

CHAPTER ONE

Language and Truth: The Aufhebung of Immediacy

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins the arduous process of appropriating human history for philosophical “speculation” with the common-sense hypothesis that there exists a world of which we are conscious. In some fundamental way, we all believe that we exist in a time and place populated by similarly existing objects and other people. Of this “fact” we believe ourselves to be completely certain: only madmen and philosophers are seriously disturbed by doubts. Nevertheless, close scrutiny fortifies these doubts and stands common sense on its head, for the effort to articulate and justify our certainty is fraught with problems.

In this chapter, we will look closely at Hegel’s dialectical interrogation of the certainty claimed by sense experience. In Part I, Hegel’s moves themselves are followed to an aporetic conclusion: although it is impossible to affirm the immediacy claimed by sense-certainty in the *medium* of affirmation—language—it is equally impossible to deny it altogether. The empiricist claims for the epistemological adequacy of sense data are revealed as naive, even contradictory; still, “being *is*.” Hegel’s philosophy proceeds from the tragic realization that knowing and being are primordially alienated toward a recovered unity in the conceptual recognition of intersubjective Spirit. But, as will only gradually become clear, the consequences of denying intelligibility to the given world in order to dialectically reconstruct it so that it may finally be appropriated by philosophical understanding are far from indifferent.

Part II of this chapter further examines Hegel’s initial “linguistic turn” from naive immediacy to articulate mediation through a reading of readings of “Sense-Certainty.” The primacy of expression in Hegel’s dialectic is regarded by some commentators as illegitimate, while more contemporary readings turn away from a mute loyalty to “raw feels” to focus instead on the narrative and rhetorical or tropological strategies of the medium itself. The stakes of this ontological commitment to language, so central to current debates, will become progressively clearer as we traverse the course of Hegel’s dialectic, arriving at last at the mediated immediacy of philosophical wisdom. But the circularity of this eter-

nal return, and its significance for metaphysical thinking, will remain obscured by Hegel's idealist pretensions; not until Zarathustra struggles with this heaviest of burdens will Hegel's legacy to a post-historical world be assumed and passed on to the philosophers of the future.

PART I. SENSE-CERTAINTY AND EXPRESSION

1. *Deferral of the Vorrede and the "immediate" beginning*

It is significant that the *Phenomenology* begins, as it were, at the end. The substantial *Vorrede*, which itself opens with a denial of the very possibility of writing a preface to a project that can only be realized in the praxis of carrying it out, nevertheless advances formulations which are proper to the fully developed philosophical cognition finally reached in Chapter VIII, *Das absolute Wissen*. Even before the claims of a hypothetical naive consciousness can be described, examined, and revised in the first chapter, diligent readers have thus already been prepared for the conclusions ultimately to be reached. "The *fundamental principle* [der *Grundsatz*] of a system of philosophy is its *result*," Hegel writes in a colorful aphorism composed during the period when the *Phenomenology* was gestating in his mind: "Just as we read the last scene of a play, the last page of a novel, or as Sancho considered it better to reveal beforehand the solution to a riddle, so the beginning of a philosophy is indeed also its point of return."¹ Throughout the *Phenomenology*, Hegel will dialectically reevaluate common sense and traditional views again and again from "our" perspective as speculative philosophers in possession of the *Begriff*, a perspective that is both pro- and retro-spective: guiding the analyses from the very outset, the absolute is already implicit in the interpretive impetus of dialectic. The Preface is accordingly a somewhat anomalous text; its special status is evident even in the way it is catalogued in the table of contents, and its extreme difficulty results from the attempt it makes to do the impossible. But because its anticipatory role can be fully understood only in conjunction with its mirror image in the recapitulative structure of absolute knowing, we will return to the Preface in order to evaluate that final apotheosis in Chapter Three. The hermeneutic circularity of Hegel's dialectical method is of central importance to this interpretation, as it provides the key to resolving hotly contested questions about the ontological potency and relevance of the absolute even as it leads philosophical method beyond dialectic toward Nietzsche's metafictional self-consciousness. But this recursive strategy called "dialectic" emerges only in practice; to appreciate its manner of operation it is necessary to play along with Hegel's game and observe closely as "naive" assumptions are systematically enlightened and revealed in their "truth."

With Chapter I of the *Phenomenology*, then—"Sense-Certainty: Or the 'This' and 'Meaning'"—we begin at the beginning. From a certain point of view it may seem that the most primitive form of knowledge, philosophical or otherwise, is that which is derived from the immediate presence of the world to the experience of simple consciousness. Although Hegel does not explicitly associate this attitude with some particular tradition, both the empiricist reduction to the epistemological primacy of what has recently been called "sense data" or "raw feels," as well as the Cartesian antithesis of this view which insists that *self-certainty* must ground all inquiry, are criticized as one-sided and inadequate.² It is, in fact, versions of these two alternatives that constitute the opposed moments in Hegel's first phenomenological dialectic.

The chapter opens with a declaration of this hypothetical starting point in a primitive, pre-philosophical knowing; emphatic repetition of the root word *unmittelbar* (immediate) serves to rhetorically underline the methodological determination that cognition remain passive, allowing the thing to show itself:

The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a *knowledge* of the *immediate* or of what simply is. Our approach to the object must also be *immediate* or *receptive*. (para. 90; p. 79)

The presumption of this proposal, which Hegel will presently challenge, is quite clear: "immediate knowledge" is possible if, in regarding the object of such knowing, in "apprehending it," we "refrain from trying to comprehend it" (*ibid.*).³

Furthermore, since the passivity of this cognitive attitude is supposed neither to augment nor reduce the "concrete content" of what thus presents *itself*, this primitive sense-certainty "immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth" even as it "appears to be the *truest* knowledge" (para. 91; p. 79). Unmediated by understanding, language, or judgment, sense-certainty is a pure knowing *that*, not yet even a knowledge *of*; as such, its object would seem to embody a plenitude of being unreduced by the essentialism of categories nor enlarged by rational schemas. It is not pen and paper that are present to sense-certainty, but merely 'This'. And 'This' is present to a completely unspecific and undetermined consciousness, the pure correlate of this simple knowing.

In fact, however, this is not "knowledge" at all, and "this very *certainty* proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest *truth*" (*ibid.*). Although sensuous presence as such is indubitable, still the *certainty* (*Gewissheit*) claimed by this hypothetical starting point is too abstract to have a proper content: "its truth contains nothing but the sheer *being*

of the thing [Sache]" (ibid.). This is not negligible, as we shall see; "mediation" is itself unintelligible unless there is something that is mediated. And this pure existence cannot be "false": it simply is, and that is its "truth." But negatively, a pure 'This', devoid of properties and qualities, is as cognitively empty as is a pure 'I', devoid of the existential characteristics of consciousness ("a manifold imagining and thinking").

Nevertheless, Hegel will not abandon the "concrete content," which here tempts sense-certainty into asserting that its knowledge is both rich and true. This *assertion* is already being called into question, since claims about the quality and extent of sense-certainty's knowledge imply the mediation of comparative judgments and cannot be "immediate." But although the truth-claims of sense-certainty cannot be maintained, it remains the case that the uttered "meaning" is identified with the particularity which expressions like 'This', 'Here', and 'Now' betray to universality. Hegel's subtitle for this chapter alerts us to the importance of this dialectic: *das Meinen*, the *meaning* (or opinion) which is uniquely *mine*, is dynamically but problematically related to the *saying* which must lose the particularity of individuals in the universality of expression. Hegel's examination of sense-certainty thus must turn from its essential but mute "concrete content" to these very claims about this content, which are from the outset regarded as dubious. With the bias for expression inevitable in any intelligible inquiry, sense-certainty must be forced to speak, even though its speech introduces reflection and mediation where there was supposed to be only immediate content. Immediacy thereby gets reinterpreted as a rhetorical posture of mediation, the construct of a certain narrative about knowledge and its origins. Pure sensual experience does not by itself assert anything at all; for it, "the thing *is*, and it is, merely because it *is*" (para. 91; p. 79). As soon as we ask questions about *what* the thing is we create a rift in the simple unity of immediate certainty.

With this realization, then, Hegel makes his first properly "philosophical" move: we are henceforth not concerned with an innocent self-revelation by sense-certainty of its own immediate content, but rather with a phenomenological examination of the relation between certainty and its object. The double vision of dialectic, which interrogates naive consciousness from the as yet distantly anticipated but already functional perspective of synthetic understanding, deprives sense-certainty of its independence: like self-consciousness in Chapter IV, distinct dialectical moments merge in a process that gives precedence to relation over determination. But the synthetic resolution of mediation presupposes an initial opposition which is not admitted by the simple unity of naive sense-certainty. Therefore, "we" philosophers must begin the process of reconstructing the synthetic unity of absolute knowing by first demon-

strating the naivety of the unity claimed by this original presumed immediacy. Faced with complacent sense-certainty, with the smug simplicity of pure presence, “we take a bit of this wealth [ein Stück aus dieses Fülle] and by division *enter into it*: Consciousness, for its part, is in this certainty only as a pure *I*, or *I* am in it only as a pure *This* and the object similarly as a pure *This*” (para. 91; p. 79).

The artificiality of any division between ‘This *I*’ and ‘This object’ must be emphasized here. Although Hegel claims that it is intrinsic to the experience—“It is not just we who make this distinction . . . on the contrary, we find it within sense-certainty itself” (para. 93; p. 80)—it must be admitted that a purely naive certainty does no “finding” at all. Rather, “we” identify these constituent moments upon reflection, thereby introducing a dynamic multiplicity of perspectives into what was originally supposed to be a static unity. Hegel will proceed to overcome immediacy, then, through dialectical analysis initiated by the observation that the two ‘Thises’ which structure any actual instance of immediacy themselves provide a primitive mediation. Insisting on the actuality of an instance over the abstraction of mere essence, Hegel notes that we know ‘This *I*’ because it is not ‘This object’, and conversely; thus, “each is at the same time *mediated*: I have this certainty *through* something else, viz. the thing; and it, similarly, is in sense-certainty *through* something else, viz. through the ‘*I*’” (para. 92; p. 80).

2. Critiques of object- and subject-centered philosophical starting points

Having made this new distinction between essence and instance, and temporarily privileging the latter, Hegel proceeds to explore the first moment of the historical dialectic proper to this chapter, in which versions of empirical materialism and Cartesian rationalism are opposed and finally overcome.⁴ In any given instance of sense-certainty, Hegel reasons, it is first of all the object that is posited as primary and essential: the ‘*I*’ that knows it may either be or not be, but the object is “regardless of whether it is known or not; and it remains, even if it is not known, whereas there is no knowledge if the object is not there” (para. 93; pp. 80–81). What, then, is the nature of this obstinate object?

Maintaining an attitude of interrogation that would force sense-certainty to speak for itself,⁵ Hegel presumes to answer that ‘This’ is at least constituted by temporal and spatial aspects. Whatever the object of sense-certainty may be, the immediate particularity claimed by this experience demands that the ‘This’ is ‘Here’ ‘Now’. Calling these determinations “the twofold shape of its being,” Hegel adds that this dialectic is contained in the object of sense-certainty just as the distinct moments ‘*I*

and 'This' were shown to be. Then, to evaluate the truth of empirical materialism and the primacy of the object it claims, Hegel proposes a simple test: specifying some arbitrary content for 'Here' and 'Now', we "write down this truth; a truth cannot lose anything by being written down" (para. 95; p. 81). But specifying any object whatsoever in terms of the primitive coordinates of an immediate 'This' 'Here' 'Now' proves indeed to lose something by being written down: although 'This' may be a tree at midnight for the immediate consciousness that utters 'Here' 'Now', the truth of this statement is contradicted at noon and by the house that stands over 'Here'. Hence, the object of sense-certainty is constantly changing, and the immediate particularity of what is meant eludes utterance. The articulation of spatial and temporal particularity is incompatible with the naive immediacy claimed by sense-certainty.

Before moving on to consider the Cartesian alternative of privileging the subject as the essence of sense-certainty, Hegel draws a lesson of great importance from this attempt to speak for the object. The 'Now' that is preserved in the written testament 'Now is Night' proves to be the opposite of what it initially appears to claim for itself: at noon, the 'Now' of Night is not. And, of course, "[t]he same will be the case with the other form of the 'This,' with 'Here'" (para. 98; p. 82). Assuming the object to be the essence of sense-certainty cannot be sustained if we are to suppose the expressions 'This', 'Here', and 'Now' indeed voice the claims of immediacy, for these expressions prove to be essentially mediated by negation. 'Now' preserves itself from night to day "as a *negative* in general" and is, therefore, "not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is not" (para. 96; p. 81). Furthermore, the radical particularity of the immediate presence meant by sense-certainty proves, when that experience is forced to speak, to be expressed in *universals*: although they are supposed to name an experience absolutely unique to the consciousness that has it, an experience so primitive and direct that any further specification would falsify it, 'This', 'Here', and 'Now' are in fact terms that are true for any experience at any time and in any place. The linguistic expression appropriate to the immediacy claimed by sense-certainty is in fact mediated by negation, and the radical particularity that is meant proves when spoken to have the character of a universal:

A simple thing of this kind which is through negation, which is neither This nor That, a *not-This*, and is with equal indifference This as well as That—such a thing we call a *universal*. So it is in fact the universal that is the true [content] of sense-certainty. (para. 96; p. 82)

The "concrete content" and the "true content" of sense-certainty are thus rigidly distinguished by what Derrida will call a "trick of writ-

ing": the former remains mute in the fullness of being—a plenitude that, in its self-sufficient immediacy, is indifferent to truth-claims—while the latter introduces the possibilities of articulation and discrimination at the cost of "directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant *get into words* at all" (para. 110; p. 89). Although we utter mediated universals in the attempt to make sense-certainty speak about immediate particulars, nevertheless "language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us to say, or to express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*" (para. 97; p. 82).

This is a startling claim with far-reaching consequences. It is impossible to abandon immediate sense-experience altogether—even in terms of "truth," pure being cannot be said to be "false" since it makes no assertion at all ("it *is*, merely because it *is*"), as we have seen. Yet every utterance about what is, precisely because it *is* an utterance and not the thing itself, sets an unbridgeable gulf between two domains of being that we naively suppose to be intimately connected. "The sensuous being that is meant," Hegel writes, "*cannot be reached by language*, which belongs to consciousness, i.e., to that which is inherently universal" (para. 110; p. 88). Nietzsche's ontology will also insist on this point: he speaks of independent "spheres" of being, of nerve stimuli transferred to images and again into sounds, such that "we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities."⁶ But whereas Nietzsche remains true to this view, and so develops his ideas without "forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating subject*,"⁷ Hegel will attempt to overcome the ontological impasse of indirect expression through the formal innovation of the philosophical *Begriff*. In absolute knowing, the immediate content of what we mean is not alienated by the mediation of images and metaphors, by *Vorstellungen*, but rather assimilated in the synthesis of Substance and Subject.⁸

The success or failure of this project is, of course, subject to evaluation only after we have worked through the analysis which leads Hegel to make such claims. In the meantime, however, having shown that the object of sense-certainty cannot consistently be held to be primary, Hegel next turns to consciousness itself, the "inherently universal" reflective structure to which language is proper. No longer immediate, "pure being" as the "truth" of sense-certainty retains its essential status as an abstract concept mediated by negation and expressed in language (para. 99; p. 82). The material object of naive empiricism, which on inspection proved to be a mediated universal instead of an immediate particular, is cast in a dependent role by the advance of dialectic. Accordingly, the second moment of this dialectic proposes the knowing

subject as the essence of sense-certainty: "Its truth is in the object as *my* object, or in its being *mine* [*Meinen*]; it is, because *I* know it" (para. 100; p. 83).

The strategy of this move, as well as its dialectical *Aufhebung*, is straightforward and, by now, familiar. Since the object of sense-certainty is immediately present to experiencing consciousness even though the expressions that name it dissolve it in universality as soon as they are uttered, a new tack is demanded, and it lies close at hand: "the vanishing of the single Now and Here that we mean is prevented by the fact that I hold them fast" (para. 101; p. 83). This new attitude proclaims that it is *my* knowledge which is certain, which is true or false; even if there still remains a "concrete content" of sense-certainty whose status eludes articulation, it is now asserted that the *subject* defines the essence of the meaning-relation for phenomenology. The 'I' is the new locus of truth.

However, Hegel overcomes this posture as soon as it is proposed with the same observation that was employed against the meant particularity of 'Here' and 'Now'. The 'I' is also a universal expression; reference to the uniqueness of my meaning-intention, to the "authentication" of my immediate seeing, does not solve the problem since everyone is 'I' and any other 'I' may intend different 'Heres' and 'Nows'. We see again that absolute existential particularity is unspeakable, but this time the lesson is learned by the self. This is the germ of Hegel's ultimate identification of finite man with infinite absolute Spirit.

Once more, then, we have to modify our position regarding the essence of sense-certainty; but this time, having exhausted the traditional alternatives of both object and subject by dialectizing them as "moments," a third, "synthetic" alternative emerges. Hegel neatly summarizes this first phenomenological dialectic:

Sense-certainty thus comes to know by experience that its essence is neither in the object nor in the 'I', and that its immediacy is neither an immediacy of the one nor of the other; for in both what I mean is rather something unessential, and the object and the 'I' are universals in which that 'Now' and 'Here' and 'I' which I *mean* do not have a continuing being, or *are* not. Thus we reach the stage where we have to posit the *whole* of sense-certainty as its essence, and no longer any one of its moments. (para. 104; p. 84)

Emphasizing totality and relation, the Hegelian dialectic now locates the meant particularity of immediate sense-certainty in "a pure [act of] intuiting [*ein reines Anschauung*]" (para. 104; p. 84):⁹ when I *mean This*, the universality of the expressions 'I' and 'This' is overcome in the act of their relation. Of course, the immediacy that is essential to this relation remains fundamentally existential; Hegel says that it would "lose its sig-

nificance entirely" if we retrospectively analyze it or stand at a distance from it; in philosophical analysis we can "point to it," but expression encounters the same paradox of particularity and universality we are already familiar with (para. 105; p. 85). In fact, even "pointing out" is problematic since 'This Now' "has already ceased to be in the act of pointing to it" (para. 106; p. 85); the immediacy of pure intuition is lost in any attempt to name it, even in the most primitive of mere gestures.

Instead, the Now that results from its own dialectic, which is the "true" Now, is no longer a pure or simple immediacy: it has returned to the sense of immediacy through the negation of what it is not. In the first and one of the most lucid illustrations he offers of the dialectical principle called "negation of the negation," Hegel explains how we reach this result in paragraph 107 (pp. 85–86). First, naive sense-certainty asserts the simple immediacy of this 'Now', only to discover (in the second moment of the dialectic) that what was asserted or pointed out is not; rather, it 'has been'. But then, asserting what has been is itself negated by the same inexorable dialectic: "what has been, *is not*; I set aside the second truth, its *having been*, its supersession, and thereby negate the negation of the 'Now', and thus return to the first assertion, that the 'Now' *is*" (para. 107; p. 85); emphasis added). Once again, the universal character of sense-certainty's truth is demonstrated; the return to *this* Now through a plurality of Nows is a *result*, not a beginning, a mediated and not a simple immediacy. Similarly with 'This' and 'Here', the meant particular vanishes in the multiple reference of the universal, which in turn vanishes in multiplicity itself (which logically requires individual parts). Universality is the whole, which is necessarily a sum of its parts, and each part is a whole made up of parts—and thus, in the passing from this 'Here' to that, "what abides is a simple complex of many Heres" (para. 108; p. 86).

3. The "divine nature of language": Mystery and equivocation

We can see, then, that the dialectic of sense-certainty is the history of this attempt to know a particular, frustrated by the logic of knowledge, which yields only universals: the very most primitive dialectic, beginning with nothing more than what is presumed given to consciousness, already involves the dynamism of historical relations. One such is mentioned briefly in paragraph 109 (pp. 86–87). At first, the necessary historicism of consciousness itself is affirmed as a dialectical result; Hegel even makes the apparently contradictory claim that immediate sense-certainty is already historical. This purely theoretical finding is augmented, however, by an example or illustration pertaining to "the practical sphere," taken from Greek antiquity:

we can tell those who assert the truth and certainty of sense-objects that they should go back to the most elementary form of wisdom, viz. the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus, and that they have still to learn the secret meaning of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. . . . Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed being-in-itself [an sich seienden] but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up. (para. 109; p. 87)

Ceres was an Italian deity associated with Demeter, especially ritualistically; Bacchus is, of course, Dionysus. Both Dionysus and Demeter were central to the Eleusinian Mysteries where, in fact, the rites associated with Ceres were also thought to have been performed. So Hegel's reference, although slightly evasive, is nevertheless concrete: the simple material immediacy claimed by sense-certainty reveals not even as much knowledge as beasts possess, who are not deterred by the otherness of what may be so easily mediated by crude physiology. Eating, in fact, will remain an important instance of "mediation" for Hegel, from the lord's immediate satisfaction of his (gastronomic) desires at feasts provided by the mediation of the bondsman's labor, to metaphors of ingestion and digestion in the *Logic*.¹⁰

But on closer inspection, this first explicit historical illustration in the *Phenomenology*, however incomplete, is complicated and problematic; no event is ever transparently clear to the retrospective gaze that historicizes it, but the "Mysteries" at Eleusis are not even as hermeneutically accessible as, for example, Stoicism and Skepticism are. We know that these rites were open to anyone, including women and slaves (only barbarians and violent criminals were excluded), that they are mentioned by Aristotle and were supported by both Peisistratus and Pericles—but exactly how they transformed the lives of the very many pilgrims who yearly became initiates remains a mystery. Furthermore, Aristotle suggests that what was learned at Eleusis could not be called knowledge in the usual sense at all; rather, the *mystae* underwent "an experience and an influence" (frag. 45). Summarizing the scholarly consensus on this judgment, Lewis Richard Farnell and Herbert Jennings Rose write:

In seeking to guess what the secret of the mysteries was we must first rid ourselves of the notion that it was any esoteric philosophy, or elaborate theology kept hidden from the world at large. Negatively, we have no jot of evidence that the initiates were more intelligent than the rest of Greece. . . . Positively, we have the repeated insistence, from the Homeric Hymn [to Demeter] down, that the initiates saw something which greatly comforted their souls, not that they learned anything of great importance.¹¹

To account for such "visions," it has even been provocatively argued that, whatever allegorical drama may have been staged at Eleusis, it was greatly enhanced by a ceremonial wine the initiates were given to drink that contained an hallucinogenic substance derived from ergot of barley¹²—a suggestion that resonates with Hegel's incantation, in his poem "Eleusis" of 1796, "O Ceres, you who are enthroned in Eleusis! / I feel now drunk with enthusiasm."¹³ If such was in fact the case, Hegel's reference to ingestion in the *Phenomenology* would seem to be still more significant: not just a ritualistic act with symbolic import, nor merely a rhetorical way of emphasizing simple sensuousness, the assimilated other would be the very vehicle of mystical vision. Further, this experience would be akin to the immediacy here at stake for Hegel, as its content was evidently not mediated by a teaching of any philosophic sort.

However these obscure puzzles might be solved, it is hard not to notice a suggestive affinity between the ambiguities essential to the Eleusinian Mysteries and the occult aura of Hegel's final apotheosis. At the very end of the *Phenomenology*, after the inferior mediation of religious *Vorstellungen* has been superseded by the philosophical *Begriff*, Hegel abruptly invokes a host of Christian images: revelation, Calvary, and, in the concluding verses adapted from Schiller, the personal-divine "Him." If we go on to notice the structural parallels between Hegel's metaphysical historicism and that of the proto-heretical twelfth-century monk Joachim of Fiore,¹⁴ the "divine nature of language"—first so-called in this first chapter on sense-certainty—begins to look like an important early clue. Insofar as it has the power of "directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant *get into words at all*" (para. 110; p. 89), the divine nature of language is mystery, equivocation, ambiguity. And indeed, when moving beyond sense-certainty to a perceiving that admits mediation and begins distinguishing properties and qualities, Hegel exploits the lexical composition of *Wahrnehmen* (perception) to emphasize the partial and problematic appropriation of the immediately real by a cognition that wishes to speak: "instead of knowing something immediate, I take the truth of it [*nehme ich wahr*]" (para. 110; p. 89). As we will ultimately see, the sublime irony of Hegel's metaphysical accomplishment is the very abolition of philosophy from the impossible burden of its own questions: a partial "taking for true" leaves the "wealth" of being as both the ground of meaning and as that which exceeds the attempts of language to subsume and supplant it.¹⁵

Thus, the systematic and comprehensive clarity of philosophical Notions would appear to be incompatible with "language" and expression. But is such incompatibility even intelligible? From the outset, Hegel seems to have set himself the task of transcending language itself in

aspiring for the absolute. What can he hope to put in its place? And what will be its status with regard to the tangible and undeniable,¹⁶ even if inexpressible, reality of sensuous experience?

PART II. ON READING SENSE-CERTAINTY

In overcoming the claims made by sense-certainty, it remains unclear whether or not Hegel has also decisively overcome the *Sinnliche* or *gemeinte Einzelne* of actual experience. Is the immediacy of meaning satisfactorily accounted for in the dialectical move Hegel's linguistic bias encourages him to make—or is the *Aufhebung* of immediacy dialectically presupposed and predetermined? Although the universality of sense-certainty's expression is admittedly incompatible with the particularity of the experience that is meant, belief in the reality of that experience survives the dialectical assault on its truth.

Two things are at stake in this somewhat aporetic "result": the status of the overcome but not obliterated *gemeinte Einzelne*, and the medium of mediation itself. Even if sense-certainty speaks falsely, it does and must try to speak. Thus, language is set out from the beginning as the realm, won by a compromise, in which an urgent certainty is mediated—that means alienated, transformed or translated, even negated. And since the elaborate articulations of Science and System, even of history itself, grasp toward the reconciliation of the Absolute,¹⁷ Hegel first tells the "fall story" of a retreat into truth from simpler certainty.

In looking now at some of the readings this puzzling text has provoked, Hegel's own analyses and amplifications may usefully be considered first. The immediacy whose simple presence to consciousness in sense experience proves too mute to base a philosophical understanding of the development of culture on, is in fact the very subject of the *Logic*: "*Being* is the indeterminate *immediate*."¹⁸ When we have seen how Hegel has not abandoned immediacy in overcoming sense-certainty, we will examine a selection from among the remarks other philosophers have made about Hegel's move to mediation. In particular, the critics cluster around questions concerning the legitimacy of this linguistic turn: has Hegel killed sense-consciousness, or at least robbed it of its integrity by forcing it to speak "through an alien medium"?¹⁹

1. *The Immediacy demanded by the Logic*

Both of Hegel's Logics, in working toward an elaboration of a Science of Being, carve out a place for immediacy: the certainty of Faith, an intuition necessarily not alienated and falsified, demands it.

Without exploring the suggestion, Charles Taylor notes that "The references to 'pure Being' [in the *Phenomenology*] evoke parallel arguments in the *Logic*."²⁰ These "parallel arguments," it turns out, are less equivocal about the status of what we might call "dogmatic immediacy" than their phenomenological counterparts. In spite of the dialectics from 1807, which so rigorously interrogate naive certainty, Hegel writes twenty-three years later that "immediate knowledge is to be accepted as a *fact* [*Tatsache*]."²¹

This passage concludes a dialectical argument which is exercised on behalf of God in Chapter V of the *Encyclopedia Logic*. The chapter, entitled "Third Attitude of Thought to Objectivity: Immediate or Intuitive Knowledge," follows chapters that critically examine the "attitudes of thought to objectivity" in Hegel's precursors: Kant, the empiricist tradition, and the unquestioning belief in reflection and its adequacy to truth of "common sense." Thus, the discussion of immediacy as a dogmatic imperative is placed at the pre-logical level of an as yet unclarified "attitude of thought" (*Stellung des Gedankens*), albeit the third and last of these historically expressed attitudes. Just as Revealed Religion holds the penultimate place in the phenomenological pageant of Spirit's developing self-consciousness, the immediacy claimed by Faith makes a last stand at the threshold of the logical "Doctrine of Being."

The argument Hegel offers, which concludes so dogmatically, is easily rehearsed. Employing a strategy not unlike that of the "ontological argument" as found in Anselm and Descartes, Hegel insists that knowledge of God *must* be immediate because mediation implies negation and error: "insofar as the object in question be the True, the Infinite, the Unconditioned, and we change it into the mediated and conditioned, far from apprehending the truth by thought we have rather inverted it into untruth [in Unwahres verkehren]" (section 62).

Knowledge of God, the certainty of which Hegel questions as little as does Hume's "Philo" in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, must nevertheless not be threatened by the perpetual permutations of an empiricist dialectic. Thus, again like Hume's "Philo," Hegel sketches out a subtle theism for which the stripping away of "anthropomorphic conceptions" does not merely reduce God to a "substantially empty essence [erklecklich leeren Wesen]." Rather, the "taking for true" of experience and perception (*Wahrnehmung*) is grounded in the certainty of self that is also the foundation of Faith:

The principle of *Experience* entails the infinitely important stipulation that, in order to accept and take as true any subject matter, one must *be in contact* [*dabei sein*] with it, or more precisely, one must find this subject matter united with *one's own self-certainty* [*der Gewissheit*

seiner selbst]. . . . This principle is the same as that which in the present day has been termed Faith [Glauben], immediate knowledge [unmittelbares Wissen]. (section 7)

Since the “highest aim” of philosophic science is to bring about a “harmony” (*Übereinstimmung*) of actuality and experience through a “reconciliation of self-conscious reason [selbstbewussten Vernunft] with the reason of existing things [seienden Vernunft]” (section 6), we may anticipate here that the *Logic* must crucially inform any reading of Hegel’s final phenomenological move to Absolute Knowing.²² In fact, the status of immediacy, the nature of the medium of mediation, and the constitutive role of expression (*Entäußerung*) can finally be made intelligible only from that fully developed dialectical perspective. However, the end is “in” the beginning, and first steps importantly establish direction. Hyppolite does not exaggerate when he says “we can consider the sensuous certainty with which consciousness starts as at once its highest truth and its greatest error.”²³

The relation between the immediate and the Absolute thus deferred until the historical possibilities and actualities of mediation can be fully explored, we return with Hegel to the opening moves of the *Logic*. These pages labor to expose the philosophical instability of unexamined, taken-for-granted ontological presuppositions. Hegel notes that the “other sciences” enjoy the luxury and security of being able simply to assume the existence of a certain class of phenomena; unlike them, philosophy “cannot . . . rest with the existence of its objects as immediately given representations” (section 1). Repeating the dialectical interrogation employed in the overcoming of sense-certainty,²⁴ Hegel attempts to purge the starting point of presuppositions. This is a pre-eminently “phenomenological” move, a Cartesian or Husserlian drive toward foundational certainty. What does Hegel’s inquiry reveal about these ambitions?

Granting first of all that “some acquaintance [*Bekanntschaft*] with its objects . . . philosophy may and even must presume” (section 1), Hegel turns immediately upon this assumption to see what it entails. Such primitive “acquaintance,” even though we reach its positing through reflection and thought, seems to make an appeal to intuition through “feelings” that reflection recognizes as resistant to conceptual thematization. These “contents of consciousness,” although already “human” and “thought grounded” (*menschliche, Denken begründete*), “do not originally appear in the form of thought, but rather as feeling, intuition, representation [*Gefühl, Anschauung, Vorstellung*]” (section 2).

Hegel is trying to make an important distinction here between supposedly primitive *Gefühle* and *Anschauungen*—which, insofar as they are human, are already determined by thought—and some other kind of

experience that is more explicitly and self-consciously reflective. That we have experience of the latter sort is clear and needs no demonstration; but how can the more primitive encounter with Being be accounted for in the very medium of reflective thought which is supposed to be essentially inadequate to it?

Hegel's way of answering this question casts the net of concepts over all experience while at the same time distinguishing the receptive passivity of mere consciousness from the reflective activity of an emerging self-consciousness. "But it is different," he writes, "to have feelings and representations *determined* and *inspired* [*bestimmte und durchdrungene*] by thought—than to have *thoughts about them*" (section 2). In a passage which recalls the amusing demonstration offered in the *Phenomenology* that even animals recognize objects as *Denken begründete*—and so, without ceremony, fall to and eat them up (para. 109; p. 87)—Hegel reiterates his wit as well as his argument at this same stage of the dialectic in the *Logic*. To suppose that reflective, self-conscious knowledge exhausts all that is determined by thought, he writes, "would find its parallel if we said that eating was impossible before we have acquired a knowledge of the chemical, botanical, and zoological characters of our food; and that we must delay digestion until we had finished the study of anatomy and physiology" (section 2).

The articulation of the forms of thought that "determine and inspire" even the most primitive of supposed immediacies emerges out of these logical reflections as the imperative of philosophy. Although the "difficulty of making a beginning lies in that a beginning, as *immediate*, makes—or better, itself is—an assumption" (section 1), philosophy steps in swiftly and "puts *thoughts, categories*, or better, *notions* [*Begriffe*]²⁵ in place of representations [*Vorstellungen*]" (section 3). These "representations"—along with "feelings" and "images," as we have already seen—are thus netted out of the dark sea of unself-conscious immediacy by Hegel's linguistic turn to narration and expression. Accordingly, uninterpreted moments of pure presence "may be regarded as *metaphors* [*Metaphern*] of thoughts and notions" (section 3); a dialectical slight-of-hand redescribes immediacy as precisely that ambiguity the meaning of which it is the hermeneutical project of philosophy to clarify. "To have representations," Hegel scolds, "does not yet imply that we know their meaning" (section 3).

And of course, their meaning is—ambiguous. Rehearsing the entire sense-certainty dialectic in a dense but lucid passage of section 20 in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel explains how the meant individuality (*Einzelheit*) that is basic to the distinction between sense and thought cannot itself be captured in the medium of language: language utters universals when what is meant is absolutely particular. Before turning at

last to Hegel's commentators in order to examine more closely the consequences of these important early dialectical commitments, it may be useful to quote this passage at length, allowing Hegel to summarize his conclusions for himself:

Moreover, if the sensible has been determined by *individuality and mutual exclusion* [*Einzelheit und des Außereinander*], it is well to add that [attributes of sense] are also thoughts and universals; in Logic it will become clear that thought, and the universal, is at once itself and its other, that it overreaches [*übergreift*] both and lets nothing escape. As *language* is the work of thought, nothing can be said in it which is not universal. What I merely *mean* is *mine* [*Was ich nur meine, ist mein*], it belongs to me as this particular individual [*Individuum*]; but if language expresses only the universal, then I cannot say what I merely mean. And the *unsayable*—feeling, sensation—is not the most excellent and truest, but the most meaningless and untrue. When I say ‘the *individual*’ [*das Einzelne*], ‘this individual’, ‘Here’, ‘Now’, all these are universal terms; *everything* and *anything* is an individual, a This and, if it be sensible, a Here and a Now. Similarly, when I say ‘I’, I *mean* just myself to the exclusion of all others; but what I say, ‘I’, is just every I, which [likewise] excludes all others from itself. (section 20)²⁶

2. “Sensualism” versus the always already linguistic

We turn now to the critical debate over the legitimacy of Hegel's opening moves. The battle is waged along partisan lines: whereas Feuerbach, Löwith, and Loewenberg defend the integrity of the object of sense-certainty (which, they hold, Hegel has unfairly “impersonated” and abolished), Solomon, Taylor, and Derrida turn their attention away from mute immediacy toward the involved and dynamic mediation of language.

The “loyalist sensualism” of Feuerbach and Löwith, as it might be called, has become an almost canonical target for contemporary commentators more familiar with the language obsession of current philosophical debate. “Hegel's analysis in no sense does away with the singularity of the sense object” insists Martin J. De Nys, but “it does argue that the concrete singular object is internally complex or mediated, and is not a bare, immediate particularity.”²⁷ Robert Solomon agrees, crediting De Nys with “an excellent discussion and refutation of the Feuerbach and Löwith arguments.”²⁸ Although a closer look at these arguments must reach the same conclusion, the consequences of Hegel's analysis can be exposed to scrutiny in the process. Finally, Loewenberg's appeal on behalf of “silent sensualism”—a term he coins himself—formulates this same view in a rather more dramatic way. In so doing,

Loewenberg very clearly illuminates the ontological status of Hegel's linguistic turn: "the beginning of speech is the end of immediacy."²⁹

The crux of loyalist sensualism is outrage at Hegel's conceptual bullying. "What an immense difference there is," Feuerbach writes, "between the 'this' as an object of abstract thought and the 'this' as an object of reality! This wife, for example, is my wife, and this house is my house, although everyone speaks, as I do, of his house and his wife as 'this house' and 'this wife'. The indifference and uniformity of the logical 'this' is here interrupted and destroyed by the legal meaning of the word."³⁰ For Hegel, Feuerbach complains, particularity and universality "flow together, indistinguishable for thought" (p. 43).

We may or may not wish to dispute Feuerbach's "legal" rights of possession over his wife, but his claims to having understood Hegel seem even less certain. His account would attribute to Hegel the foolish view that the "indifference and uniformity" of universals threatens the hearth and home of humble particulars with a kind of ontological terrorism. Rushing to protect his wife from the negating onslaught of the Hegelian *Begriff*, Feuerbach battles the Word bravely on behalf of his favorite objects:

We have before us in the beginning of the *Phenomenology* nothing other than the contradiction between the word, which is general, and the object, which is always a particular. And the idea that relies only on the word will not overcome this contradiction. Just as the word is not the object, so is the being that is spoken or ideated not real being. (p. 43)

But this quixotic, if rather gallant, skirmish completely misses the point. Hegel's strategy is really quite benign. On the one hand, insisting on mediation denies the absolute otherness of the "objective" and opens the door to the possibility of reconciliation; on the other, Hegel opposes the Romanticism of Fichte, Schelling, Jacobi, and so many others who claimed immediate access to the Absolute through occult intuition. In effect, the famous Preface already makes this point, and in a pithy way: it ironically proclaims its own impossibility in face of the philosophical imperative of phenomenology. The labor of the negative, the parade of historical forms mastered dialectically by Spirit advancing toward self-consciousness, cannot be bypassed so easily. Thus, the "idea" does not merely "rely" on the word—this would indeed lead to an unresolvable contradiction, as Feuerbach notes, between word and object. Rather, the idea becomes word, it externalizes itself (*ent-äußerung*) in expression (*Entäußerung*), it in-forms the *Gestalten* of historical Spirit. And among these manifest shapes or forms, both Feuerbach's wife and house must be included.

Karl Löwith's version of loyalist sensualism is only slightly complicated by his closer attention to language. Just as Feuerbach had characterized the meant sensible particular as the "boundary of thought" (p. 40), Löwith complains that Hegel's starting point "begins with thought rather than with that which is the precondition of all reflection which thought itself cannot anticipate."³¹ Refusing to abandon prelinguistic experience to the necessity and ubiquity of mediation, Löwith evokes a "realm of images" (*einem Reich der Bilder*) in which "there are meanings that are not mediated by language [nicht sprachlich vermittelt], for example the meaning of music and painting."³² But what such meaning may be is hard to say—in fact, it is impossible to say, which is the basis of Löwith's error. "Music and painting" are supposed, on this theory, to be as it were pre-linguistic languages, manipulating pure sense by evading conceptual mediation, but nevertheless conveying some profound meaning. Unfortunately, the metaphor with the arts only points up the naivety of Löwith's sensualism: the linguistic elements—grammar, vocabulary, syntax—of music and painting are too easily specified. Without an exquisite metaphysics like Schopenhauer's to give some content to such aesthetic mysticism, the view seems merely parochial.

Establishing a dualism of word and thing in order to eviscerate the former in contrast to the fullness and plenitude of the latter, Löwith thus separates what Hegel unites. Recalling almost exactly Feuerbach's battle with the windmills of Hegelian mediation, Löwith insists that "actual being is definite existence, here and now, thought and word are abstractly universal."³³ Mistakenly supposing that Hegel means to argue with the claims of immediacy, Löwith petulantly concludes "sense-certainty will never be talked into believing that its object is a universal 'this' mediated by negation."³⁴

Jacob Loewenberg's "silent sensualism" comes just as vigorously to the defense of pre-linguistic immediacy as do Feuerbach's and Löwith's loyalisms. According to Loewenberg, in Hegel's chapter on sense-certainty "the task is one of impersonation, involving the subtle art of assuming the attitude of another mind."³⁵ It is this impersonation that forces sense-certainty "into a false position": "the incongruity of immediacy results from feigning it" (p. 25). Loewenberg distinguishes "simulated" from "real" immediacy in order to argue that "real sensuousness cannot be convicted out of its own mouth because it does not speak at all" (*ibid.*). Accordingly, when Hegel forces it to speak, thus revealing the supposed truth about universality, he should not be surprised to find that sense-certainty perjures itself: "Immediacy raised to the level of discourse is indeed absurd, but the absurdity inheres in the attempt to formulate a type of experience whose nature beggars all description" (*ibid.*). The mistake has been to hold sense-certainty "responsible for the

implications of our language, a language to which it is manifestly not committed. . . . Cozened into concepts, it inevitably reveals itself as suffused with mediation" (pp. 25–26).

Loewenberg's commentary constantly attends to the meaning-saying dialectic, and so to the problem of saying what we mean. Since sense-certainty has here spoken only under duress, a "real adherent of immediacy might decline to answer altogether and his silence would be an eloquent tribute to the strength of his position" (p. 28). A defender of the speechless certainty of "silent sensualism" thus points out that sense-certainty is asked to describe what it experiences "through an alien medium" (*ibid.*). Loewenberg repeatedly indicates that "the method of interrogation" specifically causes "the defect of immediacy," the violation of the meant. Meaning is always destroyed by saying because "the beginning of speech is the end of immediacy" (p. 31). Although immediacy will persist throughout the *Phenomenology* as the dialectical moment which opposes mediation, at this early stage the claims of immediacy to truth are shown to be wanting.

Like Feuerbach and Löwith, Loewenberg's position is "dualistic" because it describes immediacy or sensuousness as independent from and incommensurable with all discourse. Moreover, Loewenberg insists that Hegel's *Aufhebung* proceeds illegitimately from correct dualistic premises to reach the

astonishing conclusion that in the absence of words capable of saying what we mean we must end by meaning what we say. The immediate and its expression being at loggerheads, we are called upon to sacrifice the authenticity of intuition to the ambages of locution. Because the immediate, admittedly inexpressible, turns into its opposite as soon as we open our mouths, we are required to hold that it is other than itself on its own plane of being. The *non sequitur* of this is evident. The contradiction is not in sense-certainty but only *between* it and discourse. (p. 36)

On Loewenberg's account, Hegel succeeds in overcoming sense-certainty only by forcing it to speak and then pointing out that it has done so falsely according to its own lights. This leaves the status of the original, "immediate" intuition very much in limbo, since the account it leaves of itself is importantly ambiguous.

Of course, this criticism presupposes something highly peculiar: that inarticulate immediacy can "claim" to be real, even though it can advance this claim in no language. Since, however, Hegel's explicit concern is with "certainty" (*Gewissheit*), Loewenberg's criticism would seem to expect too much of simple "sensuousness"; he doubts the autonomy of all *Meinung* "in the absence of words capable of saying what we mean." But this is an instructive exaggeration since it tends to reveal the

narrative strategy implicit in Hegel's move to mediation; dialectically appropriating what expresses itself only negatively, Hegel is able to comprehend this indeterminacy by casting it in an intelligible role—a role which will later be re-interpreted so as to recover the immediacy here imbedded in the *Aufhebung*, which moves beyond it.

Solomon, recognizing the dialectical synthesis Hegel works on the sensualist dualism, agrees with this interpretation:³⁶

the "truth of sense certainty" is "the universal" (paras. 107, 109, 110, 111). But this does not mean that from here on we will dispense with sense and cease to consider particulars as objects of knowledge. It means only that neither sense nor individual objects (including sensations) are to be considered as *given* prior to the attempt of consciousness to understand them.

This emphasis on engagement and involvement—an account of knowing which takes seriously the synthetic dynamic that essentially distinguishes dialectic from static dualism—is of extreme importance. It at once marks the distinctive feature of contemporary readings of Hegel, in which the Absolute becomes ever more the property of the aphoristic, just as it provides the key for moving on in the *Phenomenology* to the animated encounters of interpreted history that are initiated by the primal conflict between master and slave. As De Nys points out, the dualistic arguments of Feuerbach and Löwith erect an obstacle to dialectic that would invalidate the entire project of the *Phenomenology*. "The dubious character of idealism," Löwith writes, "is bound up with its attitude toward nature. The primary model for theoretical mediation is not the primary world of nature, which produces and reproduces itself without human mediation, but rather the secondary world of human spirit."³⁷ Refusing the dialectical turn nips Hegel—and all subsequent philosophy!—in the bud.

Thus, as Solomon puts it, "the basic lesson of the *Phenomenology* is that our conceptions of experience . . . and the reality that we experience are inseparably one" (p. 326). In a formulation that anticipates Nietzsche, Solomon crystallizes Hegel's teaching: "*There are no uninterpreted experiences*" (p. 327).

This participatory dialectic of experience and expression, which will presently bring Hegel's gaze to the involvement of independent self-consciousnesses, is underlined also by Charles Taylor. Having concluded that the main theme of Hegel's first chapter "is a refutation of the claim of sensible certainty to be in immediate contact with sensible particulars,"³⁸ Taylor is quick to identify the positive moment of this *Aufhebung*: "The immediate is negated, but it is retained in mediated form" (p. 167). A "mediated immediacy" is the truth of sense-certainty; expe-