On Reading Hegel before the Age of Eighty

Lecture delivered by Janet Dougherty
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When I was a sophomore in college one of my professors, to whom I owe a great deal, told me he thought that one ought to postpone reading Hegel until about the age of eighty, presumably accepting the consequence that one might thereby entirely escape the task. The breadth and power of Hegel's work, so difficult to assess or criticize, was certainly part of the reason for his opinion, and perhaps he thought Hegel's philosophy was wrong in important respects. For me, however, it was already too late. My freshman year another professor has assigned large portions of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and I had, at first dutifully, and then with great excitement spent many hours on it. I thought I could see then what must constitute my life's work. I must read the philosophical works Hegel read, study what he knew of history and science, and then return to Hegel's system to evaluate whether he had indeed articulated the truth. Would I have thought more freely and with greater clarity had I never been gripped by the possibility that Hegel may have known and articulated the truth?

Later, in Prague in the spring of 1979, I recognized a copy of one of Hegel's books next to several by Marx in a bookstore window as I was walking with a Czech friend. My friend, noticing my glance, instructed me "Don't look at that. That's trash." His error was understandable. The dialectical theory of history, as expounded by Marx and adopted as the rhetoric of communism, had a great impact on his life and the life of his nation. It was taught as dogma and exploited as an excuse for a tyranny imposed by the Soviet Union. I felt deeply privileged that I had always been free to examine these thinkers on

their own terms, but at the moment the freedoms I normally enjoyed were being highlighted by many contrasts. It was important for me to see to what effect others had exploited the theories with which I was familiar from books.

Obviously no thinker should be judged on the basis of the effects he has had on his followers. Still, the political possibilities of liberalism and of totalitarianism form part of the context in which we read philosophical works. Moreover, political freedom and the capacity to recognize the truth are far from identical. Although this lecture is primarily on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, I will say a little here about Hegel's political writings, in which he presents the modern state as the context of the achievement of human freedom. My reading of Hegel belongs primarily in the context of the goal of our education at St. John's College as I see it, the goal of rendering our minds freer and therefore less vulnerable to succumb to the domination of prejudices of any sort. Hegel's work directly challenges many contemporary prejudices while revealing the source of others. I intend to illuminate in what follows some of what I mean by that claim.

Hegel is very difficult. It may even be that finally the *Phenomenology* is unintelligible on its own, without a prior understanding of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. But how can we not confront Hegel's claim to have put an end to philosophy as we encounter it in our freshman readings as the love of (and striving for) wisdom? If Hegel's thought is correct, Wisdom is in principle available to us all (Preface, section 13). Hegel challenges one of the premises of the education we offer at St. John's College (there are of course a variety of appropriate formulations): since none of us, and perhaps no one at all, is in possession

of the truth, we must strive to speak together in such a way as to gain greater clarity both concerning our presuppositions and concerning the fundamental questions that recur in our collective thought, demanding answers. We must try to discern the barriers that hinder us in the attempt to attain a recognition of what is. We must strive for such clarity because everything depends upon it, everything that matters. For we wish to be responsible human beings, living in accord with an honest understanding of ourselves and of the problematic character of the world we find ourselves living in, and recognizing one another as similarly responsible human beings. For Hegel, these tasks are transformed by the availability of truth and its conformity with what is realizable concretely in the ethical and political as well as the intellectual community of human beings. The premise of the community of SJC is anti-Hegelian. This fact makes reading Hegel both crucial for us and deeply problematic, far beyond the difficulties of negotiating one's way through his prose.

Allow me to cite a couple of passages that illustrate the grandiosity of Hegel's claims:

> The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself in its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result* that only in the end is what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz., to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself. (Preface, 20)

We cannot know this result, the Absolute, unless it has been achieved. In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel says:

> The experience of itself which consciousness goes through can, in accordance with its Notion, comprehend nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of the truth of Spirit. . . In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something

> alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of 'other', at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself. (Intro., 89)

The *Phenomenology* ends with a section called Absolute Knowing. The passages I have cited do more than illustrate Hegel's confidence that the Truth, the whole, Absolute Knowledge, can become available to the readers of his work. They also illustrate his conviction that the whole is achieved by the development of spirit over time to its completion. In this completion, the distinction between subject and object, familiar especially to readers of Kant and to grammarians of all sorts, collapses. Absolute Knowledge, Truth, simply is. The meaning of this claim is the key to the movement of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and to each of its parts, including the assigned reading for senior seminar. I will try to cast some light on those readings in the course of this lecture. But first a digression on the role of history in illuminating the truth for human beings, that is, on the development of consciousness over time.

I. **Background**

We encounter first in Rousseau an insistence that we must understand human beings in the light of alterations that have occurred in our species over time. In his *Discourse on Inequality* Rousseau presents us with the paradoxical position of man in society: the nature of man is obscured not only by gradual changes in our way of being but also by laws and conventions that shape contemporary society. But it is only through knowledge of nature that we can isolate the influence of law and evaluate its suitability to the beings it governs:

> But as long as we are ignorant of natural man, it is futile for us to attempt to determine the law he has received or what is best suited to his constitution. All that we can see very clearly regarding this law is that for it to be law, not only must the will of him who is obliged by it be capable of knowing submission to it, but also, for it to be natural, it must speak directly by the law of nature. (Preface, Hackett, p. 35)

The paradox leads Rousseau to develop a hypothetical history of man designed to render discernible a standard for just rule. Rousseau's *Social Contract* is a necessary sequel to his *Discourse on Inequality*, which ends with this scathing attack on contemporary inequality:

> ... it follows that moral inequality, authorized by private right alone, is contrary to natural right whenever it is not combined in the same proportion with physical inequality: a distinction that is sufficient to determine what one should think in this regard about the sort of inequality that reigns among all civilized people, for it is obviously contrary to the law of nature, however it may be defined, for a child to command an old man, for an imbecile to lead a wise man, and for a handful of people to gorge themselves on superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities. (p. 81)

The Social Contract begins "I want to inquire whether there can be some legitimate and sure rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they are and laws as they might be. I will always try in this inquiry to bring together what right permits with what interest prescribes...." There is no guarantee that such a solution can be fully achieved, but Rousseau outlines in this work what would be required. Rousseau ends Book I of *On the Social Contract* this way:

> ... instead of destroying natural equality, the fundamental compact, on the contrary, substitutes a moral and legitimate equality to whatever physical inequality nature may have been able to impose upon men, and that, however unequal in force or intelligence they may be, men all become equal by convention and by right.

No less than a complete transformation of the human subjects and the freedom that characterizes them must take place.

Hegel too is concerned with what I have described as the paradoxical position of modern man. Unlike Rousseau, however, he sees the paradox dissolving through its spontaneous development in the unfolding of consciousness. Rousseau points to the *perfectibility* of natural man, a term with a rather elusive meaning that refers both to the absence of a static limiting nature and to the possibility of a variety of developments. There is no natural human whole. Hegel by contrast indicates that the course of human history correlates with the development of spirit and culminates in a perfected state in which human beings can combine without alienation or loss of freedom in an ordered, coherent whole. The beginnings of this development are visible in the Lordship and Bondage section of the *Phenomenology*, one of the most easily misunderstood passages in the assigned readings from that book. While Rousseau sees human society as requiring the development of a political and moral freedom that completely supplants natural freedom, Hegel understands autonomy of mind and the political freedom of individuals to coincide in principle in his time. The modern state is the concrete manifestation of a necessary process of the development of mind or spirit. The loss of unselfconscious nature that for Rousseau precipitates the establishment of rampant injustice is for Hegel no loss. Freedom is nothing if it is not rational.

The problem of what it means to be free is more visible in Rousseau than in Hegel precisely in that Rousseau sees no satisfactory solution for modern man: natural freedom

is unattainable and moral or political freedom requires, to put it bluntly, submission to a lie. (See especially Bk. II, Ch.VII of *The Social Contract.)* Both Kant and Hegel were powerfully affected by their readings of Rousseau. The solution offered by Kant, to recognize both the power of natural science and the limits to human reason, along with the moral freedom he claims any nine year old knows by experience that she has, leaves our desire for a comprehensive account no more satisfied than Rousseau's. We must live in two worlds, that defined by the laws of nature and that we envision as governed by the moral laws. Kant gives voice openly to his own imperfect acceptance of this split in his essays on history, in which he envisions a republic characterized by freedom as a culmination of human development for which there is no guarantee. Hegel's work is a valiant attempt to unify the world as it is understood by modern natural science with the freedom that he understood to characterize human beings. His solution involves the dissolution of all paradox, all contradiction in the unity of absolute spirit. For us who acknowledge great difficulties in grasping things as they are, Hegel's work is both implausible and profoundly compelling. It would be foolhardy to dismiss out of ignorance Hegel's claim that he articulated a knowledge of the whole. As in Socrates' second sailing (*Phaedo,* 99d-100a), in considering Hegel's solution we embark on an inquiry into things through the words of another human being, in particular one who has developed articulate speech to an extraordinary degree. We must examine Hegel's claim that the proper meaning of words is revealed in the whole as it is manifest in the process represented in the *Phenomenology* and that this process *is* a development of the things themselves. Hegel's claim is that he has brought together in responsible, coherent speech all that characterizes modern, i.e., rational man. If this account founders, it is for us to

bear witness to its defects and to continue to strive for recognition of things as they are. Even more important, we must pursue clarity about the desire for intellectual mastery that Hegel's system exemplifies and whether it is in some way at odds with a true understanding of what is.

II. Consciousness

A. *Sense-Certainty and Perception*

Obviously the small portion of Hegel's corpus that we read allows only that we begin to embark on the perhaps quixotic project I have outlined. But the beginning is crucial. Disdaining attempts to articulate a method for reason, to define his terms or to list a set of criteria, Hegel begins with Sense-Certainty, the immediate awareness of all that our senses convey. One of the most important observations the reader will make is that Hegel's (inevitable) use of language here renders it impossible to grasp particulars immediately as particular: the words 'here' and 'now,' as he points out, have no single referent. "Here' is just as much where I stand as where you sit, and the word 'now' is similarly ambiguous. Conscious awareness may have forms that avoid the problem. My son's bearded dragon, for example, is not entirely lacking in consciousness but presumably makes no attempt to name things and so avoids the trap Hegel describes. When something outside him seems edible, he eats. For Hegel a merely functional sort of consciousness is not good enough. In sense-certainty the conscious subject presumes the existence of a substance outside itself, something that one may fail to grasp as it is. Knowledge may or may not be available, but it is crucial that there be something outside of the potential knower that is true. The universals we use illustrate the difficulty we

have in knowing that we grasp the truth: language is evidently inadequate to the experience. In recognizing this inadequacy we become aware of what it is to be a subject, while implicitly in our speech we acknowledge not the individuals we thought we were talking about, but Being in general. Hegel jokes that this is just the divine character of language – to reverse the meaning of what is said and make it into something else. Sense-certainty with the help of language utterly fails in the attempt to grasp individual particulars. There is no truth in sense-certainty on its own. In the effort to get back to whatever the potentially knowing subject attempts to grasp in sense-certainty, consciousness becomes the perceiving consciousness, and the object of its consciousness becomes the thing.

We are familiar with the contrast between sensation and perception from Aristotle: one perceives an object through a kind of common sense that relates sensations and identifies them with a thing. Hegel would welcome the association with Aristotle who, like Hegel, appears at least to consider the mind adequate to its object, but the language of motion that Hegel uses in the section on perception differentiates his treatment from anything we read in *De Anima:*

> Perception takes what is present to it as universal. Just as universality is its principle in general, the immediately self-differentiating moments within perception are universal ...With the emergence of the principle, the two moments which in their appearing merely occur, also come into being: one being the act of perceiving, the other ... the object perceived. In essence the object is the same as the movement .... (111)

Hegel goes on to discuss two different accounts of thinghood, i.e., as a collection or plurality of properties, and as the medium in which these properties inhere (Section 113). Thirdly, the properties themselves can be thought of as independent of the thing observed

(section 115). Hegel presents these not as a list of possibilities from which we can choose as we endeavor to understand what it is to be a thing, but as aspects (moments) of a development:

> The sensuous universality, or the *immediate* unity of being and the negative, is thus a *property* only when the One and the pure universality are developed from it and differentiated from each other, and when the sensuous universality unites them, it is this relation of the universality to the pure essential moments which at last completes the Thing. (115)

It is no accident, but rather the fundamental meaning of consciousness, that it moves from less to more adequate accounts of its object, and it is fundamental to the object of perception that what it is for consciousness results from this movement. More important even than the movement through various theoretical approaches to the thing, consciousness moves from a less to a more thorough grasp of its own role. Here, in perception as in sense-certainty, the object is first of all considered primary. It is "the True and universal, the self-identical, while consciousness is alterable and unessential ..." (116). Consciousness can err. Each new account of the object is not merely a superior attempt to get at the truth of the thing, to correct its previous errors, but also an opportunity for consciousness to witness its own movement (118). It comes to recognize that "The outcome and the truth of its perception is its dissolution, or its reflection out of the Truth into itself." This leads to the claim that "We are ... the universal medium in which such moments are kept apart and exist each on its own" (119). Awareness of the variety of things in the world gives us an opportunity to be aware of the role of the perceiving consciousness, which itself unites the various moments of perception.

There is not only one Thing in the world. Things are understood in relation and in contrast to one another (123). The recognition of this fact could lead to a discussion of the various species of things that exist in the world. It could do so if Hegel had confidence in the significance of the names language gives us to differentiate things from one another or if he posited something like Nature as a whole, a unit that contains a variety of individual types that one can accurately identify and name. Instead Hegel reflects upon the relation between universals represented in the thing and the multiplicity of individuals that are supposedly one with that universality. There is no 'red' without a red thing, and there are many red things, but 'red' is none of them. Similarly, there is no 'dragon' simply, only a variety of individuals that fall under that category. The gap between the word that refers to one thing and the multiplicity of individuals signals the problematic character of sensuous universality (130). "Sound common sense" is the faculty of mind that corresponds to the sensuous universality: it takes itself to be a solid realistic consciousness" (131), Hegel says, but it is in fact only the play of the abstractions of singleness and universality, essence and the unessential, for it goes back and forth between these pairs, never resting in an unambiguous account of the beings it encounters. Hegel is casting doubt on the naïve awareness of what is in the world. There is no simple, reliable, unphilosophical grasp of things available to us, neither for the naïve, uneducated human being or, it turns out, for the modern empirical scientific inquirer who pretends to impose nothing on what he observes (for example, Bacon). Only philosophy "... recognizes [mental entities] as the pure essences, the absolute elements and powers ... [and] in doing so, recognizes them *in their specific determinateness* as well, and is therefore master over them, whereas perceptual

understanding [or sound common sense] takes them for the truth and is led on by them from one error to another" (131). The section on perception ends with an attack upon the pretensions of common sense which leads to the crudely inadequate distinction between what is essential and what is inessential. The fancy philosophical sounding term "inert simple essence" turns out to correlate with so-called common sense, which cannot by itself make sense of the stability of things in the world along with their flux and variability. It attributes to things first one essence or abstraction, then another, and can never escape the infinite series of abstractions. Philosophy must bring them together, somehow getting beyond mere abstractions to the things themselves. The work of the next section of the *Phenomenology*, on Force and the Understanding, accomplishes this by bringing closer together the conscious subject with its object of inquiry through what Hegel calls the Notion.

B. *Transition through Force and Understanding to Self-Consciousness*

Autonomy, the giving of *nomoi* to and for oneself, is the fundamental characteristic of consciousness, despite the appearance that conscious thought must conform itself to the way things are, discerning and articulating laws that underlie the flux of perceived objects in the world. Modern (Baconian) scientific inquiry exemplifies the systematic response to the fear that thought imposes nonsense on the world if it does not restrict itself to the articulation of observed relations. It radically distrusts human thought, presuming as superior the correlation of observable facts. It would freeze the development of consciousness before it could attain to truth and therefore to its autonomous activity. However productive of useful tools for manipulating the environment, this radical self-

restraint is ultimately quite wrong-headed, in Hegel's view. It is not therefore worthless. Rather, it was an appropriate response to the tradition of scholasticism and an important stage in the development of self-conscious spirit. While a certain sort of (Cartesian) skepticism is at the root of the development of modern science, allowing the investigator of the world to put aside his presumptions and expectations, Hegel's work exhibits and recounts a deeper and more enduring sort of skepticism directed against each form of consciousness as it appears, including modern scientific methodology. The road of the development of natural consciousness can

> ... be regarded as the pathway of *doubt* or more precisely as the way of despair ....this path is the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge .... The skepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness . . . renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is. (78)

In particular, in the section on Force and the Understanding, consciousness must escape the domination of Newtonian science with its emphasis on laws.

The laws Newton articulates are inherent in the phenomena and consciousness, putting aside its own character, must acknowledge and articulate them. In general, modern scientific thought integrates a wide range of phenomena by means of a limited set of laws that articulate objective relationships graspable by the human understanding. Kant's categories of the understanding, which account for the possibility of Newtonian science, are thrown into question and finally overcome insofar as force and law are superseded in Hegel's account. The section entitled *Force and the Understanding* is, then, a challenge to Kant's system as a definitive statement of what human beings can know. In it Hegel also challenges Kant's separation between natural science on the one hand and serious

thought about ethics and politics on the other. Both take on a new appearance after the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness. The section on force and the understanding culminates in that transition.

Before we can see how to move past the sort of thought that characterizes modern science, we have first to grasp its character. "Force and Understanding" is a section of the *Phenomenology* which we at St. John's have the good luck to be particularly well prepared to appreciate. By the time we read Hegel we have read and studied not only Kant but also Newton. As a community we resist slavish obedience to any doctrine, and so we tend to be cautiously skeptical of modern science with all its instructions for the proper use of the most important tool we have, our minds. Hegel would approve. He, more that any other thinker I know, disdains the sort of scientific inquiry that substitutes even the most thorough description of the structure of a corpse, for example one of our freshman lab specimens, for a living creature. Nevertheless, before consciousness can emerge as an appropriate interpreter of organic substance, it must develop and through its own internal motion supersede the limited understanding of the natural world that becomes available for criticism once common sense recognizes its failings.

Force is the concept that allows for the understanding of the relation between dispersed, independent elements and the unity out of which they arise and into which they return. This return is simply the recognition that the force (of attraction, for example), accounts for a variety of observed occurrences that are unintelligible on their own terms (136, 137). Since there is no intelligible account of how force can act directly on an object,

force must be understood to solicit another force. Newton himself was concerned with the unintelligibility of action at a distance (see letters cited in *Principia*, Vol. II, pp 634 and 636, Motte translation). The force of gravity, for example, cannot pull a ball towards the earth the way I can throw it with my hand. Rather, the force of attraction of the ball for the earth is met with the mutual attraction of the earth to the ball, and with the resistance to this attraction that results from the force with which it was thrown. The word 'force' has meaning here only in the context of the motion for which it accounts.

> These two Forces exist as independent essences; but their existence is a movement of each towards the other, such that their being is rather a pure *positedness* or a being that is *posited by another*, i.e., their being has really the significance of a sheer *vanishing*.

"Force" is in fact essential only to the account consciousness attempts to give of the motion.

> ...the truth of Force remains only the *thought* of it; the moments of its actuality, their substance and their movement, collapse unresistingly into an undifferentiated unity, a unity which is not Force driven back into itself (...), but is its *Notion qua Notion (Begriffe)*. Thus the realization of Force is at the same time the loss of reality; in that realization it has become something quite different, viz., this *universality*, which the Understanding knows at the outset, or immediately, to be its essence and which also proves itself to be such in the supposed reality of Force, in the actual substances. (141)

These substances are evidently Kantian objects of experience. But that is not all they are. Part of the meaning of the term 'Notion' is that movement occurs such that earlier inadequate formulations give way to something more adequate. Here this means that the observed particulars fall away in favor of an account of force on its own terms, which is truer than any mere collection of observed (conceptually elusive) phenomena, and the account of force in turn is taken as a description of concrete substances as they behave in

the world. The Notion or *Begriffe* in general is something akin to a Platonic *eidos* endowed with life (see paragraph 55, Preface): far from holding itself in reserve from the flux of nature and the world, it is one with it. It appears at first as characteristic of thought in contrast to external reality, but that contrast is not definitive. "Consciousness ...is explicitly the Notion of itself. Hence it is something that goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself" (Intro to *Phenomenology,* 80). The notion of Force provides an alternative to the language of universal and particular:

> Within this *inner truth,* as the *absolute universal* which has been purged of the *antithesis* between the universal and the individual and has become the object of the *Understanding,* there now opens up above the *sensuous* world, which is the world of *appearance,* a *supersensible* world which henceforth is the *true* world ....(section 149)

Within a few sections Hegel pronounces this supersensible world to be "appearance qua appearance." By this phrase Hegel does not mean to collapse the supersensible world into what is sensuously perceived, but to indicate that the supersensible world does not stand on its own; in fact, the sensuous world (insofar as it is a world) turns out to be nothing but the thought world that reflection upon the sensuous elicits. Just as there is no world devoid of sensuous characteristics, there is no world available to sense alone. For there to be any true understanding, neither world can claim victory over the other. Rather, the two 'worlds' must be brought together and recognized as one. Similarly, law and that which it governs turn out to be inseparable.

I started this section of my talk (IIB) with a discussion of law, and so far the account of force has included no reference to law. Section 148 ends this way:

> ... what there is in this universal flux is only *difference* as *universal* difference, ... This difference, as a *universal* difference, is consequently the *simple element in the play of Force* itself, and what is true in it. It is the *law of Force.*

Further on (149) he declares "... the *supersensible* world is an *inert realm of laws* .... Hegel is aware of the tendency of the mind to unify all laws into a single, comprehensive law (150). This tendency underlines and exacerbates the unsatisfying characteristic of law as indifferent to that which it governs. One powerful example of this indifference is the law of motion (153) which requires that time and space, or distance and velocity, be understood as independent of one another in order that they may be quantified and related. This should remind some of you of our discussions of Galileo's treatment of motion in his *Two New Sciences,* the Third Day, in contrast with the Aristotelian beginning point in which motion is something simple and immediately intelligible. Hegel's impatience with the claim that laws reveal necessary relations (153) stems from his criticism of the arbitrary distinction upon which the law is based, and anticipates later scientific developments of space-time (Einstein, Minkowski). But when I use the word 'criticism' here I do not mean to suggest that Hegel thinks the abstraction of these terms a simple mistake, or even that it was avoidable. Rather, the effort of the understanding to grasp things as they are produces a division which leads to further dialectical movement culminating, finally, in full correspondence between knower and known. Consciousness grasps that there must be a deeper unity behind the law of motion that accounts for the relation of the elements of the law (155). It moves to a realm of its own, the supersensible, as it attempts to bridge the gap between what is outside of consciousness and the thinking subject.

The process by which the differences between subject and subsistence are overcome is articulated throughout the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but one can see its character very well here in the section on Force and the Understanding. The subject, in the form of understanding,

> ... learns that it is *a law of appearance itself*, that differences arise which are no differences, or that what is self-same repels itself from itself ....

And further that the differences thus created overcome themselves, "...what is not self-same is self-attractive." Hegel goes on to say here that

> The Notion demands of the thoughtless thinker that he bring both laws together [i.e., the law of force and the law of appearance] and become aware of their antithesis.

I will not go into all the details of the complex ensuing movement, though for Hegel each step is necessary and indispensable (not, I think, inevitable, but to argue that would require a long discussion). For us tonight it will be enough to see that the development of the understanding produces first, a supersensible world, whose purpose is to explain the sensible world, second an inverted world, the second supersensible world in which the kingdom of laws is shown to contain abstractions from a deeper unity. Hegel draws an analogy here (158) between physical and social science, or rather points out that the same sort of reasoning finds its way into both:

> The punishment which under the law of the *first* world disgraces and destroys a man is transformed in its *inverted* world into the pardon which preserves his essential being and brings him to honor.

In general, this sort of reasoning is first an attempt to identify causes (*aitiai*) or, in the case of crime, guilt, then to deal with it through manipulation (punishment). In the case of crime one must also acknowledge the originally invisible intention (the second

supersensible) of the criminal only to return to the act with the observation that "the truth of intention is only the act itself" (159). The inverted world does not substitute for the world of appearances but must be reconciled with it, just as a good intention does not cancel the heinousness of one's acts. The nature of the act is not fully visible until the intention is discerned, but the intention cannot subsist in a realm different and permanently separate from the act. Hegel's juxtaposition of human issues with objective natural laws imitates the general character of consciousness that moves between 'realms' it separates. To begin with, Hegel reasons by analogy about the forces that govern human acts. The understanding must recognize the differences it has noticed as inhering in the thing itself as well as in the understanding (160), and therefore finally as united. Just as divine judgment must one day become manifest on earth, reconciling the disparity between internal truth and outward appearance, human thought must finally unify the two. The supersensible world is "itself and its opposite in one unity. (160)." Here Hegel makes a claim that may surprise the reader, namely that the understanding itself (160) and its differences are an *infinity*. Christianity provides a way of thinking that Hegel transforms by recognizing in it a response to the unstable separations inherent in modern scientific thought.

Readers of Aristotle ought to find Hegel's use of the word 'infinity' recognizably different from the actual infinity Aristotle repudiates, and different in important ways from the potential infinity Aristotle accepts as real (the infinite divisibility of a magnitude, for example). Hegel offers a rather poetic (Dantesque?) description which I will cite and attempt to interpret.

> This simple infinity, or the absolute Notion, may be called the simple essence of life, the soul of the world, the universal blood, whose omnipresence is neither disturbed nor interrupted by any difference, but rather is itself every difference, as also their supersession; it pulsates within itself but does not move, inwardly vibrates, yet is at rest. It is self-*identical*, for the differences are tautological; they are differences that are none. This self-identical essence is therefore related only to itself; .... (162).

Simple infinity is self-absorption with no isolation: all relations have turned out to be relations within itself. Without dissolving differences, infinity is the deeper unity of these differences from which they differentiate themselves and then return. We would have no reason to think such a thing is real except that it corresponds not only to the history of thought about the thing, but to the nature of thought in general. In thinking about our experience of the world, we make abstractions and articulate distinctions which later we must reconcile, knowing that we can do so because the distinctions arose in the first place from the singleness of our minds. Hegel is more optimistic than many thinkers about the successful outcome of this activity: while we wish that in putting together that which we have analyzed in the attempt to understand it, we will return to the phenomenon or experience as it originally was, we often believe we have reason to wonder what effect our intervention has caused. Hegel's confidence takes the form not of a happy coincidence of our mental powers with our object of inquiry, the world, but of the recognition that all this activity has been taking place within consciousness itself. The world that appears at times to agree and at times to disagree with our account of it is always the world for consciousness, which in turn reflects upon their relation. Our thinking about "objective," nonhuman matters and about human things is akin but not yet unified. It cries out for a reconciliation that can occur only in a consciousness that grasps

more fully the origin of the differences. The end of the section on force and understanding is therefore the turn to self-consciousness.

> This curtain of [appearance] hanging before the inner world is therefore drawn away, and we have the inner being [the 'I'] gazing into the inner world – the vision of the undifferentiated selfsame being, which repels itself from itself, posits itself as an inner being containing different moments, but for which equally these moments are immediately *not* different – *self-consciousness.* It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless *we* go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen. (165)

This is not an end to the discussion of how we know, but a new beginning.

Before we go on to self-consciousness a brief recapitulation is appropriate here. Hegel begins his quest for truth in the *Phenomenology* with sense-certainty, a sort of knowing that at first appears both rich and immediately accessible. But the consciousness of sensory experience turns out to yield no truth at all. In fact, it yields no more than an awareness of the distinction between the potential knower and what he would know. The elusive other of sense-certainty must then be an independent thing that can be grasped through perception. But in perception consciousness confronts the problem of how to combine a plethora of individual things with the universal under which they must be thought. 'Force' is the name we give to that which turns out to unify particulars. It cannot be perceived but can be understood. The articulation of laws, in general the Law of Force, leads to the establishment of a realm separate from the world forces were originally intended to explain. The work of reconciling law and force on the one hand with the world on the other leads consciousness to recognize that the differences to be reconciled arise out of its own activity. Kantian understanding transforms into an

awareness of itself as the consciousness that has relied on the law of force and now must reconcile it with the world. This is a transformation that Kant did not endeavor to accomplish, for it requires that consciousness go beyond the distinguishing of the various faculties of the thinking mind to see how they inhere in self-consciousness.

III Self-Consciousness

The section of the *Phenomenology* Hegel calls 'Self-consciousness' begins with "The truth of Self-Certainty," a subdivision that includes the discussion of Lordship and Bondage. The phrase that best characterizes Hegel's introductory remarks here is "certainty gives place to truth" (166). This phrase should call to mind Descartes' standard of clarity and distinctness, a standard that does not require or involve the perfect correspondence of what is known to the object, and which Hegel unambiguously rejects. The influence of Descartes is however, inescapable, and Hegel builds his anti-Cartesian epistemology, or account (*logos)* of knowledge, on the even more fundamental Cartesian turn, toward the self. Here then '... the certainty is to itself its own object, and consciousness is to itself the truth" (166). Farther down in the same paragraph Hegel says

> Opposed to an other, the 'I' is its own self, and at the same time it overarches this other which, for the 'I' is only the 'I' itself.
>
> With self-consciousness, then, we have therefore entered the realm of truth. (169)

While conscious thought set itself the goal of grasping truth, to achieve this goal requires that the thinker get beyond the artificial distinction between knower and known. This is no leap of faith, but is rather the honest awareness of the fact that one can distinguish and

reconcile only what is already present in thought, i.e., that thought cannot step outside itself to another realm external to itself. If this sounds like a call for a Kantian critique, distinguishing all that we can know and reason about from the inaccessible thing-in-itself, Hegel's response is that he has gone Kant one better: since the recognition of the limits of reason and the positing of the thing-in-itself to which reason cannot reach are within, not outside of consciousness, he argues that this distinction, like all others within thought, can be overcome. As Hegel points out (167),

> As self-consciousness, it is movement; but since what it distinguishes from itself is *only itself* as itself, the difference, as an otherness, is immediately superseded *for it* ....

The significance of this step that Hegel makes is very great. For one thing, it leads naturally to an account of living beings superior to any that the laws of matter in motion can offer. Such an account is to differing degrees elusive for Bacon, Descartes and even Kant, who hesitate to attribute to the object about which one theorizes any tendencies that are not verifiable in accord with laws. Aristotle of course knew better: in observing the living being one must begin by trusting that one sees in it impulses and tendencies akin to one's own purposiveness, for example. Like Hegel, Kant accepts (in the *Critique of Judgment,* Preface) that one cannot dispense with purposiveness in the attempt to understand living beings, but the place of this third critique in Kant's system is problematic enough to have justified the acceptance of many doctoral dissertations. 'Purposiveness' has no place in the table of categories Kant presents in the First Critique in the attempt to give a definitive account of the basis for scientific understanding of the world of experience.

Just as Hegel offers no definitive list of the categories, he denies that there is any need of a set of rules or techniques for self-consciousness in the attempt to understand life, for life is precisely the correlate of self-consciousness:

> But *for us*, or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become Life. (168)

But the living being is not merely the object of naïve or scientific inquiry; it is furthermore the object of desire *(168)*. It is at the same time a whole independent of the desiring subject:

> Life consists rather in being the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself. (171)

Independent as it is, though, life also "...points to something other than itself, viz. to consciousness, for which life exists as this unity, or as genus (172)".The individual pre-conscious living being is, according to Hegel, radically incomplete.

The discussion of life in the introductory paragraphs of Self-consciousness leads rather quickly to the following pregnant and powerful claim: "Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness." (175). How does Hegel arrive at this claim? The key to making sense of this transition is to see what it means that the living being is both dependent and independent. I have cited Hegel's claim that life is a 'self-developing whole (171, end)'. He has already moved in his discussion to 'life as a living thing,' confusing life in general with a particular organism. Hegel is not being sloppy. Rather, he is acknowledging that life is intelligible only via the individual living thing. It is obvious that no single organism lives simply self-sufficiently. Equally important for

Hegel, its character is to develop in accord with a process that characterizes not only itself, but also many other individuals that together comprise a genus or a species, a process that is in fact determined by its species. There is no species existing on its own. The characteristic activity of a living being in general, namely to absorb otherness (for example, food) within it and make it one's own, is always of a particular sort. Consciousness alone can recognize it for what it is. But further, the only consciousness capable of recognizing the living being for what it is is self-consciousness (cf. A on *nous* containing the forms). And the primary way the 'I' of self-consciousness relates to other living things is through desire. Like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, Hegel knows that human beings want the goods of food, shelter, sexual satisfaction, etc., and therefore the power to acquire and possess them. The desire for food is the easiest to grasp but it is not the most illustrative here, for one ordinarily eats only what is already dead, and is soon hungry again. Eating is not therefore a model for the satisfaction of self-consciousness.

> "On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, ... In the sphere of Life, which is the object of Desire, *negation* is present *in an other*, viz in Desire, or as a *determinateness* opposed to another indifferent form, or as the inorganic universal nature of Life. But this universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as *self-consciousness. Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.* (175)

Living among other independent living beings which one strives to understand is a step forward, but to satisfy conscious desire requires that the desiring subject recognize itself and that it be recognized by another. It requires that certainty become truth. "But the truth of this certainty is really a double reflection, the duplication of self-consciousness." (176) Just as consuming food cannot be a genuine end (*telos*) for human beings and the

proper labeling of various beings is not by itself fully satisfying to the conscious mind, so for self-consciousness to be at all requires that its object retain its character when it submits to the knowing subject, that it "... is equally independent in the negativity of itself; and thus it is *for itself* a genus, a universal fluid element in the peculiarity of its own separate being ...." Hegel rejects as a model of knowledge mastery of nature by a creature alienated from it and therefore barred from the deepest understanding of its meaning. Followers of Baconian science sell themselves too short, according to Hegel. Truth is available to the human knower, but only if he/she knows what to seek.

Hegel responds to an urging superficially similar to that which moves Socrates in the 'second sailing' he describes in the *Phaedo.* We cannot know the world directly but only through the speeches and the deeds of other self-consciousnesses. For Socrates this implies the need to engage in dialectic discourse with other men and examine the accounts they form in speech. It is unclear whether this dialectic will produce adequate knowledge of the topic of discussion but it will at least illuminate something about the souls of the speakers. (See *Gorgios).* For Hegel the need to rely on other self-conscious beings takes a very different form. Since the knowing subject has no proper object than another self-consciousness, for which it is an object as well, two (and later, more) embodied consciousnesses must come to recognize themselves in one another. Truth requires full reciprocity between 'subject' and 'object'.

> A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much I' as object. With this we already have before us the notion of *Spirit.* 'What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is – this absolute substance which is the unity of the different, independent self-

> consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence. (177).

Modern science has destroyed the natural world in illuminating the relations that characterize it because the 'natural world' never was the realm of truth; it was merely the realm the mind constructed (see Kant) to account for observed appearances. Truth, or science in the full Hegelian sense, is spirit fully conscious of itself. It must be shared in a community of conscious persons. (See Preface, section 69). Similarly, appropriate human laws cannot arise out of a detached scientific analysis of human need and passions (Hobbes), but only in a real community of persons. This is the insight that informs Hegel's discussion of lordship and bondage.

I said earlier that the lordship and bondage section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is frequently misunderstood. One of the most common misunderstandings arises from an assumption about Hegelian idealism that I would like to lay to rest first of all. Where Hegel asserts "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." (Preface, p. 10 of *Philosophy of Right*), many readers take him to be saying that only what we spin out of our own minds counts as real, that the apparently real world, insofar as it is anything at all, arises from the mind's own creative activity. Similarly, the reader bent on seeing Hegel as an idealist in this sense views the lord and the bondsman as aspects of the mental activity of a single individual: the struggle between them is then nothing more than the mental anguish of a divided mind incapable of self-respect for the straightforward reason that it lacks integrity. Hegel leaves such struggles for others to explore (there are many literary examples, ranging from Dmitri Karamazov to Gollum).

Hegel, by contrast, in direct conversation with Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, is addressing the question of how two human beings independent of law and society interact with one another. Having been educated by those thinkers, especially Rousseau, Hegel does not claim that two men once confronted one another in precisely the fashion he describes and followed precisely the steps he recounts in the approach to mutual recognition. Similarly, no human being need ever undertake precisely the transformation of spirit the *Phenomenology* describes. Rather, following Hegel, one can recognize the progression from one stage to another as intelligible now that they have occurred in human experience. The lord and bondsman are archetypes of real flesh and blood humans who confront one another in an effort to become what they must be if they are to be at all: autonomous beings who share a world with others akin to themselves.

> Self-consciousness exists in and for itself, when and by the fact that, it exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged. (178)

The account of how this acknowledgement develops is clearly not a report of historical event: it is worked over and clarified by coherent thought. Hegel's description is a description of how "... the process of the pure Notion of recognition, of the duplicating of self-consciousness in its oneness, appears to self-consciousness" (185).The process has already occurred in the sense that real humans beings have recognized the authority of a master, worked the land, discovered in themselves abilities they were unaware of and that even render them superior to those they serve, etc. Even more importantly, this process has been seen (by Hegel at least) for what it is, an essential part of the development of autonomous spirit.

The distinction Hegel drew earlier (166) between certainly and truth figures here again as crucial. The two consciousnesses that soon emerge as lord and bondman at first appear to one another

> .. like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being [or immediacy] of *Life* .... Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty still has no truth. (186)

Such 'truth' is "...possible only when each is for the other what the other is for it ..."; subject and object must correspond perfectly. In order for the two consciousnesses to achieve this correspondence, self-consciousness must stake its life, showing itself not to be attached to any specific existence. Hegel says explicitly "each seeks the death of the other" (187). In our comfortable community of learning, in which for the most part we attempt to recognize one another as worthy participants through cooperative discourse, the claim that mutual recognition requires a fight to the death may seem absurd. We are fortunate in sharing the assumption that theoretical inquiry can be the occasion for creating a community and that no particular practical activity must precede that creation. But we arrive at the College as self-conscious beings. The question then remains: is Hegel correct in denying that a self-consciousness with integrity can emerge without a crisis in which the very being of that self-consciousness is in question? Once the first known fight to the death has occurred, Hegel thinks we need not take up arms again as long as we can truly grasp the meaning of the experience. (This is not a comment on international peace, merely on the relations of individuals capable of forming a particular community). Hegel's lord and bondsman display what it means for potential human beings entirely stripped of convention to strive to be human in the fullest sense. We frequently repeat the Socratic dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living." For

Hegel, one's life can only be worth living if one is recognizable and recognized as a self-conscious human being, and to be recognizable as such requires that one seek full self-consciousness at all costs. To this goal, everything else must give way.

The modern state as Hegel outlines it in *The Philosophy of Right* presumably cushions its citizens against such dire conflicts while it facilitates the development of free self-consciousness. How that is so would require a lengthy discussion. Suffice it to say here that Hegel roundly rejects Hobbes' account of the origin of civil society. The ground for this rejection is not that Hegel considers it impossible that humans would enter into a social contract out of fear and in order to avoid the danger of violent death. Rather, a society based upon the mere tendency to flee such a danger must be a society of inferior, in fact slavish, human beings. Hegel rejects Hobbes' argument for the foundation of political right. He is moved, as no doubt Hobbes was, by the real terrors of war. For Hegel, theoretical inquiry into the basis of political life must follow the experience of war, at least vicarious experience; the theoretical understanding of politics follows from the previous stage of conscious existence.

I noted above that Hegel asserts that the two individuals who will become lord and bondsman seek each other's death. Clearly a trial that indeed issues in death is no way to begin a mutually satisfying relationship between any two human beings (188). The interesting case occurs when one of the two individuals confronting the other brings him to the brink of violent death and that other "... learns that life is essential to it as pure self-consciousness" (189). This learning process so far has a good deal in common with

Hobbesian fear. Everything for the bondsman has 'been shaken to the foundations' in his experience of the fear of violent death and he has therefore been put in touch with the "... simple, essential nature of consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is implicit in consciousness." Fear of violent death and the aggressive attempt to conquer nature constitute a good beginning, but they are not sufficient for developing self-consciousness: "...although the fear of the lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom, consciousness is not therein aware that it is a being-for-self" (195). Having learned that he must live if he is to be conscious, the unlucky participant in the life and death struggle submits to his conqueror and becomes his slave, an apparently thankless life of subordination that eventually reverses itself into a kind of victory. The reversal is hardly inevitable, but when it occurs it constitutes the development of real self-consciousness. According to Hegel it reveals a greater truth than is visible through the eyes of the brute of a master who has access to the world only through the labor of his slave, and who experiences the other only as the instrument of his desires.

The picture Hegel presents of the life of lord and bondsman is straightforward: the bondsman works to satisfy the needs and desires of the lord, who never sullies his hands. The lord seems to have all the advantages of life without its disadvantages: he enjoys things without ever having to experience their resistance and he is honored. The arrangement is unequal, to be sure, but from the point of view of the master not obviously defective. But there have been tyrants who remained permanently dissatisfied, no matter how easily their desires are satisfied. Hegel makes sense of this phenomenon with the observation that the lord receives homage only from a dependent, not an independent

consciousness akin to himself. This does not suffice probably because the tyrant somehow realizes that there is or can be something better. The bondsman by contrast has the independent consciousness of the master as his 'essential reality,' Hegel says, or at least in his purview. He need not invent the moment of 'pure being-for-self': it is there before his eyes in the form of another human being. Similarly, he need not strain his faculties to imagine what it is for everything in nature to dissolve (194); but he accomplishes this dissolution. "Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every detail, and gets rid of it by working on it" (194). He is intimately aware of the possibility of destroying and reforming natural objects in order to make them serve human needs.

The bondsman then has a great deal in common with the modern scientist even in a free state in his attempt to conquer and manipulate nature. More importantly, work is the means by which the bondsman develops the awareness of who he is. By working to reshape natural objects he becomes concretely aware of the independence not only of those objects but also of himself: "... the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (195 and 196). While to have a mind of one's own is only a nascent form of freedom, it constitutes a superiority of the bondsman over his master, who recognizes nothing in the world capable of resisting his will, which is therefore not even really his own as opposed to another's. (Children share some of the constraint of the bondsman's life and therefore the need to make claims of mastery. My son's response at 31/2 or 4 was to assert his conquest of nature this way, after tolerating undoubtedly excessive

expressions of maternal concern: "I never get thirsty; I never get cold; and I never have to go pee.") The dialectic between master and bondsman continues through Stoicism, Scepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness (one level of Hegel's interpretation of Christianity) until within self-conscious spirit develops what Hegel calls Reason "... the certainty that, in its particular individuality, it has being absolutely *in itself*, or is all reality" (230). This is the implicit identification of subject and substance of which Hegel proceeds to articulate the development in the section of the *Phenomenology* entitled 'Absolute Spirit.'

Conclusion

I will not try to analyze here in detail the movement from the bondsman's willfulness to Reason. For all the refined grandeur of Hegelian Reason and of his emphasis on Spirit in its fully developed form as the goal of even the most ordinary human activity, friendship provides the best analogy for the goal ultimately sought by participants in the dialectic of lord and bondsman. While it is quite clear that these two particular human beings will never be friends, the autonomy of mind that can be secured only through such a struggle as theirs is the condition for friendship, or at least for the kind of political community Hegel envisions. The insight that no constitutional provisions can create political freedom if the proper habits are not first established, if the people do not know how to be free members of a political community, is nowhere so deeply acknowledged than in Hegel's political thought. But even if it is true that the right understanding of what it is for a human being to be free has developed in the course of the history of human thought, will political freedom arise and maintain itself in the modern state once humans are in

principle capable of governing themselves? Does the ability for self-governance emerge once the truth of absolute spirit has taken shape and appeared in an articulated form?

The end and the goal of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is Absolute Knowing, thought complete in itself and untainted with any externality. I have elucidated how the early sections of the *Phenomenology* that we read participate in the movement towards this goal. Absolute Knowing is not mere freedom to think for oneself in a world ridden with complexities. Only perfect clarity and thorough comprehension of the truth would allow mind to be at rest with itself, and this is only achievable if substance and subject are one, if mind (or spirit, *Geist)* finally *is* all. It is no accident that Hegel's writing in the *Phenomenology* integrates the rational working through of philosophical quandaries with reference to practical experience, for both the theoretical and the practical are the activity of Spirit. But while Hegel sees autonomous thought as the goal of a collective lifetime of inquiry and self-examination, until we ourselves attain such knowledge we must doubt that such a goal can ever be won. We at the College are well trained both to appreciate the greatness of Hegel's work and to assess it soberly. The familiarity we share with the work of great thinkers who encourage us to doubt that knowledge of the whole is available must help to protect us against Hegel's perhaps seductive charm. Can the autonomy of Absolute Knowledge be all that humans strive for, all that is good?

The tense relationship between the good of the individual and the good of the city which Plato illustrates in the city in speech, the deliberate absurdity of Socrates' request that the city of Athens commit funds to support him so that he can continue to be a gadfly to his

fellow citizens, are not obviously anachronistic in our age, despite Hegel's accomplishment on the one hand and our treasured citizen freedoms on the other. To discern what it takes for human beings to be free requires calm reflection on what is knowable independently of practical considerations. It requires that the thinker be wary of succumbing to the oppressive power of prejudice. It requires no less that one resist the temptations to disdain politics and to turn political life into a visible aspect of reason alone. I dare to wonder whether Hegel, for all his greatness, allowed the latter tendency to mar his political as well as his philosophical thought.