

### **G. W. F. HEGEL THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT (1807)**

(Trans. A. V. Miller – see herein J. N. Findlay's useful paraphrase entitled "Analysis of the Text," pp. 425ff)

Hegel's immensely difficult *Phaenomenologie des Geistes* (*The Phenomenology of Spirit* – sometimes the title is translated as *The Phenomenology of Mind* because the German word 'geist' can mean both 'spirit' and 'mind') can only be summarised in a way that does an injustice to the complexity of his argument. If the term 'phenomenology' is 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, the very title (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) indicates the study of how the material phenomena through which Spirit manifests itself presents themselves to consciousness.

*The Phenomenology of Spirit* is intended to trace the "stages in the mind's necessary progress from immediate sense-consciousness to the position of a scientific philosophy" (v), as Findlay puts in his Foreword. That is, it traces the phases in the development of consciousness from uncertainty to absolute certainty. 'Consciousness' here means two things: Spirit or Mind on a macrocosmic scale as well as the individual spirit or mind through which Spirit or Mind manifests itself on a microcosmic scale. The various degrees of certainty which individuals and, by extension, the cultures they form possess correspond to different stages of this development. The predominance of Rationalism in the seventeenth century, followed by Empiricism in the eighteenth and by Kant's attempted synthesis of these positions, each of which is not without its failings, may be seen as examples of the incomplete knowledge peculiar to particular phases. The individual spirit (mind) is caught up in an intellectual and spiritual odyssey that transcends the individual who is consequently rarely able to realise (unless you are Hegel, of course) his role in and current location on this journey. The journey in question is nothing less than the progress of Spirit (Mind) towards full self-consciousness and it is from this totalising perspective that it is possible to understand man's quest for certainty and the failings thereof as various stages on the way to a position of absolute certainty or scientific knowledge. At this point, Hegel thought, there is a coalescence of knowing subject and object known, where consciousness corresponds to reality and vice versa. To put this another way, the knowing subject discovers himself in the object known and the object known in the knowing subject.

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#### **Section A: Consciousness**

Here, Hegel identifies three important ways (or stages) in which consciousness relates to the object. It is worth quoting Findlay's summary at length:

the Sense-certainty which merely confronts an object in what seems to be its rich individuality without making anything definite of it, the Perception where it begins to distinguish properties or qualities in the immediately given, but is unable to integrate them in the unity of the perceived thing, and finally the Understanding, where the nature of things are seen as fixed patterns of mutual interference and interaction behind their manifest, phenomenal surface. Sense certainty is dialectically flawed . . . since it is impossible to pin down the qualities which are thus felt to be rich and various or the individuality which is thus felt to be wholly unique. For in the flux of experience one quality is constantly yielding place to another, and it is impossible to seize what is individual by pointing gestures or by

demonstrative words such as 'This,' 'Here,' 'Now,' 'I,' etc. which are irremediably general in meaning. Perception, likewise, is dialectically flawed by its incapacity to integrate the separate characters it picks out with the unified individuality of the object to which it seeks to attribute them. Both lead on to the Understanding . . . [which is] dialectically flawed by its inability to explain the comprehensive dovetailing of essential natures, forces, and laws into one another, so as to form only one system of interacting essentialities. (xvi)

The next stage on the journey of consciousness is the realisation that such explanatory unities are imparted to objects by the conscious mind. The consciousness of objects is henceforth replaced in importance by self-consciousness, that is, by the need to have a consciousness of consciousness. The focus switches from the objects per se to the "rational creatures around oneself, who are all interpreting the same objects, without identifying their interpretive acts with the interpretations embedded in things" (xvi). There is a switch from saying "Things are interacting in a manner X" to 'We all are understanding things as interacting in a manner X"' (xvi).

The Phenomenology of Spirit, then, is first and foremost an epistemological study. It is also, as such, one of the most important studies historically of the nature of subjectivity as a discussion of the nature of knowledge (i.e. what it is possible to know) implies the necessity to understand the nature of the knower (i.e. the structures of consciousness).

### **Section B: Self-Consciousness**

This is why Hegel turns his attention in Section B to the question of Self-Consciousness, the most important section of which is that devoted to what has come to be called the *Master-Slave Dialectic*. It is important to realise in what follows that Hegel's interest is not in the nature of slavery per se but is using the relationship of master to slave as a metaphor or analogy for the relationship of one consciousness (what is sometimes called the subject Ego) to another (the object Ego). Hegel's thesis here is that self-awareness is only possible through this relationship to the Other, a notion that has been profoundly influential upon a whole host of materialist thinkers (not least Marxists and Phenomenologists who are, of course, hostile to Hegel's idealism). For these, if Hegel is wrong about everything else, he is not wrong about the way in which our consciousness is formed by our relationship to each other. This is, in their view, a constitutive feature of all inter-personal relationships.

Hegel's point here is, in a nutshell, that human relationships are basically of the nature of that of master to slave. There is, as Nietzsche put it later, a 'will to power' (over each other) that informs human relationships. That is, each person seeks domination over the other even as each person depends on the other: the master needs the slave's *recognition* or acknowledgement of his / her authority as much as the slave is in turn dependent upon the Master's recognition or acknowledgement of his / her service. As a result, self-knowledge is inextricable from what some would term the *gaze of the Other*. In other words, other people function somewhat as mirrors in which one sees oneself reflected, as it were. This view is exemplified by Jean-Paul Sartre's play Huis Clos (In Camera) in which each character is shown to be entirely dependent (even when they deny it) for a sense of self (this is their self-consciousness) on the perspective which others have on him / her. Self-consciousness (i.e. awareness of one's self, self-knowledge) is entirely dependent, paradoxically, on our relationship to the *Other* from whom we demand recognition.

### **“Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage” (pp. 111-119):**

Here, in what is for many admirers and critics alike the most influential part of the entire book, Hegel argues that self-consciousness “exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged: (111). It reveals itself in a number of traits which have to be kept firmly apart even though they are constantly melting into each other, thereby dissolving this separateness. The “detailed exposition of the notion of this spiritual unity in its duplication” (111) presents us with the “process of Recognition” (111).

When self-consciousness “is faced by another self-consciousness” (111), Hegel argues, “it has come *out of itself*” (111). This means two things: firstly, “it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self” (111). However, it “must supersede this otherness of itself” (111), that is, the “*other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being” (111). But, in so doing, it “proceeds to supersede its *own* self, for this other is itself” (111). In this way, it makes a “return *into itself*” (111), receiving back its own self “because, superseding *its* otherness, it again becomes equal to itself” (111). Of course, this is also true of the Other (the second) which is, in itself, a Self (a first) for whom the Self (the first) serves as Other (second): “this movement of self-consciousness in relation to another self-consciousness has in this way been represented as the action of *one* self-consciousness, but this action of the one has itself the double significance of being both its own action and the action of the other as well” (111-112). What we have, therefore, is the “double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same” (112). The “middle term” (112) between these two “extremes” (112) is “self-consciousness which splits into the extremes; and each extreme is this exchanging of its own determinateness and an absolute transition into the opposite” (112). “Each is for the other the middle term through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account” (112). They both “*recognise* themselves as *mutually recognising* one another” (112).

Hegel then turns his attention to how this process of “recognition, of the duplicating of self-consciousness in its oneness, appears to self-consciousness” (112). At first, all that appears is the “inequality of the two, or the splitting up of the middle term into the extremes which, as extremes, are opposed to one another, one being only recognised, the other only *recognising*” (112-113). Self-consciousness is, “to begin with, simply being-for-itself, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else” (113). Its “essence and absolute object is ‘I’; and in this immediacy, . . . of its being-for-itself, it is an *individual*” (113). “What is ‘other’ for it is an unessential, negatively characterised object” (113). However, the “‘other’ is also a self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual” (113). They are for each other “ordinary objects . . . submerged in the being of Life” (113). Both being deeply absorbed in the business of living, each is “certain only of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty has no truth” (113). According to the “notion of recognition” (113), “this is possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it” (113).

Self-consciousness expresses itself, however, as the negation of all objectivity, that is, all that is outside of the self. This initially takes the form of a desire for the death of the other which is necessarily at the risk of its own existence. A “life and death struggle” (114) consequently ensues between the two rival self-consciousnesses: they must engage

in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth" (114). It is "only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its [mere] submergence in the expanse of life" (114). The "individual who has not risked his life may well be recognised as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness" (114). Similarly, "just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other's death, for it values the other no more than itself; its essential being is present to it in the form of an 'other,' it is outside of itself and must rid itself of its self-externality" (114).

However, Hegel points out that death is the "*natural* negation of consciousness" (114). With the death of those caught up in such a dialectic, there vanishes from their interplay the essential moment of splitting into extremes with opposite characteristics; and the middle term collapses into lifeless, merely immediate, unopposed extremes; and the two do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things. Their act is an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession. (114-115)

This is why self-consciousness learns that life is "essential to it" (115) and that death merely removes the very means by which its own self-consciousness is attained.

This is why self-consciousness quickly learns that it needs the other to be not on par with it (quickly resulting in mutual elimination) but in a relationship of inequality and even dependency. To begin with, they are "unequal and opposed, . . . they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness" (115). The goal is, consequently, to demote the other, to make it thing-like and dependent, to make it acquire the self-consciousness of a "bondsmen" (115) (or slave) as opposed to that of a "lord" (115) (the master). The former is the "dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another" (115), while the latter is the "independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself" (115). The master is aware of himself (as superior) in so far as he is *recognised* as master by the slave. His self-consciousness (as superior) depends on the slave's acknowledgement of this superiority and, thus, his corresponding consciousness of his own inferiority. The lord "achieves his recognition through another consciousness" (116): the "other consciousness sets aside its own being-for-itself, and in so doing itself does what the first does to it" (116). This "action of the second is the first's own action; for what the bondsman does is really the action of the lord" (116). The key device to this end concerns the things which are owned by the master but upon which the slave is forced to work by the master ultimately for the latter's enjoyment. The master

is the consciousness that exists *for itself*. . . . It is a consciousness existing *for itself* which is mediated with itself through another consciousness, i.e. through a consciousness . . . whose nature it is to be bound up with an existence that is independent, or thinghood in general. The lord puts himself into relation to both these moment, to a *thing* as such, the object of desire, and to the consciousness for which thinghood is the essential characteristic. . . . The lord relates himself mediately to the bondsman through a being [a thing] that is independent, for it is just this which holds the bondsman in bondage; it is his chain from which he could not break free in the struggle, thus proving himself to be dependent. . . . But the lord is the power over this thing. . . . [S]ince he is the power over this thing, and this again is the power over the other [the bondsman], it follows that he

holds the other in subjection. (116)

The thing in question (the sugar cane, for example) is "independent vis-a-vis the bondsman, whose negating of it, therefore, cannot go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation; in other words, he only works on it" (116). For the lord, on the other hand, the "*immediate* relation becomes through this mediation [it is the slave who works on thing, not the master] the sheer negation of the thing, or the enjoyment of it. What desire failed to achieve, he succeeds in doing, viz. to have done with the thing altogether, and to achieve satisfaction in the enjoyment of it" (116). This mutual recognition is also achieved by means of both the punishment and rewards which the master dishes out to the slave in an effort to keep him in thrall, inspiring fear and gratitude in the slave. However, for "recognition proper this moment is lacking" (116). The "outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal" (116) in that the dependent consciousness of the other turns out to be the "*truth* of his certainty of himself. But it is clear that this object does not correspond to its notion, but rather that the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-itself* as the truth of himself" (116-117).

This is why Hegel argues that the "*truth* of the independent consciousness" (117) is to be found not in the master's self-consciousness (the truth of which is to be found in its opposite, the dependency of the self-consciousness of the slave), but in the "servile consciousness of the bondsman" (117). Just as "lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is; as a consciousness forced back into itself, it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness" (117). Up to this point, we have only seen "what servitude is only in relation to lordship. But it is a self-consciousness, and we have now to consider what as such it is in and for itself" (117). Because "servitude has the lord for its essential reality" (117), the "*truth* for it is the independent consciousness that is *for itself*" (117). However, servitude is "not yet aware that this truth is implicit in it" (117). The self-consciousness of servitude is one of fear and "dread" (117), especially in relation to the lord. It has "trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its very foundations" (117). Although "fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom, consciousness is not therein aware that it is a being-for-itself. However, through work upon things" (118) (e.g. the conversion of the sugar cane to sugar), which he is compelled by the lord to do, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is. Given that "work forms and shapes the thing" (118), work means "desire held in check" (118). The reason for this is that desire, according to Hegel, is the "pure negating of the object" (118), that is, it only comes into play when the object is absent. In other words, in an influential account of desire, Hegel contends that one only desires something that is absent – you desire a sexual partner, for example, only in so far as s/he is unavailable in some way. When you get what you want, when the object in question is present, you no longer experience desire. The slave staves off desire because s/he is faced with an object which demands some sort of work performed upon it. Given Hegel's claims that the self only realises itself in its opposite, The slave's self-consciousness "comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence" (118). Out of the dialectic of self (slave) and other (the object) comes self-consciousness. In it, the "pure being-for-itself of the servile consciousness acquires an existence" (118). In "fashioning the thing, the bondsman's own negativity, his being-for-self, becomes an object for him only through his setting at nought the existing shape confronting him" (118). He "destroys this alien negative moment, posits *himself* as a

negative in the permanent order of things, and thereby becomes *for himself*, someone existing on his own account" (118). In

fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to *him*, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right. The shape does not become something other than himself through being made external to him; for it is precisely this shape that is his pure being-for-self, which in this externality is seen by him to be the truth. Through this rediscovery of himself, the bondsman realises that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own. (118-119).

In this way, as Findlay puts it, the slave "rises above the quaking fear which was his first reaction to absolute otherness as embodied in the lord. Then he achieved self-consciousness in opposition to such otherness [he acknowledged his own inferiority in deference to the master's superiority], now he achieves a self-consciousness not opposed to otherness, but which discovers itself in otherness. In shaping the thing, he becomes aware of his own boundless originality" (522). Without the "discipline of service and obedience" (119), Hegel argues, only absolute "fear [of the otherness of the other] remains" (119), not the discovery of the self in the other which his work on the object in question provides.

In Hegel's view, this flawed relationship of dependency where each subject desires sovereignty only for himself is eventually transcended by means of an "unflawed universality where every subject recognises and promotes active universality in every subject, where we all equally recognise and cooperate with each other" (xvii). The world will come to be so arranged that "all can be servants and thus also lords to one another" (xvii).

### Section C

Briefly, in the remaining Section, C, which is sub-divided into parts devoted to Reason, Spirit, Religion, and Absolute Knowing, Hegel contends that, though the magical synthesis of knower and known is not achievable by individuals at any stage on the path towards this endpoint, this is the ultimate destination of human civilisation as a whole, the history of which is nothing less than the self-realisation of Spirit. Absolute certitude is achieved when Spirit reaches full self-consciousness because the material *objects* in which Spirit manifests itself are the means precisely by which it attains *subjective* self-awareness. Because they both form part of all-embracing, ubiquitous Spirit, the knowing subject and the object known are each inseparable from the other, caught up in a dialectical relationship with each other. Spirit (the Self in Hegel's dialectic triad) explores or mediates itself through material phenomena (its Other) from which it derives a sense of what it inherently is in fact (this would be the synthesis). It is in this way that absolute (self-)consciousness is achieved.