

THE INITIAL CONDITION IN HEGEL'S PHENOMENOLOGY

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I

FOR Hegel the world in which we find ourselves is one where the absolute has manifested itself through a dialectic self-unfolding. Yet, the theoretical reconstruction of this process, as he points out in his *Phenomenology of Mind*, begins with the abstract, unhistorical condition described as naive consciousness. This we must consider to be a falsifying projection from the point of view of its partiality; its perspective is justified by the dialectical process which it helps explain.

The relationship of part to whole is in Hegel peculiar and programmatically preeminent so that our judgment of Hegel's philosophical merit depends upon what we understand him to be doing at this point and how we assess it. The "unhappy consciousness" which results from the partiality of consciousness unable to find a unity with the structure of reality (the whole) carries the weight of Hegel's political and social thought. But even this important manifestation of the absolute spirit in human history must be understood as manifesting a yet more general condition of rationality. This condition is both expressed and manifested in the "first step" of the *Phenomenology*, the discussion of sense-certainty. Here Hegel suggests that the partial, as a theoretical projection, when not consi-

dered as a mere part of the whole (that explains it, which it rationally demands and to which it leads theorizing toward) corrupts understanding and makes eristic and arrogant claims to explanatory hegemony. The part, as for instance a particular scientific field, not governed by the balance of the whole, falsifyingly seeks to "swallow" all other dialectical claims. A warfare ensues among the contenders of various partial visions in which each is alienated from self-understanding and thereby its appropriate function. This theoretical alienation also carries with it a distortion of passion, of life and potentiality.

For Hegel various philosophical positions, other than his own, since they are seen to present a theoretical perspective of some stage of dialectic partiality, are examples of a breakdown of rationality which is manifested in theoretical and passionate or spiritual distortion. Consequently, a host of rich themes suggest themselves and depend on this "first step." Our following discussion on sense-certainty is offered under the view that it is vital to all themes in Hegel.

II

Naïf consciousness presents as a philosophical position the world as considered existing apart from itself, and that it itself is distinct from the world. For Hegel this position is not only untenable, it presents dialectical tensions which lead on to a more sophisticated philosophical position and, ultimately, to his own systemic insight which embraces all philosophical positions and stands over against them as rest stands to motion.

The discursive expression of Hegel's philosophical conclusion, "that the real is rational and the rational is real,"¹ must do justice to the following methodological demand:

Everything depends on grasping and expressing the ultimate truth not as Substance but as Subject as well. At the same time we must note that concrete substantiality implicates and involves the universal or the immediacy of knowledge itself, as well

¹ *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), p. 14: "Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig."

as the immediacy which is being, or immediacy *qua* object for knowledge.²

Furthermore, the unity of Substance and Subject must be viewed as a systematic, teleological concreteness which can be ultimately grasped as a totality. Therefore,

realized purpose, or concrete actuality, is movement and development unfolded. But this very unrest is the self; and it is one and the same with that immediacy and simplicity characteristic of the beginning just for the reason that it is the result and has returned upon itself — while this latter again is just the self, and the self is self-referring and self-relating identity and simplicity.³

Also note:

The truth is only realized in the form of a system, that Substance is essentially subject, is expressed in the idea which represents the Absolute as *Geist*.⁴

The first step in Hegel's philosophical *scala perfectionis* in the *Phenomenology* is under the title: *Certainty at the level of Sense-Experience — the "This", and "Meaning."* Herein the initial distinction is made between "mere apprehension" (*Auffassen*) and "conceptual comprehension" (*Begreifen*). The immediacy of *Auffassen* is to be kept free of *Begreifen* thereby providing mere-ness to sensuous certainty. There is no differentiation in the landscape here, there are no objects, the sensuous immediacy alone is the concrete content. What Hegel proposes by *Auffassen* is a kind of ontological myth reminiscent of unformed matter in the classical metaphysical tradition. Such sensuous immediacy must indeed become object but it can only do so when it is recognized as object for mind; that is, its encapsulated mereness is destroyed when it becomes an object for "philosophical science" and yet, ironically, it has no existence outside philosophical science. The ordinary sense observations grasp

² *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

sense-objects, not the sensuous container in itself. It is only for philosophical speculation that *Auffassen* exists. Therefore, though it can be understood as the container or substrate for the endless variety of sense-objects in the world, in itself, "this bare fact of *certainty*, however, is really and admittedly the abstractest and poorest kind of *truth*."⁵

With *Auffassen* we cannot have before our consciousness an event, say a man falling off a ship. This would be a selective particularization indicating an intrusion of conceptual comprehension, *Begreifen*, into mere apprehension, *Auffassen*. Indeed, the understanding of "an event" or "a fact" must intrude into unconstructed sensuous existence and propose a project for the container's replete possibilities. For instance, once we make the initial intrusion and speak of a man falling off a ship then we are on the road to presenting an elaborate systematic project or explanation. That is, the question arises as to what is the knowledge necessary for considering a man falling off a ship? Is it psychological, biological, chemical, physical, or what? If the knowledge project is psychological then we have a very definite group of facts, let us say, those appropriate to the psychological explanation of a suicide. Again, if the knowledge project is from physics then we also have a definite, though different, group of facts: facts appropriate for a different explanation. In any case, we are led to understand that a systematic condition is essential to all conceptual comprehension.

The further problem is the relation of the explanation projects of the sciences to philosophical science. This is something that must be faced because of the "indifference" or, to use Ryle's language, the different "logical bearing" of the facts of one explanatory project to the others. This problem becomes crucial for Hegel at a later stage. What we must attend to at present is that we find, when we want knowledge, that we must proceed by abstracting from what is concrete and immediately given as *Auffassen*, the "this"; we make the "this" rational when it is instrumentalized by a conceptual grouping, an explanatory project. The "this" in itself is not explained, however. It itself is not dealt with by the explanatory projects of the sciences. Therefore, the "this" is specifically a philosophical entity.

But to speak of the "this" as if it can be spoken of as merely exterior and essentially unrelated to Subject is a philosophical fal-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

sification. It is the reification of a mythical entity. Indeed, Parmenides did exactly this. One might reasonably conjecture, his thought turned upon the inability of any conceptual comprehension, *Begreifen*, to do justice to the "this." The partial truth of the explanatory projects of the sciences cancel each other through exclusion or opposition. Truth, in its impartial and total systematic sense, "the well-rounded wholeness" of the "this," is immune from characterization. Parmenides, unlike Hegel, has no proposal for a philosophical science. The "this" considered as the real, the concrete ground of all possible abstractions, with its concreteness in contrast to the mediated or abstract quality of explanation, can not be spoken nor can it be thought. We can neither know the real nor speak of it for Parmenides because mind is not seen by him as unified with and inseparable from the world. He leaves no room for a philosophical science which considers reality from the point of view of such a unification and consequently proposed truth as absolute over above and embracing the truths of the explanatory projects of the sciences.

Parenthetically, may I suggest that when the "this" is the consciousness of the individual itself, the ego, the Parmenidean approach accords with that of Fichte, for whom the ego is also alienated from absolute truth because it can be known only when objectified in a particular conscious content. In Kant, however, where the "apperception of consciousness" is reflexive, the ego can know itself simultaneously as subject and object. I might further suggest that the strength of the Cartesian "cogito" and a crucial turn for the ontological argument depends upon this simultaneousness which Hegel wishes to objectify by grounding it in an intuition of immediacy unifying both knowledge and being.

J. Loewenberg tells us, "What the *Phenomenology* seeks to investigate, as Hegel explains in the introduction, is apparent knowledge, apparent in the sense of merely appearing and being speciously self-evident."⁶ Indeed, the speciousness of the certainty of sense is expressed in that it is a certainty of nothing determinate. But this from the viewpoint of philosophical science is not crucial. Rather, the impossibility of sense-certainty remaining self-encapsulated and isolated from the subject is all important. For the attempt to grasp the object of sense-certainty, its total indeterminateness,

⁶ J. Loewenberg, "The Comedy of Immediacy in Hegel's *Phenomenology*," *Mind*, vol. 44, Jan. 1935, p. 23.

demands the recognition of a grasping ego, "in the shape of pure Ego."

Hegel tells us that the "I here does not think."⁷ It is a pure "this" counterposed to the pure "this" of the object. Neither the I nor the thing is considered as having a multitude of qualities, of being replete with projects for the sciences, Hegel emphasizes this point:

Rather the thing, the fact, *is*; and it *is* merely because it *is*. It *is* — that is the essential point of sense-knowledge, and that bare fact of being, that simple immediacy, constitutes its truth. In the same way the certainty *qua relation* [to the I], the certainty "of" something, is an immediate pure relation; consciousness is I — nothing more, a pure *this*; the *individual* consciousness knows a pure *this*, or knows what is *individual*.⁸

A critical question which may be asked, at this point, is why we can not consider the pure I as reflexive and thereby having already come to the goal of philosophical science by having isolated a pure thing and a pure I? Of course, one could point to this as a diremption between philosophical science and contingent truth. Nevertheless, Hegel's essential implied answer is to direct us to the truly mythical status of these entities. As Loewenburg might put it: so far we are "impersonating" thought, we are not thinking.

The "this" of the object, sense-certainty, has demanded the "this" of a subject, the ego, and yet as the first philosophical entity could not exist for thought without demanding our awareness of the second, so also both can not exist immediately, they must be mediated and consequently yield the next stage of the dialectical pursuit of reality; they demand a new metaphysical entity. Hegel says,

When we reflect, for the purpose of philosophical analysis, on this distinction, [of the two "theses,"] it is seen that neither the one nor the other is merely immediate, merely *is* in sense-certainty, but at the same time *mediated*: I have the certainty through the other, viz. through the actual fact; and this, again, exists in that certainty through the other, viz. through the I.⁹

⁷ *Phenomenology*, p. 150.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Pure Being is the metaphysical entity which is "the mediated simplicity" or the "universality" of the "thises." The manner and the meaning of this conclusion is as follows: first, once we are confronted with a contentless and undetermined object and a contentless and undetermined I, which exists upon the prior recognition of the existence of the object, we can return to pondering the truth of the object from the vantage of intellectual demands for sensuous existence. We can ask about the *Now* and the *Here*. From this point of view "the object is the real truth, is the essential reality; it is, quite indifferent to whether it is known or not; it remains and stands even though it is not known, while the knowledge does not exist if the object is not there." What Hegel has done is to allow intellectual categories into the object which could not have been introduced when we considered sensuous reality as mere apprehension, *Auffassen*; yet, conceptual comprehension, *Begreifen*, is not considered at this point as elucidating concrete objects, as in the projects of the sciences, but, rather, presenting rational faculties capable of dealing with the metaphysical entity. . . . the object.

Second, Hegel by the thought experiment which tests the universality of the *Here* and the *Now* establishes the impossibility of establishing these "universals" as contingently applicable. The level of truth, Hegel wishes us to concede, is the universality of sense-certainty. At this stage of the dialectic it is impossible to deal with the concrete objects of the world. The pure object and the pure I spun off it are mediated by Pure Being. A rather Kantian moment in the dialectic. Hegel elucidates:

Pure Being, then, remains as the essential element for this sense-certainty, since sense-certainty in its very nature proves the universal to be the truth of its object. But that Pure Being is not in the form of something immediate, but of something in which the process of negation and mediation is essential. Consequently it is not what we intend or "mean" by being, but being with the characteristic that it is an abstraction, the purely universal; and our intended "meaning," which takes the truth of sense-certainty to be *not* something universal, is alone left standing in contrast to this empty, indifferent Here and Now.¹⁰

Because the "this" which contains the *Now* and the *Here* does

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

not disappear under the philosophical investigation but, rather, its concrete particular content disappears or becomes "indifferent" — this tree, this house, this afternoon, this evening — "the object, which professed to be the essential reality, is now found to lie in the opposite element, namely in knowledge, which formerly was the non-essential factor."¹¹

If this is the case, then philosophical science cannot be asked to deduce or find *a priori* a particular sense content: the particularity of the thing escapes at this stage of the dialectic. The truth of sense-certainty must take the whole of sense-certainty as its reality, nevertheless. It must not rest with the "I" or the "object" taken separately.

Its truth stands fast as a self-identical relation making no distinction of essential or non-essential, between I and object, and into which, therefore, in general, no distinction can find its way.¹²

I am directly conscious, I intuit and nothing more, I am pure intuition; I am — seeing, looking.¹³

Briefly, what Hegel has done is turn the philosophic moment of sense-certainty into a form of intuitive immediacy which presents nothing more than its content. The dialectical process in this moment has exposed that immediacy as mind in and for itself. For instance, the *Now* is a universal made concrete by being one and the same with its immediate content. The *Now* at a prior stage of unfolding, considered from the viewpoint of an abstract universal gives no content but merely the structure of such a content, its abstract condition as an "I." However, this is synthesized in an intuition which reestablishes the object of naive consciousness, mediated by the "I," into a reality where the content is in and for itself as mind. Hegel's conclusion is then that

It is clear from all this that the dialectic process involved in sense-certainty is nothing else than the mere history of the process — of its experience; and sense-certainty itself is nothing else than simply this history.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

The conclusion here for philosophical science, which it proves again and again on each different dialectical level as it examines the unfolding of each level, is that the finite, the contingent, is actual only in so far as it becomes a phase in the self-development of absolute spirit. This is an intuition which is grasped and validated by consciousness of the totally unfolding and unfolded process. Hegel put this movement succinctly in *Geschichte der Philosophie*: "The being of mind is its act, and its act is to be aware of itself."¹⁵ He writes in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*:

True reality is merely the grasp of reinstated self-identity, of reflecting into its own self in and from its other, and is not an original and primal unity as such. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves.¹⁶

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¹⁵ *Gesch. der Philos.*, xiii, 45.

¹⁶ *Phenomenology*, p. 81.