

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Those who have no comprehension of philosophy become speechless, it is true, when they hear the proposition that thought and being are one; none the less, underlying all our actions is the presupposition of the unity of thought and being.

Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*

Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of discord and harmony, a historical, metaphysical, and phenomenological exploration of the interacting forces of strife and reconciliation. It is a philosophy of *discord* because the Hegelian dialectic is impelled forward by the inherent force of sheer "negativity," which undermines all that is stable, which proves all satisfaction to be ephemeral, which animates all life by a dynamic of self-opposition and estrangement. It is this philosophy of discord which motivates Hegel's famous description of human history as "the slaughterbench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized" (PhH 21),¹ and his portrayal of the path of human consciousness in its pursuit of self-realization as "the pathway of doubt, or more precisely, the way of despair" (PhS 49). Discord is an intrinsic, dynamic element of all life, and hence not something we can avoid, however much we may seek strategies of escape through wish-fulfillment or self-deception. Much of Hegel's first great philosophic work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is devoted to exposing the way in which all such strategies – whether that of the Master seeking to satisfy his longing for self-assurance through domination of the Other,

or of the Stoic seeking solace from the strife and suffering of the world through a flight into solitude, or of the Sceptic seeking by sheer force of doubt to disarm reality of its power over him – how all such strategies ultimately collapse, being incapable of sustaining a feeling of harmony in the midst of the discord of alienation they inevitably engender. Hegel is absolutely committed to the harsh proposition that “the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks from . . . the tremendous power of the negative . . . and keeps itself untouched by devastation [*Verwüstung*], but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it” (PhS 19).

Yet Hegel's philosophy is also a philosophy of *harmony*. He writes in his Berlin lectures on the *History of Philosophy* that while “the eternal life [of spirit] consists in the very process of continually producing . . . opposition [within itself],” it also consists in the process of “continually reconciling it” (HPh 3:551). Just as Heraclitus found harmony in opposition, in the tension of the archer's bow and the union of opposing musical tones, Hegel insists that in the very strife of negativity there is an underlying harmony, a principle of unity and synthesis in the midst of discord.

Hegel, like Heraclitus, finds particular forms of harmony in different varieties of discord, but there is one fundamental relationship which determines the overall pattern of each particular unity-within-opposition he describes. I refer to what Friedrich Engels called “the great basic question of all philosophy, . . . that concerning the relation of thinking and being.”² It is this relation between thinking and being – or self and world, consciousness and reality – that Hegel is concerned to trace out in his philosophy through all of its historical alterations and vicissitudes, identifying the dynamics by which the two terms of the relation perpetually fall into discord, and seeking to uncover and demonstrate the harmony he finds in the midst of this discord. For although “the highest severance is the opposition between thought and being, . . . the interest of philosophy . . . [consists in] comprehending their unity” (HPh 3:160).

Some sixty years before Engels had penned the above-cited words, Hegel had written that “the ultimate aim and business of philosophy is to reconcile thought . . . with reality” (HPh 3:545). Thought and reality stand in need of reconciliation, precisely because their relation is first of all one of opposition. Every new birthpang of spirit takes place in pain and separation, and every achieved satisfaction of spirit breeds a new desire and hence a new sense of discord and yearning. Yet Hegel is convinced that this discord is not a purely destructive, nihilistic force, a purposeless havoc of anarchy, but that it masks a

deeper unity, a secret power of reconciliation, like Milton's "hidden soul of harmony . . . through mazes running."³ This theme of the ultimate unity of thought and being, in the very midst of their discord – what I will refer to as the Hegelian *grand synthesis* – will be the central theme of this book.

In one of Hegel's earliest philosophic writings, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801), he suggests that "the need for philosophy" arises in times of cultural upheaval and intellectual disillusionment, where there is a perceived disunity between human ideals and human reality. He writes that "disunion or division [*die Entzweiung*] is the source of the need of philosophy. . . . [Only] when the might of union vanishes from the life of men, [does] the need of philosophy arise" (Diff 89,91). Fifteen years later, in his *History of Philosophy*, Hegel echoes this insight.

It may be said that philosophy first commences when a people has for the most part left its concrete [customary] life, . . . and when a gulf has arisen between inward strivings and external reality, and the old forms of religion, &c., are no longer satisfying. . . . Philosophy is the reconciliation following upon the disintegration of the real world (HPH 1:52).

Hegel's philosophy is guided throughout by the goal of reconciling human consciousness with its world, of unifying thought and being. But as these passages suggest, his philosophy is not out to show that thought and being immediately coincide, for in fact the need of philosophy arises only in times of the falling-asunder of the "might of union." Indeed, "life eternally forms itself by setting up oppositions, and [an authentic union of consciousness and world] . . . is only possible through its own reestablishment out of the deepest fission [*der höchsten Trennung*]" (Diff 91).⁴

This is crucial for our understanding of Hegel's grand synthesis, that thought and being do not immediately coincide, but that their unity is the result of a historical process of the human spirit struggling with the oppositions and divisions of cultural upheaval. Hegel is not out to show, as Parmenides was, that all change and discord is illusory, nor as Plato was, that the world of appearance and becoming was ultimately "unreal." The strife of becoming is the very lifeblood of being for Hegel, both historically and psychologically, so that any harmony that is to be found can only occur *through process*. This points to what will be a central focus of my analysis of Hegel's basic theme of the unity of thought and being – that both thought and being are

inherently processes of becoming. Hegel steadfastly holds to the principle that neither thought nor being can be adequately described or comprehended apart from its grounding in history. Both follow a teleological course of becoming and development in the world, and Hegel's task becomes one of demonstrating that the teleological progression of being is a process which (in some sense) parallels the *Bildung* of thought, so that there is no ultimate gulf between being and thought. It cannot be overemphasized that this is no immediate identity, however, for again, it is just the consciousness of disparity between thought and being which is the impulse towards the "labor of transformation of spirit" (PhS 6), towards the progressive development and enrichment of thought and being in history.

But it is only because thought has the power to "transform it[self] into a world" (HPh 3:546), so that our thought and the being of the world are united in a shared dialectic of development and transformation, that we are not finally alienated from the world. It is this transformative, revolutionary power of thought that leads to the possibility of reason becoming "conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself" (PhS 263), so that thought and being achieve a unification.

My aim in this book is to analyze Hegel's project of demonstrating that both being and thought are conditioned by an internal impulse to becoming, and how this is to establish his vision of a grand synthesis of thought (or knowledge) and being (or world). My procedure will be to look at central themes of his epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of history, and philosophic method, tracing out and critically assessing the hypotheses and arguments he employs to establish his position. In Chapter Two, I will introduce Hegel's double theme of (a) the essential *unity* and (b) the immanent *becoming* of thought and being through an examination of his theory of truth. Chapter Three, an analysis of Hegel's theory of knowledge, will expand on the first of these themes; and Chapter Four, an investigation of Hegel's theory of becoming and dialectic, will elaborate on the second. I will then turn, in Chapter Five, to a discussion of Hegel's philosophic method, where we will see how his radical reconception of the nature of scientific demonstration illuminates his claim that knowing and being are united in a teleological process of becoming.

Just as Hegel views his philosophic method as one which initiates a pathway of development leading from initial "shapes" or *Gestalten* of a problem towards a consummating resolution which these initial phases anticipate, so too Chapters Two through Five of the present work are best described as a "pathway" towards a culminating denoue-

ment in the companion Chapters Six and Seven, where I will discuss Hegel's eschatological vision. In successively articulating various facets or "shapes" of the Hegelian grand synthesis, the earlier chapters will be preparing the stage for the last act, in which we will explore a certain tension which emerges in the anatomy of Hegel's grand synthesis between two basic, conflicting desiderata.

The first desideratum is the description of both being and thought as inherently teleological processes of becoming; without such a description, Hegel feels that we cannot give an adequate account of either knowing or being. The second desideratum is for an account of thought (or knowledge) which will overcome epistemological relativism and scepticism, and an account of being which will overcome its perpetual alienation; Hegel believes that only his system of philosophy can achieve this *Aufhebung* of the "never-ending striving" of spirit. I will argue that these two desiderata unavoidably create an internal conflict in Hegel's philosophy, for if becoming is not simply an ephemeral, temporary feature of thought and being, but their very essence – as indeed Hegel insists it is – then the *overcoming* of the dialectic of becoming in "Absolute Knowledge" and in what Hegel calls the "repose of being" seems to be self-defeating, suggesting the negation of the necessary condition for the very possibility of knowledge and existence.

I do not feel that this is just another example of a dialectical tension which is to be overcome by Hegel's infamous principle of the "unity of opposites" (a principle which we will see to be fundamental to his grand synthesis of thought and being). I hope to show that it is, rather, an unresolved conflict in Hegel's philosophy, reflecting a real ambivalence between his metaphysics of becoming and his anatomy of an absolute "conclusion of the movement in which spirit has shaped itself" (PhS 490). In the concluding chapters (Six and Seven) I will discuss this tension at some length, and offer an interpretation of Hegel's philosophy in which the desideratum for an absolute consummation of thought and being is set aside in favor of a less extreme doctrine which is consonant with his metaphysics of becoming. I will argue that only under this interpretation, which is in conflict with the generally accepted reading of Hegel, can we make sense of his grand synthesis, and further, that this interpretation does not leave Hegel completely defenseless against scepticism and the charge of epistemological relativism, the two related "evils" he sought to avoid by insisting on an absolute consummation of his dialectic.

The task of interpreting Hegel's eschatological language of a completion of the dialectic of becoming is a notoriously difficult one. By

and large, I believe it is fair to say that commentators have either tended to choose all too quickly for one side or the other of the Hegelian dilemma – either his commitment to a metaphysics of becoming or his commitment to a closure of becoming – or to show a tremendous hesitancy in making a choice at all. The former, in turn, either argue (very much against the evidence, I feel) that there simply is no dilemma – that Hegel really never was committed to a metaphysics of becoming or else really never was committed to a closure of becoming – or, and there seems no kinder way of putting it, they simply ignore the dilemma. Those who maintain a stance of hesitancy do so with every right and with the evidence very much in their support, since, as I will try to show, *Hegel himself was hesitant*: he was profoundly and unremittingly ambivalent about how to resolve the dilemma he had gotten himself into. My own feeling is that it is possible to choose for Hegel where he himself did not; that such a choice, if made with care, violates no philosophic principles of Hegel's system, since the dilemma he is led into by his ambivalence is not itself necessitated by his philosophic principles, but is more a wayward turn; and that the reconstruction of the Hegelian system entailed by such a choice offers us the chance to revitalize the "magic charm," as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it,⁵ of Hegel's dialectical vision of history which his ambivalence had placed so much into question. The crucial note of caution here is that we must not choose too quickly, or seek to simply brush one side of the dilemma under the rug. We must recognize and seek to justify that the process of choice does initiate a reconstruction of Hegel's philosophic vision; for by seeking to resolve his ambivalence, one pole of the dilemma must be displaced, and this will certainly have important repercussions on the system as a whole.⁶

In the Book of Revelation, the author concludes the account of his revelation by saying:

I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book;

And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev. 22:18-19)

To avoid this double curse when reading Hegel is not easy; we are often faced with the danger of either adding to or leaving something

out of account in our interpretations of his philosophy. This is partly due to what Hegel himself admits is the justified reputation of Germans for being "not infrequently obscure" (PhM §394 *Zusatz*)! But more than that, there is much truth in John Heckman's insight that "each generation . . . feels that it has discovered or rediscovered Hegel."⁷ Hegel himself gives support for this phenomenon, for he believes that while "the demand that the historian should proceed with impartiality . . . seems to be a legitimate demand," it is not, since

it demands that the historian shall bring with him no definite aim and view by which he may sort out, state, and criticize things. . . . A history without such aim and such criticism would be only an imbecile mental divagation [*nur ein schwachsinniges Ergehen des Vorstellens*] . . . (PhM §549 *Anmerkung*).

And in his *History of Philosophy* Hegel writes that we cannot "merely expound on what is given, . . . [for] to expound without the individual spirit, as though the sense were one entirely given, is impossible. . . . Just because I make something clear to myself, I make my conception, my thought, a factor in it; otherwise it is just a dead and external thing, which is not present for me at all" (HPh 3:13).

If we take Hegel at his word, then it seems appropriate that each generation should have its own discovery and appreciation of his philosophy, for each age will be animated by new historical and cultural perspectives. Our own age is in many ways one of disillusionment and apprehension, an age struggling to find a sense of purpose and moral identity, situated as it is in the aftermath of the Holocaust and towards an anxiety-laden future fraught with the risk of nuclear Armageddon. What message Hegel's philosophy holds for our age depends upon how we interpret his eschatological language of the "completion of the work" of spirit (PhS 486). If, as is usual, we read Hegel literally when he announces the "absolute end of history" (PhH 103), then we must say that history has already achieved its purpose, and we are merely carrying out the last cycle of destiny, spiralling downward ever closer to the final act of death. History, by this reading, is pronouncing its last rites, and the Freudian prediction of an ultimate victory of the death instincts over the instincts of life is achieving its historical fulfillment.

I have already shown my hand, and declared my intention to argue for a nonliteral reading of Hegel's eschatology. We will have to look very carefully at the literal (absolutist) reading when we reach Chapters Six and Seven, and be careful not to dismiss it solely because

we are uncomfortable with its implications for our modern age. It should already be clear, however, that if we are successful in our argument for a less absolutist (less literal) interpretation of Hegel's theory of completion, then his message for our contemporary world would obviously be entirely different from the bleak and frankly terrifying destiny implied by the absolutist interpretation. Hegel's message would then stand not as a prediction of doom but as a voice of hope for redemption from our disenchantment with the world – what Freud calls man's "*Unbehagen*," his uneasiness and discontent with his civilization. It would stand, that is, as a challenge to resist the attitude of indifference and despair, and to recognize that reason has the power to transform the world, "beget[ting] revolutions in the world as well as in individuals" (HPh 3:8), and that it is our highest responsibility to take up and use this power conscientiously. For Hegel, it is precisely in times such as our own, times of cultural, historical crisis and discord – where "the might of union has vanished from the life of men," and "a gulf has arisen between inward strivings and external reality" – that we must "give ear to the urgency [of spirit]" and hear its "summons" (HPh 3:553), to struggle to heal over our wounds, to transfigure our *anomie*, to search out a higher harmony in the midst of our sense of discord. By my proposed reading of Hegel, his grand synthesis of thought and being, of inward strivings and external reality, is not something which is now *accomplished*, but is rather *ever accomplishing itself*, standing as a perpetual challenge to revitalize our ideals and sense of purpose, and to remake our world accordingly.