

CHAPTER 1

Hegel's Preface: Reflection versus Speculation

Hegel wrote his preface to the *Phenomenology* after the work was finished. It is a general statement of his system, not simply an opening to the *Phenomenology*. The preface is a whole, a statement of the nature of true philosophy that compresses in one narrative more themes than a single set of remarks can cover. The preface is Hegel's phenomenology of philosophy; it treats the various forms of philosophizing and delineates their defects. In a sense the preface is the completion of the section on absolute knowing. The book is itself a circle, the form Hegel attributes to the system as a whole. A theme that runs through the center of the preface is Hegel's criticism of reflection and the understanding (*Verstand*) as capable of producing true philosophy and his characterization of speculation and reason (*Vernunft*) as the replacement for this inadequate form of philosophizing.

We find two sets of images in the preface. On the first page Hegel speaks of anatomy as being not a true science but only an "aggregate of information" (par. 1). Because it is a knowledge of only the parts of the body regarded as inanimate, we lack, in anatomy, a knowledge of the living body itself, of its principle of life. On the second page Hegel introduces the contrasting image of the bud of a plant producing a blossom that becomes a fruit. He characterizes this as an image of "organic unity" (par. 2) and as representing stages of necessity in the life of the whole. He plays on the image of the dead, the corpse (par. 3), and on the concrete richness of life (par. 4).

Further, he compares spirit with the birth of a child and to bringing forth a "new world" (pars. 11–13). Later, in sharp contrast to this, he speaks of *triadic form* reducing all to a "lifeless schema" (*lebloses Schema*) (par. 50). He speaks of "a synoptic

table like a skeleton with tickets stuck all over it," the flesh and blood having been stripped off. Such schematic orderings, he says, are the "products of reflection," and he says "all are equally products of the lifeless understanding and external cognition" (par. 51). He speaks of spirit being deprived of life, "of being flayed and then seeing its skin wrapped around a lifeless knowledge and its conceit" (par. 52). In contrast to this is his famous image that "The true is thus the Bacchanalian revel at which not a member is sober; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much a scene of transparent unbroken calm" (par. 47). There is no schematic order to the revel; it is an activity of a whole, alive within its own limits. Hegel says that the understanding schematizes experience, "a table of contents is all that it offers" (par. 53).

The understanding, which proceeds through reflection on the object, produces, in thought, a world that is dead. All objects are fully categorized and rendered lifeless, labeled, like parts of a skeleton, or pigeon-holed, like boxes in a grocer's stall. Reason, which proceeds speculatively, seeks out the principle of motion or life that is within the object, that makes the object, so to speak, what it is. Reflective understanding grasps the body as an anatomically ordered *substance*. Speculative reason goes within the body to its spirit to grasp its principle as a living *subject*. The images Hegel is using fix for us the *archai* of the question he is asking. What is this question?

The answer to this lies principally with Kant, with transcendental philosophy and critique. In his effort to answer David Hume and to secure, for the understanding, its own categories of experience, not derived from the senses, Kant forces himself to abandon reason. This causes Kant to formulate a very limited notion of experience, in which reason plays no role in the constitution of the object. Once one enters the world of critique there is no way out, no way to restore reason to its rightful place. Reason is sacrificed to reflection and to the trap of the transcendental. Even as Kant tries to loosen the bonds of critique, in the *Third Critique*, and include aesthetic and organic natural form within his system, he finds he cannot make the ideas that govern reason constitutive of the being of the object.

The *Third Critique* may show us Kant at his most attractive moment, but he still finds himself and his “fellow worker” bound to the Caucasus of critique. Kant finds he cannot escape from the island, that in the *First Critique* he says is the pure understanding, “enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is a land of truth—enchanted name!—surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he never can abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion” (A235–36; B294–95). Kant’s warning about reason echoes René Descartes’ warning in the *Discourse on Method* to those who would listen to fictitious narratives. They are liable, Descartes says, “to fall into the excesses of the knights-errant in our tales of chivalry, and to conceive plans beyond their powers” (pt. 1). To seek the realm of reason is to seek the *Abenteuer* of deluded seafarers or the *extravagance* of paladins tilting at windmills in philosophy, engaging in fictions as if they were real life.

Hegel singles out Kant’s schematism as the great flaw of the understanding because it is often taken as the great achievement of transcendental reflection. The schematism is often taken to be the element in the *First Critique* that leads to the sympathetic treatment of organic form in the *Third*. The schema is the leading example of the *triadic form* that is at the foundation of Kant’s philosophy of critique. The problem stated in Kant’s famous assertion, “Thoughts without concepts are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (A51; B75), is thought to be solved by the schema, that through which intuitions and concepts are held together. The schema is claimed to be the concrete form from which they are factored out. Hegel says: “Kant rediscovered this triadic form by instinct, but in his work it was still lifeless and uncomprehended” (par. 50).

Hegel says the formalism inherent in this manner of thinking “imagines that it has comprehended and expressed the nature and life of a form when it has endowed it with some determination of the schema as a predicate” (ibid.). In other

words, coming upon a problem, this way of thinking just makes a further distinction, then considers the problem overcome. How is the concept related to the intuition? They are part of a third thing, the schema, and like this on down the line. Hegel says: "Such predicates can be multiplied to infinity, since in this way each determination or form can again be used as a form or moment in the case of an other, and each can gratefully perform the same service for an other. In this sort of circle of reciprocity one never learns what the thing itself is, nor what the one or the other is" (ibid.).

What is Hegel's question, exactly? Given the important success of critique, of rescuing philosophy from both rationalism and empiricism, is there any way now to rescue reason from critique and reestablish it in some sense similar to the ancients' principle of *nous* and to recover a doctrine of ideas that makes them more than sirens calling out to the philosophical seafarer from the fog banks of illusion? Hegel, finishing the *Phenomenology* in 1807, having worked out the full nature of his system several years earlier, in Jena, could see what we often have difficulty in seeing—that Kant's philosophy is the pinnacle of Enlightenment thought. In his doctrine of critique Kant has taken *raisonnement*, that power natural to reflection, and made its distinction-making power the systematic activity of the understanding. The understanding is the creation of Descartes' *Discourse* and John Locke's *Essay*, which develop it in terms of the idea of reflection as the central activity of the mind in its act of knowing.

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel says that ancient metaphysics believed thought could achieve a true knowledge of things, "But *reflective* understanding took possession of philosophy [Aber der *reflektierende* Verstand bemächtigte sich der Philosophie]." He says the view that philosophy is essentially reflective has become a slogan (*Schlagwort*) (p. 45). Through reflection formulated as critique we only know the object as a phenomenon, "as reflected," and by transcendently turning reflection on the knower we know the necessary conditions under which the phenomenal object can be known. For we moderns, this is our secure island. The ancients, and Hegel, thought they could know more.

How does Hegel move from the established fact of reflection to speculation? To do this he first embraces a doctrine of the absolute. A doctrine of the absolute means that "The true is the whole [*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*]" (par. 20). Critique moves across experience, not within its inner life. Since critique is a doctrine of the part, analyzing this kind of knowledge and then that, we never can produce the whole. To analyze a great number of words will not produce a language and to analyze a great number of phenomena will not produce a world. "The true *as* the whole" is what we must begin with, and it is a circle. Speculative truth is always a circle. The true, Hegel says, "is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning" (par. 18).

We cannot achieve the absolute by a formalism of the idea any more than we can achieve it by a formalism of the schema. To relate the contents of experience to the idea externally, showing how each instance is an instance of the absolute is what Hegel calls a "monochromatic formalism" (par. 15). It is a form of thought that repeats the same formula in the same way in relation to whatever it encounters. This way of thinking notices the connections among things and then passes on to the assertion that in the absolute all is one. This is an absolute in which $A = A$, or the "night in which all cows are black" (par. 16). It is a static form of speculation because there is no principle of self-development whereby the particular determinations of things are comprehended as transforming themselves into larger and larger wholes so that the whole itself is articulated in terms of the particular determinations it encompasses.

Hegel attributes this formalistic or empty absolute of pure identity to Friedrich Schelling. He regards Schelling as having moved from the subjective idealism of Kant to the objective idealism of the absolute, but as not having overcome the formalism inherent in reflection by so doing. The other sense of the absolute Hegel rejects is one he attributes to Friedrich Jacobi, Novalis, and Friedrich von Schlegel. They attempt to replace reflection with *edification* and *enthusiasm* (par. 7). On this view the absolute is to be reached directly by insight and intuition. It is to be not thought but felt. Hegel says: "For the

absolute is not supposed to be comprehended, it is to be felt and intuited; not the *Begriff* of the absolute, but the feeling and intuition of it, must govern what is said, and must be expressed by it" (par. 6). The absolute as an object of edification is connected to the "beautiful," the "holy," the "eternal," "religion," and "love" (par. 7). Hegel says these are held out to entice us to embrace such a position.

Transcendental reflection (see Kant's *First Critique*, A262; B317 and A260; B316) cannot be opposed by a formalism of the absolute nor by its intuition through edification. It can only be opposed by what Kant has excluded as constitutive of the object—reason (*Vernunft*). What is the relationship of reason to reflection? Hegel says "the activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power" (par. 32). Reason does not dissolve experience into its elements. Hegel says: "Reason is *purposive activity*" (par. 22). The understanding's uses of reflection, which are directed solely to the object with the subject simply attached as the "I think," is the opposite of reason. Properly used, reflection is part of the true and part of reason. Hegel says: "Reason is, therefore, misunderstood when reflection is excluded from the true, and is not grasped as a positive moment of the absolute. It is reflection that makes the true a result, but it is equally reflection that overcomes the antithesis between the process of its becoming and the result, for this becoming is also simple, and therefore not different from the form of the true which shows itself as *simple* in its result; the process of becoming is rather just this return into simplicity" (par. 21).

Reflection placed at the service of reason is the basis of speculation. Hegel must take up reflection and absorb it into speculation, thus passing beyond it. The fundamental point on which the *Phenomenology* turns is Hegel's claim that *substance* becomes *subject*. He says: "everything turns on grasping and expressing the true, not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*" (par. 17). Kantian formalism cannot get beyond substance; it can offer the object of reflection only as externally ordered. Such reflection cannot offer us the *inner form* of the

object. The object becomes something only when it is externalized from what it is in itself and is taken up by the knower as the phenomenal object. The phenomenal object is functional, but the thing-in-itself is substantive.

Speculation requires us to approach the object as not substance but subject, as having an inner life—not simply, so to speak, as a body with anatomy but as a living body governed by spirit. Applicable here is A. N. Whitehead's concept in *Process and Reality* of "vacuous actuality" (pp. 43; 253). Understood as substance, the object is vacuous in its actuality, a mere phenomenon for the knower to schematize in the production of judgments. Approached as subject, the object, like reason, is internally ordered, its actuality is not vacuous, not inert. It has an "inside." Reflection at the service of reason becomes an activity of mediation. To know something under the aspect of the true is to know it as subject, as Hegel says: "Something that is reflected into itself, a subject" (par. 23). He says: "Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself—not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such—is the true" (par. 18). He says that spirit as substance "is nothing but its own acquisition of self-consciousness, the bringing-about of its own becoming and reflection into itself" (par. 28).

Reflection in the service of reason becomes a process of consciousness wherein the knower meets itself in the known. Reflection becomes an activity internal to what is known rather than an external formation of it. Reflection is taken up into dialectic, which is the science of spirit or the organic unity of the whole. Spirit is "reflection which is itself simple, and which is for itself immediacy as such, *being* that is reflected into itself" (par. 26). Dialectic is reflection turning back on itself, which can capture in thought the self-movement that is substance become subject.

Dialectic enters into the content of the thing, which is in contrast to the formal understanding, which, Hegel says: "Instead of entering into the immanent content of the thing, it is forever surveying the whole and standing above the particular existence of which it is speaking, i.e. it does not see it at all" (par. 53). Argumentation or *raisonnement*, that the understanding can

practice, “is reflection into the empty ‘I,’ the vanity of its own knowing” (par. 59). Mathematical cognition is also inadequate as a model for a science of spirit, for mathematical truths are true independently from whatever proof we may subjectively use to establish them. Their proofs do not form a necessary part of their result. Propositions that state ordinary facts or that state historical conclusions should be affirmed or denied straightway, depending on the evidence.

Thinking that apprehends the true as the whole and can thus produce a science of spirit requires a different sense of the proposition than that which attaches a subject to a predicate to state a particular truth. This requires what Hegel calls the “speculative proposition” or “speculative sentence”—*spekulativer Satz* (par. 61). The speculative sentence or what he also calls the “philosophical proposition” (ibid.) is Hegel’s special idea in the preface. It has within it the dialectical motion necessary to present consciousness as alive and self-developing through its determinate shapes to the organic whole of spirit as “absolute knowing.”

With it we can distinguish Hegel’s phenomenology, which is based in a speculative use of reason from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, which remains a reflective phenomenology. Husserl says: “The phenomenological method operates exclusively in acts of reflection” (*Ideas*, sec. 77). Husserl’s phenomenology is a descriptive, schematic phenomenology of the contents of experience. We may also distinguish Hegel’s speculative reason from Gadamer’s “hermeneutic reflection.” Gadamer in *Truth and Method* says: “What role does reason play in the context of human practice? In every case it takes the general form of reflection” (p. 569). Indeed, the legacy of Descartes, Locke, G. W. Leibniz, and Kant is the unexamined tenet of modern philosophy that to think philosophically is to reflect.

Regarded from the standpoint of speculative reason, reflection immediately lacks two things: a principle of “inversion” and a principle of “determinate negation.” Hegel says: “The immediate existence of spirit, *consciousness*, contains the two moments of knowing and the objectivity negative to knowing” (par. 36). Speculation or dialectical reason follows conscious-

ness as it turns its object to its opposite, as it inverts the truth it holds to in one moment to the opposite that it holds to in the next. Hegel says: "Let science be in its own self what it may, relatively to immediate self-consciousness it presents itself in an inverted posture" (par. 26). Science, Hegel says, causes natural consciousness to walk on its head (*ibid.*). He says "the science of this pathway is the science of the *experience* which consciousness goes through" (par. 36). The movement of consciousness from one moment to the other is not the simple negation of argumentation (*raisonnement*) when it refutes something as false. In the actual process of consciousness what is rejected as false is also part of the true. The false has content (par. 39). True and false are relative determinations dependent upon their position in the development of the experience of consciousness.

Hegel says: "In speculative [*begreifenden*] thinking, as we have already shown, the negative belongs to the content itself, and is the *positive*, both as the *immanent* movement and determination of the content, and as the whole of this process. Looked at as a result, what emerges from this process is the *determinate* negative which is consequently a positive content as well" (par. 59). What is the speculative sentence upon which the doctrines of dialectical inversion and determinate negation and, in general, the experience of consciousness depend? Hegel describes it in musical terms. The distinction between subject and predicate that exists in the general form of a proposition "is destroyed by the speculative proposition" (par. 61). He says the conflict between the general form of the subject and predicate and the unity produced between them by its transformation into true conceptual form is like "the conflict that occurs in rhythm between metre and accent. Rhythm results from the floating centre and the unification of the two" (*ibid.*). Hegel says that in the speculative or philosophical proposition the unity of the subject and predicate is meant to emerge as a harmony, that is, the subject is not simply dissolved into the predicate or the reverse.

Putting this in general terms, Hegel says that in speculative thinking the passive subject of reflective thinking or *raisonnement* perishes in an active relation with its object and "enters

into the differences and the content, and constitutes the determinateness" (par. 60). Picture-thinking (*Vorstellung*), Hegel says, also cannot cope with this disappearance of the subject into its predicates. *Vorstellung* normally is a way of thinking that runs through predicates in order to get beyond them. But it discovers that "the predicate is really the substance, the subject has passed over into the predicate" (ibid.). Although *Vorstellung*, unlike *raisonnement*, is a holistic way of thinking, it is unable to go further because the subject cannot be located and has disappeared into the predicates. *Vorstellung* suffers from not being a truly dialectical way of thinking. It can only *present* the subject as its predicates, so to speak.

Hegel explains the speculative sentence in paragraph sixty-two, which deserves to be read several times. He uses the example: "God is being." God, the subject, in order to be what it is, is taken up or dissolved into the predicate, "being." What God is, after all, is "being." That is the meaning of the proposition. But as "being," God, as a definite subject, so to speak, ceases to be. We are taken back to God as the subject to determine exactly what the predicate is. Hegel explains this circular motion a second time, with the example: "The *actual* is the *universal*." We move from subject to predicate to subject again. The crucial point is that on the return to subject we do not possess the same subject. It has been affected by the process of the movement, because now it is a subject that stands as something determined by its predicate. Hegel says: "Thinking therefore loses the firm objective basis it had in the subject when, in the predicate, it is thrown back on to the subject, and when, in the predicate, it does not return into itself, but into the subject of the content" (par. 62).

Hegel's point concerning the difference between reflection and speculation can be seen from their Latin roots. *Reflexio* (*reflectere*) is "to bend back," "to turn back or reverse." *Specio* (*specere*) is "to spy out," "to see into." In the general form of the proposition typical of reflective thinking, the subject moves to the predicate and is thought simply to turn back to the subject. No dialectical change has occurred. In the speculative proposition, in the movement from the subject into the

predicate, something has been “seen into” about the nature of the subject such that as it returns, keeping the predicate in relation to itself, it is no longer the same as the original subject. Upon this sense of thinking Hegel's *Phenomenology* depends.

In summary, reflection in the service of the understanding allows us to experience the world commonsensically, as a world of particular things that can be brought together into various orders of things and various levels of these orders. For the understanding the knower is separate from the known. The knower, through the power of reflection, can grasp the known. Reflection allows us to “understand” the world. The hallmark of this understanding is that the knower regards the object it knows as having a reality other than its own reality. Reflection begins to be in the service of reason when the knower turns its reflective activity away from the reality of the world as something other than itself and attempts to use reflection as the means to have access to its own reality. The knower attempts to reflect on itself, not on what it takes to be other than itself. This self-reflection is the step that consciousness requires in order to transpose reflection into speculation and to allow the understanding to be superseded by reason.

The phenomenon of self-reflection suggests to the knower that all knowing, including knowledge of the object, may be apprehended as a kind of self-knowledge. The knower's self-knowledge is not separate from the object as known. Speculation stems from this sense of self-reflection. Consciousness enters into speculation when it realizes that what it knows of itself cannot be divorced from what it knows of the object. Reflection when turned backward onto the knower becomes self-reflection, and when self-reflection is extended back onto the self's relation to the object, speculation is born for consciousness. In a wider sense, speculation has been there all along and was presupposed by reflection. Once consciousness, in its drive toward knowing, is in possession of the speculative moment, it can experience all knowing as a kind of self-knowing.