Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, first published in 1807, is a work with few equals in systematic integrity, philosophical originality, and historical influence. This collection of newly commissioned essays, contributed by leading Hegel scholars, examines all aspects of the work, from its argumentative strategies to its continuing relevance to philosophical debates today. The collection combines close analysis with wide-ranging coverage of the text, and also traces connections with debates extending beyond Hegel scholarship, including issues in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, ethics, and philosophy of religion. In showing clearly that we have not yet exhausted the *Phenomenology*'s insights, it demonstrates the need for contemporary philosophers to engage with Hegel.

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EDITED BY DEAN MOYAR AND MICHAEL QUANTE

HEGEL'S
Phenomenology of Spirit
A Critical Guide

EDITED BY

DEAN MOYAR

AND

MICHAEL QUANTE

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Preface

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* has just turned two hundred years old. The first book that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel published has lost none of the inspirational force that it had not only in Hegel's lifetime but, above all, in the decades after his death. The Russian émigré author Alexander Herzen, writing about the intellectual scene in France in the 1840s, reports the following:

> Proudhon often went there to listen to Reichel's Beethoven and Bakunin's Hegel: the philosophical discussions lasted longer than the symphonies. They reminded me of the famous all-night vigils of Bakunin and Khomyakov at Chaadayev's and at Madame Yelagin's, where Hegel was also discussed. In 1847 Karl Vogt, who also lived in the Rue de Bourgogne, and often visited Reichel and Bakunin, was bored one evening with listening to the endless discussions of the *Phenomenology*, and went home to bed. Next morning he went round for Reichel, for they were to go to the Jardin des Plantes together; he was surprised to hear conversation in Bakunin's study at that early hour. He opened the door – Proudhon and Bakunin were sitting in the same places before the burnt-out embers in the fireplace, and were with a few last words just finishing the dispute that had begun the day before.[1]

The power of the *Phenomenology* to stimulate new thought and provoke philosophical innovation continues unbroken today. It has enjoyed the widest and most intense reception of all Hegel's work. There are many reasons that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has had such a wide impact and that, over such a long period, it has been the ever-renewed subject of intense discussion. In the nineteenth century the primary reasons were, of course, political, as in no other text does Hegel's dialectic hold out more

[1] Alexander Herzen (1982), 422. The people referred to in the Herzen quote are: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), French utopian socialist – author of the famous quote that "property is theft"; Adolf Reichel (1817–1897), German composer; Michail Alexandrowitsch Bakunin (1814–1876), Russian anarchist and antagonist of Karl Marx; Alexey Stepanovitsch Khomyakov (1804–60), Russian poet; Pyotr Yakovlevitsch Chaadayev (1794–1856), Russian philosopher and writer; Avdotya Petrovna Yelagin (1789–1877), famous through her literary salon in Moscow in the 1830s and 1840s; Karl Vogt (1817–1895), German scientist and materialist. Translation altered.

promise of demonstrating how political reality can be transformed. Yet the revolutionary ethos of the *Phenomenology* is only one among the many features that have contributed, and still contribute, to its legacy. In this brief introduction we would like to distinguish three features of the text that have contributed to its overall appeal, and three philosophical themes of the *Phenomenology* that remain very much alive today.

First, Hegel treats in this work an astounding wealth of material that one cannot find (at least, not in the primary text) in the *Science of Logic* or in the three editions of the *Encyclopedia* or in the *Philosophy of Right*. The sheer breadth of the spectrum of phenomena and "objects" is overwhelming, running from the semantics of deictic reference in sense perception to absolute knowledge, and from the ethical, religious, and aesthetic self-conceptions of the ancients to the "modern" natural sciences and their disenchanted view of the world. This wide-ranging "path" of the *Phenomenology* is no doubt responsible for the text having found an audience beyond Hegel experts and those engaged with traditional philosophical questions. The most famous and influential theme, the "struggle for recognition," which attracted the early left-Hegelians as an analysis of social conflicts, remains a current theme for philosophers and political theorists, and has also provoked innovative interpretations by psychologists, literary critics, and sociologists.

Second, Hegel conceived of the *Phenomenology* as a text that could stand on its own, something which can otherwise be said only of his *Science of Logic*, since both the *Encyclopedia* and the *Philosophy of Right* depict Hegel's thoughts in outline and require explication through spoken lectures. In contrast to the "greater Logic" the *Phenomenology* appears less abstract, more accessible, and more open to the reader who does not want to go into the fine structure of speculative thinking. In addition, Hegel's argumentation in the *Phenomenology* is not yet overloaded with the speculative philosophical conceptual apparatus that in the eyes of many critics suffocates the phenomena in the later work. For many readers, it is only in this early text that Hegel's thinking is still close enough to the phenomena to illuminate their meaning.

The third general reason for the lasting success of the *Phenomenology* is that in this work Hegel brings together two seemingly countervailing tendencies of thought. On the one side is the incredible philosophical aspiration to give a phenomenological account of everything. Hegel's aim of providing necessary connections between each and every shape of consciousness stirs the philosophically interested reader to reconstruct his argument or to find a gap in his reasoning. Hegel's self-assurance in the

power of his arguments, and his unbroken trust in the capabilities of philosophical thinking to explain the world, must appear to us today highly provoking, or at least irritating. The fascination and the strangeness of the *Phenomenology* comes also from the difference between his time and our own with regard to both the cultural understanding of philosophy and the dominant view of the nature of the philosophical undertaking itself. For Hegel, the idea of philosophy as the highest and most important cultural form was grounded in the actual (high) culture of his time. So, too, his belief that the true philosophy had to be systematic and had to encompass everything was widely shared among philosophers. Our cultural and philosophical self-understandings have changed, and we are no longer so optimistic about the power or desirability of philosophic system-building. But, on the other side, the *Phenomenology* is also a deep engagement with the skeptical tendency that has accompanied Western philosophy from the beginning, and it therefore always seems one step ahead of the critics of idealism. The way in which Hegel develops his own answer to the skeptical demand, by co-opting it for his method and showing how it "completes," and therefore overcomes, itself is highly original. The experience of consciousness is the pathway of despair that nevertheless leads to the "spiritual daylight" and the liberation of self-knowledge. From the interplay of these two sides Hegel's argumentation radiates a spiritual energy that has retained its splendor; the dust of centuries has not been able to cloud the brilliance of the phenomenological "movement."

The first of the three main philosophical reasons represented in this volume for the continued importance of the *Phenomenology* has to do with the particular kind of *holism* that Hegel attempts to establish. Although there are not many philosophers today who would endorse the grand system-building that Hegel thought necessary, holistic strategies of justification are quite popular and appear likely to become even more widely accepted. This tendency has much to do with the demise of foundationalist programs of tracing claims of knowledge back to one or more basic indubitable sources. Hegel's alternative to foundationalism does not fit neatly into the mold of contemporary coherentism, and just what exactly his strategy amounts to turns largely on how one reads the *Phenomenology* and its goal of providing a "ladder" to speculative philosophy. One of the promises of the *Phenomenology* is that it can deliver an argument for why holism is the only sound metaphilosophical position, to do so as a sustained argument against every form of foundationalist claim to immediate knowledge, and yet to achieve a positive position that has overcome all forms of skepticism. Hegel thought that only an idealism of a very radical sort could

make this strategy work, and no doubt many present-day skeptics would say that Hegel's cure is much worse than the disease. Yet Hegel's systematic solution remains a promising epistemological approach that can deliver results at both the overall level and through the specific arguments in the "local" argumentative movements between shapes of consciousness and their claims to knowledge.

The second point concerns Hegel's ingenious response to the perennial problem of the relation of the natural and the normative. With the remarkable success of the natural sciences in the past two centuries, both the promises and the threats of various kinds of philosophical explanation oriented by the "hard sciences" have dramatically increased. Programs of reductive naturalism abound in Anglo-American philosophy today, and lively debates are taking place over the limits of such programs for understanding the mind and ethics (to name only two). Hegel's idealistic program was born out of the perceived insufficiencies of Kant's transcendental or critical idealism, which sought to restrict the realm of natural explanation to the domain of spatio-temporal appearances. The problems of Kant's peculiar kind of dualism are too vast even to summarize here, but the central issue that arose in the first two decades of reception and transformation of Kantian idealism was the issue of how to provide a unified account of nature and freedom while maintaining the relative independence of each. In the concept of Spirit, and in the overall architecture of his System, Hegel claimed to have achieved this result, providing a theory of the emergence of freedom from the natural that did not reduce freedom to nature. Just how he accomplished this feat, and whether he actually accomplished it, continues to be a central aspect of scholarly work on Hegel's texts. While not offering Hegel's full story on this question, the *Phenomenology* remains the best point of entry into his critique of certain kinds of naturalism and into his own answer to how freedom is possible beginning from within the natural processes of "life."

Finally, a great attraction of the *Phenomenology*, and a source of some puzzlement, is that within its method of experience it treats both theoretical and practical stances, both claims of knowledge (in a narrow sense) and claims of action. Philosophy of action has been among the most vibrant areas of philosophy in the past fifty years. This includes both questions of how we distinguish actions from mere events, and how practical reasoning undergirds ethical and political philosophy. So, too, a rebirth of pragmatism in a variety of forms has led to an interest in exploring the interconnections of action and knowledge. The famous Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* is only the most obvious site where Hegel's epistemology

and his action theory intersect. At nearly every stage of the text, Hegel thematizes what consciousness *does* with its concepts, and the endpoint or endpoints of the account in one way or another all describe a practical process. The *Phenomenology* therefore offers not only a series of reflections on the practical nature of any knowledge claim, but also detailed accounts of the more explicit contexts of action.

The *Phenomenology* rewards persistent study, but it also makes serious, at times even outrageous demands on the reader (the literary scholar M. H. Abrams only exaggerated a little when he claimed that Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is an easy read by comparison). In addition to the fact that two hundred years have created both a language barrier (even for German scholars) and a formidable distance from the original philosophical context, other difficulties are the complicated Hegelian idiom, the wealth of the specific material, and, last but not least, the complex arrangement of the philosophical argumentation. Hegel not only operates with concepts and figures of thought that were familiar to the philosophical discourse of his time, but which today's reader can comprehend only with difficulty (and small steps), he also develops a self-sufficient and unprecedented philosophical method. His argumentative strategies work on different levels and constantly intermingle before coalescing in the end.

One result of all of these difficulties is that interpretations of both individual passages of the *Phenomenology* and of the work as a whole diverge greatly, and there is hardly any point where one could say that no fundamental conflicts exist among interpreters. It would be pointless to go into detail here about the various modes of reception and traditions of interpretation, since these have been discussed in many commentaries (one need only compare the comments in the contributions and in the bibliography of this volume). We should note that some differences in interpretation can be identified between distinct nationalities, testifying to the ability of the text to appeal across philosophical traditions. Among the ideas behind this volume was to bring together scholars from America and Germany to enact a productive dialogue between the often very different styles of interpretation in the two countries.

Our *primary* goal was to put together a volume about the *Phenomenology* that would highlight and clarify central passages and questions. The contributors were asked to accomplish two tasks. The first was to make the reader's confrontation with the Hegelian text easier by drawing out the arguments from the complex dialectical structure. The second aim was to bring out why Hegel's treatment of the question(s) is still of systematic interest from today's perspective (or why certain aspects are no longer

salvageable). The result of this program is a collection that focuses less on the origins of Hegel's project than on its systematic integrity and the viability of specific analyses for today's more specialized branches of philosophy.

We refrain here from summarizing the interpretive results of the individual contributions. Each contribution must – and, we think, can – speak for itself. As editors we are (painfully) aware that this volume could not come close to covering all that can be learned or systematically developed from the *Phenomenology* today. The breadth of Hegel's work and the complexity of his arguments are simply too great for an exhaustive treatment to be possible. Nevertheless we are confident that this collection will put the reader in a position to gain access to the entire wealth of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. For that we would like to thank the contributors, who in the midst of their many other commitments invested their energy in this volume. Finally, we would like to thank Cambridge University Press for incorporating this project into their new series.

Abbreviations and citations

All references to the text of the *Phenomenology* are given in parentheses in the main text. The notes give the page number of the German edition from the *Gesammelte Werke*, volume 9, followed by the paragraph number from the English translation of A. V. Miller: (18, ¶17), for example. We expect that Miller's translation will soon be superseded, and that subsequent translations will also employ paragraph numbers. Many of the translations have also been altered by the authors of the chapters: it proved too cumbersome to note all of these changes.

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