

On Beginning Hegel's Phenomenology

Informal Talk by Cary Stickney
September 7, 1994

Let me begin with a confession. Some of you may remember that in the second act of the Tempest the drunken butler Stefano appears with a bottle he has somehow made of tree bark and filled from a cask of sherry which he rode ashore. He presses this liquor on Caliban with the phrase "kiss the book."

My confession is that the first book I ever kissed, twenty years ago this December, was Hegel's Phenomenology. I was home on Christmas vacation and I had persuaded Robert Bart, my senior seminar leader and essay adviser, that I could write my Senior Essay on Hegel. Of the Phenomenology I had read only the two most famous parts: the lengthy Preface and the short, mystifying, unforgettable section entitled "Lordship and Bondage". A few days into the vacation I sat down to read the Introduction and the first chapter. It was on finishing the first chapter that I kissed the book. It seems now a very strange thing to have done and it seemed a little strange even at the time, I remember, but it was the only expression I could find adequate to my gratitude and happiness at that moment. I suppose I had better add, in the interest of completeness, that I never kissed the book again, and that in fact, though I have studied it a fair amount since, and even went to live in Germany for several years largely in order to study Hegel, I cannot say that I have ever read the whole book through. I hope you will not think me fickle on this account, or conclude that I am not after all enough of an expert to be of any use to you. One of the main things I want to say is that the Phenomenology, like other books on the Program, is too great to be left to the experts. So why, exactly, did I kiss the book? Perhaps, like Stefano, I had the soul of a lackey and I was intoxicated with what did not even belong to me? Maybe I had no-one else to kiss? Of course I must have been kissing myself in part, congratulating myself that I could make any sense at all on my own of this famously obscure philosopher. But I think I was primarily responding to a liberator. I felt I had been set free, or restored to myself. To what had I been enslaved?

I think I had been afraid of, if not exactly in bondage to, a deep suspicion that thought didn't ultimately make any difference; things are as they are in the world, you can think about them or imagine you understand them as much or as little as you like--nothing is thereby changed about the way things really are. I might take that suspicion another step and suspect that I myself am like everything else in the world: my being, too, will then be indifferent to any thoughts about me, even my own thoughts. I will do whatever I do and feel whatever I feel quite apart from what I or anyone else may surmise to be the reasons.

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If this is so, then any seeming confirmation of my understanding becomes somehow empty. I may successfully predict an event or exert control over a force either human or natural, but I am always coming from somewhere outside. I could as well have predicted or controlled from several very different beginning points and still succeeded, so my success is not any ultimate criterion of a true understanding. Maybe it is all the criterion there is, though.

This, or something like it, was my suspicion, from which I was so grateful to be set free. I suppose I could very roughly abbreviate it with the name "Kant," though other names suggest themselves--"Descartes", or even "Modern Science," at least as that science tends to appear on television and in high schools, and hence as it appears in its claims to be a worked out version of good solid common sense.

Hegel sets about to demolish this view at the beginning of his book and in my opinion succeeds brilliantly. It is the first task of the Introduction to step behind Kant, to turn his skeptical mistrust of the powers of human knowing back upon itself. Kant had asked, "what are the conditions of the possibility of human knowing?" that is, "what must be the case of there is to be such a thing as knowing?" That real knowing did exist he took to be given by the existence of geometry and by the dazzling successes of Newtonian celestial mechanics. His answer was couched in terms inherited from Aristotle: form and material. Let knowledge consist of necessary conclusions about objects of possible experience and its form will be the element of necessity, while the material will be the objects of experience. Kant reasoned that necessity could not be the contribution of experience, since, as Hume and many other Skeptic philosophers had long since pointed out, the mere fact of something happening to exist or to behave in a given way says nothing at all about any necessity for things to be thus. So if there is truly necessity in things it is a form we humans have placed on experience, and it must in turn be necessary and inescapable that we do so, otherwise there would be no real necessity and no real knowledge after all. But this all feels rather cumbersome; it is a little like the children's game in which you must jump back and forth over a rope which is raised and lowered. First the experiences of mathematics and celestial mechanics are invoked as containing necessity, then empirical one-at-a-time experiences are recalled as mere happenstance, void of all necessity, then again even they turn out to necessarily belong under the rubric of possible experience which must after all be governed by various necessary categories of understanding, imposed indeed by us, but necessarily, ineluctably imposed by every human qua human, such that there is really no access to any experience in which this imposed necessity is not already an inextricable element. I hope I am not doing too much injustice to what I continue to find a beautiful argument and a worthy

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enterprise for the Junior Seminar. It has been some years since I have heard any protest in Faculty meetings about devoting as many seminars as we do to Kant. This year it is ten, and I take it as a sign of the depth of intellect of my colleagues that they recognize what a giant Kant is. Let me stay with him a little longer, since, as Mr. Venable has remarked, Hegel is to Kant somewhat as the New Testament is to the Old. At least, it is nearly always illuminating to ask, when one has to begin with some idea of what Hegel is talking about, "What would Kant have said about this?" Sometimes every argument Hegel makes can sound like an argument against Kant.

One result of Kant's own argument is that a world of so-called things-in-themselves turns out to exist, about which we can know nothing. These things-in-themselves are at least required by the terms of the argument: while the imposition of necessity and various other kinds of order upon experience is our constant spontaneous act of forming, we must still be given material to form. But since time and space themselves are products of our formative activity, then the sources of the material to be formed must lie outside time and space and indeed outside all the categories of our understanding. It becomes again a problem how we can be sure these sources do exist. Kant addresses this problem in the section of the first Critique entitled "Refutation of Idealism" but I think we will hasten past to what Hegel replies to all of this.

Hegel asks how we can be satisfied with a knowledge which begins by proclaiming its separation from things as they are in themselves. What then is it a knowledge of, if not of the way things really are? Why call it knowledge at all?

He questions one of Kant's deepest assumptions: that the world is over there being and that we are over here thinking. If that is our immovable beginning then we will never solve the problem of how to know the truth. With truth on one side and thought on the other we will need a middle term, a bridge where they can meet, a tool to pull the truth over or a telescope to observe it close up from afar. But all of these things only involve us again in Kant's difficulty: what we wanted was the truth itself and what we got was how it appears in a telescope or how much of it fits onto a certain kind of bridge or how it looks after being hooked and dragged out of its home.

The problem, as Hegel puts it, is about mediation. Words like "absolute" or "in itself" suggest a truth having nothing to do with the knower. But if this is so then all knowing, all attempts to mediate the truth to the knower will be some kind of falsification. It is not a new problem. The following exchange takes place in Plato's dialogue The Sophist. Theaetetus the mathematics student is replying on behalf of the "friends of the forms", that is the believers in to the Stranger from Elea,

a one-time disciple of Parmenides. [248d]

Str.:...Do they acknowledge that the soul knows and real being is known?

The.: Certainly they agree to that.

Str.: Well, do you agree that knowing and being-known is an action, or is it experiencing an effect, or both? Or is one of them experiencing an effect, the other an action? Or does neither of them come under either of these heads at all?

The.: Evidently neither, otherwise our friends would be contradicting what they said earlier.

Str.: I see what you mean. They would have to say this. If knowing is to be acting on something it follows that what is known must be acted upon by it, and so, on this showing, reality when it is being known by the act of knowledge must, in so far as it is known, be changed by being so acted upon, and that, we say, cannot happen to the changeless.

The.: Exactly.

Str.: But tell me, in the name of Zeus, are we really to be so easily convinced that change, and life, and soul, and understanding have no place in that which is perfectly real--that it has neither life nor thought, but stands immutable, holy, and exalted, devoid of intelligence?

The.: We would indeed be yielding to a fearsome doctrine, stranger.

Hegel's answer is that change and life and soul and understanding are inextricably entwined in the truth; in other words, that mediation is not something that must be brought to bear on a reality over there. Being is mediation. It mediates itself to itself. As the Eleatic Stranger's teacher, Parmenides, had written: Thinking and Being are the same.

So I have arrived, as I had to, at one of those grandiose claims that always seem to infuriate a certain proportion of Hegel's readers. Parmenides doesn't provoke anything like that response, I'm not sure why. Perhaps because he wasn't a German Professor?

So Kant, that other German Professor, was not after all so very far wrong in Hegel's view. The world is indeed, just as Kant had claimed, thoroughly permeated with thought. The

categories of the understanding are indeed structures of the world itself; only not of a merely phenomenal world behind which would exist some unreachable realm of things-in-themselves, forever denied us, holy, exalted and mindless. No, the very articulation of Being into Kant's phenomenal and noumenal realms is in its entirety part of the self-mediation of Being. That is, the "things-in-themselves" belong together with thought just as much as the categorically determined objects of possible experience do. Far from being unknowable, they are known to us precisely as the other half of Kant's argument: we know them to be the noumenal source of the phenomenal world, we know them to be outside time and space, to be beyond the dominion of the understanding, to be the unreachably high standard of truth without which the humanly attainable truth would have no meaning. That is a great deal to know about something Kant himself sometimes modestly proposes to denote with no more than an "X".

It is that last thing we know that has the most importance for the program Hegel lays out in the Introduction.

We know enough about these things in themselves to say that our humanly attainable truth is not the whole truth. Thus, apparently, we can conceive of knowing the whole truth, if it is meaningful to us to speak of not doing so, and thus there must be more knowing left for us to do. After learning about the limits of Reason, we must ask, "In the light of what kind of a Beyond have we recognized these limits as limits?" Limits cannot reveal themselves as limits unless there is some sense of what lies on their other side. But as soon as there is any sense of that at all then they are no longer absolute limits, for we are already, at least in thought, beyond them. As Socrates put it, the terrible thing is not to be ignorant, but to be unaware that you are; and on the other hand, to know of one's ignorance is already to have some hope of relief from it. We can begin to have a conversation about what our experience of knowing might be, about what kind of beings we might ourselves be in order to know how to critique our knowledge, or hope to improve it. This conversation goes by the name of Dialectic, both for Hegel and for Socrates, and for both of them it seeks to go beyond all ordinary human limits to the unifying source of all that is. For Hegel the full self-mediation of Being is found in the Being that knows itself to be all that is, one and many, same and other, Being and Becoming. This he calls Geist or Spirit. The title of his book means: The Ordered Account of the Appearing of Spirit to Itself. For we humans are Spirit, and so is everything we think about.

Let me dwell a little longer on what it means to say that Being is mediation. It means that nothing is simply and immediately itself alone. Everything is involved in a great whole and nothing could "be" by itself. So the conventional understanding of matter cannot be correct. By that account

matter simply exists as a kind of inert opposite of thought. It needs nothing else to exist and on some level it is impervious to thought. Thought always connects and relates things to one another; it mediates by gathering and separating. But if matter as such is immediate then thought will never grasp why matter is or what it is, because there will be nothing in terms of which an explanation could be formulated. Matter would be a given, a brute fact. That givenness, conceived apart from any actual giver, that impenetrability to thought, constitutes for most people a very large part of the realness of what is real.

Such a view makes the intellect into a stranger in the world. Moreover it gives no account of any motion. If matter is only as it is, inert, then why is it always moving and changing? I think Hegel would tell us that we are not minds surrounded by matter, in the sense of two opposed and equally fundamental principles, but that we are Mind in the presence of Mind, or if you prefer, Spirit in the presence of Spirit. It is very exciting to see the details of this extremely bold thought worked out. Maybe it would be helpful for me to read a few passages aloud and approach them with these thoughts in mind.

In paragraph 91 of the Introduction Hegel is beginning to speak of the testing of knowledge that he will conduct and of its difficulties. A test seems to require a criterion, but how can a criterion justify itself in advance? We would seem to need already to know the truth in order to begin sorting out the true in our knowledge. This is very like Meno's paradox that we cannot learn what we don't know because we will not know it when we see it; and Hegel has a not dissimilar answer to the one Socrates gives. Let us, he says "call to mind the abstract determinations of truth and knowledge as they occur in consciousness. Consciousness simultaneously distinguishes itself from something and at the same time relates itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists for consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this relating, or of the being of something for a consciousness, is knowing." Shall we dwell on this sentence a moment? It is, as he says, abstract, by which he nearly always means "rather schematic and relatively lifeless." If Hegel had a pair of columns, as the Pythagoreans are said to have had, with the good in one and the bad in the other, he would certainly have "concrete" in the good column and "abstract" in the bad. "Concrete" comes from a word meaning "to grow together" and so for one who believes that the truth is the whole, the higher the degree of concreteness a thing has, the more it is grown together with other things, the more adequate it is as an expression of the truth.

Still, abstract though it be, the sentence does show how we tend to think about knowing. It is an analysis of what we mean by saying "I am conscious of something"; this may mean "I see something" or "I imagine something" or "remember something" or "I

am explicitly aware of something". "Conscious" translates Hegel's German word "bewusst" which might be over-literally rendered "beknown". "Conscious" and "bewusst" both take a genitive object: one is conscious of or has a share in this or that. The earliest attested usage of "conscious" given in the OED is 1601, when it appears in its Latin-derived meaning of "sharing knowledge with " or "privy to, sharing in, or witness of human actions or secrets" and is applied in a line of Ben Jonson's to Time. It comes to be applied to the knowledge one shares with oneself, so that to be conscious means to be a fellow-knower with oneself of something. Something like this is what we mean by our conscience: Not only do I know I have done something wrong, some other judging part of me is a fellow-knower of my trespass. A division in ourselves and even in the knowing part of ourselves is necessary to be able to speak this way. It is suggestive that this usage comes into English during the century of those tireless dividers Hobbes and Bacon, Descartes and Pascal, but the Latin usages of *consci*us are many centuries older and perfectly parallel: one may very well be conscious to or with oneself of something else already in, say, the time of Ovid. "Bewusst" seems to have more the sense of being known to oneself as knower of this or that. But this too is a dividing up of myself into two knowers, one who knows something, the other who knows that the one knows something. "Ich bin mir dessen bewusst" is a common expression for "I am aware of it" which literally translates as "I am bekknown to myself of it." One sometimes hears that there is no word for consciousness in Hegel's sense to be found in Ancient Greek. I think this is true if it means the same as saying that no-one before Hegel endowed consciousness with such a panoply of forms and powers. On the other hand there is the verb *σύννοια* which is often used with a reflexive pronoun, as when Socrates says in the *Apology*, "*σύννοια ἑαυτῷ οὐδ' ὅτι οὐκ ἔσθ' ὧν*" . "I am well aware that I am not clever at anything" or literally "I know with myself, not being clever at anything". There are also the nouns *συνείδησις* and *συνείδεισις* which mean "conscience", as well as "awareness" or "consciousness". Certainly the words one is accustomed to see in Plato and Aristotle for "intellect", such as *νοῦς* , *διανοία* , *φρονήσις* , do not translate "consciousness" and that fact cannot be without significance.

Still, a knowing that is doubled and thereby fully explicit; the being well aware that comes from one part of me knowing something and another part knowing that I know, doesn't that kind of knowing imply that another kind would exist? If the first kind is called conscious knowing, the other kind would be unconscious knowing: one part of me will know something without this being known to all of me, without my being well aware or my knowing fully explicit. And isn't this very much what we find in some of the Platonic Dialogues? The story told about Recollection in the *Meno* is intended to explain the possibility of learning by proposing that the soul knows all things in an

unconscious way, which can be compared to the way one knows something one has temporarily forgotten. In the Theaetetus Socrates is constantly bringing the conversation to a halt by saying that this or that account of the nature of knowledge has the peculiar consequence that we would have to know something and at the same time not know it, or not know that we know it. This does appear absurd and unacceptable to the young mathematician, but Socrates surely knows that if something of the sort is not possible, then neither is dialectic at all. I conclude that many of the thoughts which Hegel associates with the word "consciousness" are indeed present in the thought of Plato and that perhaps Whitehead is right when he says that all Western Philosophy is footnotes to Plato. But this etymological digression is in some danger of sounding like a footnote itself.

The second part of Hegel's sentence was "...the determinate aspect of this relating or of the being of something for a consciousness is knowing". Notice that knowing is a rather loose term: anything determinate in the aspect a thing presents to us is something we "know" about it.

What comes next is very important. "But we distinguish this being-for-another from being-in-itself; whatever is related to knowledge or knowing is also distinguished from it, and posited as existing outside of this relationship; this being-in-itself is called truth. Just what might really be involved in these determinations is of no further concern to us here. Since our object is phenomenal knowledge, its determination too will be taken directly as they present themselves, and they do present themselves very much as we have here apprehended them." I think the reservation Hegel is voicing has to do with his understanding that there cannot ultimately be a being-in-itself outside any relation to consciousness. Why then is this impossibility so much a part of what we first mean by truth?

I think Hegel's answer is that we are somehow inexplicitly aware, within the division of ourselves that is called consciousness, of an overarching oneness or wholeness of ourselves, or of ourselves with everything, which we nevertheless do not see directly, as we do the varying particular contents of our consciousness.

This unity cannot be reached until the end of the "necessary sequence of patterns of consciousness" has been found. It is the only real "thing-in-itself", because it is the whole, and thus needs no other to complete its being or its intelligibility. It is our implicit connection to that Whole which makes us discontent with every limited and partial knowledge or pattern of consciousness we encounter, or rather become. Our discontent always takes the form of noticing that what we have understood is not the thing itself, but only how it appears to us. That, is we notice that there is more that the thing can be than we are yet

seeing, because we who do the seeing know that we are limited in this or that particular respect. But as I said earlier, we only perceive those limits in the light of what lies beyond them, and so we can go beyond them and revise our view of the thing by means of our new position, one step closer to the Whole. Thus we change along with our knowledge of the thing and this, says Hegel, is what is meant by Experience. The ordinary view according to which I learn some error of my ways when I happen to have some new experience, is only another limitation of the learning consciousness. Hegel, who is by hypothesis already at the end of the path, will show how the only way I was ready to have that new experience make sense to me was by my having reached a kind of end of my previous pattern of consciousness, and by having sensed what lay beyond that end. These movements indeed were actually what constituted that which seemed to present itself as a spontaneously occurring new experience. Of course hardly anyone can experience life as a relentless march toward final wisdom, and when Hegel speaks of a necessary sequence of patterns of consciousness, he doesn't mean that it is necessary that any one consciousness go through all of the forms he lays out in the ordered sequence of his book. On the contrary, his claim is that everyone before him has without exception gotten stuck somewhere along the way, and that he is the first to see the completed whole of the self-unfolding Spirit. Still, if there is to be a whole, then there must be an order to its parts, and if it is a whole over time, that order must be also a temporal order. Hence there must be a necessary sequence of patterns of consciousness, ending as Hegel says, at a point where consciousness "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."

These are the last words of the Introduction. But you were promised a talk on Sense Certainty and Perception.

What can I usefully say and leave time for a question period? Maybe we could look at the transition from sense-certainty to perception and try to see in what sense it might be called part of a necessary sequence?

So sense-certainty has proposed itself as true knowledge, invoking its purity and immediacy as character witnesses. But its truth has turned out to be not the immediate particularity it intends by saying "This" and pointing, but rather the most abstract generality, a universal "This" made of a universal "here" and "Now". Only by being indifferent to any particular content can these terms stay open to all possible examples of their meaning, and only so can they be applied to any one thing

meaningfully. In Hegel's words "An actual sense-certainty is not merely this pure immediacy, but an instance of it." That is, it is one among many others of the same kind. If I could manage to be and remain fully absorbed in my immediate sense-certainty of the one and only being in existence, I would have no need to say "this" or to point at all. Of course I would have to keep myself unaware that there were after all already two things and not just one, namely this solitary thing I am sensing with certainty, and myself. But once I recognize multiplicity then my knowing will have to take it into account. To know one thing will then involve knowing how it is not some other, but also how it could be. That is, I will at least need a way to recognize that insofar as they all have being, all beings are the same and insofar as each is not the others they are all different. Universal words like "this", "here" and "now" do precisely that: they single out a particular by saying that it is not any other and at the same time they say nothing about it that could not be said of any other, for every particular is a "this", every location a "here", every time a "now", and each of them is not any other. We use them sometimes when we want to let a thing speak for itself, because we suppose if we say the very minimum the richness of the thing's own particularity will have the most room to come across. But if we are replying to the question "Wherein lies the certainty of your knowledge of the thing?" with the words, "I am certain of it because it is this unique one, here and now immediately present before me", then we say the opposite of what we intend, for all of those words refer us to the very broadest categories of things, and hence to mediation and relation, and not at all to a kind of self-contained pot of truth, sitting on its own off to one side, whether that be the side of this "I" or of this thing. The true is the universal, and insofar as we already see that the word "I" is just as universal and non-unique as the "this", we are a step closer to seeing that our being is not ultimately other than that of the things of the world, and that to understand the one will be to understand the other.

Now, how does the truth of Sense-certainty become the new truth of Perception?

Before addressing that let me dissent a little from a view of how to read Hegel that may seem to be implied by the selection of seminar readings. That view, if I were to exaggerate it a bit, might claim that Hegel's thought is not only systematical, but mathematical, so that if you haven't understood steps B and C you can't hope to get anywhere with steps D and E. I have sometimes been asked by worried Seniors if it wouldn't be better for them to re-read an earlier Hegel reading several more times before going on to the upcoming assignment, since they feel they have so much left to understand already back there. I try to remind them of Aristotle, another system-builder, whose system is nevertheless more like a circle whose identical curvature reveals

itself everywhere than like a brick wall, the location of whose particular bricks would have to be gauged by keeping a careful count of how many units up and over from the cornerstone one had travelled. Not only may one fail to understand many previous sections and suddenly be illuminated by a later chapter; even within a page or paragraph one may go from the darkest kind of puzzlement about one sentence, to piercing insight in another. Such at least has been my experience. A stubborn and attentive gnawing and worrying at an obscure passage is probably never simply a wasted effort, but don't imagine you must solve each sentence before you are allowed to read the next. Hegel often seeks to say the same thing in other words, or to say briefly what he has just said at length, or, most often, as Mr. Venable's note pointed out, to describe in one way for us his readers what he describes in another way as the experience of the consciousness that is his protagonist. A glimmer of understanding found in any of these can sometimes be used to unlock some of the surrounding mysteries. And sometimes not.

I will (briefly) return to Perception. Sense-certainty had ended with the coming-to-be of the universal as a unity of one and many: the Here is "in its own self a simple Together of many Heres." [Even so the "I" is now known as this I only by not being any other I, each of which is, insofar as it too is just an I, not nameably different.]

Consciousness continues to seek the truth outside itself, as it imagines, namely in the object. But the object means something different now. Hegel says "Since the principle of the object, the universal, is in its simplicity a mediated universal, the object must express this its nature in its own self. This it does by showing itself as the thing with many properties." One of the things these sentences are saying is that the very simplicity of the universal implies some unfinished business, a thought that has not been thought through yet. In order to be simple in the way it is, the universal must be mediated. But that means it must be negatively related to many others. Mediation always involves negation. Hegel somewhere reckons it to his credit that he has gone beyond Spinoza's insight that every determination is a negation to the realization of the converse: every negation is a determination. Spinoza had meant that we define a thing by marking it off from what it is not; that everything we say about something is really a form of saying how it differs from some other thing and is thus a negation. Hegel's advance is to say, as he does in the Introduction, that to discover a thing is not what we thought it was is never a dead end, but is always a gain. If we have negated then we have further determined. He speaks of negation that is not empty but is precisely the determinate negation of some specific previous understanding. In fact he is speaking of it in paragraph 113, right after the passage I just read. He says: "The This is therefore established as not This, or as something superseded;



and hence not as Nothing, but as a determinate Nothing, the Nothing of a content, namely of the This. Consequently, the sense-element is still present but not in the way it was imagined to be in the case of immediate certainty: not as the singular item that is "meant", but as a universal or as that which will be defined as a property. Supersession ("Putting up") exhibits its true twofold meaning which we have seen in the negative: it is at once a negating and a preserving. Our Nothing as the Nothing of the This, preserves its immediacy and is itself sensuous, but it is a universal immediacy. Being, however, is a universal in virtue of having mediation or the negative within it; when it expresses this in its immediacy, it is a differentiated determinate property. As a result, many such properties are established simultaneously, one being the negative of the other."