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## The Tragedy of Experience

Hegel underscores his thematic intention to complete and thus reach the end of philosophy in a remarkable passage from the ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology*. He writes, “to bring it about that philosophy may become closer to the form of science [*Wissenschaft*]—toward the goal of being able to lay aside its name as the *love* of *knowledge*, and be *actual knowledge*—this is what I have set out to do.”<sup>1</sup> Hegel tells us that his speculative philosophy is supposed to consummate our knowledge of the world, our past, and ourselves, and so alleviate any need for further philosophy understood in the sense of the ancient Greek φιλοσοφία, the loving pursuit of wisdom. Yet, it is precisely the compass of Hegel’s ambitions that compel him to explore the issue of finitude as it appears in human affairs under its multiple guises of incommensurability, strife, confusion, and difference. For Hegel’s desire to achieve knowledge in its absolute form leads him to turn his speculative eye toward history and to develop a systematic, unified knowledge of a phenomenon that appears, perhaps more than any other, to be guided not by rules, but by incalculable and often violent transformations, catastrophe, innumerable collisions, and interminable change.

While Hegel’s thematic purpose is to show that our powers of synthesis ultimately prevail even in the face of such apparent disjointedness, Hegel’s references to tragedies and theoretical works on tragedy are decisive for his project because he turns to tragedy as the supreme type of expression to capture and clarify the most terrible and aporetic of such dynamics of historical life. If Hegel dedicates the *Phenomenology* to one of the grandest of unities imaginable—the speculative unity of the concept—he nevertheless

recommends tragedy as an indispensable voice of incommensurable differences, disunity, confusion, and strife.

Perhaps none of Hegel's uses of tragedy has broader application, or deeper consequences, than his reliance on a resource of tragedy to characterize the phenomenon of experience. One of Hegel's most overarching purposes in the *Phenomenology* is to present absolute knowledge as it emerges in the life of spirit. Hegel rejects the idea that the absolute arises either through formalism or empiricism, and he argues instead that it ultimately comes about only thanks to the education we receive through concrete experience.<sup>2</sup> In this light, the *Phenomenology* unfolds primarily as an effort to depict not only the final accomplishment of knowing in its absolute form, but also the progression of spirit toward this end through each of the essential moments in its experiential growth. Hegel's presentation of spirit thus affords a central position to the notion of experience as the fundamental principle of spiritual transformation, and Hegel's association of experience with tragedy has implications not only for the concept of spirit in general, but also for every moment of its development. Moreover, the connection Hegel sees between experience and tragedy also supplies something of a prototype for all of his further references, insofar as he uses each of them to shed light on the tragic dimension of specific forms of experience.

It is true that much of Hegel's thematic, and triumphant, vision of spirit is sustained by the claims he makes about experience. After all, on his view the attainment of absolute knowledge is ultimately contingent on and enabled by the expansion of our awareness that is precipitated by experience. But, Hegel believes that it is only from the speculative standpoint of his celebrated 'we,' the philosophers for whom this expansion of our awareness is already complete enough to recognize the internal necessity in the progression of experience, that we see absolute knowledge as the final destination of the lessons learned from experience. From the more natural, or naïve, standpoint of consciousness that remains on the path of its education, by contrast, it is impossible yet to see any necessity in absolute knowledge as the end result of our edification, and our encounters with experience unfold primarily as a series of difficult and unanticipated trials that force us not only to confront, but also to overcome the hitherto latent oppositions and limitations in our preconceived awareness of things.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even from the vantage point of Hegel's 'we,' our awareness continues to include the memory of the difficulties faced along the way. Despite Hegel's belief in the positive outcome of experience, he acknowledges that it is a Janus-faced phenomenon. In fact, Hegel delivers strong words to convey the

consequences of the negative aspect of experience for his conception of spirit. He writes, “the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself undefined by devastation, but the life that endures and lingers upon death. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Hegel’s use of such language appears to place his concept of experience well within the vicinity of the tragic. But, Hegel scholarship has seen much debate about the importance of Hegel’s rhetoric for his larger view. On one end of the discussion, we expect some commentators may maintain that Hegel’s more tragic remarks on experience anticipate important post-Hegelian (and even anti-Hegelian) movements in philosophy. In some figures to approach Hegel in this vein, such as Jean Hyppolite, for example, we hear the suggestion that Hegel’s tragic depiction of experience as it appears for naïve consciousness points to something of a theory of existentialism *in nuce*.<sup>5</sup> On the opposite extreme, it would probably not be hard to find philosophers today who would simply write off Hegel’s use of notions, such as death, ruination, destruction (and, as we shall see), anxiety, doubt, and despair, as so many overwrought metaphors and rhetorical flourishes without substantial bearing. Yet, still others maintain that while we must proceed with caution, Hegel’s use of concepts such as these to describe experience cannot be ignored. Merold Westphal poses the sentiment as a genuine question:

When Jean Wahl tells us that Hegelian doubt is more like that of Pascal or Nietzsche than that of Descartes, and when Jean Hyppolite suggests that we have to do here with *une angoisse existentielle*, is it Hegel or the intellectual atmosphere of France in the forties which is speaking to us?<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, we are tempted to say that Westphal’s question is perhaps really an *Urfrage* for Hegel studies—a provocation that is as unavoidable as it is undecidable—and thus continues to pose a challenge for commentators today as it did for those a half-century ago.

But what, precisely, is Hegel’s conception of experience? Before it is possible to measure the larger significance of Hegel’s association of experience with tragedy, we must consider Hegel’s view in some detail. What is Hegel’s concept of absolute knowledge, and how does he believe experience will lead us to it? And what, precisely, makes experience so tragic?

Important scholars of Hegel in recent decades, perhaps, especially those interested in the epistemological dimensions of Hegel’s notion of the absolute, have fruitfully approached his conception of absolute knowledge as a response to Kant’s critique of reason.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I also wish to

interpret Hegel's notion of absolute knowledge in terms of his relation to Kant, with an eye to illuminating Hegel's notion of experience. However, by focusing on some of what might be called the more ontologically-motivated concerns that inform Hegel's response to Kant, I hope to emphasize that Hegel's conception of experience involves important, and even tragic, consequences for the character of life of spirit. As we shall see, Hegel points to the tragic side of his view in his contention that the education we receive through experience unfolds as a path not only of 'doubt,' but also of 'despair.'<sup>8</sup>

Hegel believes that the expansion of our awareness through experience is predicated on doubt, as experience compels us to recognize and relinquish our certainty in things as we have hitherto conceived of them.<sup>9</sup> Hegel claims that this form of doubt is also, and more crucially, a form of despair, for our doubt in the reality of things unfolds as much more than a mere, Cartesian-style epistemological and methodological exercise. Instead, as genuinely conscious and concerned beings, our loss of certainty crucially upsets our sense of ourselves and our place in the world because it forces us to recognize that in the flow of experience our knowledge remains importantly finite, not simply incomplete or partial, in the sense that our store of knowledge is less than comprehensive, but finite, as our knowledge remains dependent on conditions that we can neither control, nor even survey. While Hegel uses a number of ideas and images to point out the tragic aspect of this dynamic, none is more important than the concept of reversal, a notion that Hegel might be seen to borrow, albeit somewhat obliquely and with important qualifications and innovations, from Aristotle's *Poetics* and its effective history. Hegel's use of this notion emphasizes that for naïve consciousness, at least, experience brings us face to face with a form of finitude that bespeaks the tenuousness of even our deepest beliefs about ourselves and our world, and that thus exposes the precariousness and vulnerability of human affairs.

### ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE AS SPECULATIVE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Scholarship on Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge is as expansive and rich as it is varied, and, as John Burbridge recently points out, the interpretation of Hegel's complete view is made all the more difficult by the fact that he himself appears to employ the notion of the absolute in a number of contexts and senses.<sup>10</sup> But in the *Phenomenology*, at least, one of Hegel's chief claims about absolute knowledge suggests that it may properly be

viewed as a speculative form of self-knowledge accomplished in the expansion of our awareness that results from experience. By 'absolute knowledge,' Hegel refers neither to a form of romantic insight, of the sort we might find exemplified in, say, J. G. Hamann, nor to, say, an exhaustive catalog of the fruits of human learning, as might have been envisioned by some of the eighteenth-century encyclopedists.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Hegel identifies absolute knowledge primarily as a special type of self-reflection, a manner or way of knowing the self that is distinguished from other forms of cognition by its self-sufficiency, or sovereignty. On Hegel's view, absolute knowledge is constituted as that form of self-conscious reflection that is complete and sound because it is completely free of qualifications and constraints. Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, "the word means nothing other than 'the absolved,' and in classical Latin stands as the antonym of 'the relative.' It indicates the independence from all restrictive conditions."<sup>12</sup> For Hegel, the absoluteness of knowledge turns not foremost on the breadth of its substantial content (though, certainly, he believes that it covers an expansive range of phenomena), but, rather, on its independence from those conditions that threaten the completeness of its veracity.

But, Hegel identifies the accomplishment of speculative self-knowledge, this absolutely self-conscious awareness, principally, as the culmination of a dynamic process, and not simply as a static, cognitive content. The achievement of absolute knowledge comprises the final stage in a development, an education (*Bildung*), that we receive from experience.<sup>13</sup> In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel maintains that consciousness develops dialectically in stages, and he argues that with each of its advances, it relinquishes its former convictions because it comes to appreciate that they resulted from a merely relative, or limited, perspective. Indeed, Hegel's account of this process is grand in sweep, and, as we know from the overall itinerary of his narrative, it encompasses experiences not only of more basic cognitive functions such as sensation, perception, and understanding, but also of history, multiple forms of practical relations, theoretical and practical rationality, ethical life, culture, and religion. From this standpoint, speculative self-knowledge requires us not to abstract ourselves from all conditions that restrict our perspective, nor to meditate on ourselves as unsituated subjects in order to discern our essential features. Rather, speculative self-knowledge demands that we come to see ourselves as nothing short of the end result of the lessons we learn from experience, and, thereby, as the totality of all of the merely relative certainties held in the course of our development.<sup>14</sup>

But this tells us perhaps too little, and in order to determine Hegel's conception of absolute self-knowledge in adequate detail, we might consider the

issue, as Hegel did, in light of larger philosophical questions of his times. It is too often forgotten today that the topic of absolute knowledge forms not only a vital issue in Hegelian philosophy, but also the centerpiece of a broad range of intellectual debates in German Idealism and Romanticism. Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge is deeply informed by the concerns that drive these debates, and though there are important differences among Hegel and figures such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Hölderlin, it may safely be said that important aspects of their approaches are galvanized by an extremely rich, and ambivalent, relation to Kant.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, much of Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* (and, of course, elsewhere), as well as his conception of absolute knowledge and his view of its connection with experience, can be seen as part of a larger effort in German Idealism and Romanticism to resolve decisive tensions in Kant's philosophical project. The intellectual atmosphere of German Idealism and Romanticism was alive with the enthusiasm that Kant's critical philosophy marked a brilliant and decisive break with both the rationalist and empiricist traditions of modern philosophy. Yet, many believed that even though Kant's breakthrough made it impossible to return to earlier schools of thought, his critical project, nevertheless, demanded further attention and emendation because it was imbued with internal inconsistencies that threatened its overall coherence.

The influence of Kant's radical departure from the tradition on German philosophy took hold so rapidly and was so extensive that it led Schelling, in a notice penned on the occasion of Kant's death in 1804, to say that the Kantian critical project formed nothing less than "the boundary of two epochs of philosophy, of one, which he puts to an end forever, of another, which he prepared negatively. . . ." <sup>16</sup> A survey of Kant scholarship might bear out that a greater share of recent Anglo-American approaches focus on the aspects of his thought that are relevant for questions in fields such as epistemology and the philosophy of science, and, perhaps, on themes that Kant develops in the portions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* devoted to the first part of his 'Transcendental Doctrine of Elements,' the 'Transcendental Analytic' of our cognitive faculties of the intellect (*Verstand*) and of sensibility. In German Idealism and Romanticism there is also extensive interest in these parts of the first *Critique*, and no doubt much of the widespread enthusiasm for Kant's critical project at the time stems from the implications of it. Of the numerous lines of Hegel's corrective of Kant, for example, Hegel's critique of Kant's views of the unity of apperception and of the categories stand out.<sup>17</sup> However, some lines of debate about the absolute in this period, including Hegel's contributions to them, can be seen as centering not on the

first part of Kant's Doctrine of Elements, but on the second, his 'Transcendental Dialectic' of reason (*Vernunft*).

Even though the German Idealist and Romantic reception of Kant is animated by the desire to scrutinize and improve on the critical project, the period after Kant may, nonetheless, be said largely to embrace Kant's identification of the purpose of reason with the unconditioned. In the first *Critique*, Kant identifies reason as our "highest" cognitive faculty because its predilection for synthesis outmatches those of our other important theoretical faculty, the intellect. It is true he believes our power of reason to be bound up in "transcendental illusion" because it bears no intrinsic relation to intuition, but nevertheless, reason retains its paramount status because its proper function, the *telos* that defines it and directs its activity, is the accomplishment of universality. Indeed, the proper vocation of reason is to represent universal ideas with an unrestricted extension and not simply ideas that cover only a limited, specific domain of particulars. At this highest level, the universal is "explained by the concept of the unconditioned, insofar as it entails a basis for the synthesis of everything that is conditioned."<sup>18</sup> Reason is our greatest synthetic faculty, and its purpose is to represent unconditioned, universal ideas, in contrast with the faculty of the intellect, a lower-order power; all knowledge derived from which remains dependent on and bounded by our reception of the phenomena through the sensibility.

If much of German Idealism and Romanticism is animated by the wish to fulfill the promise of reason as Kant describes it, then it might also be said that some of the concerns for absolute knowledge in this period unfold in attempts to elaborate further on and to determine in more detail Kant's vision of an unconditioned, universal idea. Evidence of this is found, we might suggest, in the widespread circulation of the term 'absolute' itself among Hegel and his contemporaries, as the term may be traced back to an important, though sometimes overlooked, passage from the first *Critique*. Indeed, in the course of his discussion of the concept of unconditioned knowledge, Kant pauses to observe:

Because the loss of a concept . . . can never be a matter of indifference to philosophers, thus I hope that the determination and careful protection of the expression, on which the concept depends, will also be no matter of indifference to them. . . .

"Then," he says, properly to express the concept of the unconditioned, "I . . . will use the word: *absolute*. . . ."<sup>19</sup> If the enthusiasm that figures such as

Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, and Hölderlin have for Kant's account of the purpose of reason permeates their thought, then, perhaps, one important dimension of their approach turns on a certain deference to Kant's judgment in their use of the term 'absolute' to capture the form of knowledge that reason seeks.

Yet, figures in German Idealism and Romanticism, perhaps especially Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, owe still more to Kant, for in their attempts to determine absolute knowledge in deeper detail they follow Kant's further claim: that reason reaches the highest form of universal, unconditioned knowledge in the idea of the unity of *subject* and *world*.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, Kant's account of the absolute synthesis of subject and world in reason is quite intricate, and he envisions this unity as a third and final form in a hierarchy; the first synthesis turns on the unity of the subject in its own right and the second turns on the unity of the world. But while figures such as Schelling and Hegel retain a critical distance from many aspects of Kant's view, their research unfolds in no small part under the sign of the Kantian conclusion that the purpose of reason, namely, to represent absolutely unconditioned knowledge, attains its height in the idea of a unity of the human subject, identified by its rationality and autonomy, with the material world of phenomena, known, through the powers of the intellect at least, to be governed by the mechanical laws of nature. Important streams of intellectual debates in Germany at the dawn of the nineteenth century were animated by the conviction that Kant not only properly discerned the purpose of reason, and found the suitable expression for it, but also discovered the specific form that the absolutely unconditioned universal idea would take, the unity of subject and world, reason and matter.

Despite their debts to Kant's discussion of reason in the first *Critique*, Hegel and some of his contemporaries may nevertheless be seen to argue that Kant's conception of reason is laden with decisive problems and is thus unacceptable as it stands. One of the troubles lies in Kant's contention that it is impossible for reason completely to fulfill its own purpose. While Kant believes that the ambitions of our highest cognitive faculty know no limits, his view of reason is nevertheless tempered by his further claim that our power of reason effaces itself in its very efforts to attain the absolute—that reason's demands exceed its grasp. It is this vision of reason that Kant wishes to express, in distilled form, in the very first lines of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The passage reads,

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its knowledge: it is troubled by questions that it cannot dismiss, for they are given to it

through the nature of reason itself, but that it also cannot answer, for they overstep all of the powers of human reason. It finds itself in this embarrassment through no fault of its own.<sup>21</sup>

Our greatest cognitive gift, reason, is guided by its intrinsic inclination to represent the absolutely unconditioned, in the end, the unity of subject and world. Yet, despite this native proclivity, reason is ill equipped to make good on its *telos*. What is worse, this impotence of reason is unavoidable, for it results not from some corrigible failure, but, rather, from the operations of reason as such. This conviction ultimately leads Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to conclude that the only legitimate use of reason is regulative, and not constitutive, in nature.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Hegel is convinced that this conclusion, along with others in Kant, comprises an embarrassment to philosophy that must be addressed and corrected.<sup>23</sup>

One focal point of Hegel's approach to Kant turns on Kant's elaboration of this 'peculiar fate' in his discussion of how reason, in virtue of its very efforts to attain its end, necessarily falls into multiple and irresolvable dialectics. The architectonic structure of Kant's text suggests that his discussion of the third and final dialectic, 'the ideal of pure reason,' should treat the difficulty that plagues our power of reason in its attempt to represent its highest synthesis of subject and world. But, Hegel and others in German Idealism and Romanticism do not always attend to the letter of Kant's account, and influential here is the view first developed by Schelling in the 1790s that the focal point of Kant's treatment of the unity of subject and world is found in the 'Third Antinomy of Pure Reason.'<sup>24</sup> Kant actually indicates that his purpose in this particular section of the first *Critique* is to show that reason succumbs to a formidable dialectic in its endeavor to discern an unconditioned, universal principle of causation that directs the universe, which would thus represent a unified idea not of the subject and world, but simply of the world on its own terms. The German Idealists' concern for Kant's elucidation of this dialectic has decisive implications for their take on Kant's idea of the unity of subject and world, and of equal importance, some idealists suggest the dialectic exposes inconsistencies in the Kantian conception of reason.

Although numerous approaches to Hegel's conception of reason may be found in the literature, it may be asserted, minimally, that central to his reception of Kant is the objection that important difficulties in Kant emerges from his confusion about the ontological status of reason, and the unity of being and thought.<sup>25</sup> While Kant's critical project constitutes a revolutionary and original movement in philosophy that resists being

pigeonholed as a representative of any one school of thought, it may be said that Kant's critical philosophy is a form of transcendental idealism, at least insofar as he maintains, for example, that the ideas of reason have no basis in, and indeed bear no intrinsic relation to, the phenomenal order of spatiotemporal entities. However, the emphasis in Kant's critical project is preeminently on epistemological issues, as one of the overarching purposes of Kant's project is to use reason as the basis to critique our theoretical and cognitive faculties; and for Kant the critique of a faculty does not require that we determine its ontological status, but, instead, only that we determine all of the possibilities and limits, or, as Henry Allison puts it, the 'epistemic conditions,' that direct it.<sup>26</sup>

Yet to Hegel's mind, Kant's critical philosophy fails on its own terms, or, as Paul Guyer puts it, Hegel argues that "Kant's conclusions fall short of his own philosophical expectations."<sup>27</sup> In this vein, one of Hegel's chief concerns is that despite the broadly epistemological focus of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's discussion points to the need for a more fully ontological conception of reason than Kant explicitly provides. Although Hegel does not organize his treatment of reason in the *Phenomenology* expressly as such a response to Kant, the central lines of his argument might be stated as follows. Kant tells us that the highest idea of reason seeks to represent the unity of subject and world. But he conceives the subject as the organic unity formed by its cognitive faculties, and he defines the world in regard to the phenomenal order. Thus, on the Hegelian approach, Kant's discussion implies that the true vocation of reason is really to represent itself, not merely from an epistemological standpoint as a cognitive faculty, but rather from an ontological standpoint as something that underlies and gives determinacy to reality. Indeed, to the extent that the principal directive of reason is to represent itself as real, all epistemologically oriented, merely regulative employments of reason, such as those endorsed by Kant, are really only incomplete and limited uses, inadequate to the demands of speculation.

From this standpoint, Hegel's speculative philosophy may be characterized as a fully ontological determination of transcendental idealism that would promise to show more fidelity to Kant's conception of reason than Kant himself shows. Moreover, Hegel's *Phenomenology* may, then also, at least in part, be viewed as a corrective against Kant that works to represent the being of reason.

One of the most important foci of Hegel's rejoinder is his concept of experience. Hegel recognizes that for Kant, our cognitive powers enable us to conceive of, or think [*denken*] any number of things. But Kant believes

that genuine knowledge—what we may genuinely know [*erkennen*] in the strict sense—is circumscribed by and therefore limited to the domain of things we can experience.<sup>28</sup> In the first *Critique*, this leads Kant to the conviction that the faculty of the intellect forms the seat of all our true knowledge, as its concepts result from the cooperation of its categories with sensible intuitions, the ineluctable source of experience. Kant concludes that by contrast, our highest synthetic faculty, reason, provides no actual knowledge at all, since its ideas bear no essential relation to intuition.

Yet Hegel, in direct contradistinction to Kant, maintains that the ideas of reason, even the highest, unconditioned ideas, *do* provide true knowledge—though, Hegel does not arrive at this view because he disregards Kant's association of knowledge with experience. On the contrary, Hegel actually concurs with Kant that all of our genuine knowledge must have a basis in experience. While it can be argued that both Hegel and Kant subscribe to versions of transcendental idealism, neither of them gainsays the importance of concrete life, and each believes that philosophical research is spurious and empty unless it maintains a firm foundation in aesthesis. Instead, Hegel develops his belief in the consanguinity of reason and knowledge based on his rejection of Kant's claim that rational ideas bear no intrinsic relation to sensible intuition. Hegel believes that the domain of experience entails much more than Kant had thought, and one of Hegel's most important labors in the *Phenomenology* is to elaborate on the conditions that allow us to achieve genuine knowledge of reason through experience, and, ultimately, absolute knowledge of the unconditioned, universal synthesis of subject and world, reason and reality.

The purpose of speculative philosophy is to achieve absolute knowledge, but since in its highest form, this knowledge takes shape as an unconditioned idea of the being of our power of reason, absolute knowledge may be understood as a certain form of self-knowledge. In the speculative sense, however, self-knowledge requires us to see ourselves not simply from an epistemological standpoint as rational subjects defined by their cognitive powers, but rather to discover through experience that we ourselves, at least insofar as we participate in reason, form the constitutive basis of reality.<sup>29</sup> On Hegel's thematic view, speculative philosophy culminates in the form of absolute self-knowledge that not only fulfills the promise of reason, but thereby offers a corrective against the Kantian belief in a peculiar fate of reason that would leave us unable to find our place in the world.

Scholars have commented that the explosion of interest in tragedy after Kant unfolds in no small part as a response to his characterization of human reason, as a power guided by aspirations it cannot realize, and we

may wonder if the peculiar fate of reason leads less to embarrassment, as he says, than to humility.<sup>30</sup> But if this is the case, then Hegel's thematic vision of absolute knowledge can be seen as a triumphant conception of reason that counters the Kantian, tragic view, and that places experience in the crux of their difference from one another. Can absolute self-knowledge be won through experience? Do we really come to know reason in the course of our concrete affairs, and, if so, does reason really overcome its peculiar fate through experience? Does reason ever encounter its own limits in experience? Although in the end Hegel contends that our power of reason fulfills its purpose to attain speculative self-knowledge through experience, he does not think that this happens all at once, nor does he think that it is easy. On the contrary, the attainment of absolute knowledge is contingent on education in the experience of spirit that incorporates the speculative whole of history. Hegel calls this educational itinerary "a long path," and, though it results in the absolute, the way is punctuated at each step by difficulty and confusion.<sup>31</sup> Even if Hegel believes his view of absolute knowledge forms a sort of corrective against the Kantian view of reason's peculiar destiny, Hegel nevertheless appears, at least, to think that the course of experience itself has something peculiarly tragic about it.

### THE LONG PATH OF EXPERIENCE

Hegel's *Phenomenology* presents absolute knowledge as it emerges through experience in the course of the history of spirit. Insofar as the attainment of absolute knowledge turns on the unity of the rational subject and reality, the absolute can be understood as a form of self-knowledge, and the lessons we learn from experience thus teach us primarily to understand ourselves. Hegel's conception of the course of experience may be characterized as a process by which the rational subject becomes aware of itself more and more fully as the constitutive basis of the world. Hegel's view of this process is complicated and intricate enough that in our efforts to understand him, we should be wary of oversimplification. However, in his 'Preface' he associates his view with a classical notion of purposive activity, and at one point compares the expansion of our philosophical awareness, and our understanding of truth, with the process of natural growth.<sup>32</sup> But although Hegel calls the path of experience the "royal road of science [*Wissenschaft*]" because it results in the majesty of absolute knowledge, he also believes that it must "be seen as the way of doubt, or, more to the point, despair."<sup>33</sup> For absolute knowledge results not in an infinite increase

in the positive content of our comprehension of things, but instead in an expansion of our awareness that results from our total divestiture of certainty in the legitimacy of our preconceived ideas, values, and customary practices.

Hegel structures his explanation of the emergence of absolute knowledge through experience in a narrative about the education of conscious beings, and thus Hegel's approach requires us to consider at least the broader strokes of his conception of consciousness itself. In general terms, Hegel's interpretation may be seen as an intentional theory of consciousness, and one that is distinguished by his insistence that the cognitive subject forms a synthetic unity with its world. Hegel's conception of conscious life differs in a number of respects from many of those found in the main-streams of the philosophy of mind today, though, of course, this is not to say that his approach has nothing to say to scholars in the field. On the contrary, Hegel's overall view of consciousness may be seen to offer a critical perspective on what Daniel Dennett has referred to as the "the orthodox choice today in the English-speaking world,"<sup>34</sup> broadly, those interpretations of consciousness that seek a description of mental life in physical terms. Hegel's view could also be seen as a fecund resource for scholars who, led by figures such as Thomas Nagel and John Searle, "have in different ways insisted upon the irreducibility of the subjective point of view and the intrinsic or original intentionality of consciousness."<sup>35</sup> But for purposes of the present study, it might not make sense to develop the relation between Hegel's view and those in the philosophy of mind at length.

Still, if the concerns that guide recent Anglo-American approaches to mind remain somewhat foreign to Hegel's approach, important discourses in continental heritages of thought illuminate his view. For example, important aspects of Husserlian phenomenology resonate with, and thus help to shed light on, Hegel's view. Certainly, differences between Husserl and Hegel, both in sensibility and in substance, abound, not least of which is their divergent views of the relationship between the philosophical enterprise and phenomenological research.<sup>36</sup> For whereas Husserl identifies phenomenology as the foundational philosophical science (*Wissenschaft*), the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* maintains that philosophical science involves two parts—not only phenomenology, the science of experience, but moreover the science of logic, for which phenomenology prepares us.<sup>37</sup> But both Husserl and Hegel envision phenomenology principally as the scientific study of consciousness as an exclusive province of what appears to us as given. Moreover, both figures, if in somewhat different idioms, identify consciousness as a purposive, organic locus of intentional activity, which,

in Hegel, unfolds “simultaneously in the diremption and correlation of knowing and being, of the for-itself and the in-itself.”<sup>38</sup> As Hegel states it in the ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology*, consciousness, in its characteristic intentional activity “*differentiates* something from itself, to which it at the same time relates itself; or, as this is expressed: consciousness is for this something; and the determinate side of this *relation*, or of *being* for a consciousness, is *knowledge*.”<sup>39</sup> For Husserl and Hegel, consciousness should not be cast reductively as a substantial, static entity, a ‘thinking thing’ (*res cogitans*), but must instead be grasped as a dynamic complex of activities.

Yet, despite their similar notions of consciousness, a venerable heritage of post-Husserlian continental philosophy, which includes figures as diverse as Heidegger and Derrida, and a number of current scholars associated with them, points to a criticism of Husserl’s conception of phenomenological research that emphasizes an instructive difference between Husserl and Hegel.<sup>40</sup> Though criticisms of this type unfold along a number of lines, one of the most general worries turns on Husserl’s view that phenomenological research is predicated on the achievement of the phenomenological step back, the *epoché*. The concern, we might assert, is that Husserl’s notion of the *epoché* uncritically presupposes the possibility of a theoretical attitude that abstains from all involvement with and engagement in the world. From this standpoint, critics often charge that Husserl’s notion of phenomenological method retains a residual trace of Cartesianism, not, of course, because Husserl engages in the methodological doubt of the existence of the external world, but, rather, because the *epoché*, perhaps not unlike Descartes’ methodological doubt, appears to rest on the assumption of a disengaged, even disembodied, cognitive subject. As Donn Welton argues, for continental philosophers critical of the purported Cartesian deposit in Husserlian phenomenology such as John Caputo, Husserl’s approach to phenomenological description here fails to put enough weight on the hermeneutic elements that inform our conscious life.<sup>41</sup> From such a standpoint, Welton cites Caputo, we may worry that Husserl even “asks us to believe in two selves: one situated in the world and the other, its transcendental double.”<sup>42</sup>

Criticisms of this sort sometimes are pressed into the service of scholarly research on figures, such as Heidegger and Derrida, and are used to separate their views from what are cast as (Cartesian) assumptions informing Husserl’s approach. Yet, some commentators recognize that it is possible to differentiate Hegel, too, from the alleged difficulties in Husserl.<sup>43</sup> For, we might assert, not entirely unlike figures such as Heidegger and Derrida, Hegel, too, maintains that phenomenological research remains

deeply interested in and involved with the world. It is true that like Husserl's phenomenologist, Hegel associates his 'we,' that is, those philosophers, or, perhaps again, those phenomenological observers, who have already achieved the standpoint of absolute knowing, with a reflective stance toward the experiences of consciousness.<sup>44</sup> But in contrast with Husserl, Hegel conceives of our reflection on our experience not as a disengaged and detached investigation, but, rather, as the very culmination of our experience itself, and, indeed, a form of reflection that is directed by our desire for self-knowledge, which, thus, is characterized not by *disinterest*, but, rather, by *interest in the most intense and robust sense*.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Hegel maintains that his philosophical 'we' achieves its reflective stance by means not of a methodological invocation of an *epoché*, but, quite to the contrary, of its observation of consciousness' dialectical struggles in the course of its concerned participation in the world through experience.

Recent scholarship on Husserl has challenged many of the assumptions held by his critics in continental heritages of philosophy, and some commentators argue that Husserl offers a much more robust picture of the interplay of phenomenological research and our involvement in the world.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, one commentator suggests that Husserl's thought includes a "generative phenomenology" that provides an account of the interplay of the phenomenologist and history, culture, and other complex aspects of the world that rivals, if not exceeds, Hegel's phenomenology of spirit in richness.<sup>47</sup>

But for Hegel, the interrelationship between the phenomenological observer's standpoint of absolute knowledge and our involvement in the world is predicated on the long path of experience, which he characterizes as the developmental process that leads consciousness to gain an ever-deeper awareness of the intrinsic unity of the rational subject and the material world. Hegel is able to claim that for conscious beings, at least, this unity is essential and in principle always obtained, as the consciousness of the rational subject grants being to the world and its objects in the first place. But Hegel also believes that from the standpoint of naïve consciousness, at least, we fail to see this unity and fall into the common sense, but false, belief that the being of things is independent of us, insofar as we exhibit the tendency to disregard or forget the essential role of our own conscious activity in the constitution of the world and its objects.<sup>48</sup> We attain absolute knowledge of the genuine unity of subject and world as the result of a course of experience that increases the sophistication of our awareness and, finally, that overcomes the deceptive clarity of our naïve, commonsense beliefs. Absolute knowledge turns on the insight that we ourselves, as rational conscious beings, ensure our unity with reality, and this knowledge results

from an itinerary of experiences that lead us to self-discovery through a certain abnegation of the self's commonsense commitments.

But if absolute knowledge—the triumphant awareness of the unity of subject and world, of reason and reality—is the destination of the long path of experience, why is it also a path of doubt and despair? The primary answer turns on Hegel's view that in experience, we only progress to more sophisticated, highly differentiated forms (*Gestalten*) of consciousness on the basis of—indeed, in a sort of speculative exchange for—difficult confrontations with phenomena that force us to lose faith in and, thus, to sacrifice the forms of awareness that have hitherto guided our conscious lives. Hegel elaborates on the attainment of higher forms of consciousness through self-sacrifice in his claim that each of our experiences occurs as a movement in consciousness from 'certainty' to 'truth.'

Hegel maintains that even though our consciousness is malleable and dynamic, it always appears at each stage of its development in a definite form, and in each case, this form is granted to it by its specific composite of intentional structures. For every form of consciousness, it is this composite that dictates the possibilities and limits of consciousness' powers to constitute its objects, and, by the same token, to determine the character of their being. Hegel's developmental model of conscious life suggests, for example, that at one of its more rudimentary levels, our consciousness is formed by an unsophisticated nexus of intentional structures that allow it only to constitute objects as mere perceptual objects, or things. This form of consciousness might be said, in a somewhat Husserlian idiom, to lack the sophisticated network of noetic structures that it would need in order to constitute more complex objects; and it is thus powerless properly to understand the phenomena that consciousness becomes able to cognize later in its development, such as desire, other human beings, rationality, ethical life, culture, religion, and absolute knowing. But such a rudimentary form of consciousness nevertheless becomes complacent in the certainty that its composite of intentional structures is adequate and that all of its objects really are nothing more than mere things. Hegel maintains that all forms of consciousness tend to fall into this certainty insofar as their intentional activity is not self-consciously directed back on themselves, but is rather directed outwardly. We become certain of the form that our constitution of objects takes, but really only because we tend to forget that it is nothing other than our own conscious activity that gives the world we are in its profile.

But on Hegel's view, our consciousness is led to transform and expand itself through a course of experiences. Experience wrests us from our complacent certainty in the independent being of the objects we encounter,

and experience not only reminds us of our essential role in the determination of reality, but also compels us to acquiesce to the truth that our consciousness' intentional structures are simply inadequate to the objects they seek to constitute. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel identifies each experience as an "*investigation*" and a "*test*" in which a form of consciousness is confronted by the overly complex and intense phenomena that are too robust and rich for its composite of intentional structures and thus overwhelm its powers of cognition.<sup>49</sup> The excessiveness of such phenomena constitutes a shock for consciousness that not only rouses us from our naïve belief in the independent being of the world, but also forces us to reflect on the fact that we ourselves, as conscious beings, form the final ontological condition of reality. Moreover, this reflection reveals, in turn, that the phenomena have outmatched consciousness' powers because of insufficiencies and limitations that had been latent in its own composite of intentional structures. For Hegel, experience unfolds as a test that reveals a disjunction between our cognitive powers and the phenomena we encounter. The exposure of this disjunction leads to the supercession (*Aufhebung*) of the form our consciousness has taken up until now, and establishes a new form endowed with cognitive powers that can accommodate the phenomena that had previously overwhelmed it.<sup>50</sup> In the end, this process leads to the highest form of consciousness, absolute knowledge, and the unrestricted awareness of the synthetic unity of the rational subject and reality.

Hegel believes that the path of experience is punctuated by doubt and despair because, even though all experiences lead to an expansion of our consciousness, this expansion is contingent on our recognition of the limits of our power to understand ourselves, our world, and its objects. Speculative self-knowledge forms the end result of the long path of experience, but at each juncture of this path our progress is measured not by an increase in the things we know, but rather by an expansion of our awareness that results from a recognition of truth and the relinquishment of our certainty in the independent being of the world and its objects. This abdication of our certainty is a form of doubt because it requires us to deny our naïve, commonsense belief in reality. But for Hegel, our doubt in the independent being of reality is identified more properly as a form of despair, for our doubt is not merely epistemological or methodological in nature. In his 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel rejects all Cartesian-style methodological doubt on the grounds that it reduces the problem of doubt to a mere abstraction and conceals its true import.<sup>51</sup>

In actual experience, by contrast, our doubt in the independent being of reality genuinely matters to us, for it emerges in the course of our very

real efforts to comprehend ourselves, our world, and its phenomena. This doubt is thus also a form of despair because in experience our renunciation of certainty requires us not simply to concede that our knowledge is limited, in the sense that there are gaps in its positive content, but, rather, finite. In the strict, Hegelian sense, experience is always much more than the mere encounter with phenomena that remain within the grasp of our cognitive powers, even if they are phenomena that are unfamiliar to us. From this standpoint, our consciousness is not forced to undergo a true experience so long as the phenomena we encounter fall into some class of things that our consciousness' composite of intentional structures is already able to constitute. Instead, Hegelian experience emerges in our encounters with phenomena that actually overwhelm our intentional structures. Hegel thinks that this leads us to doubt in the independent being of reality, as it throws us back on ourselves and compels us to see that it has been consciousness itself, and not the external world, that forms the ultimate condition of our knowledge. But experience also leads us to despair of ourselves, for we must also come to terms with the fact that the form our consciousness has taken up until now is sorely inadequate, and that its constitution of objects has been dependent on intentional structures imbued with forms of negativity to which we have been blind.

### THE TRAGEDY OF EXPERIENCE

How are we to understand this finitude of our knowledge more fully? What is this doubt and despair? Hegel believes even though absolute knowledge is the destination of the long path of experience, the path itself nevertheless forms an inalienable and integral aspect of the human condition that forces us time and again to doubt our certainty in things. Hegel associates doubt with despair to remind us that our abdication of certainty in the independent being of reality is much more than a merely methodological exercise, but also to underscore that in experience, we are forced to recognize that our powers of cognition are imbued with negativity we ourselves had not seen. But what does this mean? What does our consciousness of doubt and despair tell us about ourselves and our lives, insofar as we are concerned, conscious beings who undergo experience? While, as I mentioned earlier, Hegel offers a number of general images allied with tragedy to characterize experience, he also elucidates the doubt and despair that result from experience by means of the more determinate idea of reversal.

Hegel's use of this notion suggests that in experience the collapse of our certainty forms a kind of crisis in the life of spirit that exposes the instability and precariousness of human affairs.

In the larger scheme of Hegel's presentation of spirit in the *Phenomenology*, his discussions of tragedy become ever-more extensive and intricate as spirit reaches later and later stages of its development. This may be at least in part because Hegel thinks that as our conscious awareness of ourselves, our world, and our past expands, we become more and more explicitly present to the tragic dimension of our affairs. However, in his general elaboration of experience in the 'Introduction' to his larger presentation of spirit, Hegel's use of the notion of tragic reversal is quite dense and extremely brief. He claims that in experience, the emergence of higher forms of consciousness is predicated on a transition in consciousness to doubt and despair from certainty, and that this movement is caused not by an external force, but "through *the reversal of consciousness itself*."<sup>52</sup> Despite its brevity, Hegel's claim here is decisive, and he returns to the notion of reversal a number of times over the course of his presentation of spirit, perhaps most famously in his discussion of mastery and servitude. But to unpack Hegel's conception of reversal, it may help to see it in the light of its relation to Aristotle's treatment of a similar notion in the *Poetics*.

Now, the relationship between Hegel's discussion here and the *Poetics* has different stakes than the relation between his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and Aristotle's text. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel's official view of the *Poetics* is that his own speculative aesthetics supercedes all other historical theories of art, to include the *Poetics*, though Hegel admits that the *Poetics* "is still of interest now," and, indeed, important aspects of the structure of Hegel's account of the genre of ancient drama appear to be borrowed from Aristotle's analysis.<sup>53</sup> But even so, in the *Aesthetics* Hegel's uses of the *Poetics* are in the service of his efforts to understand issues that surround the work of art. By contrast, at this juncture of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel may be seen as using the (Aristotelian) notion of reversal as a deep ontological and epistemic structure of conscious life, and thereby introduces an interest in tragedy that extends beyond the confines of those typically found in traditional forms of the discipline of aesthetics. From this angle, it would be possible to claim that the deepest meanings of Aristotle's *Poetics* might have remained unnoticed by its author, insofar as he failed to approach tragic drama as an exemplification of crucial facets of human being and knowing. But properly grasped, the Aristotelian analytic of the elements of tragic poetry is nonetheless valuable, as it provides, if in a transmogrified form, decisive aspects of conscious life itself.

But even if Hegel's larger interest in the *Poetics* here diverges from that of his *Aesthetics*, and, indeed, even contravenes Aristotle's original intention, Hegel's use still closely follows some of the basic terms of Aristotle's analysis. As Hegel recognizes in the *Aesthetics*, the purpose of Aristotle's *Poetics* is to inquire into poetic practice, focusing on the epic, tragic, and comic genre of poetry (though, as we know, Aristotle's treatment of comedy is among the casualties of history, if it indeed existed in the first place). Aristotle defines tragedy as a form of representation focused on *praxis* "that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself."<sup>54</sup> He goes on to maintain that the special perfection of this genre of art is its ability to produce a peculiar form of pleasure in its audience, catharsis, through the production of two other, painful emotions: fear and pity. We will encounter these Aristotelian concepts once again later in our work on Hegel in this book. But for now we turn our attention to Aristotle's subsequent discussion of what he understands to be the essential elements of any work of tragic art capable of achieving these effects—six basic parts—"plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody."<sup>55</sup> Aristotle raises the issue of reversal in his treatment of that element of tragedy that he takes to be more important of these, the "incidents of the story," or "plot."<sup>56</sup> For Aristotle, the plot of a tragic drama consists of the sequence of events by which the action of the drama unfolds. On his view, the crucial feature of a tragic plot is that it contains "reversals;" in turn, Aristotle defines the reversal as "a change . . . from one state of things . . . into its opposite."<sup>57</sup> In tragic drama, the reversal is the crucial moment in the plot in which the fortunes of the protagonist are transformed.

Hegel's more thematic, modern, and triumphant vision of the human spirit is to a large extent sustained by his claim that absolute knowledge forms the positive outcome of the long path of experience. Yet, Hegel, nevertheless, suggests a tragic view of life, at least for naïve consciousness, in his association of experience with his speculative appropriation of this Aristotelian notion of reversal. As Dennis Schmidt asserts, Aristotelian reversals "disclose a situation that is rent by contradictions and ambiguities that easily—and without warning—convert into their opposite. They thus expose the fragility, the vulnerability of human affairs."<sup>58</sup> Hegel's reliance on Aristotle's notion suggests that Hegel, too, believes our lives to be bound up with forms of ambiguity and uncertainty that indicate the precariousness of our condition. But on Hegel's speculative appropriation of the notion of reversal, we do not learn the lesson that human beings are susceptible to unpredictable and sudden changes in fortune from the relative safety of the theater and the imaginary world of a dramatic performance.

Instead, Hegel believes we encounter this vulnerability as a fundamental dynamic that results from our concrete efforts to understand ourselves and our world. Prior to the attainment of absolute knowledge, the long path of experience is a volatile and perilous one, and Hegel's association of each of naïve consciousness' experiences with Aristotelian reversal suggests a form of life that, in our very efforts to understand ourselves, necessarily leads to difficulty, failure, pain, and suffering.

Hegel ultimately associates the attainment of absolute knowledge with the figure of the philosopher, or, perhaps better, with the final philosopher that completes philosophy and thus brings it to an end. But, perhaps, the figure that best represents the forms our consciousness takes prior to our attainment of absolute knowledge, while we remain as it were only part way along the path of experience, is not the triumphant, even heroic philosopher, but, instead, the tragic hero. In contrast with the Hegelian figure of the final philosopher, this tragic hero of experience enjoys no complete speculative self-knowledge, but is instead subject time and again to encounters with phenomena that overthrow her sense of self and of the world, and reveal the finitude of her cognitive powers. If Hegel believes that it is ultimately our destiny to attain absolute knowledge and thus overcome what Kant called the peculiar fate of human reason, then Hegel nevertheless acknowledges that for naïve consciousness, at least, our cognitive powers are destined repeatedly to encounter their own failure to grasp things. We are almost tempted to say that the long path of experience is one traversed by a kind of tragic consciousness, and that each of its experiences unfolds as a new drama with its culmination in yet another reversal. Hegel's presentation of spirit as it unfolds in experience is, whatever else it is, a presentation of spirit's tragedies.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel identifies properly speculative self-knowledge with the attainment of the absolute at the end of the long path of experience. Yet, we might nevertheless conclude that there is another, albeit quite different, tragic sense of self-knowledge exhibited in naïve consciousness in the aftermath of each of its experiences. To be sure, this is not the speculative self-knowledge of the final philosopher that knows herself to be the culmination of history and the constitutive basis of reality. Instead, it is perhaps the insight of one who, for a moment at least, recognizes her inadequacies and limitations. Prior to the completion of our speculative education, the form of self-knowledge yielded by experience is not so much triumphant and modern, as it is Delphic and ancient, and it teaches us not of our infinite powers of comprehension, but rather of a certain humility that results when we see our former certainty in things for a form of false pride. It is hardly a great leap to entertain the question, what

conception of experience would emerge if Hegel's insistence on the absolute could somehow be disentangled from his claims about experience? What would the Hegelian discourse on experience look like, stripped of its absolutist pretenses, leaving its tragic aspects in tact?

Yet, of course, Hegel *does* maintain that the human spirit ultimately attains absolute knowledge, and so the question that confronts us most immediately is, what place does he ascribe to this more tragic form of self-knowledge in his larger view? Hegel maintains that absolute knowledge forms the final 'station' on the long path of experience, and he thereby appears to imply that the attainment of the absolute thus means the cessation of further new encounters with the tragic dynamics of our affairs.<sup>59</sup> But Hegel does not believe that in our achievement of absolute knowledge we simply forget about or ignore the tragic aspect of experience. On the contrary, Hegel maintains that absolute knowledge, as a fully speculative form of self-knowledge, focuses not simply on the knowledge of our consciousness as it appears in its final form, but, moreover, contains within it the memory of consciousness' development over the course of its long path of experience,<sup>60</sup> as well as, we might add, the tragic dynamics that underpin this path. Even on his more triumphant, modern vision of speculative self-knowledge, Hegel acknowledges that the tragic aspect of human affairs forms an integral part of what and who we are. For Hegel, the attainment of unrestricted self-knowledge is only genuinely unrestricted to the extent that it entails an awareness of the long path of experience and its many tragic reversals.

In this light, if we are to achieve a more comprehensive and robust conception of the tragic aspect of our lives, then it is necessary to turn to Hegel's presentation of the long path of experience itself, and to focus on the multiple forms that the tragic dynamics of human affairs take for specific forms of consciousness. So far, our consideration of Hegel has been guided by his reliance on tragedy to illuminate the broadest structural dynamics of experience. But in order to comprehend the full scope of Hegel's association of experience and tragedy in the *Phenomenology*, we must see how the tragic dynamics of experience appear concretely for naïve consciousness in the actual course of its development. Of course, Hegel would insist that this task requires us to focus on every moment in his presentation, given that for naïve consciousness, every experience unfolds as a kind of tragic reversal. While this is certainly true, it is also true that Hegel believes the tragic aspect of our affairs to be more pronounced and tenacious at some junctures on the long path of experience than at others. So if our project is to develop a fuller account of Hegel's vision of the tragic aspect of our condition, then these especially tragic experiences are a natural place to start.