

## Introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

*Phenomenology of Spirit* is one of a small number of books from the nineteenth century that may be said to have single-handedly changed the course of civilization. (My other candidates are Goethe's *Faust* [1808/1832, with an extensive preliminary publication of scenes from the first part, alluded to by Hegel, in 1790], Darwin's *Descent of Species* [1859], Marx's *Capital* [1869], and, if it counts for the 19th century, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* [1900].) Each of these books, directly through its actual readers and indirectly through their influence, completely transformed the ways people thought about and assessed—taking them in reverse order—the passions of the mind, the life world, labor and money, society and the individual, and (as the ground for the other four), the operations of thought itself. While, for the most part, the other four are astonishingly readable, the *Phenomenology* is astonishingly difficult to read. Hegel has crafted a language that is multi-layered; his work simultaneously addresses the logic of concepts, the development of philosophical thought, the organic growth of nature, of societies, and of individuals, and the entire history of (primarily European) culture and civilization. The cost is a fearsome abstraction in which the various levels are hinted at by allusion (typically taking the form of a key term or phrase that appears rather casually) rather than through direct discussion that would narrow the focus to a single layer. The Preface to the *Phenomenology*, for instance, discusses a great many philosophers and philosophical positions, though it names only Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. There may be passages where you can get through 10 pages in an hour, but 5 pages per hour is a more normal speed. Anything quicker and you will be skating.

A further reason for Hegel's difficulty has to do with the nature of his dialectic. Dialectic is a Greek word closely related to our "dialogue," and it harks back to Socrates' interrogations of his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues. Socrates contests the presumptions of the other speakers in the dialogues and thereby elicits both self-recognition and understanding of the world: through negation comes insight, including insight into one's own limitations. Hegel is often associated with a 3-part method by which positive assertions are undermined, leading to a logical impasse that is then resolved; the well-known terms for the stages of such a dialectic are thesis-antithesis-synthesis. In actuality, Hegel never uses these terms, and he was hostile to any mechanical or rigid formulas for philosophical investigation. Thus, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology* you will find a critique of fixed schemas under the rubric of "triplicity." So do your best to forget about thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Instead, Hegel advocates a dialectic in which there are no fixed positions. Two key terms are "fluid" and "life"; he is after the fluid life of concepts, as they change and grow under scrutiny. Hegel discusses the problems toward the end of the Preface, then clarifies (not enough, you may feel) through the example of the philosophical sentence "God is being." A philosophical sentence like this one sounds like a mere definition or tautology (simple equivalence), but the more you think about it in Hegel's manner, the more unsettled it gets. It is telling you something about God, but also something about being; it complicates the notion of God by relating it to the world and it complicates the notion of being by relating it to transcendence. Is it therefore limiting both concepts, and limiting them in opposite directions? Is it effecting a compromise? Is it limiting the notion of being by excluding change? By lifting being up to God, is it separating being from experience (a term Hegel has discussed earlier)? And so forth. Each philosophical sentence demands vigilant reflection, and each return to it shows it in a new light. As Hegel says, shortly thereafter, "so much has to be read over and over before it can be understood" (par. 63; p. 52 in the German); the difficulty of philosophy is its essence and its glory.

The trick of reading Hegel is to recognize a specific referent for each abstraction and to test the abstraction out in terms of the referent. One obvious difficulty is that you may not recognize or even be aware of the specific historical and intellectual referents that are often in play. Still, with practice, it becomes somewhat easier to rethink Hegel's reasoning with an example in mind. Take, for instance, the following sentence (par. 21; p. 21): "For mediation is nothing beyond self-moving selfsameness, or is reflection into self, the moment of the 'I' which is for itself pure negativity or, when reduced to its pure abstraction, simple becoming." I understand this sentence with reference to the crucial 18th-century topic of personal identity. Locke and Hume, in particular, asked, how do I know that I am the same person I used to be? What constitutes my identity through all the changes wrought by experience? Certainly, I am different in many respects from what I used to be, yet in some sense I am still the same person. Yet I can't really define the identity; it's more a feeling than a demonstrable fact. Identity is the denial of change as such, hence (I move toward Hegel's language here) it is "pure negativity" within a world of living things, hence I understand "simple becoming" as the opposite of some kind of complex becoming that would involve essential change. But this kind of personal identity isn't a given; it's produced by reflection, as I think about myself, who I am and what I have become. Hence it isn't just self-identity, which would be inorganic, like a rock that never changes, but rather it's a "self-identity that moves itself," that thinks about—reflects upon—itself. "Simple becoming" is the simplest, most immediate way of defining identity, the self, the "ego"; the terminology implies that there will be more complex ways forthcoming than the mere feeling of selfhood. But the feeling of self is at least a start on the problem. And the abstract language allows it to be a problem not only in the psychological domain to which I have referred it, but equally in the domain of natural science, of logical thinking (about propositions such as "God is being"), of social formations such as the self-identity of racial groups, and so forth. (For instance, "self-identity is simple becoming" could thus be an explanation of ethnic identification: I belong to a group to the extent that I allow myself to become part of it.) If the issue from eighteenth-century philosophy isn't familiar to you, then you may be able to clarify the sentence for yourself through hooking it into an example from one of these other domains. It's never easy, but it does get better with practice, and at the same time, dialectically, it trains your skill at cross-disciplinary thinking. One of Hegel's achievements was to make it impossible, for those in his tradition, to think of any sphere in isolation from the whole of human experience.

In one sense, Hegel's vocabulary is very general and commonplace. But it simultaneously appears very technical. He uses ordinary language in special ways (though also often in line with the usage of other philosophers of his time). "Negative," for instance, doesn't just or even primarily mean contradictory. It's often a term of praise. The positive is that which is merely asserted: "I=I." But that doesn't mean much. A universal isn't of much use. To give a positive assertion meaning, it must be de-fined, de-limited. The negative sets boundaries, gives outline and contour. Even "pure negativity," in the example sentence above, is associated with life, and specific negatives can often be essential in specifying the identity of concepts.

Hegel's terms are, in this way, often not what they seem. Sometimes the difficulties arise at the grammatical level; in the example sentence (and often) it's crucial, and hard, to figure out whether "or" expresses difference—"or else, at a different time or in other circumstances"—or whether it expresses equivalence, "or, in other words," as is the case above. But there are also many philosophical words with meanings you may not expect, often closer to the etymology of the (German) term or of its Greek equivalent than you may be used to. And very often, given the slippery life of Hegel's thought, the movement of ideas depends on puns, and these don't always

come across in English. Reading him is often a matter of learning to live your intellectual life in his spirit, which is both the deepest root of his difficulty and the reason why his writing was so revolutionary and transformative.

While reading Hegel is largely an unending, learn-as-you-go proposition, a few definitions an advance can help. Perhaps the best-known Hegelian term of all is "Aufhebung," a common German word that refers to the resolution of a dialectical contradiction; A. V. Miller generally translates it with some form of "supersede," while others use the learned English word "sublation." Literally, "Aufhebung" means lifting up, as does, etymologically, "sublation." It always evokes the closely related German word "Erhebung," meaning "sublimation." But in addition to the sublime, "Aufhebung" also directly means two other ideas suggested by its English parallel "lifting up." One is suspension: to lift up a contradiction is to suspend it, to hold it in abeyance, as one holds up progress. But another meaning is to conserve it, to save it for another day. (So, in English, one "holds up" one's part in a bargain or "puts up" fruit. If Hegel were writing in English today he might pun on the multiple meanings of "jam" as preserves, interferences, and, in jazz, improvisations.) Hegelian dialectics progress by preserving contradictions, but in a kind of suspension where they are raised to a higher level of consciousness and thereby resolved without being forgotten or merely left behind. "Superseded" captures only a very limited part of the word's range.

The other terms worth defining in advance are the prepositions "an" and "für," translated "in" and "for." (The terms are defined in Hegel's way in the "Introduction," which follows the Preface.) If we look at something "for us," it means we are considering how it relates to us, not what it is in isolation or in existential purity. We can look at ourselves the same way, not as we exist but as we know ourselves to be. That is the condition of being "for oneself," otherwise known as self-consciousness. The term "for," in this sense, is clear and intuitive enough. "In" is harder. "In itself" is the alternative to "for us." The nature of something as it is inherently is its "in itself," as opposed to the way it interacts with other things, which is the way it is "for us." A thing "in itself" differs from the same thing "for us" with respect to how its identity is conceived, how it exists in time, how energies flow through it, and in many other, equally abstract respects. More complicated still is that we can think about something (consider it "for us") in both of its aspects. That is, it can be "for us" both as it relates to us and as we consider its independent, self-sufficient existence: the latter form is termed "in itself for us." You should quickly get used to such usages, which are at once among the most immediate and the most far-reaching of Hegelian tools. It's worth keeping in mind that the German preposition "an" doesn't normally mean "in," but rather "at." The "in itself" isn't really inwardness, certainly not psychological inwardness. When Hegel does want to refer to the inwardness of something, he uses the German preposition "in," perhaps translated "within." If I were starting afresh, I might translate "an sich" with "of itself" (as in our expression, "in and of itself"), but the English formula is too well established to change it. Occasionally Hegel uses yet another preposition, "bei," translated as "with."

Armed with these preliminary suggestions, you are ready to plunge in. Take a deep breath, use smooth, broad strokes, and don't get distracted by jellyfish or sharks.