

Rolf-Peter Horstmann:
From Apparent to True Knowledge (*Wissen*)

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From Apparent to True Knowledge (*Wissen*)

Transitions in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Table of Contents

Preface	3
I. Introduction	7
II. The concept of knowledge and its twofold problems (circularity, complexity)	17
III. What are the subjects and the objects of knowledge?	29
IV. The main transitions in the <i>Phenomenology</i> from <i>Consciousness</i> to <i>Spirit</i>	69
V. Knowledge as a semantic relation between subject and object	107
VI. Transitions within <i>Spirit</i>	121
VII. Consequences and Perspectives	149
Bibliography	163

Preface

A rather short book does not need a longish preface. It should be enough to point out its primary aims and the background assumptions that guide the reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* presented here.

To start with the background assumptions, they consist mainly in a rudimentary assessment of the basic tenets of Hegel's philosophical project in general and of its methodological means. Everyone who engages with whatever aspect of the *Phenomenology* has to face a number of questions that are presumed to result from alleged obscurities on Hegel's part as to the methodological tools he relies on in his phenomenological endeavor and as to the systematic function he wants to attribute to this work (at least at the time of its conception and completion). Questions regarding methodology not just of the *Phenomenology* but of his philosophy in general have led to a myriad of studies on what is called 'Hegelian dialectics'. Questions regarding the somewhat dubious systematic function of especially the *Phenomenology* within the Hegelian system gave rise to numerous exchanges about the viability of the project of a system in general and of Hegel's system in particular. All of these discussions have been guided by the general outlook that there is an intimate connection between Hegel's dialectical method and his system such that without the employment of his method there would be no Hegelian system and, conversely, without his system there would be no need for this method. At the bottom of this assessment lies the preconception that the idea of a system has its roots in a practice of philosophers or, more generally, individual subjects methodologically manipulating a given content with the intention of bringing some order or structure into it. The resulting structure is called a system if it succeeds in determining all aspects of the content in such a way that the content can be seen to form a unified whole. It is in this sense that we speak of arithmetic as a system of numbers ordered according to a particular method of

I. Introduction

For more than two hundred years many ways have been explored to understand in one way or another the task Hegel pursues under the title of a *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Many if not most of these explorations took as their point of departure quite reasonably what they assumed to be the main aim of the phenomenological project as it is stated by Hegel himself. However, already in the attempt to determine this starting point, things became quite confusing, because it proved to be anything but obvious what exactly Hegel professed the aim and the target of the *Phenomenology* to be.

Several options lend themselves for consideration. The first of these is the least surprising, because it seems that the title page of the book already settles the question. Here Hegel presents the *Phenomenology* as the first part of a *System of Science*, giving rise to the expectation that what he aims at is a presentation of the beginnings of a systematic outline of whatever it is he refers to as ‘science’. This view is easily confirmed at first sight by numerous passages in the *Phenomenology* and in other places of his writings as well. Thus, he proclaims already in the *Preface* of the *Phenomenology* that what this book is all about is to delineate the “coming-to-be of science in general or of knowing” (*Werden der Wissenschaft überhaupt oder des Wissens*) (*Phen.*, sect. 27). In the *Introduction* to the *Science of Logic* he states: “The concept of pure science and its deduction is ... presupposed in the present work in so far as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is nothing other than that deduction” (*Der Begriff der reinen Wissenschaft und seine Deduktion wird in gegenwärtiger Abhandlung ... insofern vorausgesetzt, als die Phänomenologie des Geistes nichts anderes als die Deduktion desselben ist*) (*SoL.*, 29; *GW* 21, 33). And in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* he maintains:

In my *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which because of this was denominated at its publishing as the first part of the system of science, the course is taken to start from the first, most simple appearance of spirit, *the immedi-*

II. The concept of knowledge and its twofold problems (circularity, complexity)

In order to get a better grip on the manner in which Hegel addresses the problem of knowledge in the *Phenomenology*, it might be helpful to provide a rough outline of the conception of knowledge which he uses as the background against which he unfolds his own account. He starts with attributing this conception to what he calls ‘consciousness’ (by which he apparently means a thinking and acting subject). According to this conception, knowledge has to be conceived as establishing a relation between an item from which a subject distinguishes itself and to which it at the same time relates. It has to be analyzed in terms of a relation between a claim to knowledge, on the one hand, and the object to which this claim pertains, on the other. Consciousness that entertains this conception shows up initially, according to Hegel, as instantiated in the form of what we would consider to be a normal, unbiased person that is sufficiently educated to articulate their views as to the nature of knowledge. This consciousness he refers to as “natural consciousness” (cf. *Phen.*, sect. 77f.). Though the general conception which natural consciousness embraces of the relational nature of knowledge is quite right, the relation of the knowledge relation, i. e., the claim to knowledge and its object, can be construed in many different ways, some of which prove to be irredeemably mistaken and to lead, without proper adjustments, to a number of serious problems that have to be resolved before there is a chance for natural consciousness to live up to its own interpretation of the underlying relational conception of knowledge. Outlined in non-Hegelian terms, the view Hegel ascribes to natural consciousness, and the problems he sees invariably connected with the way in which natural consciousness tends to understand the relational structure of knowledge, can be captured in a somewhat cursory narrative along the following lines.

Knowledge (*Wissen*) is meant to be a special attitude in which a subject relates to the world by conceptual means, a world that is taken

Bibliography

The literature on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in many different languages is immense. For more than two hundred years, scholars and non-scholars alike from almost all areas of the academic and the non-academic universe have been occupied for innumerable reasons both with the entire work and with individual sections and chapters from the perspective of an indefinite number of topics. The attempt to list in a bibliography all or most of the printed results of this engagement would be utterly futile. It would also be a completely superfluous task, because there are already quite a number of books on the *Phenomenology* and its different subject matters that contain excellent and very comprehensive bibliographies. Thus, instead of replicating what is already done impressively in other places, I have compiled a list of titles that in one way or another have influenced my understanding of Hegel's philosophy in general and of the *Phenomenology* in particular. Most of them are not mentioned explicitly in the text because it is without footnotes. However, many of them left traces that, I am sure, are easy to discern. Books that include exceptional bibliographical material are marked by an asterisk (*).

The works of Hegel are quoted by relying, sometimes with minor revisions, on the translations by Terry Pinkard (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018) and George di Giovanni (*The Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010). Quotes from and references to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CpR*) follow standard procedures and distinguish between A (first edition) and B (second edition).

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