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978-0-521-69537-4 - Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: An Introduction

Larry Krasnoff

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HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY* *OF SPIRIT*

This book introduces Hegel's best known and most influential work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, by interpreting it as a unified argument for a single philosophical claim: that human beings achieve their freedom through retrospective self-understanding. In clear, non-technical prose, Larry Krasnoff sets this claim in the context of the history of modern philosophy and shows how it is developed in the major sections of Hegel's text. The result is an accessible and engaging guide to one of the most complex and important works of nineteenth-century philosophy, which will be of interest to all students and teachers working in this area.

LARRY KRASNOFF is Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, College of Charleston. He is co-editor with Natalie Brender of *New Essays on the History of Autonomy* (2004).

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Preface

I have long seen a need for a short introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but at the same time I have been acutely aware that such an introduction faces severe obstacles. The first of these are immediately obvious to anyone who even thumbs through the book: the work is especially long, and it is written in a dense, abstract language that seems as if it could be comprehensible only to Hegel himself. For all of that, the work is deeply connected to themes in the history not just of philosophy but also of religion, politics, and literature, and it has been highly influential in all of those areas. One would expect that a proper introduction to any philosophical work would have at least something to say about its terminology, its particular arguments, its historical background, and its subsequent historical influences. But in this case doing justice to even one of these topics would lead to a prohibitively long book.

The situation is only partially helped by a decision to focus on a specifically philosophical introduction, by which I mean to focus specifically on what the work can be said to attempt, and to accomplish, as an argument. That sort of focus relegates the matters of historical background and influence, and even the issue of terminology, to supporting roles: the task is to convey, in clear language accessible to contemporary readers, what Hegel's main claims are meant to be. But even this particular task is complicated by the style and the diverse influences of the work, and by its sheer length. Different sorts of philosophers have different standards for what constitutes a philosophical argument, and indeed Hegel remains a kind of litmus test for this question, since the reception of his work was crucial to the still tense division between "analytic" and "Continental" philosophy. So it is virtually impossible to identify Hegel's most important arguments in a way that will satisfy every philosopher's conception of what constitutes a philosophical argument – especially when many philosophers have long thought that Hegel abandoned argumentation entirely. And there is no way to identify those most important arguments without ignoring some sections of Hegel's

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text, each of which is made up of dozens of sub-arguments and narrative twists. Given the length of the *Phenomenology*, this kind of introduction cannot be a commentary like one of the many already in print, the sort of book that takes itself as obligated to discuss every section of Hegel's text.¹ That sort of approach would lead, once again, to a prohibitively long book.

In navigating my way through these difficulties, I have tried to focus on the context in which an inexperienced but philosophically interested student is likely to encounter Hegel's *Phenomenology* for the first time. That context is likely to be a class for advanced undergraduates or beginning graduate students, a class that treats Hegel not on his own but in the context of a larger survey, perhaps of Kant and German idealism, but more likely of nineteenth-century or Continental philosophy. Such classes can assign only selections from the *Phenomenology* to occupy the three to four weeks that can typically be devoted to Hegel. Usually these sections come from the first parts of the work: the Preface, the Introduction, and the chapters on "Consciousness" and "Self-Consciousness." After that, there tends to be a good deal of divergence about what to read. And so my close argumentative reading of Hegel's text concentrates on the sections of the work through the chapter "Self-Consciousness" (which ends with the discussion of the Unhappy Consciousness). In this book, Chapter 5 is intended to be read alongside Hegel's Preface and Introduction, Chapter 6 is intended to be read alongside his chapter on "Consciousness," and Chapter 7 is intended to be read alongside his chapter on "Self-Consciousness." After that, in Chapter 8, I offer textual discussions only of selected sections, those that I suspect are most likely for instructors to assign. But these discussions are presented merely as excurses, which readers can feel free to either examine or ignore. In Chapters 8 and 9, I concentrate mainly on the larger question of what the later sections of the book are intended to accomplish. The idea is not just to keep the textual discussion to a manageable length, to avoid writing a 400-page commentary, but also to present the work in

¹ For just two recent examples, see Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); and H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder: A Commentary on Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hackett, 1997). Nor, if it is to concern only the *Phenomenology*, can this be a book – like the works of Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, and Michael Forster – that attempts to lay out Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* and to then relate its status to the *Logic* and to Hegel's idea of a philosophical system. See Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge University Press, 1975); Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). I discuss some of these issues in Chapter 1, but only briefly.

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the sort of context that professors are most likely to assign it to beginning readers.

To give focus to this study, I have also chosen to frame my discussion around a single theme: Hegel's defense of modernity as the expression and even the realization of human freedom. The historical emergence of this theme is the subject of Chapters 1 through 4. It is often pointed out that Hegel is trying to provide a new defense of modern intellectual, cultural, and social institutions, one that makes an explicit appeal to the history and development of those institutions. This kind of historical account is explicitly at odds with the traditional philosophical understanding of standards of truth and rationality as essentially timeless, and it also appeals to cultural considerations (to literature, to religion, and to political developments) that have traditionally been considered outside the boundaries of purely rational argumentation. So how is a historically grounded argument supposed to work as a philosophical justification? How can Hegel argue, as he clearly does, that he has given a full rational justification of the modern idea of freedom, and also that his account is explicitly historical?

The assumption behind this study is that Hegel's answer to these questions can be found in his distinctive account of human subjectivity, which is intended to combine the notions of freedom, rationality, and historical reflection in a very special way. On the reading I will present, the *Phenomenology* is an argument for the claim that the essential nature of subjectivity – what it is to be a human being – is to seek self-knowledge through a reflection on one's past. On this kind of view, rationality is historical because human beings come to understand themselves historically, and history is rational insofar as it tends toward institutions that affirm the value of this kind of subject, of this kind of human being. The second, substantive task of this book – which should be of interest even to those who do not need it for pedagogical purposes – is to show that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can and should be read as a philosophical defense of these claims. On this reading, both the opening, “philosophical,” chapters of the book and the subsequent “historical” chapters should be seen as part of a continuous argument for a certain view of subjectivity: not just an argument that our modern conception of subjectivity is essentially connected to culture and history, but also an argument that this historical conception of subjectivity is essentially connected to the enterprise of rational justification.

Behind all of this is the thought that a philosophical introduction to any work, Hegel's included, should not just identify but also exemplify the sort of argumentation that makes the work specifically philosophical.

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That is, a philosophical introduction to Hegel should not just describe his position, but should also try to understand it as a live option in some real and ongoing philosophical debate. My hope is that by narrowing the focus of the book to a particular issue – Hegel's historical defense of his historical conception of subjectivity – the book gains in comprehensibility and philosophical focus what it necessarily lacks in comprehensiveness.² Faced with the problems posed by the length and the sprawling influences of the *Phenomenology*, I have quite deliberately abandoned the thought of a fully comprehensive introduction.³ There is much in Hegel that I will be

² In my discussions, I try to avoid Hegelian jargon as much as possible. As the argument unfolds, I of course try to explain what Hegel's terms mean, and to connect my own claims to specific formulations in his text. But I have not tried to provide any sort of systematic treatment of, or even introduction to, Hegel's vocabulary. This is not, therefore, a particularly good book for teaching someone to "talk" Hegel, to acquire the sort of technical facility that would, say, allow that person to open the *Logic* to a random paragraph and begin reading with fluidity and confidence. My view is that this kind of special competence is too remote and too impractical an aim for most readers of this book, and especially for students who are initially encountering Hegel for just a few weeks. The barriers posed by Hegel's terminology and writing style are so great that they demand something like the opposite approach: showing that it is possible to talk about Hegel in language accessible to any decent student of the humanities. What new (and even many old) readers of Hegel most need is the reassurance that his seemingly impenetrable formulations really do amount to claims that can be stated clearly and plausibly, and relate clearly and plausibly to familiar debates in philosophy. And they need to know that the sprawling and idiosyncratic form of the work really can be understood as serving a larger and understandable purpose. In short, my view is that in the case of Hegel, especially, a study like this one should be a lifeline of clarity dropped into what can seem like a hostile sea of obscurity: what the reader of Hegel needs to cling to, at every moment, is the thought that his work really does have a clear philosophical point. Only by believing that can the reader of Hegel believe that his philosophy is really worth reading, and that the technical competence needed to read him fluently might eventually be worth acquiring.

The emphasis on the unity and larger purpose of the work means that I will not be able to engage in any extended discussions of Hegel's contributions to particular fields of philosophy, such as epistemology or ethics, though I will have much to say that is relevant to such fields. The plan to read the text as a specifically philosophical argument will also neglect Hegel's vast influence on other areas of culture, such as history, religion, or literature; though I will again touch on matters relating to all of these, I will not be able to do anything like justice to Hegel's contributions. Together with the size, the complexity, and the intellectual range of the *Phenomenology*, these commitments mean that I will inevitably be neglecting interesting and important themes in the work. I would not claim that my particular emphasis on Hegel's conception of subjectivity as retrospective self-knowledge comes anywhere close to providing a full reading of the work. But I do believe that focusing specifically on this theme will best allow a reader to make philosophical sense of the entire work in a manageable amount of time.

³ That makes this book different from the short introductions to Hegel offered by Peter Singer or Frederick Beiser, which take themselves as obligated to discuss every important aspect of Hegel's life and work, at least very briefly, and which of necessity lose some of their philosophical focus. See Singer, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001); and Beiser, *Hegel* (Routledge, 2005). Beiser's account is much richer, but it is also longer and more general than what I aim for here. The book is probably closest in spirit to the shorter versions of Taylor's and Harris' books, but just because they are abridgments, it is hard to read them without feeling that one is missing something of the argument. See Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1975); and Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* (Hackett, 1995).

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unable to discuss here: my goal is not to “cover” Hegel but rather to allow him to speak in full voice in recognizable and continuing debates over such matters as freedom, rationality, and the nature of rational justification. The results, I hope, will be a kind of clarity, a lack of clutter, and a willingness finally to listen to his position, that are sorely needed when encountering Hegel at any level.

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Acknowledgments

It is always appropriately humbling to recognize how much a book owes to the work of others. At Williams College and then at Johns Hopkins University, I was fortunate to study the *Phenomenology* with a pair of gifted teachers, Mark Taylor and George Armstrong Kelly. From reading Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, and Allen Wood, I learned a great deal more not just about Hegel, but also about how to give him a voice in the conversation of Anglo-American philosophy. When I wrote the earliest sections of this book, Edward Minar provided helpful suggestions and encouragement. Later sections were presented to audiences at Carleton College, the Northeastern Political Science Association, and the College of Charleston, and I am grateful for the responses I received on those occasions. My editor at Cambridge University Press, Hilary Gaskin, has been especially supportive and patient throughout the editorial process, and she has consistently pushed me to improve the text in ways that I otherwise would not have done. Three anonymous reviewers for the Press also provided a wide range of useful suggestions. Finally, since there is no adequate way for me to acknowledge all the support I have received from my family, I will end simply by expressing my gratitude to them.