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978-1-107-02235-5 - Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit
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HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

Hegel only published five books in his lifetime, and among them the *Phenomenology of Spirit* emerges as the most important, but also perhaps the most difficult and complex. In this book Ludwig Siep follows the path from Hegel's early writings on religion, love, and spirit to the milestones of his "Jena period." He shows how the themes of the *Phenomenology* first appeared in an earlier work, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy*, and closely examines the direction which Hegel's thought took as he attempted to think through the possibility of a complete system of philosophy. The themes encompassed by the *Phenomenology* – anti-dualistic epistemology, autonomy, historicity, the sociality of reason – are thoroughly discussed in Siep's subtle and elegantly argued assessment, which appears here in English for the first time. It will be of great interest to all readers studying Hegel's thought.

LUDWIG SIEP is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany. He was coeditor, with Walter Jaeschke, of the yearbook *Hegel-Studien* (Hegel Studies) between 2003 and 2012 and his most recent publications include *Aktualität und Grenzen der praktischen Philosophie Hegels* (2010).

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*In memory of Werner Marx (1910–1994),
German-Jewish Hegel scholar and American citizen*

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PREFACE

This book tries to prepare the way for a better understanding of Hegel's most influential book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, by considering it both in its historical context and in the light of contemporary philosophical debates. It follows the path which leads Hegel to the *Phenomenology* and then his line of argument in the work itself (to facilitate an understanding of the structure of Hegel's argument, the table of contents of Chapter 6 corresponds to that of the *Phenomenology* itself). The path – in both senses – which I attempt to trace is narrow and winding, taking as its starting point Hegel's studies in Tübingen and his activity as a tutor for private families (of the “grand bourgeoisie”) in Bern and Frankfurt am Main. To appreciate the ambition of the *Phenomenology* of 1807 (described in Chapter 1) demands a basic account of Hegel's studies and manuscripts from this early period (which I sketch in Chapter 2). But the true incubation period of the philosophical system, to which the *Phenomenology* is meant to lead, is the first half-decade of the nineteenth century – the time Hegel spent at the University of Jena, which Fichte had just left (in the wake of the “atheism controversy”) and where Schelling was the dominating figure. At the beginning of that period (1801), Hegel published his first book, the so-called *Differenzschrift* (see Chapter 3), which locates his own thought among the philosophical systems of his time, particularly those of Fichte and Schelling. In order to understand the *Phenomenology*, one has to start with this booklet and then follow the path of Hegel's thought through the many manuscripts and essays of these early years when he was struggling with what eventually became one of the most complex and imposing philosophical systems ever. To help the reader navigate this serpentine path leading up to the *Phenomenology*, Chapter 3 provides a brief interpretation of the *Differenzschrift* followed (in Chapter 4) by an overview of the main

developments during the Jena period prior to the *Phenomenology*. After discussing the task and the method of the *Phenomenology* (Chapter 5), the main part of the book (Chapter 6) follows Hegel's argument through the whole work. The concluding chapter (7) focuses on some of the most significant echoes of the *Phenomenology* in nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. Throughout the book I try to link Hegel's conceptions and criticisms to recent debates, especially in Anglo-American philosophy.

What makes the *Phenomenology* especially difficult to understand is the fact that almost every one of its lines alludes, directly or indirectly, to authors, thinkers, and historical figures ranging across the entire history of spirit and culture.

There are two reasons for this. First, the work represents Hegel's attempt to "settle accounts" with all the errors committed in the history of spirit and culture, even if these were, from his perspective, necessary errors along the path to truth. The fact that Hegel takes this truth to be embodied in his own philosophy is often understood as an unparalleled form of arrogance. Yet the reasoned refutation of past and contemporary positions has, ever since Aristotle, been part and parcel of any philosophical work with systematic ambitions. Why should one put forward a novel thesis, if one regards one of the more familiar philosophical views to be adequate?

The second reason for the proliferation of wide-ranging historical and cultural references is that Hegel considers every apparently new thought or idea to represent only a further development (and often just a minimal, though crucial, revision) of prior thought – or, more precisely, a further development of the total cultural work of human history. The wish to begin anew, "*ab ovo*," can only be born out of ignorance of the presuppositions and preconditions of one's own intellectual existence and orientation. Although it is usually the interpreter who first uncovers the influences that help shape a given writer or thinker, Hegel considers this to be an inexorable duty of the author himself. Indeed, it was one of Hegel's most spirited accusations that his own predecessors, Kant and Fichte, had not carefully observed this duty. Yet the *Phenomenology* also demonstrates that culture has not made any progress without in some way forgetting its own achievements, or at least particular aspects of them.

This saturation with history is one reason the *Phenomenology* constitutes such an inexhaustibly rich source for interpreters and

commentators. (The German version of the present book also contains a “Stellenkommentar” to specific lines in the *Phenomenology* which has not been reproduced in the English version.) Although it is still probably not easy reading, the present book maintains an introductory character and is addressed not only to scholars and students of Hegel but also to a broader academic public.

Hegel published relatively few books during his lifetime. The *Phenomenology* was followed by the two volumes of the *Science of Logic* (1812 and 1816), the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences in Outline* which went through three successively expanded editions (1817, 1827, 1830), and the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820). Nevertheless, contemporary editions of Hegel's *oeuvre* stretch to over twenty volumes and the critical edition of his work (AA, see Bibliography) is significantly more extensive.

Of all his published books, however, only the *Phenomenology* and, in certain respects, the *Philosophy of Right* might be considered “great literature.” The others are difficult fare even for philosophical specialists. Some of his Berlin lectures – especially the lectures on aesthetics, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of history – also exerted influence on a wider public. However, their first and often-repeated publication by Hegel's students and followers was guided by dubious editorial principles (they are essentially just a hodgepodge of manuscript fragments mixed together with the notes of different attendees, both of which are drawn from the most various of time periods).

It is surely the *Phenomenology of Spirit* which has most stimulated the imaginations and intellects of the most significant readers in the last two centuries. It transformed Marx into a theorist. Essential features of the thought of Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger, Bloch, and many others are likewise indebted to Hegel's early masterpiece. One may well ask oneself just how many of the work's hundreds of (often cryptic) pages these important readers really studied carefully. But productive misunderstandings are often engendered by superficial readings.

At the same time, the *Phenomenology* is a work whose positions vis-à-vis many problems of contemporary philosophy (the theory of rationality, the realism debate, the problem of skepticism, the philosophy of mind, the mind-body problem, action theory, etc.) are considerably more advanced and sophisticated than most critics of Hegelianism suspect. I have taken note of such connections as the occasion to do so presented itself. Other authors have done so much more extensively – especially

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for certain sections of the text.¹ The ranks of those who are convinced of Hegel's relevance to contemporary philosophical debates – even outside so-called “continental philosophy” – are steadily increasing.

I am grateful to Wayne Martin for accepting the book for the Modern European Philosophy series at Cambridge University Press. It is a corrected, but not substantially revised, version of the German edition, *Der Weg der Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000). I have a great deal of admiration for Daniel Smyth's translation and his never-fading efforts to clarify difficult passages with me. Other acknowledgments of assistance with the German version can be found in the Preface published with it. The English version remains dedicated to Werner Marx (1910–1994), with whom I first studied the *Phenomenology* at the University of Freiburg after his return from exile in New York in 1964.

Münster, December 2012

¹ See, for example, Graeser, “Kommentar”; Kettner, *Hegels “sinnliche Gewißheit”*; MacIntyre, *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*; MacIntyre, “Hegel on Faces and Skulls”; Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*; Pinkard, *Hegel's “Phenomenology”*; Taylor, “The Opening Arguments of the ‘Phenomenology’”; Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*; etc.

CHRONOLOGY OF HEGEL'S LIFE

1770	August 27: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is born in Stuttgart. His father, Georg Ludwig Hegel, is a state official in the Württemberg finance administration; his mother is Maria Magdalena Hegel (<i>née</i> Fromme).
From 1773	Attends the German and then Latin school in Stuttgart.
From 1776	Attends the Gymnasium Illustre, later renamed the Eberhard-Ludwigs-Gymnasium.
1783	His mother dies.
1785 to 1788	Hegel keeps a diary in German and Latin.
1788	High-school diploma (completion of secondary education). Matriculates at the Tübinger Stift for Theology and Philosophy, where he shares a room with Hölderlin and Schelling (beginning in 1790).
1790	Hegel is awarded his Masters in philosophy.
1792	Hegel begins composition of the text <i>Popular Religion and Christianity</i> , published posthumously (as yet only in German).
July 1793	Defends his dissertation in theology.
September	Finishes his studies.
Beginning in October	Private tutor for the Steiger von Tschugg family in Bern, Switzerland.
1794	Further work on <i>Popular Religion and Christianity</i> (unfinished).
1795	Journey to Geneva.

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May to July	Manuscript <i>The Life of Jesus</i> (published posthumously).
November 2	Begins composing <i>The Positivity of the Christian Religion</i> (published posthumously).
July 25, 1796	Hegel hikes through the Bern Alps (until the beginning of August), keeping a diary. Thereafter, Hegel leaves Bern and travels home to Stuttgart.
1797	Through Hölderlin, Hegel becomes a private tutor in the house of the Frankfurt am Main merchant Gogel. In February 1797, Hegel authors or co-authors the so-called <i>Oldest System Fragment of German Idealism</i> (though Hölderlin and Schelling have also been suggested as sole or co-authors). The text remains a fragment (published posthumously).
1798	Hegel anonymously publishes a commentated translation of the writings of the Geneva solicitor Cart: <i>Confidential Letters on the Previous Governmental–Legal Relations of the Waadtland (Pays de Vaud) to the City of Bern</i> .
Beginning in autumn	Works on <i>The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate</i> (published posthumously).
January 14, 1799	Hegel's father dies. Hegel inherits a modest fortune, which enables him to prepare for his academic career.
February until March	Composition of a commentary on James Steuart's <i>An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy</i> (lost). Thereafter, Hegel continues his work on <i>The Spirit of Christianity</i> .
September 14, 1800	Completes the so-called <i>Systemfragment (On Religion and Philosophy)</i> , published posthumously).
September 29	Hegel composes a new introduction to <i>The Positivity of the Christian Religion</i> .
January 1801	Hegel moves to Jena. He shares an apartment with Schelling until December.
Beginning in spring	Works on <i>The German Constitution</i> (published posthumously).
July	Publication of <i>The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy</i> .

August 27	Hegel completes his habilitation at the University of Jena. The title of his dissertation is <i>On the Orbits of the Planets</i> . His review of F. Bouterwek's "On the Foundations of Speculative Philosophy" is published in the <i>Erlangen Literaturzeitung</i> . From 1801 until 1807, Hegel teaches at the University of Jena and composes a wealth of manuscripts, including numerous drafts of his System (texts on logic, metaphysics, and the philosophies of nature and spirit), which are not published until the 1930s.
October 21	Meets with Goethe.
1802 until 1803	Together with Schelling, Hegel edits the <i>Kritisches Journal der Philosophie</i> . In it, he publishes a number of essays: "On the Essence of Philosophical Critique in General," "How Common Human Understanding Takes Philosophy," "The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy," "Faith and Knowledge," "On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Right." He continues his work on <i>The German Constitution</i> and on his <i>System of Ethical Life</i> (both published posthumously).
1803	Second meeting with Goethe.
1804	Hegel is taken on as assessor for the Jena Mineralogical Society and also becomes a member of the Westphalia Society for Natural Science.
1805	Hegel is, with Goethe's support, named extraordinary (i.e. unsalaried) professor of philosophy at the University of Jena.
May	In a letter to Voss, Hegel mentions his work on the <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> for the first time.
February 1806	Printing of the <i>Phenomenology</i> begins.
October 14	Napoleon defeats the Prussian army at the battle of Jena-Auerstedt. In the night before the battle, Hegel concludes the <i>Phenomenology</i> .
January 1, 1807	Honorary membership in the Physical Society in Heidelberg.

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January	Works on the Preface to the <i>Phenomenology</i> .
February 5	Birth of his illegitimate son, Ludwig.
Spring	Hegel moves to Bamberg, where he edits the <i>Bamberger Zeitung</i> . The <i>Phenomenology</i> is published. Hegel writes his essay "Who Thinks Abstractly?" (published posthumously).
1808	On the urging of his friend Niethammer, Hegel accepts a position as professor of philosophical preparatory sciences and rector of the Ägidiengymnasium in Nuremberg.
September 15, 1811	Marries Marie von Tucher. (Her family belongs to the Nuremberg <i>Patriziat</i> or grand bourgeoisie.)
1812–1813	Publication of the first volume of the <i>Science of Logic</i> .
1813	Birth of his son Karl. Appointed adviser to the Nuremberg City Commission for Educational Affairs.
1814	Birth of his son Immanuel.
1816	Publication of the second volume of the <i>Science of Logic</i> . Accepts professorship of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg.
1817	Reviews the third volume of Jacobi's <i>Works</i> in the <i>Heidelberger Jahrbüchern der Literatur</i> . Publication of the <i>Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences in Outline</i> .
July 18	Hegel and Creuzer award Jean Paul his doctorate. Publication of "The Assessment of the Published Negotiations of the Assembly of Estates in the Kingdom of Württemberg in 1815 and 1816" in the <i>Heidelberger Jahrbücher</i> .
Toward the end of the year	Inquiry from the Prussian Cultural Commissioner, von Altenstein, concerning a philosophy professorship at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin.
October 1818	Hegel becomes professor of philosophy in Berlin (succeeding Fichte, who had died in 1814).
October 22	Hegel holds his inaugural lecture in Berlin.

Chronology of Hegel's life xxi

September 23, 1819	Meeting with Goethe in Weimar.
1820	Membership in the King's Scientific Examinatory Commission for the Province of Brandenburg (until December 1822). The <i>Elements of the Philosophy of Right</i> is published in autumn of 1820 (although "1821" is printed on the title page).
1822	Hegel becomes a member of the university senate. In autumn, he travels to Brussels and the Netherlands.
1823	Trip to Leipzig. Hegel is awarded a membership-diploma by the Dutch learned society Concordia.
1824	Travels to Vienna through Prague.
1827	Edits the <i>Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik</i> (<i>Yearbooks for Scientific Critique</i>). Reviews Wilhelm von Humboldt's work <i>On the Episode from the Mahabharata Known by the Name Bhagavad-Gita</i> . Second edition of the <i>Encyclopedia</i> . Trip to Paris. On the return journey, Hegel again meets with Goethe in Weimar.
1828	Publication of his essay "Solger's <i>Nachlass</i> and Correspondence" in the <i>Jahrbücher</i> , as well as "Hamann's Writings." Ludwig Feuerbach sends Hegel his dissertation.
1829	The <i>Jahrbücher</i> publish reviews of Karl Friedrich Göschel's works "On the Hegelian Doctrine or Absolute Knowledge and Modern Pantheism," "On Philosophy in General and Hegel's <i>Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences</i> in Particular," and "Aphorisms on Ignorance and Absolute Knowledge in Relation to Christian Theological Knowledge." Meets with Schelling in Karlsbad.
September 11	Last meeting with Goethe. In October, Hegel is named rector of the University of Berlin for a year.
1830	Speech on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession (or <i>Confessio</i>

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1831	<i>Augustana</i>). The third edition of the <i>Encyclopedia</i> is printed. Hegel works on new editions of the <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> and the <i>Science of Logic</i> . Hegel is awarded the Order of the Red Eagle, 3rd Class. His essay "On the English Reform Bill" appears in the <i>Preußische Staatszeitung</i> . His reviews of A. L. J. Ohlert's <i>Ideal-Realism</i> , first part, and of J. Görres's <i>On the Foundation, Differentiation, and Temporal Progression of World History</i> are published in the <i>Jahrbücher</i> .
November 14 1832–1845	Hegel dies in Berlin of cholera. Publication of Hegel's <i>Works: A Complete Edition by an Association of Friends of the Deceased</i> .