

Prologue

The Ladder and the Labyrinth

THERE IS MUCH TO COMMEND THE STUDY OF HEGEL: HIS ATTENTIVENESS to the deepest, most fundamental questions of philosophy, his uncompromising pursuit of truth, his amazing gift for characterization and critique, his appreciation for the grand sweep of things and the large view, his profound admiration for all that is heroic, especially for the ancient Greeks, those heroes of thought in whom the philosophic spirit first dawned, his penetrating gaze into modernity in all its forms, his enormous breadth of interests, and his audacious claim to have captured absolute knowing in a thoroughly rational account. There is no genuine philosophic education that does not include more than passing acquaintance with this modern giant, who absorbed all the worlds of spiritual vitality that came before him and tried to organize them into a coherent whole.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the great philosophic epic of modernity, appeared in 1807. Hegel finished writing it (minus the Preface) on October 14, 1806. On that day, Napoleon, the hero of the Revolution, defeated the Prussian army and marched into Jena, where Hegel was living at the time. Conceived as the prelude to philosophic Science, the *Phenomenology* offers the reader what Hegel calls a *ladder* to the absolute [26].*

But oh, how difficult it is to climb this ladder! Hegel's epic often seems more labyrinth than ladder. In the words of one commentator, "no book is less suited to a beginner."¹ The Minotaur of these regions, the Demon of Difficulty, haunts every chamber. The monstrous difficulty of Hegel is both legend and cliché. It is so great and persistent, so much a part of how Hegel thinks and speaks, that we risk losing our way at every turn. Add to this that

* The numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in A. V. Miller's edition of the *Phenomenology*. I have occasionally adjusted Miller's translation to a more faithful rendering of Hegel's German.

the *Phenomenology* is not only conceptually demanding but also allusive in ways that baffle the most experienced reader. “Who, or what, is Hegel talking about here?” is a question that often comes to mind as we struggle to connect the logical exposition with a concrete experience, historical event, philosopher, or character in a novel or play.

This book is an introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is not for Hegel scholars, although I hope they will find it useful. It is for the courageous non-specialist, who is just starting to read the *Phenomenology* and would like some help understanding it as a whole. I have tried to provide a thread through Hegel’s labyrinth: to help the reader see and appreciate what it has to teach us. Commentaries on the *Phenomenology* tend to give the reader a summary of its conclusions and teachings, often brilliantly, without necessarily helping him become a better reader of Hegel’s book. They speak from a position above the text. My approach is to take the reader with me into the thick of the argument and to try to make sense of things from the inside, as they unfold.

My plan is to go through the whole of Hegel’s text, starting with the Introduction. The Preface, which precedes the Introduction, was written soon after the *Phenomenology*. Although it contains some of Hegel’s most memorable pronouncements, and has a grandeur all its own, it is not an integral part of the *Phenomenology* itself. Rather than treat the Preface in a separate chapter, I simply refer to crucial statements that Hegel makes there, as they become relevant.

My introduction presupposes some familiarity with the history of philosophy. I also assume that my readers are currently reading the *Phenomenology* and are attempting to make sense of it on their own. They will need patience and fortitude. First-time readers in particular must bear in mind that even the most strenuous effort at clarity on the part of a would-be guide is bound to have its shortcomings, and will not remove, or appreciably soften, Hegel’s hardness. Nor should it. As Hegel reminds us in his Preface, philosophy is hard work. It requires “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labor” of real thinking [19].

We do not have to agree with Hegel’s ultimate claims in order to learn important things from him. We learn from his dialectical way of thinking, which challenges our most basic assumptions about what it means to think, his trenchant character studies, and the many powerful insights that appear throughout the *Phenomenology*. Above all, we learn about the complex spirit of modernity, and so come to know ourselves, and our origins, more deeply.

As my title indicates, I will treat the *Phenomenology* as Hegel’s logic of desire. Desire, as we shall see, has a specific meaning in Hegel’s book. I use

the term more broadly to refer to the passionate striving by which consciousness “presses forward to true knowledge” [77] and climbs the ladder to absolute knowing. I do so to suggest an analogy between the education of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* and the account of philosophy as erotic striving in Plato’s *Symposium*. In that dialogue, Diotima, Socrates’ mentor in love-matters, also uses the image of a ladder to depict the soul’s ascent to the divine (211C). The *Phenomenology* is a *logic* of desire because it attempts to give a rational account, a *logos*, of the mortal striving for immortal truth. It is the account of thought *on its way* to Science.

Desire and its completion are closely connected with another central theme of this introduction: *selfhood*. The self is the point around which the *Phenomenology* turns. It is the central concern of the so-called German idealists: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Truth, as Hegel says in the Preface, must be grasped “not as *substance* but just as much as *subject*” or self [17]. The task of the *Phenomenology* is to demonstrate how truth and subject, being and thought, God and man, are ultimately one. *Geist*, which means both *spirit* and *mind*, is the condition of fully developed selfhood. This is selfhood that exists as the living interrelation and community of human individuals. Hegel’s book tells us how this condition has been produced in the course of history. More importantly, it reveals the precise way in which our communal or social being is essential to the history and perfection of *knowledge*. For Hegel, the history of our sociality is most deeply and properly understood as the history of *reason*.

Alexandre Kojève begins his famous commentary on the *Phenomenology* with the following definition: “Man is self-consciousness.” My efforts take their cue from Kojève’s gloss. They are devoted to an exploration of *what self is* for Hegel, what follows from the identification of human nature with selfhood understood as self-consciousness, and why, as Hegel says at one point, “self-consciousness is desire” [174]. One implication of identifying man and self-consciousness is that man, for Hegel, does not just come to know the truth: he comes to know that he *is* the truth. The meaning of this extraordinary claim will become clearer as we proceed.

The identity of man and truth is closely connected with a question central to this introduction: Why is so much of the *Phenomenology* devoted to the *practical* realm, to man as a *social* being? The question points to the double goal of Hegel’s book. The *Phenomenology* chronicles the path to Science. Hegel’s goal is to transform philosophy as the *love* of knowing into *actual knowing* [5]. But the book also shows the path by which man as self-consciousness comes to be self-actualized and *free* in the context of human community. In the *Phenomenology* these two paths converge and become one path: human self-actualization and absolute knowing, the practical and

the theoretical aspects of spirit, are ultimately identical. Or, as I mentioned above, the history of our sociality is the history of reason. In the course of our journey, we will explore the meaning of this identity between the practical and the theoretical.

Several commentators are especially helpful to one's journey through Hegel's labyrinth. The provocative commentary by Alexandre Kojève, although I disagree with some of its conclusions, is useful for its treatment of self-consciousness, and its discussion of Hegel's Wise Man or Sage (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Nichols translation, 1969). Stanley Rosen's *G. W. F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (1974) offers an insightful overview of Hegel's *Science of Logic* and *Phenomenology*. Rosen spells out Hegel's relation to Plato, Aristotle, and Fichte. He argues that the *Science of Logic* is Hegel's most fundamental work, and that a proper understanding of the *Phenomenology* presupposes a study of the *Logic*. The definitive scholarly commentary in English on the *Phenomenology* is the two-volume *Hegel's Ladder* by H. S. Harris (1997). Harris is indispensable for his painstaking treatment of Hegel's topical references and his grasp of the overall argument. His dogged attempt to identify the historical *Gestalten* or human "shapes" that Hegel sets out to analyze reminds us that the *Phenomenology*, in spite of its abstract language, is about concrete human experiences. Harris saved me from many mistakes and prompted many new ideas. My debt to him will be evident in the endnotes to my chapters.

The book on the *Phenomenology* that I find most congenial is *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* by Jean Hyppolite (1946). Hyppolite makes Hegel's book come alive. His account is spirited and generally faithful to Hegel's text and argument. Hyppolite is especially good on the connection between logic and human existence, and on the controversial role of religion in Hegel's thought.

The clearest, most concise summary of Hegel's philosophy as a whole is that of Richard Kroner. It is entitled "Hegel's Philosophical Development," and appears as the Introduction to Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*, translated by T. M. Knox. Kroner's engaging essay is well suited to the first-time reader.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the first fruit of Hegel's youthful enthusiasm for the absolute. Here Hegel is still on his way to the more mature elaboration of his System that will appear in the *Science of Logic* (first edition, 1812–13) and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830). Like these two later masterworks, the *Phenomenology* is conceptually daunting. But unlike them, it is also exuberantly imaginative, rhetorically charged, and often, it seems, deliberately cryptic. Hegel strikes the note of inspired revelation: of shocking reversals, secrets brought to light, and pretensions

unmasked. The tone of high drama and sudden disclosure befits a book that puts us in the thick of spirit's "immediate existence" [35]. It is a wild, sprawling work that gives credence to Hegel's claim that truth is "a bacchanalian frenzy in which no one is not drunk" [47].

The *Phenomenology* fascinates and instructs largely because of its thematic prodigality, Bacchic exuberance, and wealth of images. Difficult to grasp as a whole, it tends to reveal its riches in its individual parts, more so than any of Hegel's other works. In attempting to bring some clarity to the *Phenomenology*, I have tried to preserve the colorfulness, vitality, and high drama of this astonishing book.

The intention and the structure of the 1807 *Phenomenology* have long been the subject of scholarly debate. It has been argued that the book is essentially incoherent, the product of Hegel's conflicting goals and changes in attitude. Some have argued that Hegel abandoned the work as a necessary introduction to Science. Most scholars agree, however, that the *Phenomenology* continued to be essential to Hegel's philosophic project, even if its precise function is difficult to grasp and inherently problematic. I have steered clear of these issues. I have tried to get into the spirit of what Hegel is doing as much as possible, and take his argument at its best. My goal has been, above all, to make my reader *want* to read Hegel. Like Plato's dialogues, the *Phenomenology* ought to surprise us with each new reading. To be critically open to what it has to teach us, we must follow the saying of Heraclitus: "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it out."

First-time readers of the *Phenomenology* experience two major problems: grasping the shape of the whole book, and understanding terms like "in itself" and "for itself." I address the first problem in Chapter 16, entitled *Interlude*, by providing some diagrams of the whole "journey of consciousness." Readers may want to consult these diagrams at an early stage of their journey. As for Hegel's baffling terminology, I have not provided a glossary but will instead define important terms as they come up. My reason for doing so is that the meaning of Hegel's terms is somewhat fluid and depends on the context in which they are used. My first attempt at defining "in itself" and "for itself" appears early in Chapter 3, *Of Mere Being*.

In writing this introduction to the *Phenomenology*, I used the English translation by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). I also consulted the older version by J. B. Baillie (New York: Humanities Press, 1910, latest reprint 1977), and the two-volume French translation by Jean Hyppolite (Aubier: Paris, 1941, 1946). My German text was the one edited by Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952).

There is an excellent translation of Chapter Six of the *Phenomenology* ("Spirit") by Daniel E. Shannon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), and a good

translation of Hegel's Preface, with a running commentary, by Yirmiyahu Yovel (*Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005]).

I offer this book in celebration of the bicentennial of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

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