

## THE PRE-HISTORY OF HEGELIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

Hegel is arguably the first to coin the term 'phenomenology.' It is evidently derived from the terms *phenomenon* and *epistemology* and as such denotes the study of our knowledge of worldly phenomena or, more precisely, how things in the empirical world appear to the consciousness of human beings. To delve into epistemology, the study of the nature of knowledge and the possibility of truth necessitates that one also enters into the field called the *philosophy of mind*, that is, epistemological speculations almost inevitably also lead to speculations on the nature of consciousness as a result of which coming to grips with what and how we know anything (the object and method of knowledge) invariably involves coming to grips with the nature of the mind which knows (human consciousness). At the risk of simplifying and reducing various views to a single over-riding theme, it can be said that Hegel in particular and phenomenologists in general argue, in a nutshell, that the knowing subject and the object known are caught up in a dialectical synthesis as a result of which knowledge is neither entirely objective nor subjective in nature, but a synthesis of these two extremes. From this point of view, a knowledge of the object casts much light on the structures of the conscious subject and, inversely, a knowledge of these subjective structures cast much light on the properties of the external world.

There is an important pre-history which needs to be grasped, even if only in the barest of outlines, if Hegel's concept of phenomenology is to be understood.

### **René Descartes Discourse on the Method (1637) (Rationalism):**

The starting point of phenomenology is Descartes's quest to determine an unshakeable foundation or indisputable truth upon which all knowledge can be based. Initially plagued by innumerable doubts, Descartes believed that he found this foundation in the existence of the *cogito* (Latin for 'I think' and, thus, a term that has become a synonym for the thinking or rational self). Descartes was of the view that even if he were able to think up doubts about something, one thing which he could not doubt was that even in the act of doubting he continued to think. That he continued to think, regardless of any doubts which this thinking might prompt, was proof that he existed because something had to be the source of this thought (hence, 'cogito ergo sum' or 'I think therefore I am'). The thinking self is accordingly, in the Cartesian schema, the one certain thing and, thus, the foundation of all certainty. Upon this stable and secure foundation, Descartes felt it was possible to build an edifice of various knowledges, that is, knowledge about a variety of things in the world. Knowledge derived from the senses was unreliable, he thought, by contrast to one's reason.

### **John Locke An Essay on Human Understanding (1660) (Empiricism):**

According to Locke, on the other hand, sense experience is the only source of knowledge, the mind being a passive receptor of sense impressions derived from the outer world and entirely formed in fact by the very external stimuli which it absorbs in this way. He compared his mind to something of a mirror, a sponge, a piece of malleable wax, or even a *tabula rasa* (or blank slate) prior to the crowding in of sense impressions.

### **Immanuel Kant The Critique of Pure Reason (1781):**

Kant came up with what he thought was a solution to the Rationalist / Idealist vs Empiricist / materialist debate by synthesising their respecting views. He concluded, by

means of a complex argument, that our consciousness is *in part* derived a posteriori from the sense impressions derived from external reality (Locke's view). This he thought was at least partially undeniable. He also concluded, however, that the mind is *in part* pre-given or a priori for the simple reason that there are certain innate categories of knowledge (humans have a tendency to think primarily in terms of space and time) and at least twelve sub-categories (such as the notion of cause and effect) with which humans would seem to be born and which necessarily shape our awareness of things irrespective of social historical context. These fundamental conditions of thought exist *a priori*, that is, are not derived from experience itself but, rather, exist independently or in advance of it. From this point of view, the mind is an organising agent that pre-exists, sorts out and classifies sense data in order to render them intelligible. In other words, the mind is pre-equipped with forms and categories which are the concepts which lend order and meaning to experience. Our minds, as a result, at least in part determine how we know the world precisely because our consciousness pre-exists the world. From this perspective, consciousness would seem to be partly a given and partly a product, partly creative and partly reactive, and partly the product of nurture, partly the product of nature. For this reason, aspects of the mind are thought to *transcend* the physical world as we know it.

The question which consequently arises is: how exactly did Kant conceptualise 'nature'? Are we talking, from a materialistic point of view, purely about biology as a result of which humans are merely flesh and blood? In this case, these epistemological categories would seem to be a product of the physiological functioning of the brain. Or is nature to be defined from an idealist point of view as a result of which human nature is the product of more than mere biology and the self arguably *transcendental*? Kant's thinking has given rise to two divergent interpretations and, thus, traditions of philosophical thought, both of which cite Kant as their ultimate inspiration. In the UK and, later, the USA, the tradition that has come to be called 'Anglo-American Analytic philosophy' and which is still the dominant style of philosophising in the English-speaking world has developed out of the biologicistic interpretation of Kant's conception of human nature. From this point of view, epistemological categories are partly physiologically-derived, partly socially acquired (not least in the form of language).

On the European continent, however, Kant's theories gave rise to an alternative tradition that has come to be called 'Continental' or sometimes simply 'European philosophy' to distinguish it from that which prevails in the Anglophone world, especially the UK and the USA. At least initially, Continental philosophers or, more specifically, the German Idealists such as Hegel, developed the transcendental aspects of his argument. For the German Idealists, the source of these categories and sub-categories that form human consciousness is the *noumenal* world (Kant distinguished between the term 'noumena' [the things of the world beyond] and 'phenomena' [the things of this world].) It is also true, however, that this transcendentalism would come to be rejected by later so-called Existentialists in the nineteenth century such as Nietzsche who would take Continental thought in a materialist direction.