of metaphysical knowledge in the proper sense of the word, for it is inferior to religion. Around 1800, Hegel's philosophical views changed fundamentally. He now came to replace the systematic status of religion by philosophical metaphysics and to accord the logic of finite human thought the function of a systematic introduction to philosophy or metaphysics. This logic is not formal logic, but rather a logic essentially composed of concepts or categories originating from the theories of Kant and Fichte. The purpose of this logic is to demonstrate the internal contradictions naturally arising from the limitations of finite human thinking, in order to overcome finite thinking and to achieve knowledge of the infinite or absolute. The method of this logic is the skeptical method of opposition by means of which contradictions are generated. Hegel takes the Kantian antinomies to be a paradigm case of such contradictions, because they allegedly demonstrate the finiteness of the human mind when trying to grasp the infinite by finite means. These contradictions are unsolvable to the human mind; they even destroy finite human thought and force us to relinquish it in favour of speculative knowledge of the absolute. So according to Hegel's modified conception, the logic of finite thinking functions as a systematic introduction to metaphysics by skeptically destroying and finally sublating the conceptual constituents of finite thought.⁸

Especially during his collaboration with Schelling in Jena, where he arrived in 1801, Hegel conceived the absolute as substance, following Spinoza's philosophy of the one substance. From approximately 1804, however, Hegel again dramatically modified his conception. This new change is due to his insight that to conceive of the absolute as substance is to leave it crucially underdetermined. Hegel realizes that the absolute is not a static object of thought – namely, substance – but rather comprises complex logical, self-referential relations that can be developed only in an independent discipline called speculative logic. Thus from this point on, Hegel no longer understands the absolute as substance, but rather as absolute subjectivity incorporating self-referential logical structures. So

⁸ It is obvious that this metaphysical conception makes a lot of presuppositions, for example that finite thinking is intrinsically contradictory and that the absolute exists. For details and the historical background, explaining the changes in Hegel's conception, see Düsing (1995), chapter 2.

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he welds together logic and metaphysics into a new “science of the absolute.”⁹ This move leads to two problems: First, if logic is unified with metaphysics, a systematic introduction to metaphysics is seemingly rendered superfluous. Secondly, does the human mind have the capacity to acquire knowledge of the absolute? Hegel answers both questions in the affirmative: First, a systematic introduction to metaphysics is still necessary, as it is an intrinsic feature of his idealism that the absolute must be made an object of knowledge. This knowledge is not just there as it were immediately, but has to be developed by intellectual guidance, and it is precisely the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that now takes on the function of introducing metaphysics as the science of the absolute. Secondly, the human mind is capable of acquiring knowledge of the absolute and it is the task of the *Phenomenology* to show this by way of a theory of the gradual acquisition of knowledge that leads from finite human thinking to absolute knowing or metaphysics. But where does this theory of the gradual acquisition of knowledge itself come from? This question represents the basic problem for Hegel at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, and it can be spelled out by looking more closely at the twofold problem of epistemic justification on the one hand and skepticism on the other.

2.2 Epistemic justification and skepticism

In contemporary epistemology epistemic justification is usually construed as the truth-conduciveness of beliefs. That is to say, epistemic justification conduces beliefs to truth. A belief is justified if it is more likely to be true than false, i.e. if there are stronger supporting grounds or evidence for than against it.¹⁰ Though Hegel does not use this modern terminology, the starting point of the *Phenomenology* is precisely the problem of epistemic justification. In the Preface – as we have already seen – Hegel characterizes his aim as a demonstration of “actual knowing” (II, ¶5), as “insight into what knowing is” (25, ¶29). As we shall see later, the method he employs is not the analysis of the concept of knowledge, in order to identify the truth conditions of knowledge or belief, respectively. Hegel’s argument is based rather on the initial distinction between the “appearance of knowledge” and “true knowledge” (54–56, ¶¶76–77). The phrase “appearance of knowledge” is meant to indicate that in the beginning there are just beliefs or epistemic claims like those of “non-spiritual, i.e. *sense-consciousness*”

⁹ Cf. again Düsing (1995), chapter 3. For a brief overview of this development, see Siep (2000), 24–62.

¹⁰ For an overview of contemporary theories, see Fumerton (2002).

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(24, ¶27), and that it is the project of the *Phenomenology* to examine step by step whether these epistemic claims satisfy the concept of “true knowledge” and to do so *without presupposing an external epistemological criterion*. So in principle Hegel conceives the *Phenomenology* as a theoretical transformation of beliefs or provisional knowledge into “true knowledge.” One of its central ideas is therefore to conduce epistemic claims to truth. In this sense the *Phenomenology* corresponds to the above-mentioned conception of epistemic justification, even though using highly specific methodological means (see below).

Now from a systematic point of view theories of epistemic justification are generally threatened by skepticism. By introducing a skeptical hypothesis like the demon- or dream-hypothesis, the skeptic argues that our beliefs cannot be justified. Hegel is well aware of this skeptical threat, and stresses that basing his own or any one else's conception on a “mere assurance” of its truth is just not a philosophical option (55, ¶76). In fact, one must demonstrate its truth, since one “bare assurance is worth just as much as another” (55, ¶76). This equipollence of epistemic claims to which Hegel refers a couple of times in the Preface as well as in the Introduction is one of the basic techniques of skeptical argumentation.¹¹ Therefore it is Hegel's core problem from the very beginning to show how his own theory of epistemic justification in the *Phenomenology* can be defended against skepticism. In the Preface he specifies two claims instrumental to his project.

3 HEGEL'S CLAIMS

Although in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel focuses on a variety of philosophical problems, he raises two claims that are central to his entire book. The first central claim concerns truth, the second concerns knowledge. I will first analyse them in turn, and then show how they are related.¹²

3.1 *From substance to subject*

At the end of section 16 of the Preface, Hegel announces that he is now going to present the “general,” though “rough idea” of his philosophical conception. What follows is the presentation of his first central claim: “In my view, which can be justified only by the system itself, everything turns

¹¹ Cf. Forster (1998), 129 ff., 152 f., Heidemann (2007), chapter 3.

¹² Another important issue in the Preface that I will not deal with in this chapter is what Hegel calls the “speculative proposition” (¶61 ff.). On the argumentative structure of the Preface, cf. Sallis (1998).

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on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" (18, ¶17). There are two important points about this claim that need to be made clear: First of all, the proposition "grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" is primarily about truth – provided that the term "the True" is equivalent to "truth"; second, since there is a fundamental difference between the definition and the criterion of truth, this proposition clearly deals with the definition of truth.¹³ So in order to understand why Hegel claims to establish a conceptual conjunction between substance and subject one has to bear in mind that in his view both concepts define, or at least determine, what truth *is*.

The idea of conceiving "the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" results from a basic criticism Hegel directs against some of his contemporaries. This criticism makes clear what the claim actually means. As mentioned above, when he arrived in Jena Hegel at first collaborated with Schelling on developing an absolute metaphysics. In regard to Spinoza's monistic substance, both agreed that the object of metaphysics was the absolute conceived as substance. Not long after, however, Hegel diverged from Schelling, arguing that the absolute or "God as the one Substance" (18, ¶17) cannot be just substance and nothing more. The concept of the true or absolute conceived as the one substance is underdetermined to the extent that it does not adequately incorporate thought and hence precludes self-determining subjectivity.¹⁴ There are two questions concerning this view: First, why is the determination of the true or absolute as substance insufficient? Secondly, even if an additional determination is necessary, why is it subject or subjectivity, and in what sense?

From the Hegelian point of view the first question can be answered in the following way: The absolute cannot be merely substance because, if it were, it would be a static principle of reality, even though it "embraces the universal, or the *immediacy of knowledge*" (18, ¶17) namely, thought. It is an essential feature of Hegel's philosophical position during the Jena period and later that the absolute can only be the true insofar as it is not distinguished from thought as it is in Spinoza's philosophy: Spinoza separates substance from thought and extension as its "attributes". For Hegel, by contrast, thought cannot be a predicate that is externally attributed to the first principle of a philosophical system; rather, it has to be its original determination. It is at

¹³ The difference consists between the definition or ontological status of truth, on the one hand, and how truth or the true can be cognized, on the other. Unlike the first, the second central claim on "knowledge as system" deals with the way of cognizing truth (see below).

¹⁴ Cf. Sallis (1998), 29 f.

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least debateable whether this critique readily applies to Spinoza at all.¹⁵ In any case, the argument from underdeterminateness depends essentially on Hegel's own conception of the true or absolute as a non-static principle which (in contrast to Spinoza's one substance) unifies being and thought.

Hegel's answer to the second question sheds further light on why such a unity has to be established and why this unity finally leads to subjectivity: "In general, because, as we put it above, substance is in itself or implicitly Subject, all content is its own reflection into itself" (39, ¶54). Hegel's argument for this claim runs as follows: The necessary condition for the "subsistence or substance" of any existing thing is its "self-identity," since a non-identical existing entity implies a contradiction ("its dissolution"). However, self-identity is "pure abstraction" and "abstraction" is "*thinking*" (39, ¶54). Existence presupposes difference insofar as no entity can exist without being determined, i.e. without being qualitatively differentiated from every other existing thing. From this results its "simple oneness with itself": "But it is thereby essentially a thought" (39, ¶54). According to Hegel, this is the proper meaning of the identity of thought and being: "Being is Thought," the latter construed not as static subsistence but as a mediated process constituted by conceptual development in three stages from self-identity to difference and back to self-identity. The structure of this process essentially describes a self-referential movement and self-reference is characteristic of the thinking subject or subjectivity. This applies to substance in general, and it is what is behind Hegel's claim to conceive "the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" (18, ¶17). Thus for the true to be substance means for it to determine itself as such, and consequently for it to conceive itself equally as thinking subject. Thus, according to Hegel, substantiality is also a characteristic of the thinking subject or of subjectivity.

It should be clear by now that Hegel holds an ontological concept of truth founded on the idealistic equation of being and thought.¹⁶ Now in principle this equation can be construed in different ways. In Hegel's time, Schelling understood it as if "thought does unite itself with the being of Substance, or apprehends immediacy or intuition as thinking" (18, ¶17). Hegel here implicitly alludes to Schelling's notion of intellectual intuition,

¹⁵ Earlier in the *Differenz-Schrift* (1801), Hegel had already criticized Spinoza for grounding philosophy dogmatically on a definition (cf. *Ethics*, I.1). On Hegel's critique of Spinoza, see Bartuschar (2007).

¹⁶ This equation is often taken as a definitional feature of idealism. Note that the concept of "idealism" in the Hegelian sense is different from representational idealism, the claim that the existence of the external world is somehow ideal. That there are still fundamental misinterpretations of Hegel's use of this term in contemporary philosophy has been stressed by Rockmore (2001), 342–353.

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which he criticizes since it threatens to “fall back into inert simplicity, and . . . depicts actuality itself in a non-actual manner” (18, ¶17). According to Hegel, this conception offers no place for a self-determining development, though “the living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself” (18, ¶18). One has to concede that the Preface can delineate only the rough idea of this conception, and necessarily falls short of a thoroughgoing argument for it. Yet this idea forms the background and can illuminate the meaning of one of the most famous statements in Hegel’s philosophy: “The True is the whole” (19, ¶20). In contrast to Schelling or, in more contemporary terms, e.g. to Wittgenstein’s view in the *Tractatus* according to which the world just comprises the sum of all facts (“Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen, nicht der Dinge,” 1.1.), Hegel thinks that “The True is the whole” only insofar as it comprises the whole development from substance to subject, not just the totality of facts.¹⁷ The core of Hegel’s first central claim is thus that substance cannot just make up the true, since the absolute is the “result” (19, ¶20) of a development within substance determining itself as subject.¹⁸ After having outlined what truth means, namely the entire development from substance to subject, the question then of course becomes whether and how truth in this developmental sense can be cognized. An answer to this question lies in the second central claim, which pertains to the method of cognizing truth.

3.2 Knowledge as system

The second central claim in the Preface reads as follows: “The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth” (11, ¶5). This claim is not about the ontological status of truth, rather it is about the “true shape” of truth, namely thought or knowledge (self-determining subjectivity). The claim therefore deals with the cognition of truth as Hegel emphasizes, “that knowledge is only actual, and can only be expounded, as Science or as *system*” (21, ¶24). One can summarize the second central claim in the following way: Since the “true shape” of truth is science or system and knowledge is actual only as science or system, therefore (actual or true)

¹⁷ I here assume that Wittgenstein would allow us to use “world” as equivalent to “the True” in the sense of “the totality of what can be or is true,” *Tractatus* (1981), 31.

¹⁸ Cf. ¶3: “nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.” On “the whole,” see also ¶12.

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knowledge is possible only as science or system. The key problem with this claim is the concept of system. There are two ways of understanding this concept in the present context: First of all, the term “system” stands for Hegel’s system around 1806, consisting, like the *Encyclopedia*, of three parts: logic–philosophy of nature–philosophy of spirit.¹⁹ Secondly, “system” is used by Hegel in the literal sense of “connectedness” (from the Greek *systema*), namely “connectedness” of concepts or propositions, respectively. Though it is reasonable to understand the term “system” in the first sense, in our context the second is ultimately to be preferred. There are two reasons for this: As we will see below, “system” as “connectedness” is the appropriate methodological concept to describe the transformation from substance to subject. Furthermore, Hegel links the second central claim with a fundamental critique of two methodological principles of philosophical knowledge formation, (a) intuitionism and (b) individualism. These principles or theories form the contrast to the idea of knowledge as system.

(a) In the broadest sense, intuitionism is the thesis that there is non-inferential intellectual insight into epistemic facts and that this kind of insight represents genuine philosophical knowledge. Though in contemporary epistemology²⁰ the use of “intuitionism” is restricted to “rational insight”, around 1800 this concept also applied to non-rational forms of knowledge such as feeling. In the Preface, Hegel attacks both, the rational as well as the non-rational form of intuitionism. According to Hegel these forms of intuitionism claim that “the True exists only in what, or better *as* what, is sometimes called intuition, sometimes immediate knowledge of the Absolute.” Since the true is the whole, that is to say the whole *development* of a justificatory process, his basic criticism is that in intuitionism “the absolute is not supposed to be comprehended, it is to be felt or intuited” (12, ¶6). This epistemic procedure essentially lacks conceptual development and subjectivity (12–13, ¶7). So, according to Hegel, intuition is an arbitrary epistemic principle, unable to do justice to his substance–subject-claim.²¹

¹⁹ The original frontispiece of the book reads: “System of Science” – “First Part the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.” “First Part” here refers to the introductory function of the *Phenomenology* to science and not to the three parts of the system itself. Cf. ¶27.

²⁰ Cf. DePaul and Ramsey (1998).

²¹ Cf. also ¶¶10–13, 16–20, 23, 27, 54, 68 f. In his critique of intuitionism Hegel mainly attacks the romantics, especially Schelling. See also *Encyclopedia* (1830), §§61 ff. On Hegel’s critique of the romantics, see Pöggeler (1998).