

INTRODUCTION

by
David Sherman

This book deals with chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is generally taken to be Hegel's first significant work. This chapter, which is entitled "Self-Consciousness," contains an introduction, "The Truth of Self-Certainty," and two sections, which are called "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Mastery and Slavery" and "Freedom of Self-Consciousness: Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness." At first blush, it may appear somewhat odd to devote an entire book to one short chapter of a much larger work, but "Self-Consciousness" is no ordinary chapter. As an initial matter, in a pivotal passage that concludes the introductory part, in which he reviews the gains that consciousness has made in its attempts to better know the world and indicates the advances that remain for it to make, Hegel suggests that chapter IV constitutes the "turning point" in the *Phenomenology*:

A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only in this way is it self-consciousness indeed—for only in this way does it become aware of the unity of itself in its otherness. . . . Since a self-consciousness is the object, it is just as much "I" as it is object. With this we have arrived at the concept of spirit. Still ahead, for consciousness, is the experience of what spirit is—this absolute substance which, in the total freedom and independence of its opposite (i.e., different independent self-consciousnesses), is their unity. Namely, it is the "I" that is "We," the "We" that is "I." Only in self-consciousness, as the concept of spirit, does con-

sciousness have its turning point. Here it turns away from the colorful illusion of the sensuous here-and-now and the empty night of the supersensuous beyond, and it strides into the spiritual day of the present. (Para. 12)¹

Furthermore, the section on mastery and slavery, which follows on the heels of this passage, is, in particular, much more than just the “turning point” in the *Phenomenology*. This section, in which two lone self-consciousnesses meet in the “state-of-nature” and engage in a “fight to the death” that culminates in master and slave, heralded a new approach for understanding ourselves, as well as the ways in which we come to know the world, and heavily influenced generations of subsequent thinkers (including—indeed, perhaps especially—those who most vociferously disagree with its message). As a result, chapter IV also constitutes nothing less than a “turning point” in the history of modern philosophy.

More broadly, the *Phenomenology* itself is basically an assemblage of successive “forms of consciousness.” Each form of consciousness, which reflects the world view or *Weltanschauung* of a specific time period (and not merely an individual consciousness), has its own particular way of looking at the world, which means that each form of consciousness has its own truths. But the object of philosophy is “the Truth,” according to Hegel, and when the contradictions that inhere in a particular way of looking at the world can no longer be satisfactorily reconciled within the context of that distinctive form of consciousness, a new form of consciousness will emerge that is more adequate to the task. This “dialectical” process does not merely involve a ceaseless, indiscriminate swapping of forms of consciousness and their concomitant truths, however. Instead, inasmuch as the truths for any particular form of consciousness always capture some aspect of the “the Truth,” however tenuously, the insights that are associated with a superseded form of consciousness are incorporated into all subsequent forms of consciousness. Consequently, shifts from one form of consciousness to another characterize an expanding, more comprehensive conception of the world. This process of conceptual growth continues until consciousness ascends to that state which Hegel calls “Absolute Knowing,” in which consciousness recognizes that its knowledge of objects is ultimately self-knowledge, and that self-knowledge is always conditioned by some existing set of sociohistorical categories. Thus, in spite of its pretentious connotations, “Absolute Knowing” involves the recognition that there is no absolute standpoint from which

human beings can reflect upon the world, which means that all thought is necessarily context bound.

Although they inauspiciously arise more than one hundred pages into the *Phenomenology*, the forms of consciousness that correspond to master and slave betoken Hegel's own distinctive philosophical contribution, for the first three chapters of the book, as well as the introductory part of the fourth, are basically a recapitulation of the philosophical failures of Hegel's predecessors. In large part, the first three chapters deal with epistemological concerns, and it is, perhaps, for this reason that the interpretations of important social thinkers, such as Alexandre Kojève (who will be considered later), take off from Hegel's seemingly unrelated discussions of "life" and "desire" at the start of chapter IV. (Indeed, this is precisely where the present translation begins.) But given the fact that Hegel is a deeply historical thinker, and that the *Phenomenology* is a deeply historical work (in the sense that we are dealing with a "logical" characterization of the historical evolution of consciousness), it is a mistake to simply disregard the earlier chapters. For Hegel's discussion of "life" and "desire," which culminates in the "fight to the death" between two stripped-down, "self-certain" self-consciousnesses, is actually not unrelated to the earlier epistemological concerns at all.

The meeting of these two self-consciousnesses, which initially "recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another" (para. 19), is the "turning point," according to Hegel, because with it "we have arrived at the concept of spirit," which signals nothing less than his repudiation of the philosophical tradition's penchant for approaching epistemological questions from an individual standpoint. Spirit, which pertains to the subjectivity of the human collective, is the interpersonal medium whose basic character both forms and is formed by our personal self-conceptions, which, in turn, condition our conceptions of the world around us. For Hegel, therefore, the concepts that are brought to bear on epistemological questions are intersubjectively generated, and this suggests that the hard and fast distinction that is usually drawn between ethical and epistemological issues becomes much less distinct. But as consciousness marches toward a social reconciliation that is tantamount to "Absolute Knowing," in which it sees that Spirit is "the 'I' that is 'We,' the 'We' that is 'I,'" it is not merely the case that the social concepts drive the epistemological ones, for the socially engendered epistemic concepts that lead us to comprehend the natural world in a particular way reciprocally determine our collective and personal self-conceptions. As we shall see, it is this reciprocal dynam-

ic that leads master and slave to not only be alienated from one another, and thus themselves (inasmuch as social and individual self-conceptions are inextricably interrelated), but also leads them to be alienated from the objects of the natural world. And it is this alienation from self, other, and the objects of the natural world that leads to forms of consciousness such as Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness, each of which finally fails to satisfactorily redress these problems in turn. This failure to reconcile self and other, subject and object, is what drives consciousness past "Self-Consciousness" to "Reason," which is what motivates the forms of consciousness that appear in chapter V of the *Phenomenology*. For our purposes, however, it is necessary to put the forms of consciousness that appear in chapter IV into sharper focus by more clearly delineating the philosophical problems that informed them.

In the lengthy passage from the *Phenomenology* that is excerpted above, Hegel says that in comprehending itself as self-consciousness, consciousness "turns away from the colorful illusion of the sensuous here-and-now and the empty night of the supersensuous beyond, and it strides into the spiritual day of the present." This passage implicitly refers to the philosophy of Kant, who had attempted to make sense of the stark epistemological division that had previously existed between empiricism and rationalism by turning to self-consciousness, but had become enmeshed in his own contradictions, and thus ended up postulating a supersensuous beyond of his own making. The first three chapters of the *Phenomenology*, which crudely correspond to certain versions of empiricism, rationalism, and Kant's so-called "Critical Philosophy," are characterized by Hegel as "Sense-Certainty," "Perception," and "Force and the Understanding," respectively. And, the Kantian turn to self-consciousness in chapter III notwithstanding, these three theories of knowledge are all classified under the general title of "Consciousness," for they all ultimately view the object that one knows as, in some sense, independent of the process of knowing. Thus, in "Sense-Certainty," we are presented with a form of consciousness that thinks that the particular objects it apprehends are immediately given to it—in other words, that knowing the world is nothing more than a matter of attending to the way that objects affect our senses. In Hegel's view, however, there is no direct acquaintance with objects, for all knowledge requires the mediation of concepts. Indeed, without concepts, there can be no knowledge whatsoever, and consciousness is not even in a position to gesture at the object to communicate what it purportedly knows. Consequently, a different view of knowledge must be undertaken in order

to overcome this impasse, and the form that it assumes is "Perception." While "Sense-Certainty" approached the object from the standpoint of the object's sensuous particularity but failed because it lacked concepts, "Perception" would tackle the problem by approaching the object from the standpoint of its properties ("sensuous universals")—in other words, the object is viewed as just a collection of its properties. But as a form of consciousness, "Perception" also comes up short, for it fails to connect with the object's sensuous particularity, which essentially falls out of the picture. In the final analysis, then, the one-sided supersensible conceptual approach to the object is no more able to grasp the object in its particularity than the one-sided sensible approach; consciousness is, therefore, impelled to move beyond the two one-sided approaches if it is to actually come to terms with the object.

The form of consciousness found in "Force and the Understanding" involves a series of philosophical and scientific views in which both the sensible and supersensible approaches to the world subsist, implicitly or explicitly, in a more comprehensive explanatory theory. For example, in scientific views on "Force," Hegel contends, there is the notion that force both expresses itself in physical phenomena as they appear and is the impetus that hangs behind the appearance. This dualistic view, which Hegel finds untenable, reaches its highest point of tension in the philosophy of Kant, and it is with Kant's philosophy that the chapter is primarily preoccupied. According to Kant, the empiricists were correct in maintaining that all we can ultimately know is the world of our experience. However, in contrast to the empiricists, for whom this position culminated in the skepticism of Hume, Kant relied upon the rationalists' notion of a priori concepts, but views them as innate to our own minds. These unconditioned universal concepts, which precede experience, are called "categories" by Kant, and they are the foundation upon which all human experience is made possible. In other words, in every person there is "the Understanding," which furnishes the laws and principles that are necessary in order for us to even have an experience. We can therefore depend upon what our senses tell us about the objects that we apprehend because we ourselves "constitute" these objects through the Understanding, which initially synthesizes them. But the shortcoming of Kant's "Copernican Revolution," which, epistemologically, shifts the emphasis from the object to the subject, is that it maintains that there is some way that the object actually is independent of our possible knowledge of it. This implies that a "world-in-itself" hangs behind our "appar-

ent” world, and bears some unknown relationship to it. Once again, therefore, we are left holding the bag in terms of knowing the actual nature of particular objects, a fact that is forcefully brought home by Hegel in his “inverted world” hypothesis. In this *reductio ad absurdum*, Hegel wryly speculates that a second supersensible world actually hangs behind Kant’s supersensible world, and that in this even truer world objects are diametrically opposed to the way in which we apprehend them—that is, what is sweet for us is really sour, what is black for us is really white, what is up for us is really down, and so forth.

To get past this dualism, consciousness seeks to do away with the idea that objects subsist independently of our experience of them, and this brings us to the first form of self-consciousness that appears in chapter IV, which corresponds to Fichte’s alteration of Kant’s dualistic philosophy. Fichte, who rejected the idea of a world-in-itself, was of the view that all epistemological inquiries essentially take place within a practical context, not a theoretical one. For Fichte, in other words, it is not knowledge, but self-knowledge and action, that is of primary importance. In this way, we move from Kant’s notion of the Understanding, which shifts the epistemological emphasis to the subject but still sees the enterprise of comprehending the world in theoretical or objective terms, to Fichte’s idea of the engaged subject, for whom the quest for knowledge is inextricably intertwined with life’s pragmatic (and moral) concerns. And these concerns are, in part, bound up with our personal desires, which stand in a negative relationship to the otherness of the world. As a result, for Fichte, and to a somewhat lesser degree Hegel as well, our desire-driven attempts to know the world involve a process of conceptualization that would—figuratively speaking—break down and wholly assimilate all objects, leaving no remainder. According to Hegel, however, this voraciousness is without limit, and what Fichte fails to comprehend is that such desire will never be satisfied because “self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (para. 10). In other words, what Hegel rejects is Fichte’s view (or, at least, the view that Hegel attributes to him) that the knowing self is an individual self, for the individual self in Hegel’s view is indeterminate: the self-certain self-consciousness of Fichte is only “the motionless tautology of ‘I am I’” (para. 2). Only by relating to another self-consciousness can a self-consciousness develop into a determinate self, and thereby attain a truer view of knowledge.

Furthermore, Hegel’s difficulties with Fichte are not limited to the latter’s characterization of an individual self. Although Hegel agreed with

Fichte's rejection of Kant's world-in-itself, he also thought that Fichte went too far in the other direction, for Fichte's all-encompassing subject sees the natural world only in subjective terms, thus losing the objective perspective of the natural sciences. Fichte thus breaks down the unbridgeable subject-object duality that Kant produces with his introduction of the world-in-itself, but loses the objectivity of the object in the process. Or, in Hegel's parlance, Fichte has merely given us a "subjective Subject-Object." To counteract Fichte's partial perspective, Hegel's draws upon the philosophy of his erstwhile friend, Schelling, whose philosophy of nature affords an "objective Subject-Object" to counterbalance the Fichtean outlook. According to Schelling, whose philosophy greatly influenced the contours of the *Phenomenology*, but, for structural reasons, is not presented until the beginning of chapter V ("Reason"), there is an absolute identity between consciousness and nature since consciousness, despite its pretensions, is only a part of nature. Thus, from the first-person standpoint, we (individually and collectively), as subjective Subject-Objects, are nature, and nature, as an objective Subject-Object, is us, meaning that we can only comprehend ourselves by comprehending nature. Furthermore, the two sides of the equation, each of which grows in a purposive fashion, are unified in a higher order "Absolute," which comes to realize itself in this enormous growth process. And it is because of this identity between consciousness and nature, Schelling contends (according to Hegel's contentious account), that we can come to know the world through (transcendental) intuition. But this is where Hegel and Schelling part company, for Hegel believes that knowledge of the world can only be obtained through "the Concept"; accordingly, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, he says that Schelling's "determinateness of intuition" is a "formalism" that is "predicated in accordance with a superficial analogy."

We are now in a position to see that the master-slave section does not reflect a radical shift in the *Phenomenology*, but rather builds upon the earlier chapters, which themselves are prototypal representations of earlier positions taken in the philosophical tradition. This section, in particular, and the "Self-Consciousness" chapter, more generally, symbolizes, in short, a radically different approach for dealing with a variety of problems relating to the knowing self. During the course of the *Phenomenology*, consciousness must surmount the forms of consciousness that correspond to master and slave, for each is alienated from the external world, the other, and, ultimately, himself. (And in terms of this condition of thoroughgoing alienation, the remaining forms of consciousness in the "Self-

Consciousness” chapter—Stoicism, Skepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness—exhibit only marginal improvement.) A large assortment of forms of consciousness must still be transversed before a situation in which “one [self-consciousness] is only recognized, the other only recognizing” (para. 20) becomes one in which consciousness sees that “it is the ‘I’ that is ‘We,’ the ‘We’ that is ‘I.’” But with the master-slave encounter, we have reached the “turning point” that has put consciousness on the proper path—the path that will lead to “Absolute Knowing.”

Hegel’s discussion of the dialectic of self-consciousness (as well as the remainder of his large and varied body of work) had an enormous impact in the years following its publication.² In Hegel’s immediate aftermath, there were the so-called “Young Hegelians,” who were particularly enamored of the radical role that Hegel’s historicized reason plays in critiquing existing institutions so as to move beyond them toward an ultimate social reconciliation. These Young Hegelians, as well as Ludwig Feuerbach, whose materialism had inspired them, gave rise, in turn, to Marx, who was strongly influenced by the master-slave section. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for example, Marx contends that

the outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of labor and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man’s own labour.³

Although he (somewhat unfairly) goes on to claim that Hegel stands the dialectic “on its head” by holding that “the Idea” creates the “real” world, as opposed to simply being “the material world reflected in the mind of man,”⁴ Marx closely adheres to the form of Hegel’s “dialectic”; in fact, the structure of *Capital* is patterned after Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

Where Marx unequivocally takes issue with Hegel, however, is in the latter’s view of the (bourgeois) State. In the *Philosophy of Right*, which is, arguably, Hegel’s most conservative work, Hegel contends that the rational state is the highest social manifestation of Spirit, and that the task of the “universal” class of civil servants that comprise it is to effectively harmonize the various interests in civil society. Unlike modern societies, however, in which particular interests come to dominate the State (which

was, in no small part, Marx's criticism of Hegel's view of the State), or come to be alienated from it, all elements of civil society regard the rational State as satisfying both their specific interests and the general public interest. And, according to Hegel, the monarchical Prussian State within which he lived met this ideal. While Marx and other leftist thinkers clearly rejected this conclusion out of hand, a reactionary group known as the Right Hegelians embraced Hegel on these very grounds. The Right Hegelians, many of whom held high office in Prussia, argued that religion and the State were the organic ties that bound a citizenry together, and that the "negativity" within Hegel's philosophy, which was so heavily relied upon by the left, was simply a mistake. Accordingly, they brought back an embittered and now conservative Schelling to teach at the university after Hegel's death in order to bring this point home, and, while there were still many Left Hegelians on the faculty, Schelling was not without his influence. Engels, who was obviously not dissuaded from his revolutionary path, attended Schelling's lectures, along with Kierkegaard, the self-styled Christian who was nominally the father of existentialism.

For Kierkegaard, unlike Schelling (who thought that Hegel stole and then misrepresented his own ideas), Hegel was first and foremost an intellectual nemesis. According to Kierkegaard, who was inclined to view Hegel through the lens of his own religious preoccupations, Hegel was a metaphysician who subsumed religion under philosophy, and, thereby, the moment of faith under the moment of reason. (Indeed, the forms of consciousness that directly precede "Absolute Knowing" in the *Phenomenology* are religious.) For Kierkegaard, however, faith is not simply a matter that is to be dissolved within an overarching, reconciling reason; instead, it is a chosen way of life that is to be lived passionately if it is to be lived at all. Reason can tell us nothing about how to live our lives, much less our faith—a point that Kierkegaard brings home when he recounts the biblical episode in which God tells Abraham to take the life of his son, which would, of course, be in violation of all rational ethical precepts. Like Abraham, we are all ultimately confronted with the decision as to whether we should make an irrational "leap of faith." Even as Kierkegaard attacks the Hegelian "system" in the name of Christianity and "the individual," who would be namelessly subsumed by it, however, he embraces a dialectical method that is akin to the one that Hegel uses in the *Phenomenology*. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard posits three "modes of existence," namely, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and claims that contradictions in each of the first two modes of existence inexorably lead one to choose the

religious life. Still, for Kierkegaard, the religious life is an unhappy one, and the form of consciousness that ends the “Self-Consciousness” chapter in the *Phenomenology*, the “Unhappy Consciousness,” is an anticipatory caricature of him.

In contrast to Kierkegaard, for whom Christianity involves ceaseless suffering, Nietzsche declares that one should love one’s fate. But while proclaiming *amor fati*, Nietzsche also attacks the very notion of “the individual”—at least to the extent that this notion gives rise to the idea that there is a discrete, self-contained “self” that subsists over time, and in its freedom should be held morally responsible for its actions. For Nietzsche, this view of the self is fundamentally “slavish.” Accordingly, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he forcefully argues that the categories of “master” and “slave” pertain to those human beings who are innately stronger and weaker, and that the Judeo-Christian tradition reflects the success of the weak in overturning the rule of the strong through the imposition of their own life-denying, otherworldly values. In contrast to Hegel, therefore, for whom the master-slave encounter gives rise to the notion of selfhood, which will progressively be perfected in society, Nietzsche views the notion of selfhood as one that was basically slavish at its inception. And, at least in this sense, he appears to valorize premodern values (although it must be quickly added that while Nietzsche is hostile toward modern mass society, the superior individuals of whom he often speaks generally take the form of great artists, such as Goethe, rather than the “blond beast”). Nevertheless, in a variety of respects, which cannot be considered here, Nietzsche and Hegel are more alike than not. For our purposes, however, it must be pointed out that more than a few contemporary anti-Hegelian philosophers have used Nietzsche (who died in 1900) as a cudgel with which to attack Hegel, which has tended to unduly diminish the thought of both.

The purpose of this book, which is comprised of three parts, is to revisit Hegel’s remarkable “Self-Consciousness” chapter from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The first part of the book consists of Leo Rauch’s translation of this chapter, as well as a supplement in which he translates the relatively brief self-consciousness section from Hegel’s *Philosophical Propadeutic* of 1809. The second part of the book is comprised of Leo Rauch’s extensive discussion of the “Self-Consciousness” chapter and his brief overview of its early-twentieth-century European reception. Lastly, in the third part of the book, I will offer a critical exposition of the chapter’s interpretation by those European thinkers whose views on it tend to hold sway today.