
THE TASK AND METHOD OF THE *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

As we know from the advertisement of his Jena lectures, Hegel was still planning the publication of his whole system as late as 1805.¹ And as early as February of 1806, the book that was supposed to contain the first part of the system of philosophy (or “science”) went to press.² This first part was entitled a *Science of the Experience of Consciousness*, a title Hegel then exchanged for *Phenomenology of Spirit* during the printing.³ The Introduction, which Hegel conceived and composed prior to writing the work, elucidates the method of the “experience of consciousness.” Whether or not Hegel alters or abandons this method in the course of the work itself continues to be a point of contention in the literature. Yet in the Preface, which was the last section to be written, Hegel continues to call the *Phenomenology* the “science of the experience which consciousness goes through” (*PhG*, 38/21).⁴

¹ Cf AA 9, 457: “totam philosophiam scientiam, i. e. philosophiam speculativam, (logicam et metaphysicam) naturae et mentis, ex libro per aestatem prodituro,” which roughly translates as “the total science of philosophy, i.e. of speculative philosophy (logic and metaphysics), [the philosophy] of nature and mind, based on a book to be published in the summer.”

² Bonsiepen is of the view that, as late as the spring of 1806, Hegel still wanted to complement the first, published part of his system with the *Logic* as the second part, but that he changed his plan “in August of 1806 at the latest” (*PhG* (1988), xxi).

³ On the printing history of the *Phenomenology*, cf Bonsiepen in *PhG* (1988), xvii f., and his editorial remarks in *PhG* (1988), 594 ff.

⁴ 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* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986). The English edition is A. V. Miller’s translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Translations follow Miller where possible, but are occasionally modified, often taking Terry Pinkard’s new, but unpublished, translation as a guide. For a guide to the citations of the *Phenomenology* see above, p. 3, note 7.

Phenomenology and the history of experience are two aspects of the same thing, not two methods that characterize different parts of the book.

Simplifying somewhat, one can say that “experience” is the path “from the bottom up” – from the most immediate forms and standpoints of “natural consciousness” up to absolute knowledge. “Phenomenology” is, then, the same path characterized “from the top down” insofar as it is along this path that all categories and all spirit’s modes of being and knowing “appear,” i.e. enter consciousness.

Now Hegel has (at least) a twofold concept of experience and of appearance. The ordinary sense of experience, he explains in the Introduction, is the replacement of a false belief with another, true one. But the sense of experience that is essential for the *Phenomenology* is a “reversal” of consciousness – that is, roughly what one would term a “conversion” in a religious context, or describe as an “expansion of one’s horizon” or a “revelation” in the secular, Enlightenment sense of the term. Experience is the insight that the foundations of one’s previous beliefs were contradictory and that one must therefore alter them and take up the contrary position. In what follows, we will examine more precisely how this method takes shape in the *Phenomenology* itself.

The double meaning of the concept “phenomenon” or “appearance” has a long philosophical tradition. An appearance can be a “mere” appearance (viz. an illusion), or it can be a manifestation, the experienceable disclosure of something hitherto inaccessible. Investigating the “essential content” of experience – i.e. investigating how much “essential content” the appearances in any experience have – was a central theme of the theory of appearances (or phenomenology) in Hegel’s time. A leading figure of this philosophical project was Johann Heinrich Lambert.⁵

Yet these concepts were also employed by Hegel’s most important predecessors, Kant and Fichte. Kant famously speaks of “appearances” in connection with the genuine knowledge that results from the co-operation of sensibility and the understanding. For Kant, however, such knowledge is restricted to spatiotemporal objects of possible experience and cannot extend to anything “supersensible” (God, the immortal soul, freedom). Attempting such an extension leads to dialectical uses of reason, such as dogmatic metaphysics and various

⁵ Bonsiepen refers not only to Lambert, but also to Goethe’s concept of phenomenon in his 1798 essay “Experience and Science” (“Erfahrung und Wissenschaft”).

other pseudosciences which ensnare themselves in contradictions. For Hegel, on the other hand, absolute truth *does* become knowable – *does* manifest itself – precisely in “finite” consciousness’s overcoming its contradictory positions through its own “experience” (i.e. in a complete series of conversions) (cf *PhG*, 35/18).

This idea of presenting the one-sided philosophical positions of the tradition as a theory of contradictory appearances and thereby “ascending” to an absolute truth can be found in Fichte as well. After several preliminary attempts in his early (1794) *Wissenschaftslehre*, he systematically implements this idea in his 1804 lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the first part of which he calls a theory of appearances or phenomenology. It is, however, not very likely that Hegel had any knowledge of this.⁶ Yet for Fichte the task of critiquing and dispelling illusion is to be separated from that of advancing a doctrine of truth or the “reinterpretation” of the positions successively overcome along the way. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, these two tasks are combined and executed in a single movement. Moreover, this unifying movement takes upon itself a further task which Fichte also sought to discharge in the early *Wissenschaftslehre*: namely the task of displaying the systematic structure of our cognitive capacities as a path of incremental steps of reflection.⁷

“Appearance” thus never signifies mere illusion for Hegel, though the concept can be used to characterize a position as one-sided and to that extent untrue, as long as one abstracts from its “truth” as a “phenomenon” of the self-knowledge of spirit (a content that becomes visible once the position has been superseded and absolute knowledge has been achieved). In this sense, Hegel even calls his own position at the beginning of the work an “appearance.” For so long as his position has not yet refuted those that stand opposed to it and integrated them into true knowledge, it remains a one-sided “appearance still to be unfurled” (cf *PhG*, 19/7). What distinguishes his own initial position from other appearances is the fact that it no longer merely occupies the standpoint of “natural consciousness” but rather anticipates the standpoint of true knowledge.

The concept of natural consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is often misunderstood as one of complete naivety, of common sense, or of the “life-world.” However, Hegel employs the phrase “natural

⁶ Cf Bonsiepen in *PhG* (1988), xvi; cf also Siep, *Hegels Fichtekritik*.

⁷ Cf Düsing, “Hegels ‘Phänomenologie’.”

consciousness” in a technical sense, albeit one that may have much in common with ordinary construals of the world. Natural consciousness is the “standpoint of consciousness which knows objects in their opposition to itself and knows itself in opposition to them” (cf *PhG*, 30/15).

The standpoint of science, or of spirit, by contrast, is one of an identity of “self” and “object”: “pure self-recognition in absolute otherness” (*PhG*, 29/14). This standpoint must, however, justify itself to natural consciousness and offer it a “ladder” by providing an immanent examination and refutation of all forms of knowledge, all modes of action, and all configurations of culture that are marked by this opposition – i.e. that are animated by a conviction in the opposition between object and self. The method of this examination is presented in the Introduction.

(a) The task of the *Phenomenology* according to the Preface

In the Preface, Hegel is primarily concerned to distance his conceptions of the absolute, the true, and the proper philosophical system from the conceptions of Fichte, Schelling, contemporary Spinozism, and the notion of immediate unification with the divine. When Hegel was working on a new edition of the *Phenomenology*, shortly before his death in 1831, he remarked that the Preface was directed against the conceptions of the “abstract absolute” that had come to dominate the philosophy of the period.⁸ These included Fichte’s concept of the I, Schelling’s notion of differenceless identity, Jacobi’s conceptions of intuition and faith, and Spinoza’s concept of substance.

However much Hegel may distance himself from his predecessors, he is nonetheless indebted to them in a number of fundamental respects. He does not dispute that the task of philosophy is to develop a system that incorporates the fundamental concepts of all the sciences as well as their paradigmatic explanatory models or ways of looking at things. Nor does he dispute whether such a systematic philosophy can or ought to cognize something “absolute,” unconditional, and complete. Like Kant before him, Hegel understands philosophy to be “rational cognition from ideas.” Yet while Kant grants these ideas only the regulative function of unifying empirical cognitions, Hegel holds that such empirical cognitions can themselves be understood as “explications” of ideas. Demonstrating this is the task of the *Phenomenology*.

⁸ Cf AA 9, 448.

In the Preface, Hegel also distinguishes his concept of the absolute and his concept of the system of philosophy from those of his predecessors. Briefly, he has a holistic conception of the system of philosophy, his concept of truth has both ontological and epistemological significance, and he understands the “absolute” as a unity of Spinozistic substance and the transcendental subject, viz. self-reflection. All this is expressed in his renowned formulation: “That the true is actual only as system, or that substance is essentially subject, is expressed in the representation that articulates the absolute as *spirit*” (*PhG*, 28/14, Hegel’s italics).

First, holism. For Hegel, any concept, proposition, or theory can only be fully intelligible and justified in its interconnection with all the concepts (propositions, theories) in its proper domain. And a domain is itself only to be understood in its complete interconnection with all the other domains of knowledge. There are no propositions – not even the axioms of logic – which are valid or even intelligible simply on their own, sundered from the wider context of axioms and “combinatory rules.” To demonstrate this is the aim of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, the fundamental ideas of which he had already developed in his Jena manuscripts.

Nor is there any domain – not even the domain of classical mechanics in physics – which is complete unto itself and which might be treated as the foundation of all the others. The mechanistic view of nature must still be placed in some relation to the view of nature as chemical, organic, etc. and, more generally, to the world of culture, knowledge, and other object domains and perspectives on things. Fichte, Reinhold, and Schelling’s respective attempts to deduce a philosophical system from “self-evident” first principles are doomed to failure. As Hegel argues in the *Differenzschrift*, such principles cannot be established independently of what is to be deduced from them. Moreover, these principles get augmented, filled out, differentiated etc. in the course of the deduction itself. Viewed on their own, they are therefore not absolute, but rather one-sided, flawed, and undeveloped (“immediate”). Even immediate certainties and intuitive insights concerning such principles remain unintelligible so long as the concepts and criteria one employs in formulating them as propositions remain unexplained. Far from elaborating and vindicating the system, such a development from a (purportedly) independently valid and certain principle itself constitutes the “refutation of the principle that constitutes the *foundation* of the system” – namely a “demonstration that the foundation or principle of the system is, in fact, only its

beginning” (*PhG*, 28/14, Hegel’s italics). A philosophical system must not be understood as an analytic deduction starting from supreme first principles, but rather as an organic development from simpler to more complex theoretical structures which reciprocally explicate one another. A more contemporary example of such a philosophical procedure can be found in Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

Spinoza and Fichte thus commit the same error in conceiving of the movement from their respective absolute principles (substance; the I) to be one of increasing limitation rather than one of development and fulfillment.

Next, to truth. “Truth,” for Hegel, is not just a predicate ascribed to propositions or theories; it also has an ontological significance. There are not only true propositions, there is also “true” artwork, a “true” state, and “true human composure.”⁹ In this sense, what it is for something to be true is for it to attain (or at least approach) its intrinsic determination. This surely represents a sort of essentialism: there are certain essential properties of the state and of mankind which something must possess if it is to be a state or a human being. But for Hegel such essentialism is compatible with holism. Each “thing” attains its essence only if it stands in determinate relations to other things and processes – that is, only if it manifests a “network” of relationships. Consider a state, for example. A state is, on the one hand, a structure of rights, institutions, and powers; yet, on the other hand, every state stands in a determinate relation to other states, to nature, and to internal and external cultural structures, like religion, science, etc. All of these features can be more or less developed and hence more or less “true.” A state that protects rights, but without offering opportunities for participation in government, is one that is not entirely true.

Like his concept of truth, Hegel’s holism also has both epistemological and ontological significance.

Holism and systematicity not only constitute a property of our knowledge, i.e. an organizational form possessed by theories or true propositions about reality; they also pertain to reality itself. The terms “system,” “subject,” and “spirit” in the passage cited above (*PhG*, 28/14) are at the same time expressions for substance, for the absolute – i.e. for reality proper.

⁹ On Hegel’s concept of truth, cf Halbig, “Ist Hegels Wahrheitsbegriff geschichtlich?”

The inheritance here is partly Platonic–Aristotelian, partly Spinozistic. For Aristotle, the concept of a thing contains, as it were, the “code” that guides its development. This code is not itself something material but does “use” matter for its own individual realization. For Spinoza, by contrast, each thing is a constellation of forces playing themselves out according to a fixed (“determined”) pattern as part of a self-contained world-process (“substance”). Hegel adheres to Spinoza’s monism, but without retaining the same parallel between the material and the conceptual determinacy of the “modifications” of this single process.¹⁰ For Hegel, matter is really only the medium in which the form or concept of a thing realizes and manifests itself. Admittedly, the concepts of form and matter are not sufficient, on their own, to fund an understanding of relations such as number, extension, force, law, etc. which underlie, e.g., our physical concepts of nature. And an adequate understanding of the more complex dimensions of the world-process (chemical, organic, mental, and social processes) would require a still more precise determination of the relation between the concept and the “medium” of its presentation. The text of the *Phenomenology* does, however, shed some light on this latter point.

The idea that the absolute is substance, truth, and system can, for the moment, be “translated” as follows: reality is the self-caused and self-grounded (*causa sui*) process of the presentation of concepts. Now this gloss surely does not exhaust the determinations of “subject” and “spirit.” Hegel adopts the concept “subject” from the contemporary philosophy of subjectivity – from Kant, Reinhold, Fichte, and Schelling. The concept of “spirit” belongs, in his own words, to “the modern age and its religion,” i.e. Christianity (*PhG*, 28/14). As can already be discerned in his Frankfurt writings, Hegel is here enlarging the contemporary concept of the subject with characteristics drawn from the Christian Neoplatonic tradition.

The features of this concept of the subject that are particularly important to Hegel in these passages of the Preface are its “self-production” and its reflection, its “being-for-itself” and its “knowledge of itself.” In this he follows Fichte, who saw the common root of all the faculties of the human mind in the unity of spontaneity and reflection. Drawing exclusively upon the “mechanism” of these two “tendencies” of the human mind, Fichte attempts to explain the laws of logic and the

¹⁰ On Hegel’s reception of Spinoza, cf also Chiereghin, *L’influenza*.

categories of the understanding which jointly enable us to produce true judgments about objects of experience. In this context, “reflection” is not only an *intentio obliqua* to the act of thinking, judging, willing, etc. but refers to the original activity of distinguishing and juxtaposing. For Fichte and Schelling, however, reflection remains an act of limitation, of finitization, a loss of the original unity – a view whose anthropological counterpart can be found earlier in Rousseau.

Hegel devotes much of the Preface to an unwavering polemic against the identification of the absolute with such an oppositionless identity. Indeed, he expressly employs the concept of “spirit” in order to integrate opposition, or “otherness,” into the very process of self-production. Hegel takes himself to have discerned precedents for this in Christian dogma. He interprets not only the Trinity (the tri-unity) of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also the incarnation and redemption as processes of becoming other and recognizing oneself in the other.

Yet modern science and philosophy have “translated” these metaphors into theories and concepts: knowledge of the lawfulness of nature is a matter of reason encountering itself again in its “otherness” – viz. in the structures of space, time, mass, force, etc., all of which are themselves rational. Even history itself can be understood as the gradual development of rational orders of law and will. Hegel takes Kant’s critical philosophy to have expressed this insight into the rational structure of reality in a merely “subjective” manner. This is “subjective” because the objectivity of knowledge is underwritten by categories and schemata which are ultimately features of our own subjectivity, even though there is, for Kant and for Fichte, an “otherness” outside these subjective structures. The *Phenomenology* aims to show that this distinction between the concepts of subjectivity and an in-itself is untenable.

To demonstrate this, however, the *Phenomenology* must provide a new understanding of concepts – one which Hegel had already developed in his Jena Logic. Concepts are themselves “self-like” (*selbstisch* – literally, “selfish”). That is, the explication of their semantic content involves a “logical” movement between various concepts which partially presuppose (partially contain, partially exclude, etc.) one another. This process of explication – a process which does not apply to concepts from without, but is rather inscribed in their very sense and meaning – is itself one in which a concept “becomes other” and “becomes for-itself.” For Hegel, only thoughts – thus conceived as “self-movements, circles” (*PhG*, 37/20) – can be genuinely termed concepts. Logic, which Hegel simply calls “science” in the Preface, is the “self-organization” of concepts

into a system within the “element” of pure thought. That this conceptual movement is simultaneously what we discover in the sciences and what determines the historical development of the human mind and spirit – this is what the *Phenomenology* must still demonstrate, thereby conferring “completeness and transparency” upon the “element” of the self-presentation of concepts “through the movement of its becoming” (*PhG*, 29/14).

To thus understand the absolute, or reality proper, as spirit – i.e. as the explication of the meanings of concepts – involves an “inversion” for consciousness. Here Hegel employs an image that Marx later turns against him: “Science” demands that “natural consciousness” “take a turn on its head” (*PhG*, 30/15). As before, natural consciousness is to be understood here as the “standpoint” that assumes an insuperable difference between consciousness and object. Such standpoints are involved in all possible theoretical and practical attitudes, be they realistic, empirical, subjectivistic, or what have you. According to Hegel, every science, every morality, and every culture’s “collective self-understanding” involves such a standpoint and posits this difference in one form or another.

To refute the view that such a difference might actually obtain, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the refutation must be intelligible to the relevant shape of consciousness as it climbs the “ladder” up to the standpoint of spirit. Second, the refutation must itself proceed in scientific manner and hence exhibit a systematic and conceptually structured form. The *Phenomenology* is at once the preparation for and “the first part of the system” (*PhG*, 31/15, 38/20). As such, it has its own “logic” – its own conceptual development linking arguments and levels of argumentation (stages). “The path along which the concept of knowledge is attained likewise becomes a necessary and complete process of becoming” (*PhG*, 38/20).

But the formation and cultivation (the *Bildung*) of consciousness into science – i.e. into the standpoint of spirit – is not merely the task of a philosophical work. It is a result of the cultural history of mankind. For the history of mankind must itself be understood as a spiritual process in which concepts are successively presented and reflected in various different elements (politics, culture, religion, etc.). The “first part of the system,” as Hegel conceives it, must therefore present this cultural history of mankind as a coming-to-be of “science.” Indeed, “each moment” of history that is relevant and necessary for the preparation of the true standpoint of spirit must be presented in this manner.

Insofar as each such stage makes a necessary contribution to the whole and its result (the “standpoint” of spirit), this coming-to-be displays an immanent necessity and “purposiveness.” It is on account of this purposiveness that Hegel speaks of the “world-spirit.” But world-spirit should not be understood as a subject who is engaged in consciously enacting or guiding this process. Rather world-spirit is the “teleological” and intrinsically purposive process through which a consciousness of spirit first emerges. The world-spirit is, in a certain sense, the tendency and the result of the cultural history of mankind: “One must say of the absolute that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is” (*PhG*, 24/11, Hegel’s italics). World history is, in a certain sense, an “invisible-hand” process with a conscious result. Hegel’s term for what unconsciously guides this process of spirit’s coming to consciousness is “substance” or “spiritual substance.” Thus, relative to the consciousness of individuals, the spirit of their respective epoch counts as substance, while the world-spirit counts as substance relative to the epochs themselves.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to read the *Phenomenology* as a whole as a philosophy of history – a tendency to which Marxist interpreters such as Georg Lukács often fall prey.¹¹ The order in which Hegel presents the systematic refutation of all shapes of consciousness – or, put simply, the refutation of the subject–object distinction – does not always correspond to the temporal succession of historical epochs.

Thus, for example, ancient ethical life (morality, politics, and religion) is treated in the first part of the chapter on spirit (VI A.), which occurs after the treatment of modern science and other aspects of modern culture in the chapter on reason. This ordering reflects the fact that the relation between consciousness and reality was more thoroughly integrated in ancient ethical life – particularly when it came to the relation of the individual to institutions and to public life. In a certain sense, however, this integration was “premature” (and more easily achieved), since some aspects of the individual’s freedom were as yet undeveloped. Hegel’s strategy in ordering the episodes in the *Phenomenology* is to correlate certain aspects of various cultures with the principal versions of the opposition between consciousness and object. Thus “consciousness” in the strict sense refers to the

¹¹ Cf Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, 552 ff./433 ff. As with other citations, the first page number refers to the German edition, the second to the English edition, translated by Rodney Livingstone. See the Bibliography.

fundamental conviction that the object is what is properly real and enduring, while the subjective representation of it is inessential. That is the significance of the heading “A. Consciousness” over the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology* in Hegel’s extensive Table of Contents.

By contrast, the title “Self-Consciousness” applies to all versions of the thesis that self-consciousness, thought, or subjectivity constitutes what is properly real. Accordingly, this heading can cover a variety of aspects of ancient or modern philosophies, conceptions of nature, and practical attitudes. Now, within its respective epoch, each of these aspects may well have been connected with a conception of reality that does realize a form of unity between self and objectivity – as, for example, is achieved in Roman law in the concept of the person as the foundation of a social order. But Hegel does not inquire into the conceptions of reality that actually dominate a particular epoch until the chapter on spirit.

In the *Phenomenology*, then, the aspect of world history that comes in for consideration is the history of experience with the opposition of consciousness. This experiential history is at once the science of the experience of consciousness and the “system of the experience of spirit.” It must therefore begin with the most immediate form of the opposition between self and object. “Immediate” means that neither side of the opposition is determined either in itself or in relation to the other side. “Sense-certainty,” which embodies this form, involves only the consciousness that what one sees, hears, feels, etc. “is” or exists independently of consciousness. But the very attempt to formulate such certainty in propositions fails, because all propositions of this kind contain a “theoretical surplus.” Accordingly, the very meanings of “being,” “object,” and “knowledge” must be corrected and refined.

With the help of such “experiences,” whose method is explicated in more detail in the Introduction, Hegel arranges the explicit and implicit philosophies of human history into a series of incremental sublations of the opposition between consciousness and being. This development of knowledge, this refinement of the “background ontologies” of individual and social practice, thus manifests itself as the self-corrective activity of knowing subjects. It is the “disparity which obtains in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object” or the “separation of knowledge and truth” (*PhG*, 39/21) that is to be overcome through these corrections. Yet to the extent that this sequence of sublations reveals itself to be a purposive path leading to the standpoint of “spirit” – an internally differentiated unity joining

both sides of this supposed separation – it must also be understood as the process by which spirit comes to consciousness of itself.

Hegel follows Rousseau in terming this process both an “alienation” of what is originally simple and a “return” to a system of internally differentiated unity. But since consciousness is the “standpoint” or the “element” of this opposition, it must be overcome as a whole, for this element remains inadequate to spirit. It is not spirit’s truth but “only the *appearance* of spirit” (*PhG*, 39 f./22). We only encounter “the true in the *form of the true*” in the Logic, from the standpoint of identity, and again in the philosophies of nature and spirit, which are systematically developed with the help of the logical categories. Yet portions of the content of this resultant system are already anticipated in the *Phenomenology* itself, albeit from its special perspective as an introduction to the true scientific system.

“Phenomenology” thus has a double meaning for Hegel. On the one hand, it is the “ascent” from “untrue” positions to the true standpoint of philosophy. On the other hand, these “untrue” positions are simultaneously stages in a process that leads to consciousness of the truth – a process whose course is determined by the concepts or moments of the absolute system. In this respect, the process itself is, in Hegel’s sense, “science” (*PhG*, 33/17) or the “first part of the system” (*PhG*, 31/15, 38/20). But this process still only *leads to* the true philosophical standpoint, for it consists in the self-examination and self-correction of “natural” consciousness – i.e. the form of consciousness that rests on the opposition between subject or (in contemporary parlance) “conceptual scheme” and object. Nevertheless, since philosophical knowledge in general consists in developing the “logic” of a topic, this movement of examination need only be reconstructed in conceptual terms to embody genuine philosophy. Just how such a reconstruction is possible and how it can occur in tandem with the process of self-examination is something Hegel explains in the Introduction.

**(b) The method of the “experience of consciousness”
according to the Introduction**

Hegel engages in further polemic in the Introduction in order to distinguish his method in the *Phenomenology* from prevailing procedures of critical epistemology. Yet the text can hardly be understood as an exacting critical engagement with, say, Kant. The “natural representation” of cognition as a sort of “tool” with which one can attain

(“take possession of”) mind-independent truth (“the absolute”) hardly captures Kant’s theory of the subjective conditions of knowledge and the objects thereof. Nor does Hegel come any closer to Kant with the idea he claims is connected with the first – namely that one can grasp the in-itself of the object by removing all the perspectival distortions of cognition. Such an idea is more likely to be found in the tradition of “negative theology” – in Hegel’s time perhaps in late Fichte, whom Hegel surely does not have in view. He is more likely thinking of Jacobi, who thought it essential to insulate the faithful intuition of God from all concepts of the understanding.

Yet to appreciate what is central to the idea of a *Phenomenology*, we need only grasp the basic thrust of Hegel’s criticism of the separation of forms of knowledge from their content. The epistemology of the Kantian critical philosophy distinguishes between three poles: cognition or knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), reality or the “absolute,” and “us” (i.e. the philosophers examining the relationship between knowledge and reality). This threefold distinction is simply presupposed, never justified. The “use of words such as ‘the absolute,’ ‘cognition,’ as well as ‘objective’ and ‘subjective,’ and countless others whose meaning is assumed to be generally familiar” is, in truth, unaccounted for (*PhG*, 71/48). Of course, at this point, one would be equally unjustified in asserting the antithesis: namely that forms of cognition are *not* to be distinguished from their content as an instrument, medium, or distorting kaleidoscope. Hegel’s aim in the *Phenomenology* is precisely to justify this latter claim through a complete proof *ex negativo*.

The position of critical epistemology is, as it were, a highly developed form of “natural consciousness” which regards the difference between what is “in itself” and what is “for us” as insuperable. In the Introduction, Hegel also refers to this form of consciousness as the “soul.” The *Phenomenology* is the

path of the soul as it wanders through the series of its own configurations [*Gestaltungen*], as stations laid out for it by its own nature, so that it might purify itself into spirit by arriving, through a complete experience of itself, at an acquaintance with what it is in itself.

(*PhG*, 72/49)

What in fact guarantees the completeness of this experience is, of course, one of the central problems of the phenomenological method. The self-knowledge of natural consciousness consists in doubting and examining, according to Hegel. The *Phenomenology* claims to have

integrated and radicalized the skeptical method and to have thereby overcome skepticism as a doctrine (see above, p. 3). But the skeptical method is not to arbitrarily doubt this or that, as Hegel accuses the skepticism of late antiquity of doing in the section “Skepticism” (see below, pp. 97–99). That is the sort of isolated and ad hoc reflection that theories profess to engage in when their validity has been called into doubt. Rather, the series of theories under examination are supposed to give rise to a necessary progression. This is a “self-consummating skepticism” insofar as each successive refutation of a claim to validity generates the next claim to be refuted until the process finally culminates in the complete refutation of natural consciousness.¹²

The “absolute knowledge” which results from this skepticism is neither a “supertheory” nor the impossibility of all theory, but rather a kind of method. And the examination is not directed at theses or theories about particular objects (nature, the law, causality, etc.) but rather at epistemological and ontological theses about both what it even *means* to be an object, or knowledge, or reality, or consciousness, and about how these notions relate to one another. These ontological and epistemological theses are, as we mentioned above, “implied” by “contentful” positions (“shapes”) of knowledge and action, culture, and religion.

But why isn’t skeptical examination and doubt an equally arbitrary method? According to Hegel, it is not arbitrary precisely because self-examination is internal to the human claim to knowledge itself. Nor does this examination stand in need of an external standard, for it contains its own. “While consciousness is examining itself, all that is left for us to do,” i.e. for us the philosophers depicting this path, is “simply to watch” (*PhG*, 77/54). The skeptical examination “rests” on nothing more than the distinction between object and knowledge, according to Hegel. For this distinction implies both that the object is not exhausted in the knowledge of it and that we are supposed to produce agreement between knowledge and its object. The classical theory of truth as *adequatio* of knowledge and object is, to a certain extent, natural to human understanding – or, as Hegel abbreviates it, natural to consciousness. Nor need the direction of fit always involve accommodating our knowledge to the object. Theistic or idealistic

¹² Hegel is possibly referring here to Fichte’s concept of the “self-comprehending and self-implemented skepticism” in his *Appellation an das Publikum* of 1799 (cf Rôhr, *Appellation*, 100).

positions locate the “standard” in the mind of God, in ideas, or in the subject, and accordingly understand truth as *adequatio rei ad intellectum*. Positions of this sort crop up in many places in the *Phenomenology*.

What the classical theories of truth and knowledge are not conscious of, however, is the fact that making such adjustments involves altering not only the knowledge, but also the very standard to which it is supposed to conform. The standpoints of consciousness not only imply a difference between self and object as such; they also involve particular conceptions of the “essence” of the object and the intellect. The object is assumed to be something that endures, that is independent of our knowledge of it, that underlies all change, etc. Hence, when knowledge fails to satisfy the demands of correspondence, a “paradigm shift” ensues – one that affects even the standard of correspondence itself. Fundamentally different knowledge demands a different ontology. Our view of reality is altered. Ultimately, we begin to admit not only individual things as real, but also processes, constellations of force, etc. To put the point in contemporary terms: the *Phenomenology* thematizes paradigm shifts, or the consequences of foundational crises in science, morality, etc.

Yet such shifts are here understood not as random, but rather as necessary consequences.¹³ The new conception of the object is supposed to contain the (unique) solution to the old paradigm’s unbridgeable distinction within knowledge between the knowledge itself and its presupposed standard, reality proper. For Hegel, these distinctions are, strictly speaking, contradictions because they can be traced back to mutually exclusive concepts. And it is for this reason alone that Hegel can term the experience of consciousness a “dialectical movement” (*PhG*, 78/55). “Dialectic” in Hegel always means the development and sublation of a contradiction. Yet “sublation” always carries the sense of “conservation” in addition to that of “annulment.” The resulting concept or proposition is supposed to contain both sides of the dissolved, sublated contradiction. Admittedly, it is not in the Introduction that Hegel says that consciousness is doomed to failure at each successive level, since its conceptions of the object implicitly contain incompatible concepts, but rather in the text itself (cf *PhG*, 105 f./77 f.).

Busily engaged in its self-examination, however, consciousness is altogether ignorant of the dialectic of concepts taking place. Hence,

¹³ This constitutes the principal difference between Hegel and the theory of “paradigm shifts” in modern history and philosophy of science (cf Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*).

consciousness is equally unaware of the extent to which the new standard is connected with the old and the extent to which the new shape constitutes a “reversal of consciousness.” Yet this is the proper sense of “experience” in the *Phenomenology* (*PhG*, 78/55). The characterization of experience that Hegel provides in the Introduction (*PhG*, 78–81/55–57) is not very clear. The essential point is that the “being-for-consciousness” of the old object (the in-itself) is what becomes the new object of consciousness. This surely means that the self-correction of knowledge calls for alterations in the underlying “ontology” (the “object”) and that these alterations then lead to a new representation of reality which contains moments of both the old and the altered conception. To this extent, the object is a synthesis, a result, a “determinate negation.” Thus, for example, a dynamic conception of nature or a holistic concept of truth might arise through the unification of features belonging to the old conception (mind-independence, permanence, inter-subjective authority, verifiability, etc.) with moments of knowledge (laws of motion, verification conditions). However, it is not clear to consciousness qua examiner that the new object is a “dialectical” synthesis of moments from the “old” ontology and from actual knowledge; such awareness is rather the “contribution” of the philosopher qua observer.¹⁴

Now the term “dialectic” applies only where there really is a synthesis of contradictory propositions or concepts. But the presence of such a synthesis in various “foundational crises” and “paradigm shifts” will hardly be demonstrable from the perspective of the history and philosophy of science. Hegel in fact imputes a further “contribution” to the philosopher. For it is the philosopher who labels each new “object-conception” (each new paradigm or ontology). The *Phenomenology* does not simply follow the history of science or the history of culture. It is rather the philosopher who says where to find the “determinate negation” of whichever shape of consciousness is currently subject to skeptical examination – i.e. it is the philosopher who says in which science, philosophy, religion, morality, etc. this “determinate negation” is to be found. But the philosopher does not simply invent these new shapes: they have manifested themselves over the course of history. Nevertheless, the philosopher does bring them to

¹⁴ Cf *PhG*, 79/55. On the procedure of the *Phenomenology*, cf also the clear and economical presentation in Fulda’s *Hegel*, 78.

consciousness or analytically disentangle them from the more complex conceptions in which they may be entrenched (e.g. by teasing out the understanding of subjectivity involved in the French Enlightenment). The necessity of the succession of shapes is apparent neither from the perspective of contemporary scientific “revolutionaries,” nor even from the retrospective viewpoint of historians. The historical series of events is, as such, marked by any number of chance occurrences. And to that extent, Hegel would be in partial agreement with the theorist of arbitrary paradigm shifts.

A necessary sequence emerges only thanks to the philosopher, for whom temporally distinct (and not always successive) “object-conceptions” are connected by a dialectical movement that ultimately stems from the “semantic relations” between the underlying concepts. As consciousness runs the course of the philosopher’s demonstration – i.e. as it is “comprehended in the experience” – it must grasp the ineluctability of the procedure, even though it lacks proper acquaintance with the logic of concepts through which “science” first unfolds. Therein lies one of the most obvious difficulties of the phenomenological method.

Like the sequence itself, the presentation of the particular moments in this examination is not purely descriptive. Hegel does not simply recapitulate the reflections of the protagonist of each respective standpoint – a Plato or a Sextus Empiricus, a Newton or a Leibniz, a Rousseau or a Robespierre. The discrepancies, corrections, contradictions, and “revolutions” identified in the science, legal institutions, or religion of an epoch or series of epochs are, in a certain sense, “ready-made,” i.e. simplified and idealized by the philosopher. (Consider the relation of master and slave, which can be found in numerous cultures and epochs.) This idealized interpolation occasionally takes the form of a Socratic dialogue in which one first puts “into the mouth” of an immediate and unreflected “certainty” those theses which it must advance if it is to defend its conceptions of reality and knowledge. There is thus far more of a philosophical “contribution” in play in the *Phenomenology* than Hegel *expressis verbis* admits in the Introduction.

Now today’s reader does, of course, have access to an “interpretive aid” which readers in 1807 lacked, namely Hegel’s later *Science of Logic*. But the state of the *Logic*’s development in 1807 is unclear. Though many contemporary interpreters take one of Hegel’s brief remarks in the *Philosophy of Spirit* of 1805–1806 to get to the very heart of the *Phenomenology*, the fact remains that it provides only a very rough

framework.¹⁵ And even in the later system, the logical foundations of which we know quite precisely, correlating the logical concepts to the contents of the *Realphilosophie* (i.e. the philosophies of nature and of spirit) remains one of the most difficult problems interpreters face.

(c) The organization of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

As far as the organization of the *Phenomenology* is concerned, Hegel himself ensured enduring confusion by providing the work with a new Table of Contents during the final stages of the editorial process. Its divisions (indicated by letters) are not to be found in the text itself, where the eight main chapters are titled only with roman numerals (cf *PhG*, 597/xxxiii–xxxv). In contemporary editions, however, both the numerical and alphabetical divisions are printed in the Table of Contents and often in the text itself.

We do not know whether these two different tables of contents have something to do with the “unfortunate confusion” which beset the final phase of work on the *Phenomenology*, according to a letter of Hegel’s to Schelling, and which attends “even in part the composition itself.”¹⁶ Many interpreters attempt to ascertain compositional changes in the light of the later addition of the second Table of Contents.¹⁷ But such lines of reasoning rely in part on willful interpretations of the text and are, in any case, hardly verifiable. It is even possible to argue for the complete agreement of the two divisions.¹⁸

Even so, the lettered division of the work contains several peculiarities, especially when considered in view of the shape Hegel’s system took on as early as the Jena period and retained ever thereafter.

¹⁵ Cf *JSE* III, 286/181, as cited above, pp. 43 f. On the relation of the *Logic* to the *Phenomenology*, cf also Fulda, “Zur Logik,” and Pöggeler, “Die Komposition.” Cf also the Introduction in Köhler and Pöggeler, *Hegel*, 4 ff., 23, and 25. In his *Analytischer Kommentar*, Scheier also invokes the general determinations of Hegel’s *Logic* (being-in-itself, being-for-itself, the speculative doctrine of the syllogism, etc.), but without identifying this logical framework with a determinate version of the Hegelian *Logic*.

¹⁶ Hegel, May 1, 1807 (*Briefe* 1, 159–162/*Letters*, 79–80), 161 f./79. On the problems Hegel had with his publisher, cf Bonsiepen’s Introduction to the Wessels/Clairmont edition of the *Phänomenologie* (1988), xxi ff. On the possible influences of the printing history on the composition and division of the work, cf also the Introduction in Köhler and Pöggeler, *Hegel*, 22 f.

¹⁷ The most radical of these attempts, which also relies on a new reading of the *Logic*, is made by Schmitz in his *Hegels Logik*, 278 ff.

¹⁸ As J. Stewart recently argued with admirable force in his “The Architectonic of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’,” 447 ff.

On the face of it, it is puzzling that “(A) Consciousness” and “(B) Self-Consciousness” should be followed by a (C) which is given four subtitles in lieu of a principal heading – namely “(AA) Reason,” “(BB) Spirit,” “(CC) Religion,” and “(DD) Absolute Knowledge.”

The internal organization of (C) itself is also curious, particularly its distribution of certain sections of the philosophy of spirit. In light of the development of the Jena system and Hegel’s later system as presented in the *Encyclopedia*, one would rather associate the passages in “(BB) Spirit” with the later form of *objective* spirit (ethical life, law, morality) and the passages from the sections “(CC) Religion” and “(DD) Absolute Knowledge” with *absolute* spirit (art, religion, philosophy). Indeed, this division is already visible in the late Jena writings (see above, p. 44). The contents of subjective spirit are treated from a phenomenological perspective – i.e. under various ontological “banners” – in the opening chapters (I–IV according to the first Table of Contents). Yet this system of numbering accords the first three sections of the chapter “(A) Consciousness” a pride of place which they clearly do not enjoy in the actual line of thought. Indeed, Hegel sets it aside altogether in organizing the abridged version of the *Phenomenology* in the *Encyclopedia*.¹⁹ When listing the crucial “reversals of consciousness,” one must surely highlight the stages of consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit.

The shapes of consciousness Hegel gathers together in “(A) Consciousness” (viz. “sense-certainty,” “perception,” and “force and understanding”) all proceed on the assumption that reality proper, to which knowledge is supposed to accommodate itself, lies on the “side of the object.” The real must be something enduring, something independent of subjective impressions, perceptions, propositions, etc. By contrast, the theoretical and practical positions addressed in the self-consciousness chapter locate the properly real in the subject – be it in the desirous self or the self who demands recognition, in doubting or in thinking, in the human self or in the divine self. Everything distinct from the subject has reality and meaning only as the object or product of subjective achievements. Under the title “Reason,” by contrast, Hegel examines positions which hold that subjective achievements serve to “constitute” an independent reality, within which alone those very achievements can finally acquire an objective form. As the *Phenomenology*

¹⁹ Concerning the transformation of the *Phenomenology* into a part of the doctrine of spirit in the *Encyclopedia* during the Nuremberg years (1808–1816) cf Rameil, “Die Entstehung.”

proceeds, it becomes increasingly characteristic of shapes of spirit to know their objects and counterparts as their self-objectification and thereby “find themselves again” in their respective other. Natural, historical, and social reality is finally rendered intelligible as a manifestation and reflection of the “order of concepts” by philosophically comprehending the cultural and moral developments in the “Spirit” chapter and the history of religion in the “Religion” chapter. The individual who has arrived at this understanding and adjusted his actions accordingly thereby fulfills both his own essence and the essence of the spirit, which he understands.

It is impossible for an introduction such as this one to provide commentary on every line of thought in each individual chapter. Yet it is equally important for a comprehensive overview to refrain from reducing the wealth of perspectives in the *Phenomenology*. These perspectives are admittedly subordinate, in a certain way, to Hegel’s guiding ontological and epistemological question. But Hegel is also concerned to make philosophical claims about society, morality, history, and religion. As we have seen, Hegel’s philosophical program, beginning with the *Differenzschrift*, strives to overcome the dualisms and dichotomies that afflict not only philosophy, but also the culture of his time. Our aim in what follows will be to elucidate three aspects of his execution of this program in the *Phenomenology*: namely how consciousness overcomes the dichotomies of knowledge and object, of individual and social reality, and of truth and history.