The Phenomenology of Spirit

Type of philosophy: Epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of history

First published: Die Phänomenologie des Geistes, 1807 (English translation, 1868; also known as *The Phenomenology of Mind,* 1910)

Principal ideas advanced:

- As the science of appearances, phenomenology is distinct from metaphysics, which is the science of being.
- Phenomenology of spirit observes and describes the forms of unreal consciousness and the necessity that causes consciousness to advance from one form to another.
- Knowledge of the dialectical structure of reality makes possible the scientific study of the forms in which consciousness appears.
- In its evolution, mind has passed through three moments: consciousness of the sensible world, consciousness of itself and of other selves, and consciousness of the identity of the self and the sensible world.

While Napoleon was defeating the Prussians outside the walls of Jena, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was completing his *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Napoleon's victory signified for Hegel the triumph throughout Europe of enlightened self-rule and marked the beginning of a new social era; and in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* he drew a parallel between Napoleon's achievement and his own. "It is not difficult to see that our epoch is a birth-time and a period of transition", he wrote. "The spirit of man has broken with the old order of thinking". Changes leading up to the present had, he said, been qualitative change such as happens when the child draws its first breath.

When Hegel made this optimistic assessment of his own achievement, he was thinking not merely of the book in hand but of the system of knowledge for which he was later to become famous and which, even then, he was expounding in university lectures. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* was to introduce the system to the public. Originally, he had planned to include the work in the first volume of his *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1812-1816; *Science of Logic,* 1929), but the project outgrew the limits of an introduction and was published as a separate work.

Metaphysics

Like philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Hegel was a metaphysician in the tradition that stemmed from the Greek philosopher Parmenides. The problem of philosophy in the broadest sense had to do with the identity of being and knowing. Admitting that the way of mortals is mere seeming, each of the three in his own way was trying to expound the way of truth. For Fichte, the Absolute (ultimate reality, the Kantian thing-in-itself) is the self that produces the phenomenal world and then overcomes it. For Schelling, the Absolute is the common source of the self and the world. Both men held that the task of philosophy is to lead the finite mind to the level of immediacy at which the difference between knowledge and being disappears in vision. Hegel thought that both men went too far in their attempts to abolish diversity. In his opinion, an intuition that leads all

difference behind is ignorance rather than knowledge. He said, rather unkindly, that Schelling's Absolute is "the night in which all cows are black". He agreed that knowledge demands immediacy but he denied that the distinctions present in human consciousness are thought and the logic of being are the same. In short, when one thinks dialectically, one thinks truly. This, as is often pointed out, was also Aristotle's solution to the Parmenidean problem. According to Aristotle, divine mind – mind fully actualised – "thinks itself, and its thinking is a thinking of thinking".

An obvious difference between Aristotle and Hegel is that for the latter, the divine mind is immanent in the world process. Hegel expresses this by saying that Substance and Subject are one. Spirit, which is Hegel's Absolute, is said to be "the inner being of the world". It exists in itself (*an sich*) as Substance, but it also exists for itself (*für sich*) as Subject. "This means, it must be presented to itself as an object, but at the same time straightaway annul and transcend this objective form; it must be its own object in which it finds itself reflected". The process Hegel describes as a circle that has its end for its beginning. What he means is that when the movement begins, Spirit is one, and when it ends, it is again one, while in between, it is divided and tormented by the need to end the division. From Hegel's point of view, the circular movement was not in vain. In the beginning, Spirit was potentially everything but actually nothing. Only by means of the processes known as nature and history does Spirit attain to actuality.

Phenomenology

All of this is metaphysics. Like Parmenides, Hegel, when he speaks of Absolute Spirit, views the world not as it *appears* to mortals, but as it is known by the gods. Metaphysics, the science of reality, is not phenomenology, which is the science of appearances. In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit,* Hegel, without abandoning the standpoint of one who knows, observes and describes the opinions of finite spirits in the multiplicity and contrariety. It is like history, says Hegel, in that it includes the sum of human experience, both individual and communal; but, whereas history views these experiences "in the form of contingency", phenomenology views them "from the side of their intellectually comprehended organisation". Most of the book is a far cry from metaphysics; and if one finds some parts indigestible, the explanation is usually that Hegel is alluding to things one has never encountered in one's reading. Incidentally, the German word *Geist*, unlike the English words "mind" and "spirit", conveys the whole range of human concerns. Psychology, history, philology, sociology, theology, ethics, and aesthetics, each of which Hegel manages to illuminate, are all referred to in German as *Geisteswissenschaften,* or "sciences" of *Geist.*

The Phenomenology of Spirit, therefore, is the story of humankind. It is concerned directly with finite spirits and only indirectly with the Absolute, which must be thought of as hidden behind these appearances. Nevertheless, in order to understand the layout of the book, one needs to keep in mind what Hegel says in the preface about the movement of the Absolute realising itself in a threefold process: first, positing itself as a living and moving being, in constant change from one state to its opposite; second, negating the object and becoming subject, thereby splitting up what was single and turning the factors against each other; and third, negating this diversity and reinstating self-identity. This final movement, Hegel reminds us, is a new immediacy, not the immediacy with which the process began:

> It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose and has its end for the beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the three movements are designated not from the standpoint of Absolute Spirit but from the standpoint of humanity. Part A, "Consciousness", is concerned with humanity's attempts to achieve certainty through knowledge of the sensible world. Part B, "Self-Consciousness", deals with humanity as doer rather than knower, but it is mainly concerned with the self-image to which humanity action leads. Part C, not titled in Hegel's outline, exhibits the stage in which humans see themselves reflected in the external world. Hegel explains that these three moments are abstractions arrived at by analysis; he does not intend anyone to think that the dialectic that he traces in the development of consciousness was anterior to that which he traces in the development of selfhood. On the other hand, because what is meaningful in history comes from humanity's efforts to attain self-knowledge, the great moments in history may be seen as illustrative of this triadic movement. Thus, the extroverted mind of pre-Socratic Greece serves to illustrate the first stage; the introverted mind of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the second; and the boisterous, self-assertive mind of modern humans, the third. The plan was simple, but the execution is complicated by Hegel's tendency to loop back into the past to give a fuller exhibition of the dialectic.

Consciousness and Self-Consciousness

Part A, "Consciousness", is an essay in epistemology. Specifically, it is a critical history of humanity's attempt to base knowledge on sensation. Although it seems probable that Hegel first envisaged the problem as it appeared to Plato in *Theatetos* (middle period dialogue, 388-368 B.C.E.; *Theaetetus,* 1804), his exposition makes full use of the light shed on it by modern empiricism. In three chapters, Hegel traces humanity's attempt to find certainty through knowledge, first on the level of sensation, then on the level of perception, and finally on the level of scientific understanding. Sensations are indeed immediate, but the cease to be such the moment one makes them objects of knowledge. The object of perception, of which common sense is so sure, turns out to be a collection of properties. The chemical or physical force in terms of which humanity tries to explain these properties turns out to be unknowable and has to be abandoned in favour of descriptive laws, which, although satisfactory from a practical standpoint, are unsatisfactory to consciousness bent on knowledge. In the end, consciousness learns that the sensible world is like a curtain behind which an unknown inner world "affirms itself as a divided and distinguished inner reality", namely, self-consciousness. However, says Hegel, to understand this "requires us to fetch a wider compass".

In Part B, "Self-Consciousness", Hegel makes a new start. The wider compass means taking account of humanity's animal condition. Life, says Hegel, is an overcoming. The animal does not contemplate the sensible world but consumes it. Self-consciousness dawns when humanity's appetites turn into desires. Unlike appetites, desire is universal. What one desires is the idea of overcoming. One is not content to consume what one needs: One destroys for the sake of proving that one is an overcomer; however, not satisfied with proving it to oneself, one needs to prove it to other. Thus, says Hegel, self-consciousness is a double

movement. In order to be certain that one is a self, one needs to be recognised as such by other selves.

Hegel works through the dialectic of self-consciousness in a famous section titled "Lordship and Bondage". It is by killing a rival in life-and-death combat that primitive humanity attains to selfhood. If the rival lacks mettle and cries out to be spared, the double movement is still accomplished: The rival survives not as a self, but as a slave who exists only to serve the lord's desires. The slave, however, although lacking an independent existence as first, learns to value himself as a worker and, through the skills that he acquires, gradually wins the recognition of his master. In the end, the master, who wanted nothing more than to be independent, finds himself dependent on his slave.

Much has been made, by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and others, of the two types of consciousness, that of the master and that of the slave. For Hegel, however, this section is scarcely more that an introduction to the one that follows, entitled "The Freedom of Self-Consciousness". Failure of consciousness to find independence in the mutual relation between the two selves leads to the negation of the double movement. "In *thinking* I am free, because I am not in another but remain simply and solely in touch with myself". This bold attempt to recover immediacy Hegel illustrates by reference to the subjective philosophies of late antiquity, when culture was universal and life was burdensome to master and slave alike. In Stoicism, thought affirmed itself indifferent to all the conditions of individual existence, declaring its universality. In scepticism, individuality reasserted itself in the giddy whole of its disorder. In Christianity, the attempt was made to combine the universality of the former with the facticity of the latter, giving rise to the consciously divided self that Hegel calls "the unhappy consciousness". Devotion, ceremony, asceticism, mysticism, and obedience are viewed by Hegel as means of overcoming this rift, but the healing remains a mere "beyond". Meanwhile "there has arisen the idea of Reason, of the certainty that consciousness is, in its particularity, inherently and essentially absolute". Thus, humanity enters the last stage of its pilgrimage.

Reason, Spirit, and Religion

Part C, left untitled by Hegel, is the synthesis of consciousness and self-consciousness; but the synthesis, insofar as it falls within the compass of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, is incomplete. This incompleteness must be kept in mind when considering the titles that Hegel gave to the three subdivisions of Part C. They are Reason, Spirit, and Religion. The titles are part of the passing show, banners around which modern people are accustomed to rally.

Reason, as understood in this major division, is the reason of newly awakened modern humanity. In contrast the to ascetic soul of the Middle Ages, modern humans are blessed with sublime self-confidence, certain of their vocation to pull down the rickety structures of the past and to build new ones on the foundation of reason. Hegel discusses the rise of science, humanity's pursuit of pleasure, and the doctrine of natural law. This section is memorable mainly for the comical situations into which people's zeal and good intentions get them. Disregarding their objective nature, they plunge into life, only to find themselves mastered by fates beyond their control. Retreating somewhat, they take refuge in "the law of the heart", which the cruel world refuses to understand. Or, as a "knight of virtue", they engage in sham

fights with the world. All this appeal to immediacy, Hegel says, is "consciousness gone crazy… its reality being immediately unreality". A delusory objectivity is achieved in the third section of this division when the individual undertakes to find meaning in life by devoting himself to some worthy cause. Hegel's title for this section, "The Spiritual Zoo, or Humbug!" indicates that high-mindedness has its low side.

The excessive claims made for reason provoked reactions, known historically as pietism, illuminism, and Romanticism. These are all dealt with in the section "Spirit", which represents people looking for the truth within themselves. The fact that Hegel loops back in time in order to draw a contrast between the consciousness of the Green heroine Antigone and that of the "beautiful soul" cherished and cultivated by German Romantics somewhat obscures the dialectical movement. In this section, Hegel examines court life in France under the *ancien régime,* which for him, was a brilliantly orchestrated variation on the old theme of self-alienation. To be recognised as a self, one had to sacrifice oneself to society by fighting, working, or talking. Almost everybody who was anybody chose the third way. The prerevolutionary salon made Paris appealing to outsiders such as philosopher David Hume, but to insiders it was a snake pit. Hegel points out that the revolt against the meanness and duplicity of the existing order was two-pronged: religious and philosophical. Wilhelm Bossuet exemplifies one party, Voltaire the other. However, the difference, Hegel tries to show, was superficial. Both parties were otherworldly, taking flight to the Absolute, whether it was called the Trinity or the Supreme Being. The philosophical party was to triumph as the party of Enlightenment. It lacked cohesion, however, and splintered into political sects that stoked the fires of revolution and, in their pursuit of absolute freedom, were consumed in the Terror.

Morality

Absolute freedom is undoubtedly what every self demands. However, the lesson Hegel draws from the Enlightenment is that the individual cannot claim to be absolute: The truth that is in one must be in everyone else as well. This was the new morality that was then enjoying great success in Romantic circles. Morality has the task of harmonising thought and inclination. It recovers the wholeness known to the ancient Greeks but it does not do so by means of custom but by means of the voice of conscience, the moral reason present in every person.

This section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is important chiefly for its criticism of deontological ethics. Universal law raised above all the contingency and duty divorced from all advantage made obvious targets for Hegel's satire. Far from harmonising the soul, morality gives rise to dissemblance. The beautiful soul is divine in conception – the "self transparent to itself" is similar to Hegel's definition of the Absolute. Unfortunately, reality did not match the concept, as one must recognise when one judges oneself. On such occasions, conscientious people want to confess their faults and ask for forgiveness, and this can be rewarding, except when the individual is hard-hearted and "refuses to let his inner nature go forth". Here, as Hegel points out, morality anticipates religion.

Religion

Hitherto, consciousness has conceived of itself alternately as object and subject, as individual and social. At each level, Spirit has taken into itself more of the content of human experience, although it continues to mistake each new experience for the whole toward which it aspires. This wholeness Hegel finds in "Revealed Religion", by which he means Christianity. However, once again he loops back in time and, in the final section, presents an entire phenomenology of religion.

Religion had been of a major concern to Hegel from the time when, as a theological student, he had found difficulty reconciling biblical revelation with Greek *paideia.* His survey traces religion through three stages: the cosmological stage represented by Persia and Egypt, the anthropological stage represented by classical Greece, and the revelational stage represented by Christianity. The first stage removed the divine too far from humanity, and the second brought it too close (for example in classic comedy), leaving it for the gospel of the incarnation of God's Son to find the proper distance. For Hegel, the doctrine of the Trinity – one God revealed to humanity simultaneously as being, as being-for-itself, and as the self knowing itself in the other – comes as close as religion can possibly come to Absolute Knowledge. However, in religion, self-consciousness is not fully conceptualised. The self does not yet know itself directly but only as appearance.

"The last embodiment of Spirit", Hegel explains in a brief concluding chapter, "is Absolute Knowledge. It is Spirit knowing itself in the shape of Spirit". Consciousness, which in religion is not perfectly one with its content, is here "at home with itself". Although the particular self is "immediately sublated" to the universal self, however, it is not absorbed into it, for the latter also is consciousness; that is to say, "It is the process of superseding itself". However, that leaves phenomenology and places the reader on the threshold of Hegel's system.

Jean Faurot