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11 The Phenomenology of Spirit G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)

No one finds Hegel easy. Those who comment on Hegel, particularly since the start of the twentieth century, use the words 'impenetrable', 'difficult', 'incomprehensible', 'obscurantist' and, in less charitable moments, 'unspeakable'. Hegel's style is certainly part of the problem. He writes in such a way that you have to come to his work already knowing something about him in order to make sense of it. He is, in other words, not particularly smooth sailing for the novice student. There can seem to be no obvious way in. Instead you have to read and re-read more or less everything he writes, hoping eventually for a momentary flicker of understanding. Once this hits you, though, the clouds really do break a little.

His approach makes matters even worse. Hegel is not dealing with individual philosophical questions as we know them. He is a system builder, perhaps the last great system builder, and his writing offers nothing less than a conception of more or less everything.

You can find your way into Hegel, a little, by thinking about him as a reaction to Kant. Recall that Kant argues for a version of idealism, transcendental idealism, in which the mind actively structures the empirical world. According to Kant, the *a priori* forms of sensible intuition, space and time, as well as the categories of the understanding, ensure that whatever is given to us in sensory perception is structured and ordered into a world of objects. Thus, for Kant, the world we experience is what it is because of the activities of the mind. While Kant argues that the categories are written in stone – the categories are the same for any mind which experiences a world of objects as such – the philosophers who follow Kant largely reject his absolutism in favour of some species of relativism. For them different categories and, therefore, different worlds are possible.

Instead of thinking of individual minds as shaping reality, Hegel argues for absolute idealism. Here the view is that reality is not shaped by individual minds, but a single Cosmic Mind, which Hegel

calls, 'Spirit'. You can think of this Mind as a thing trying to understand itself, as its categories or modes of understanding change with the times. This is not quite right, however, as for Hegel there is no genuine difference between reality and the Spirit which shapes or categorizes it. For Hegel, the whole of human history is Spirit coming to understand itself as reality. This, in a nutshell, is the key to understanding Hegel's thinking.

You can try coming at this tenet from other directions. A large part of Hegel's main claim is that the usual picture of the individual knower on the one hand and the particular object known on the other is a false one. Consciousness and the world itself are integrated. Consciousness is not really a discrete property of individuals, nor is the self something inside us. Instead, we are all parts of a single, whole, conscious Spirit, which is, itself, everything. This is not to say that the whole of reality is a unified substance; on Hegel's view, it is a complex system of Spirit, of which we are component parts.

If that did not help, you can try thinking again about Kant. As noted a moment ago, Kant argues that the categories are fixed, and there is just one reality for any subject which experiences a world of objects. Later German idealists – Fichte, for example – argue that there are different ways of 'seeing' the world; one might view the world objectively, scientifically or as a moral realm wherein one acts. Hegel argues that there are very many ways of viewing the world, numerous 'forms of consciousness'. But we cannot simply choose them; we cannot decide which form to take up. Instead, which view we have is fixed by our historical moment. Further, and this is probably Hegel's largest insight, the forms of consciousness evolve: better or perhaps more complete ones emerge as part of a large, historical process which tends towards a perfect view of the world. Throughout this historical process, Spirit comes to know itself better, truth develops and, in a literal sense, so does reality. History, in other words, is going somewhere, and Hegel studies it, teasing out its meaning. He is, in this sense, the first philosopher of history.

The dialectic

Hegel argues that the historical process is dialectical in nature. 'Dialectic' is an ancient Greek word for a certain sort of reasoning, exemplified in Plato's dialogues. The word was probably at first only associated with questions and answers, but in Hegel's hands it outlines a process of reasoning or logic. A particular claim is made (thesis), as its contradictions are drawn out and rendered explicit; a new conception is arrived at which emphasizes these contradictions (antithesis), and finally a resolution or blending of the two views is reached (synthesis). Hegel sees the whole of human history as exhibiting this sort of pattern, with a particular time holding to some conception of things, that conception containing within itself certain contradictions or difficulties which eventually become explicit, those contradictions being transcended by a new conception of things, and so on. Throughout it all, Spirit is coming to know itself better, until an ultimate state, Absolute Knowing, is realized.

The Phenomenology of Spirit is Hegel's attempt to sift through history with this dialectical process in mind. Marx, a student of Hegel who obviously took him very seriously, called the book 'the true birthplace and secret of Hegel's philosophy'. For Hegel, phenomenology is the study of appearances, phenomena, the way things seem to us insofar as we are perceivers, as opposed to metaphysics, the science of what truly is. 'Spirit' is Hegel's world for the Cosmic Mind which comes to know itself through the historical, dialectical process just sketched. So the title of the book suggests that here Hegel is examining the workings of Spirit as it appears to human beings. The book, by Hegel's lights, is nothing less than the truth about human history, what it all means and where we are headed.

In the Preface, Hegel says something about how the Absolute realizes itself, that is to say, comes to know itself. There are smaller dialectical moments, sub-dialectics working themselves out in parts of history, as well as a large historical trend which has three parts. First, consciousness is aware of just the sensible world; then

consciousness becomes aware of itself. Hegel argues that in self-awareness consciousness negates or dominates the merely living and in so doing becomes a subject which experiences objects. Third, this false diversity is itself negated, and Spirit finally recognizes itself for what it is, that is to say, consciousness recognizes that both consciousness and the sensible world are one. If this does not yet make much sense, perhaps it will help to have a closer look at some of the processes the book describes. *The Phenomenology* falls into several parts, each examining a stage in or aspect of the historical process.

Consciousness and self-consciousness

Consider Section A, 'Consciousness'. Here, Hegel takes up three possible epistemological relations between consciousness and the objects which appear to it, and in each case he tries to show that one relation leads on to the next. The first and barest is sense-certainty, in which consciousness merely encounters an object perceptually but does not make much out of it: the thing is simply 'before the eyes'. The second, perception, involves consciousness distinguishing the properties of a thing without grasping the underlying nature of the thing itself. The third, understanding, is an attempt on the part of the knowing subject to come to terms with the underlying nature of objects, an attempt to get at the things behind the properties.

Hegel finds each sort of relation in the history of human beings' efforts to come to know the natural world. We begin by rooting knowledge just in sensation, which ultimately fails, because the moment we take sensations as the objects of knowledge, their immediacy is lost – they become something else. Our attempts to know based on perception reveal only that we know bundles of properties, with nothing but a mysterious 'substance' underlying them. An attempt to say what these properties are rooted in, a scientific understanding of things, leaves us with a long list of unknowable, alien forces. We end up with the view that trying to understand the world by pinning down sensation leaves us with no access to reality. What

is needed, Hegel argues, is a consideration not only of consciousness, but also of self-consciousness.

In Part B, 'Self-Consciousness', Hegel considers our conception of ourselves as actors. The section contains probably the most famous example used to flesh out the nature of dialectical thinking, which Hegel calls 'the independence and dependence of self-consciousness: lordship and bondage'. We might think of animals as merely conscious, little appetite machines which are not self-reflective. Human beings, though, have more than just appetites. We have desires, and among those desires is the desire to be recognized as an independent self by others. Peering into history, we see feudal lords destroying their rivals in an effort to be recognized as powerful, free individuals. Some rivals are spared and become mere objects or slaves in the service not only of the lord's needs, but also in his desire to be seen as a powerful agent, a conqueror. However, in functioning as a servant, the slave attains a kind of value, realizes that he is, in fact, needed by the master. The drive for independent selfhood on the part of the lord results in a kind of servitude, a dependence on the slave. The thesis here is the drive towards independence; the antithesis is the master's eventual dependence on the servant.

The attempted synthesis is found in the struggle for free self-consciousness. When Spirit fails to find freedom through the interaction of two self-consciousnesses, it turns back in on itself in a novel way. Consciousness attempts to find freedom in itself, by renouncing a need for others. Hegel cites various attempts by later Roman thinkers to do so, in particular the resurgent Stoics and their steadfast indifference to the vagaries of existence, as evidence for an historical shift from dependence on others to a new kind of self-reliance. Finally, modern human beings look to reason, spirit and religion to achieve the necessary synthesis between consciousness and self-consciousness.

The rationality of the Enlightenment, as well as the rise of science, is characterized by Hegel as an effort to secure a kind of self-reliance or freedom through rational methods. These efforts, however, pull humanity too far in the direction of a cold and unsatisfying

objectivity, and there follows a kind of resurgence of spirituality in the form of Romanticism, consciousness again looking inwards for resolution. Romantic thinking itself drags in a new moral thinking, in particular the view that the truth which is in an individual is felt by others, and thus others have an equal claim, are to be counted as valuable as oneself. It is in religion, finally, where humanity comes closest to the necessary and final synthesis. Hegel considers the whole history of religious thought, concluding that revealed faith, particularly Christianity, is the closest religion can get to absolute knowing, Spirit seeing itself for what it really is. Christ is God made flesh, on the Trinitarian view, and this is as near as phenomenology can come to the truth, namely that humanity is not distinct from ultimate reality, but a finite part of it.

So what Hegel is up to, generally, is rendering explicit a dialectic of ideas in human history – cashing out the rise and fall of religions, political and social relations, moralities and scientific theories. He sees none of them as entirely either true or false, but it is a mistake to conclude from this that Hegel was merely a relativist. There is truth and falsity in each historical moment, and each succeeding epoch gets closer to the final stage, absolute knowing, which Hegel sometimes thinks of as a kind of blurry, water-coloured utopia of human freedom and universal peace. What else could it be like, once everyone finally realizes that we are all really parts of one ultimate rationality? Before the realization, though, the road to the goal is more than a little unpleasant. If you want to think of Hegel himself as a product of his times, notice that he lived in the Napoleonic era, a time of bitter and costly wars. He calls the way to utopia 'the slaughter bench of history'.

The end

How close are we to the end? Part of Hegel's claim is that the goal of the process is nothing less than understanding the process itself, of seeing Spirit coming to know itself through history. Brace yourself. This is achieved by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*. If he is right, then the

book itself is the culmination of the history of consciousness. You can rightly begin to smell a rat here. There is, in just about every age, the belief that the end is nigh, the hope or at least the thought that now is the moment of some great culmination. Can it all really have ended with the publication of the *Phenomenology*? Well, plainly it has not.

In fact, Hegelian thinking went on in earnest for more than a hundred years after the publication of the *Phenomenology*. As Marleau-Ponty puts it, 'All the great philosophical ideals of the past century, the philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche, existentialism and psycho-analysis had their beginning in Hegel'. Perhaps Marx is the most influential on this list of remarkable thinkers and movements. You can find a handle for thinking about Marx by regarding him as a kind of inversion of Hegel. Instead of thinking that ideas shape history, Marx argues that history or, anyway, historical facts, shape ideas. This might have been the largest thought, in terms of political fallout, of the past century or so, and its roots are certainly owed to Hegel. Hegelianism was probably the dominant philosophy, in both Europe and America, right up until the start of the twentieth century. You would be hard pressed to find even a handful of straightforward Hegelians alive today.

Hegelianism died because of a shift towards analysis in philosophy. Odd tenets were thought to follow from the view that reality is a single Cosmic Absolute. For example, the very idea of independently existing things (wine bottles and corks) standing in relation to one another (the cork is in the wine bottle) is incoherent if Hegel is right. If reality itself is unified, then the appearance of distinct objects, as well as relations between them, is illusory. Truths about particulars, on this view, can only be partial. G. E. Moore and those who followed him insisted on a return to the truths of common sense. The ordinary language movement attempted to return philosophical talk to its origins in everyday usage. Bertrand Russell's work on logic and mathematics made talk of concrete particular objects respectable and clear. A. J. Ayer and the Logical Positivists argued that the wild claims of Hegelian metaphysicians are literally nonsense. Against all of this, Hegel never stood a chance.

12 The World as Will and Representation

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)

Reflection on the lives of at least some philosophers can be dispiriting. When their books aren't being burnt, they are. The ones who hold on to sanity for a while are variously arrested, poisoned, exiled or forced to flee for their lives – a few have been shot, usually by their students. When they manage to escape such fates, their lives are not lived in celebration, and their deaths are frequently sad and lonely. Even many of the great philosophers have been comprehensively ridiculed in their lifetimes – others are just ignored until long after their deaths. Rarely are philosophers carried out of the lecture hall on the shoulders of their cheering and adoring students. Never do you see their faces on the cover of *Vogue*.

Despite all of this, you can come around to the view that philosophers as a species seem fairly happy, certainly happier than you might expect. They smile a lot. The autobiographies of at least some philosophers brim with cheerfulness. Given the miserable lives of philosophers, you would expect philosophy to contain some miserable books, some unhappy conclusions, but by and large it does not. The legendary exception is Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer's philosophy is spectacularly pessimistic, and so was Schopenhauer.

His mother tells us that from an early age he 'brooded on the misery of things'. She operated a literary salon, and eventually threw him out because her guests found his diatribes on the futility of existence a little tedious after a while. The broodings, though, produced a book of genius. He wrote the first edition before he was 30, but no one really noticed. He had to wait until he was 77 for interest in his work to demand a third edition. What is remarkable is that throughout the intervening years he found no reason to make substantial changes to the original manuscript. Instead, he added pages, spelling out what he took to be the further consequences of truths already discovered and firmly established almost 50 years earlier.