

THE AMBITION OF THE *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is at once one of the most obscure and one of the most influential works of philosophy. Yet only members of academic philosophical circles tend to be familiar with his earlier work, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (referred to in the literature as the *Differenzschrift*). Hegel published that work in 1801, at the age of thirty-one, at the very outset of his time at the University of Jena. It has often been construed, not least of all by Fichte himself, as a partisan defense of Hegel's friend Schelling, who was already teaching in Jena.¹ But Hegel also takes the opportunity to indicate his own "difference" from Schelling in the text.² And their shared time in Jena saw the two thinkers grow even further apart.³ Indeed, the position Hegel takes up in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* involves a sharp critique of the Schellingian school. Although Hegel expressly excludes Schelling himself from that critique,⁴ the book has been understood as a definitive repudiation of Schelling.

Hegel nevertheless remains committed to the essential aims of his predecessors in the *Phenomenology*. He shares Fichte's conviction that philosophical knowledge must begin by understanding the principle,

¹ Fichte describes Hegel as a follower of Schelling in his letter to Schelling, January 15, 1802. Cf his *Briefwechsel*, 5, 113; translated by Michael G. Vater and David Wood in *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling*, 73 f.

² Cf Düsing, *Schellings und Hegels erste absolute Metaphysik*, 186 f.

³ Cf Düsing, "Spekulation."

⁴ See Hegel's letter to Schelling, May 1, 1807, in *Briefe* 1, 159–162; translated by Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler in *Hegel: The Letters*, 79–80. Schelling accepted this explanation with some skepticism (*Briefe* 1, 194; *Letters*, 80) but was known to express a negative view of the *Phenomenology* to third parties. Cf Wolfgang Bonsiepen's Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont (1988).

or the structure, of subjectivity. And he simultaneously aligns himself with Schelling in attempting to overcome the dualism between nature and spirit.⁵ There is, in truth, nothing that is not “spiritual”: matter, extension, and sensibility are but implicit, unreflected forms of spirit. Yet this does not represent a typical form of “idealism” (understood as the opposite of “realism”). Objects (things, events, states of affairs) are not dependent on human consciousness – not even in the “transcendental” sense advocated by Kant and Fichte, according to which the categories and schemata in which humans comprehend the world can be traced back to necessary, though unconscious, functions of the human mind. For Hegel, the human mind rather participates in a universal “logic” that determines nature and culture alike. This logic is “reflected” in human thinking itself and can be disclosed through spirit’s (i.e. human) action and codified in the social realm. Cultural history is the process by which human consciousness of the structure of reality becomes more extensive and more differentiated. Of course, Hegel does not employ the modern concept of “culture,” but rather speaks of the history of spirit or of religion – the form he takes to encapsulate the human account of the world. This notion encompasses the histories of law, the state, economics, art, science, etc., though each of these cultural forms and their respective developments may be differently (and increasingly independently) “articulated” in particular periods.

Hegel accordingly had to incorporate world and cultural history into his system in a completely different way from his predecessors. The *Phenomenology* constitutes his first comprehensive attempt to do so, which is partly what enabled it to have such a broad impact on the

⁵ The German concept *Geist* is notoriously difficult to translate. The term is sometimes employed in contexts where an English speaker would say “mind.” For example, the philosophical contemporary subfield “philosophy of mind” is known in Germany as the *Philosophie des Geistes*, which has led some (notably J. B. Baillie) to translate the title of Hegel’s work as the *Phenomenology of Mind*. However, this translation fails to account for other prevalent uses of the term *Geist* which inform and color the German concept. The history of culture is called *Geistesgeschichte*, the humanities (qua academic discipline) are referred to as the *Geisteswissenschaften*, while the “spirit of an age” is described as its *Zeitgeist*, and the Christian concept of the “Holy Spirit” finds expression as *der heilige Geist*. Thus, *Geist* not only pertains to the faculties and achievements of individuals, but comprises social structures and cultural products. Though the English term “spirit” has largely fallen out of common currency and is reserved for quite specific contexts, we hope that any awkwardness its use may arouse will serve to remind the reader of the unfamiliar plasticity of the German concept. In this commentary, therefore, *Geist* is typically translated as “spirit,” except in a few cases where the significance of the term is clearly restricted to or primarily focused on what English-speakers would call “mind.”

“reading public.” Still today, as thinkers like Jürgen Habermas or Francis Fukuyama illustrate, the *Phenomenology* incites us to interpret our time in both its historical origins and its possible future developments.⁶

Hegel’s aim was to help the spirit of the age, as expressed in the great upheavals during the epoch of Napoleon and Goethe, to come to “consciousness” of itself. He therefore sought to provide a system of categories equally capable of making sense of the development of morality, art, the constitutional state, or the natural sciences. But Hegel was no mere cultural critic concerned with interpreting the signs of the times. Indeed, he aims to satisfy even the most stringent demands of the critical philosophy as formulated by Kant and his followers. And he aims to convince even the most rigorous philosophical skeptics by employing their very own method in refuting them. The *Phenomenology* aspires to be a radical (“self-fulfilling,” *PhG* 72/50⁷) form of skepticism – through which skepticism undermines itself and establishes its opposite.⁸ Hegel’s name for this opposite was “absolute knowledge.” Such knowledge is supposed to be absolute both in its degree of certainty and in its contents – an ambition that has elicited as much fascination as it has incredulity and ridicule.

“Absolute knowledge” naturally cannot help but come into competition with religious claims to certainty. Themes like “religious consciousness,” “faith,” and “religion” take up considerable space in the *Phenomenology* and Hegel ultimately wants to translate the true core of religious history into philosophical concepts. Hegel’s

⁶ Cf Habermas, “Können komplexe Gesellschaften eine vernünftige Identität ausbilden?,” 23–75; Fukuyama, *The End of History*.

⁷ Citations of the *Phenomenology* are abbreviated *PhG* and provide the page numbers of both the German and English editions, in that order, separated by a slash. The German edition is the third volume of the *Theorie Werkausgabe* (1986). The English edition is A. V. Miller’s translation, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Translations follow Miller where possible, but are occasionally modified, often (as here) taking Terry Pinkard’s new, but unpublished, translation as a guide. (Pinkard’s translation is available on his website: <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html>.)

⁸ Hegel had been exercised by the question of skepticism ever since his time in Berlin. (This interest is also apparent in his “Positivitätsschrift”, cf AA 1, 209, the bulk of which has been translated by T. M. Knox in *Early Theological Writings*, although the cited passage in question occurs in Hegel’s subsequent “additions” which were not included in the English edition.) After Kant, the problem of refuting skepticism became a dominant theme of the period. Cf Fulda and Horstmann, *Skeptizismus und spekulatives Denken in der Philosophie Hegels*; see also Meist’s “Sich selbst vollbringender Skeptizismus: G. E. Schulzes Replik auf Hegel und Schelling,” as well as more recent work by Vieweg.

attempts to “sublate”⁹ religion into philosophy, which are extensively and systematically developed in his late Berlin lectures and writings, have sparked embittered controversies and a schism within his own followers. What he is concerned to do, as we see in the *Phenomenology*, is to effect a reconciliation between religion, science, and philosophy and to resist the banal misunderstandings of religion popularized by a shallow Enlightenment (see pp. 184–186 below). The *Phenomenology* is equally an attempt to show that the philosophical and scientific insights of the modern age (from roughly the early seventeenth century to the early nineteenth) actually confirm the religious belief that an absolute (divine) wisdom reveals itself in the world.

Hegel thereby rejects the contemporary religious and theological “fallback positions” of the time, which introduce a strict separation between knowledge and faith and treat the divine as itself unknowable, but accessible through moral conviction or religious feeling. Such separations took many forms, in Hegel’s view, ranging from Kantian critical philosophy’s reduction of rational theology to the moral postulate of God, to Jacobi and Schleiermacher’s theology based solely on faith and religious feeling. Kant admittedly did not fully reject either the religious belief in God based on the purposive arrangement of the world or the role of divine providence in the course of history. But he denied such thoughts the status of scientific knowledge. The only “strictly scientific” kinds of knowledge were to be found in the cognition of “mechanical” laws of nature and in the analysis of the necessary preconditions of such cognition by human reason.

This mechanistic mode of explanation, according to Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Teleological Judgment* (the second half of his *Critique of the*

⁹ Like *Geist*, the German term *aufheben* poses great difficulties for any translator. Depending on context, the German word can mean any of three things: (1) to annul, void, suspend, or cancel (e.g. a law or decree); (2) to raise up or elevate; (3) to preserve or save for later (e.g. the leftovers of a meal). Hegel most often uses the term in an unprecedented way that synthesizes all three of these meanings (*negare*, *elevare*, and *conservare*). When a shape of consciousness is *aufgehoben*, (1) its present form is eliminated, its self-understanding overthrown, and its key epistemological and ontological claims are negated (*negare*); (2) it is then (and thereby) elevated to a new, higher level, transformed into a novel and more sophisticated form (*elevare*); even as (3) this new form nevertheless preserves essential aspects or elements of the prior one (*conservare*). Whenever *aufheben* is used in this peculiar manner, it has been translated as “sublate.” Uses of the term which rely on only one of the three meanings above have been translated accordingly (as “elevate,” “revoke,” etc.), depending on context. For a brief discussion of the different valences of *aufheben*, cf. Pinkard, *Hegel’s “Phenomenology”*, 349–350 n28.

Power of Judgment), does not enable us to fully understand the products of organic nature. Nor does it enable us to connect all our knowledge of nature – including the particular laws of physics and biology – into a systematic whole. Yet human reason must always search for such systematic unity among its various bits of knowledge in order to understand them as parts of a complete, “syllogistic” system, founded on principles and inferences. Consequently, it is necessary to assume, though impossible to prove, that the purposive interconnections of nature rest on the wisdom of an infinite understanding. Moreover, since our attempts to explain our moral feeling of duty lead us to the (equally hypothetical) assumption of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent being, it is only consistent for us to search through history for signs of a rational plan.

Kant thus grants that religious belief in “providence” and the wisdom of creation makes rational sense, but disputes its scientific character inasmuch as it could never admit of empirical or “logical” proof. Hegel wants to restore the scientific character of this conviction – albeit at the price of what one might call (following Rudolf Bultmann¹⁰) a radical demythologization of its religious contents. The modern natural sciences and the progress of reason in the modern “secularized” state reveal, if only one does not misunderstand them, the purposive organization of nature and history.

Yet such misunderstandings of the natural sciences are, like the “naïve” conception of religious truths, incredibly widespread throughout the sciences themselves (in their “enlightened” self-understanding), as well as in philosophy, literature, and theology. All these misunderstandings rest on dualisms – between sensibly perceptible matter and intelligible laws, between intuition and concept, between subject and object, between the human and the divine mind, etc. The content of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a comprehensive and complete critique of such dualisms. What one can actually learn from the modern sciences, according to Hegel, is that the world does not simply consist of particular sensible things and universal spiritual laws, but rather constitutes a process whose events and structures exhibit an intelligible order of implicit concepts and inferences. Something analogous goes for the historical development of cultures (particularly legal orders) and also for the historical evolution of art and religion.

¹⁰ Cf Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie* (1941).

But not everything in nature and history is rational or purposive. There are phenomena and realms in which only weak indications of order(s) are visible – such as in the variety of biological species or the elaborate offshoots of particular traditions in human culture.¹¹ Yet these peripheral regions do not spoil the total order. Quite the contrary; the total order reveals its imperturbability in the face of such “overly complex” patterns and various historical relapses and detours.¹²

Now if human beings are to be able both to cognize such an order (in nature) and to produce it (in culture), then human thought and action must be understood as modes of becoming conscious of, and execution or enactment of, universal reason. The manifestation and self-realization of an order is, for Hegel, the essence of “spirit.” Whether one calls it human or divine is ultimately a matter of perspective. One views spirit from a human perspective if one occupies the standpoint of an individual situated in a particular culture and epoch and looks “upwards” at the total order revealed through epochs and peoples. But if one looks “down from above” – from the total order of nature and history that is recognized or “revealed” in the progress of cultures and sciences (though it is always individual human beings who recognize it) – then one occupies an infinite or, in religious terms, “divine” perspective.

It is not until one brings into view the full ambition of Hegel’s philosophy, which receives its first systematic articulation in the *Phenomenology*, that one can understand the idea and the impact of the work. In today’s culture, the claim to “absolute knowledge” and a complete understanding of religion and history necessarily presents itself as untenably hubristic. Practically no one in philosophy shares this project anymore. Contemporary interest in the *Phenomenology* is mostly restricted to its more “modest” aspects. The attempt to synthesize scientific and religious knowledge of the world has nonetheless been characteristic of European philosophy since the advent of Christendom. Thomas Aquinas, Leibniz, and Hegel are perhaps the most significant practitioners of such a synthesis.

If one were to call the unity effected by such a synthesis “metaphysics,” then it is understandable that some consider Hegel to mark the end of metaphysics.¹³ For around the end of the nineteenth century some

¹¹ Cf Hegel’s *Encyclopedia* (1830), §§368 and 394.

¹² Cf Henrich’s “Hegels Theorie über den Zufall.”

¹³ One can indeed interpret Hegel as thoroughly “anti-metaphysical,” as, for example, Terry Pinkard does in his book, *Hegel’s “Phenomenology”*. For Pinkard, absolute knowledge

of the central presuppositions of such a synthesis began to appear increasingly dubious as the empirical sciences progressively distanced themselves from the idea of nature as a clear, logically structured totality. Chaos theory and modern conceptions of the origin of the universe have accorded chance an increasingly significant role. The same is true of geological studies of the history of the earth or biological evolutionary theory. Meteor impacts and shifts in tectonic plates cannot be traced back to a rational plan or *telos* any more than can spontaneous mutations or “copying errors” in the replication of genetic information.

With the rise of modern, primary-source-based historical disciplines, there was a similar shift in the study of human culture away from “grand designs” and an increasing tendency to emphasize “unsystematic,” narrative history which cannot be understood as adhering either to a human plan or to divine providence. The political and moral catastrophes of the twentieth century finally shook all faith in reason and its progress throughout history. It is admittedly an open question how successful attempts at a comprehensive, unifying theory (in, say, physics) may be. And we do cleave to the idea of some progress, at least in certain areas such as our legal systems (human rights, democracy, separation of powers). But the idea of a perfectly rational, total order of nature and history is less credible today than ever before in Western history. Accordingly, Hegel's idea of a system – particularly a system of history – must appear hubristic to us.

Yet the *Phenomenology* also contains opposed, “anti-metaphysical” undercurrents which, for some interpreters, make Hegel the father of modernity. None of his predecessors sought so thoroughly to historicize all religious, philosophical, and scientific standpoints. And none of them gave so systematic a presentation of the genesis of the modern subject, free from all bonds of tradition, as Hegel does in the *Phenomenology*.¹⁴

precisely consists in refraining from any pre-given truths or metaphysics (including natural law): “Absolute knowledge . . . is the practice through which the modern community thinks about itself without attempting to posit any metaphysical ‘other’ or set of ‘natural constraints’ that would underwrite those practices” (262). Cf also 268.

¹⁴ Cf Falke, *Begriffne Geschichte*, 9, 22. In his commentary, Falke emphasizes a modernizing interpretation. Still, he is aware that, even in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel attempts to reconnect “modern subjectivity, as it stands immediately before an Absolute devoid of substance to a traditional order of the state, religion, and metaphysics” (22). An analogous account of the genesis and reconnection of the modern subject can be found in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*.

Nor had anyone prior to Hegel so emphasized the significance of communal life for the development of our concepts of possible objects and our criteria of truth and goodness.¹⁵ Anti-metaphysical readings have seized on these features of Hegel's views, thus drawing him closer to the pragmatists or to Wittgenstein.¹⁶

But even for those who are skeptical both of the work's aspirations to inaugurate a complete system, and of all-too-"modern" interpretations of the *Phenomenology* that seek to downplay these aspirations, there are important connections to contemporary philosophical topics to be found in the *Phenomenology*. Consider, for example, Hegel's program of overcoming traditional dualisms (between concept and object, understanding and sensibility, form and matter, etc.),¹⁷ or his "holistic" conception of theories and their object domains, or his observations about the dependency of epistemology on social history.¹⁸ Additionally, the *Phenomenology* contains interesting ("rationalist") views about the relation of religion and science.

The genuine contributions of religion to the progress of human culture lie, for Hegel, in precisely those systems of thought which religious teaching and dogma have developed regarding the essence and activity of God – not primarily in religion's contributions to moral development, as Lessing, Kant, and most Enlightenment thinkers maintained. Viewed at an appropriate level of abstraction, these conceptual models and schemata are the very ones we employ to comprehend the nature and structures of the human mind. Hegel thinks he can show that, far from hindering natural science, the progress of theology enabled its very development. It would be impossible for us to understand nature as a self-organizing system without the conceptions of substance, subject, purposiveness, self-differentiation, etc. developed earlier in theology.

¹⁵ Cf below, pp. 200, 202, 231.

¹⁶ For Robert Pippin, Hegel is a philosopher of modernity because he understands the criteria of objecthood and truth as "principles emerged as resolutions of an experienced and logical crisis in a community's self-understanding" ("Hegel, Modernity, and Habermas," 168). For Pippin, the dialectic of this process is to be understood neither in pragmatist terms nor by means of transcendental theories of discourse. Brandom sees Hegel's thought in closer propinquity to pragmatism. Cf also footnote 13.

¹⁷ Leading thinkers in contemporary ontology and epistemology are similarly interested in overcoming dualisms between subject and object, and between concept and matter. See, for example, Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 9; or McDowell, *Mind and World*, 44 f. (cf also pp. 162 and 72 below).

¹⁸ Cf Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro as *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

Conversely, it is indisputable that the divine, too, came to be understood through the categories that proved “successful” in our understanding of man and nature. This only has the effect of “finitizing” or “anthropomorphizing” God, if God is supposed to be something “other,” cut off from the world. The traditional religious oppositions between the here and the beyond, between finitude and the infinite, are, for Hegel, untenable. Our knowledge of nature, man, and God not only involves the same categories; it is knowledge of the same thing – only at different stages of development or different levels of complexity. The concept adequate to this common topic is “spirit.” And to be spirit means, as Christian dogma illustrates, albeit in a figurative manner (creation, incarnation, salvation), to become another (*Sich-anderswerden*: “becoming-other-than-oneself”) and to recognize oneself in that other. Knowledge of the laws governing material spatiotemporal systems is just as much a level (or “appearance”) of spirit in this sense as is knowledge of the development of rational moralities and constitutional states in the temporal formations of human culture, the complex totality of which we call “history.”

How could Hegel presume to defend such a “speculative unity” in view of the standards of Kantian critique and its skeptical successors and opponents? This is the question which occupies most modern interpreters of the *Phenomenology*. Accordingly, the texts and manuscripts from Hegel’s time in Jena, prior to the *Phenomenology*, have attracted increasing interest in the literature. Yet as the *Differenzschrift* illustrates, Hegel’s method in these texts is not an immanent critique of the inconsistencies in Kant. Rather, like Fichte and Schelling, Hegel is convinced that the development of philosophy and culture (morality, law, and art) has superseded Kant. This advanced developmental state enables them to survey the significance – and the limits – of Kant’s philosophy.

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Hegel experienced his own personal version of this development. In the manuscripts from his time in Tübingen studying theology (1788–1793) and from his time as a tutor in Bern, Hegel reveals himself to be a disciple of the Kantian philosophy – particularly the religious and moral philosophy – who fully expects the continued development of Kant’s thought to lead to a radical reversal (a “revolution”) in religious and political relations in Germany.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cf his letter to Schelling, April 16, 1795 (*Briefe* 1, 23 f.; *Letters*, 35 f.).

Yet by 1796 or 1797, Hegel was already attempting, together with his Tübingen friends, Schelling and Hölderlin, to unite the Kantian philosophy with opposed movements like Spinozism and aesthetic Platonism.²⁰ He was moved to these efforts as much by his disappointment in the failure of the French Revolution to achieve an ideal of freedom as by his encounters with sentimentalism (*Empfindsamkeit*) in the thought of Hemsterhuis and Shaftsbury, and aesthetic pantheism in Herder and Goethe.²¹

Hegel initially pursued this project within the framework of his philosophy of religion, in particular his reflections on the content and historical role (the “spirit”) of Christianity. Abjuring the fundamental Kantian concepts of law and action, sensible and supersensible world, freedom and nature, Hegel appropriated (and reinterpreted) central concepts like love, life, and (in the early years in Jena) “spirit” – concepts in which the process of “division” (*Entzweiung*) and reunification with what was severed becomes intelligible (cf Chapter 2 below).

Upon entering Jena’s academic philosophical environment, Hegel turned to the task of systematically overthrowing the dichotomies and divisions which, in his view, dominated contemporary culture, and, indeed, modern thought as a whole. In his very first publication and, shortly thereafter, in lengthy essays published in the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* (which he coedited with Schelling), Hegel began to critically engage with the leading philosophers of the day – with Kant, Fichte, Reinhold, Jacobi, and, finally, also with his friend and patron, Schelling.

His lectures from the Jena period finally developed an original system of logic and metaphysics as well as a philosophy of nature and spirit, which he continued for many years to announce his plans to publish. But it was only after the end of his tenure as a docent (or unsalaried lecturer) in Jena – an end precipitated by various personal and political catastrophes (the exhaustion of his father’s inheritance, Napoleon’s conquest of Prussia) – that he published his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. It is not the whole system, but simultaneously an introduction to it and its first part.²² Nevertheless, from the

²⁰ Cf Henrich, “Hegel und Hölderlin” (translated by Taylor Carman in Eckart Förster (ed.), *The Course of Remembrance*) as well as Henrich’s *Der Grund*; Düsing, “Ästhetischer Platonismus”; Jamme, *Ein ungelehrtes Buch*.

²¹ Cf Henrich, “Historische Voraussetzungen”; Pöggeler, “Philosophie”; Jamme and Schneider, *Der Weg zum System*.

²² Cf Hegel’s advertisement of the *Phenomenology*, *PhG*, 593, which is unfortunately not reproduced in the English, Oxford edition.