CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Let's start with a familiar historical claim, a claim that is very general, very crude, but at the same time nearly impossible to deny. The way our world looks today was decisively shaped by a series of developments that began in northern Europe some centuries ago (we can argue about exactly how many), developments that transformed northern European societies from minor or even irrelevant outposts on the fringes of Roman and Islamic civilization to the most technologically, militarily, and culturally dominant societies that the world has ever seen. The name we give to this set of developments, of course, is "modernity." Just how and when it happened is the subject of endless debate, but the debates tend to center on a series of things that happened during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries: the Protestant Reformation, the development of modern physics by Galileo and Newton, the exploration and conquest of the Americas, the liberalization of trade and the development of capitalist forms of exchange, the American and French Revolutions. In some combination, we can say, these developments produced a form of civilization devoted to the study and manipulation of the physical world for unapologetically material ends, in which religion is redefined as a matter of private conviction and pushed to the margins of public life, and in which politics is conceived of as grounded in democratic choice and individual human rights. The societies that conceive of the world in these ways have become so dominant that today there is a real question about whether there are any viable alternatives to these modern forms of life.

For that reason, the question of whether modernity is a good thing may seem like an irrelevant question, like asking whether oxygen is a good thing to have in our atmosphere. We may need it, but we don't have much choice in the matter. Or the developments that make up modernity may seem so general, so diffuse, and so heterogeneous that no real evaluation is possible at all. In that case, the question of whether modernity is a good thing would be more like the question of whether religion is a good thing. You

can answer it, but your answer is almost certainly going to be incomplete, because religion plays so many different roles for so many different people that it doesn't amount to just one thing. Still, in a modern society, at least, everyone has to decide whether and how to be religious, and doing that will commit you to some story about what religion is and what you think it is good (or bad) for. Perhaps some of us don't have to decide whether to be modern, but we do have to decide how to relate to the parts of the world that still seem less fully modern than Europe and North America. And our decisions about that are not like our choices about religion, which we moderns might want to conceive of as affecting only ourselves. Our choices about how to relate, for example, to China, to the Middle East, or to Africa have military, political, and economic consequences that affect hundreds of millions of people. In justifying their actions, Western societies and governments are constantly telling stories about just what modernity is and what parts of it are good. Those stories might always be selective, but they are essential features of our cultural and political dialogue, and it is still true today – as it has been since the French Revolution – that the best way to understand where someone stands in the political spectrum is to understand what he or she thinks modernity is and what parts of it are good and bad.

The negative stories about modernity tend to concentrate on its economic and technological aspects: modern Western societies are devoted to capitalist exploitation, to soulless materialism, to the violent subjugation of nature or of "backward" cultures. The positive stories about modernity, on the other hand, tend to concentrate on its moral and political aspects and, in particular, on the notion of human freedom. In one form or another, the various positive stories about modernity tend to come down to some form of the following claim: whereas once human beings were seen as bound by class, by religion, or by cultural tradition to a fixed station in life, now modern human beings are understood as essentially free. They are free to worship according to their own convictions, free to pursue material happiness as far as their abilities can take them, free to select their own rulers, and free to choose or to abandon a particular way of life. Many or even most of these positive stories of modern freedom are crude and unconvincing: they discount or dismiss the extent to which the supposedly free choices of modern individuals are constrained by economic, technological, and cultural forces far beyond any individual's control. But since this narrative of freedom still occupies a central place in our moral and political dialogue, it cannot be dismissed until it has been studied in its most influential and sophisticated forms.

Of course influence and sophistication are two very different things, but there are rare cases in which they are combined, and the case of the

Phenomenology of Spirit happens to be one of those. If you are reading the *Phenomenology* for the first time, you should and almost certainly will be asking yourself what the point of reading this book is, particularly when the book is so long, so dense, so abstract, so idiosyncratic in its language, and so blithely uncompromising about all of those things that it can seem like the product of monumental self-absorption or the observations of some visitor from an alien galaxy. With a famous and famously difficult book like the *Phenomenology,* there are always many possible answers to that question; the book always has and always will be interpreted in many different ways. But the answer I will argue for here is just this one: there is probably no more influential and no more sophisticated presentation of the narrative of modern freedom than what Hegel offers in this book.

On the one hand, it remains true even in contemporary debates that to stake a claim to the positive narrative of modern freedom is just to count as a kind of Hegelian. To claim that the modern world represents a kind of progress toward the realization of human freedom is to make the sort of sweeping historical generalization that is often simply dismissed as "Hegelian." On the other hand, a Hegelian in contemporary debates is also someone who is sensitive to the criticism that the freely choosing individual of the optimistic account of modernity is too isolated from historical and cultural reality to be anything other than an illusion. Although he championed modernity as in some sense nothing more than the individual's coming to understand and value his or her own freedom, Hegel also deployed most if not all of the criticisms that have been subsequently leveled at the modern notion of freedom. On Hegel's account, the idea of freedom is not simply a property of the individual's will but also a cultural achievement, one that emerged through a long process of historical development. That process of development, restated in a unique and highly abstract form – a form that Hegel understood as appropriately philosophical but that subsequent generations of readers have understood as everything from seductively literary to repugnantly verbose – is what is described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.*

HEGEL'S LIFE AND WORK

What first drew Hegel himself to the narrative of modern freedom was, it seems, the French Revolution. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in 1770, the son of a low-level civil servant from Stuttgart.[1] He was a talented student, and so at the age of eighteen, he was sent off in the traditional

[1] An impressive recent biographical account of Hegel's life and work in English is Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

direction for intellectually gifted young men. In 1788, he entered the seminary at the University of Tübingen. There he met and became close friends with two of his fellow students, Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Hölderlin. From this friendship emerged, over the next few decades, some of the most important contributions to the intellectual life of Germany. Schelling would go on to become a well-known idealist philosopher, until Hegel himself far eclipsed him in that role. As for Hölderlin, he would become one of the most celebrated of all German poets. In the early 1790s, however, they were just struggling students, ostensibly preparing for careers as Lutheran ministers. But the Revolution seems to have interrupted their plans. As undergraduates, the young Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin decided they had a more important job to do, which was to assist in the birth of a new and better world.

On the face of it, theirs was an unpromising location for the work of revolution. No matter how fast events were unfolding in Paris, they had little effect on the dreary politics of southwestern Germany. The medieval University of Tübingen was a locally prestigious place to study for the ministry, but in the 1790s it was not even a backwater of the Enlightenment. Its faculty were doctrinally conservative and unlikely even to have read Rousseau. Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin read him, of course, but then they were faced with the problem of applying this most modern of thinkers to a German reality that seemed very far from modern. In England, France, and the United States, freedom now seemed to be a political reality. But the Germans were just starting to talk about the Rights of Man, and even doing that could get you into trouble with the local authorities. And it was not as if the various German monarchies had much to show for themselves in the way of military or economic power. In every respect, Germany seemed to be well behind the rest of Europe. But Hegel and his friends inherited and then expanded an intellectual context that managed to put the problem of German backwardness to creative and productive use. Two sources were crucial for this intellectual context: first, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and second, the development of German Romanticism.

For all the later German idealists, Hegel included, Kant was first and foremost a theorist of human freedom. It is the autonomous agent of Kant's practical philosophy that earned him the title of the philosopher of the French Revolution. But Kant's special contribution came in turning the modern notion of freedom into a specifically philosophical problem. I will discuss this problem extensively in Chapters 3 and 4, but for now it is enough to say that while the modern world and its revolutions were proclaiming the freedom of all human beings, Kant insisted that the more important tasks

were to understand the nature of this freedom and its place in a modern view of the world. Just what entitled human beings to say that they really are free? And since this kind of question was theoretical or philosophical in nature, it could be studied – and perhaps even better studied – from the politically irrelevant safety of a Königsberg or a Tübingen. In a late essay on the French Revolution, Kant himself went on to make an even more extreme version of the point: the real sign of historical progress was not anything that happened in Paris, but rather the enthusiastic responses of the rest of Europe to the revolutionary events.[2] Only the "disinterestedness" of these "spectators" – their inability even to consider acting within their benighted monarchies – could assure a morally pure motive for their approval, and only a morally pure motive could guarantee the goodness of the historical phenomenon that was being judged. On this view, the task of historical progress required a kind of international division of labor: it was the French and perhaps the Americans who would act, but it was the Germans who would comprehend, theorize, and finally justify those actions.

Kant's focus on the theoretical problem of freedom had an especially important consequence for his German idealist successors. The natural starting point for thinking about this problem is the nature of a free agent who, as free, is understood as independent of external determination. This starting point is what drives what is still the most familiar and influential criticism of Kant: that he presupposes an abstract, isolated, and unappealing conception of human beings as purely free and rational. These free and rational beings, it is alleged, are radically cut off from others, from society and culture, and even from their own biological natures. In the context of later German idealism, the specific response to this kind of criticism was a specifically German form of Romanticism.

Taken broadly and hence very crudely, Romanticism is a response to the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality, a response that celebrates the powers of emotion and imagination. This response is often described as a critique of the Enlightenment, but a better description would be a kind of adaptation to the limits that the Enlightenment places on the public expression of religious faith. If religion has no role to play in the scientific description of the world, or in political life, then it can only find expression in the private realm of faith and individual conscience. The result, the defining feature of Romanticism, is an intense spiritualization of

[2] Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is The Human Race Continually Progressing?" (Part II of *The Conflict of Faculties*, 1798), in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 144–159. For a sympathetic reading of the argument of this essay, see my "The Fact of Politics: History and Teleology in Kant," *European Journal of Philosophy* 2(1), pp. 22–40.

inner experience as a source of power and meaning. This sacralization of inwardness necessarily implies a turning away from the everyday world of social interaction, which always appears as pallid and even oppressive, as a disregard for the force of inner truth. In Britain and later in America, in the more "advanced" modern countries, this turning away from social life tended to imply a turning away from political questions. But in a less politically modern context, like that of Germany, it was still possible to reject the current political reality while defending Enlightenment politics. The English Romantics and the American Transcendentalists, who already had forms of democratic politics, found them mostly boring and dispiriting, and looked within for a more radical kind of human freedom. But their German Romantic counterparts, who were yet to experience democracy, were able to combine their cravings for inner significance with their desires for political freedom. Since both were remote enough from their own lived experience, they were able to imagine their common fulfillment in a different sort of society, one with an intense (and hence appropriately spiritualized) commitment to democratic values (and hence appropriately committed to equality).[3]

The favorite German Romantic candidate for this imagined society was classical Athenian democracy, sometimes linked with the pre-Christian and hence pagan German tribal past. Again, the contrast with English and later American Romanticism is instructive here. To the extent that English-speaking Romantics did think politically, they looked forward, proposing new, utopian communities whose values would be even more "advanced" than those of electoral democracies. German Romantics, by contrast, tended to look backward, to the Greek and Teutonic past. The claim that German Romanticism could achieve an even more advanced version of democratic politics would have been impossible to sustain in the German political reality of the 1790s (or even the 1840s). Instead the German Romantics needed to establish that they had any claim to democratic values, and they attempted to do that by looking backward past their petty monarchs to a deeper, classical past.

The result of all of this was a particular Romantic vision that gripped Hegel and his young friends in the 1790s, the early and enthusiastic years

[3] For an extensive treatment of the intellectual context of German Romanticism, see Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Harvard University Press, 1992); and *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

of German idealism. That vision was of a spiritualized community of free beings, united together not by political coercion or economic interest but by a shared culture of art and poetry that celebrated the freedom of the individual. The emphases on culture and emotion were intended as correctives to the excessive rationality and abstraction of Kant's positions, and also served as useful substitutes for the dubious political institutions of the various German monarchies. If the worry suggested by both Kant's philosophy and local German politics was that the modern idea of freedom might be nothing more than a mere idea, then the German Romantics responded that it was an especially sublime idea, one that was worthy of celebration in artistic and religious terms, and that would unite human beings as never before – except perhaps in the most wonderful of cultures, that of ancient Greeks. To say that this vision stood in sharp contrast to the reality of the Tübingen of the 1790s was not any sort of criticism. The sharp contrast was the whole point.

Among his group of young friends, Hegel was always the sober "old man," and his distance from their enthusiasm only increased over time. There are passages in Hegel's early philosophical works, and in the *Phenomenology* itself, that share the tone of grandiose but still earnest piety that is characteristic of Fichte and Hölderlin, but they are quickly muted by Hegel's far deeper enthusiasm for theoretical abstraction. It did not take long for Hegel to realize that his intellectual talents were better suited to an academic than a pastoral or a literary career. After graduating from the University of Tübingen, he worked first as a private tutor in Berne and in Frankfurt, and then as a *Privatdozent* (an unsalaried lecturer, paid by individual students who chose to take his classes) at the University of Jena. His first published philosophical works, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy* and *Faith and Knowledge*, are primarily works in theoretical philosophy, concerned with the possibility of knowledge rather than the celebration of human freedom. But even in these works, Hegel is concerned with defending a version of the ecstatic vision of the German Romantics: the union of the free subject with a larger world in which it now finds itself to be at home (to know and to act in). The question that Hegel's mature philosophy takes up with increasing focus is how this vision of unity can be something more than a fervent hope, how it can be defended not with emotional appeals but with rational arguments.

In his mature work, Hegel's way of characterizing the achievement of this unity is to speak of Spirit's coming to know, or to realize, itself. The term *Spirit* (*Geist*) of course raises special problems, and I will take up

some of the most important of these in Chapter 5.[4] For now, what we need to understand is that Spirit is intended to refer both to historically and culturally authoritative standards and practices, as well as to the nature of subjectivity itself. What Spirit really is, for Hegel, is a kind of collective and historical subject, which expresses the nature of freedom in cultural and historical practices. The full maturity or self-development of Spirit – and this is the odd way that Hegel likes to talk – would also represent the realization of the modern idea of freedom, the unity of Kant's abstract and purely rational idea of freedom with the cultural, social, and political practices that would embody and sustain it.

Hegel's life project, on which he worked as the rector of a gymnasium in Nürnberg, as a professor at the University of Heidelberg, and then until his death in 1831, at the University of Berlin, was the construction of what he called a philosophical system. Within this system, everything would have rational justification, which in Hegel's terms means deriving from the process of Spirit's self-realization. In a sense, what Hegel tried to do was to identify the rational core of nearly every area of human thought (logic, science, morality, politics, aesthetics, religion, and history) by describing them as part of Spirit's self-expression in history, as part of a sprawling story that describes a path toward the realization of human freedom in the modern world. In the synoptic presentation offered in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817, revised editions in 1827 and 1830), Hegel lays out this philosophical system in three stages: a Philosophy of Nature

[4] Hegel's usage is highly idiosyncratic, and to avoid misunderstanding or simply dismissing it, we need to consider the various meanings that Hegel wants to link together in this one term. The idea of Spirit is meant to include all of the following:

(1) those aspects of humanity which distinguish us from the rest of physical nature and which are specifically concerned with our conscious mental life (the realm of the "spiritual")
(2) the norms and practices that our culture takes to be authoritative (the usage that survives in the phrase – itself inspired by Hegel – "the spirit of the age")
(3) God, or at least the aspect of the divine that, in Christian doctrine, is supposed to indicate the presence of the heavenly God in the earthly realm (the Holy Spirit)

It may seem that both (1) and (3) require some sort of metaphysical commitment, a claim that there exists a reality that goes beyond the material. A significant amount of recent scholarship, however, both in German and in English, tries to understand and often to defend Hegel's arguments without assuming metaphysical claims. (See the discussion in note 6.) Not surprisingly, that means emphasizing (2) over (1) and (3), which raises the question of why Hegel or anyone else would bother speaking of an entity called Spirit as opposed to cultural norms or practices. But Hegel's position is that the authority of rationally justified norms and practices comes from their relation to the essential nature of human subjectivity as retrospective self-understanding. This claim does imply that certain norms have a special sort of authority to command us (a crucial part of what is implied in [3]) and that this authority comes from our retrospective self-understanding (a capacity which physical objects and lower animals do not have, which is a version of [1]).

and a Philosophy of Spirit, preceded by an introductory section called the Logic.[5] This organization is modeled on Kant's attempt to present the rational norms of belief and then of action in a two-part philosophical doctrine consisting of a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals, preceded by a "critical" analysis (originally just the *Critique of Pure Reason* but later expanded to include all three *Critiques*) of the possibility of making metaphysical claims. In Hegel's version, the *Logic* is meant to ground the Philosophies of Nature and of Spirit by showing that any judgment, any claim of a believing or acting agent, somehow implies a reference to Spirit's self-realization.

In the systematic account presented in the *Encyclopedia*, the subject of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – consciousness – is just one of three divisions of the section on "subjective Spirit," which is itself just one of the three divisions of the Philosophy of Spirit. Beyond "subjective Spirit" lies "objective Spirit" (discussed more extensively in the *Philosophy of Right* of 1821, Hegel's main work in moral and political philosophy, and in his *Philosophy of History*, published after Hegel's death from students' notes) and "absolute Spirit" (discussed more extensively in the lectures on aesthetics, religion, and the history of philosophy, also posthumously published from notes). In that sense, the project of the *Phenomenology* would seem to constitute a small and not particularly central piece of Hegel's philosophy, which would seem to depend most critically on the success of the *Logic*. Nonetheless the *Phenomenology* has always been the most influential of Hegel's works.

Some of the reasons for this influence are stylistic. The *Phenomenology* is still a relatively early work, published in 1807, before Hegel's academic reputation and career were fully secure. Finished as Napoleon's troops were descending upon Jena, the book retains some of the German Romantic expectation of a better but still uncertain future rather than the later Hegel's synoptic, Olympian pronouncements on the completed past. It has a literary flourish that the more systematic works lack: the book has the structure of a kind of novel, in which Spirit embarks on a biographical journey from naïveté to maturity. The attempt to turn highly abstract concepts into literary characters produces writing that is often lugubrious and sometimes even laughable, but there are a good many sustained passages in which Hegel's writing achieves a genuine narrative power, in which the theoretical debates of the past take on a dramatic form that is very different from the descriptions offered by more typical philosophical works.

[5] The "Encyclopedia Logic" is a shortened version of Hegel's larger *Science of Logic*, which was published in three stages from 1812 to 1816.

Even for those who discarded Hegel's terminology and philosophical aspirations, something of this style has animated much subsequent cultural and intellectual history.

But the book's influence has philosophical roots as well. Although the organization of the *Encyclopedia* suggests that the study of the way Spirit appears to consciousness is just of one of Spirit's many forms, this study plays an especially important role in the justification of Hegel's philosophical claims. To study the way Spirit appears to consciousness is to study the path that thought takes to get to the idea of Spirit, which for Hegel means the path that thought takes to get to a properly philosophical perspective. Hence the *Phenomenology* is conceived as a kind of preliminary work, an introduction to Hegel's philosophical system. Since Hegel conceives of a philosophical system as complete in itself, needing no external support, the introduction to his system must ultimately be a part of the system itself. The introduction is really a kind of justification of the system, a way of showing those outside the system – or, more precisely, those who might take themselves to be outside it – the need for the system in the first place. That is, the work is a defense of the idea of Spirit for those who might think they could do without it. It traces the path from non-philosophical to philosophical thinking, a path that turns out to be the journey of Spirit itself. The *Phenomenology* is, like all of Hegel's mature philosophical works, a kind of history of Spirit, but it is a history that seeks to derive the philosophical perspective of Spirit's self-development from a starting point that does without this perspective. For those who are skeptical of Hegel's attempt to justify the modern notion of freedom by understanding it as the historical process of Spirit's self-realization, the *Phenomenology* is the crucial text to read, because this skeptical perspective is exactly the one assumed in the text itself.

HISTORY AND JUSTIFICATION

So far I have said virtually nothing about what "Spirit's self-realization" could really mean, other than to suggest that it has something to do with the historical and cultural development of the modern idea of freedom, and with what Hegel understands as a properly philosophical perspective. But even these vague suggestions immediately raise a problem, one that will be at the center of this study. How can Hegel combine his emphasis on history with a philosophical emphasis on rational justification? It seems clear that Hegel wants to offer some sort of historically sensitive defense of the modern notion of freedom, and to offer a defense is obviously to offer