

Hegel's Epistemology

A Philosophical Introduction to
the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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One

Introduction

1 Hegel's *Phenomenology* is notoriously challenging, in form and structure as well as in content. Hegel's apparent ambitions in the *Phenomenology* and his highly unusual presentation have often made it difficult to relate it to more familiar philosophical views and issues. Hegel demands much of his readers. For example, at the beginning of a chapter or sub-section Hegel states a philosophical view, often to argue (by indirect proof or *reductio ad absurdum*) against that view, though sometimes only to argue against a defective account or justification of that view. Precisely what view he criticizes can at times be difficult to determine, often because he states some essential points of an historical philosopher's view without mentioning whose view it is. Hegel tends to refer to passages from the history of philosophy the way Medieval philosophers referred to Aristotle. They would write "the philosopher says ..," expecting, and knowing they could expect the reader to know exactly which passage from which work of Aristotle's was quoted or paraphrased. However, Hegel only rarely mentions his frequent paraphrasing or quotation—though his use of such references should not have mis-fired nearly so often as it has.

Three examples illustrate these points nicely. Russell famously complains that Hegel fails to distinguish "the 'is' of identity" from "the 'is' of predication."¹ However, Russell didn't recognize that Hegel conflated them only as an assumed first premise of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to show that identity is distinct from predication!² A second example comes from the critical German edition of Hegel's works, which has performed an enormous service tracking down a plethora of possible and definite references or allusions Hegel makes to other philosophers. However, Hegel's second chapter, "Perception," defied those efforts; the critical apparatus contains only eight references for it, all of them merely cross-references within Hegel's text (*GW* 9:495). In fact, "Perception" is all about Hume's epistemology in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, specifically, in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" (I.iv §2).³

¹Russell (1914), 48–49 note; (1994) 6:365.

²Westphal (1998a), §7.

³*Ibid.*, *passim*.

A third example is especially important for the present discussion: In the middle of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel paraphrases exactly the Dilemma of the Criterion from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.⁴ Roderick Chisholm (1973, 1) called this "one of the most important and one of the most difficult of all the problems of philosophy."⁵ It has received only scant attention from analytic epistemologists, far less from Hegel scholars. Yet the Dilemma of the Criterion is the central methodological issue of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to which Hegel provides the most sophisticated and successful response I have found anywhere.

Thus one reason why it is so fitting to introduce Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in view of his epistemology is that epistemology is central to the *Phenomenology*, it is central to philosophy, and it is central to much philosophical education. Introducing Hegel's *Phenomenology* via his epistemology is also timely because philosophers are once again occupied with issues that occupied Hegel: conflicts between realism and historicist relativism. Generally, realism is conjoined with individualist theories of knowledge, while historicist relativism is associated with social or non-individualist theories of knowledge. One key aim of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to show that a properly constructed social and historical theory of human knowledge requires realism about the objects of our knowledge. By the same token, one reason Hegel's epistemology has gone unrecognized is that philosophers have too often supposed that combining realism with a social and historical epistemology is impossible. "Realism," as used here, is the view that something (or things) exist and have characteristics unto themselves (e.g., our bodies and the rest of the natural world), regardless of what we think, say, or believe about it (or them). "Epistemological realism," then, specifies further that we can know at least something about such things.⁶

To say that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is centrally epistemological immediately poses another problem: it certainly doesn't *read* like epistemology in any familiar sense. Hegel's *Phenomenology* has a complex expository structure. On the one hand, Hegel distinguishes among three points of view: his own as author and narrator, our point of view as readers and "observ-

⁴Westphal (1989), 11, 14; (1997); below, ch. 5.

⁵He immediately adds: "I am tempted to say that one has not begun to philosophise until one has faced this problem and has recognized how unappealing, in the end, each of the possible solutions is" (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, Chisholm unduly restricted his list of possible solutions by ignoring the possibility and prospects of self-criticism.

⁶When introducing technical terms below (including those just used), I have tried to characterize them briefly, clearly, and adequately for present purposes. Further discussion of these terms and their associated issues may be found in the Blackwell *Companion to Epistemology* or in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

ers,” and the point of view of observed “forms of consciousness.” Various “forms of consciousness” (defined and discussed below in chapters two and five) are brought forth to illustrate various philosophical views or theses. Hegel purports that, in his examination, each uncovers problems with its own key ideas through some form of self-critical experience. This expository structure lends Hegel’s *Phenomenology* a unique literary cast that, together with the difficulties of identifying within it standard philosophical issues, has suggested to some that Hegel’s book is primarily literary rather than philosophical. This is an understandable misimpression. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* does have a unique literary structure, though Hegel developed it for *philosophical* reasons and purposes. These are discussed in chapters two through four.

Basic issues that inform Hegel’s phenomenological method are introduced in chapter two. The expository structure of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is further developed in chapter three, which shows why key features of Hegel’s phenomenological method are modeled on Sophoclean tragedy, most clearly illustrated by Creon’s role in *Antigone*. These points are brought together in chapter four, which considers the role of philosophical reflection in Hegel’s phenomenological method. These three chapters jointly provide the basis for considering the basic features of Hegel’s solution to the Dilemma of the Criterion in chapter five.

Chapter six summarizes some main features of Hegel’s epistemology. Chapter seven explores some significant thematic connections between Hegel’s views and contemporary epistemological problems. With these materials in hand, Hegel’s views are considered in relation to 20th-century empiricism (chapter eight), Dretske’s information theory (chapter nine), and the continuing debate between realists and historicist relativists (chapter ten).

One central, recurring theme of this book is the nature and role of reflection in judgment and rational justification. This theme is introduced in chapter one, which reviews some basic features of Hegel’s “phenomenological” method and his reasons for adopting it. The theme of reflective judgment is raised again at the end of chapter two and developed in chapter three, which examines what Hegel very likely learned about it from Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Chapter four develops this theme further, by highlighting the kind of reflective judgment Hegel seeks to facilitate for and encourage in his readers. The nature and role of reflective judgment in philosophical assessment is expanded in chapter five, by linking it to Hegel’s analysis of the self-critical structure of self-conscious human awareness. Chapter five explicates reflective assessment in terms of “mature judgment” and indicates the role of mature judgment in Hegel’s fallibilist account of epistemic justification and his pragmatic

account of rationality. In summarizing Hegel's central epistemological arguments in the *Phenomenology*, chapter six indicates how and where Hegel introduces mature judgment as a topic of the *Phenomenology*. Chapters seven through ten then invite the reader to consider the nature and role of mature judgment in philosophical assessment by exercising such judgment while reconsidering some central philosophical issues and apparent dilemmas that have profoundly guided philosophical thought from the Enlightenment to the present day. These include basic assumptions that steered philosophers toward empiricism and individualism in twentieth-century epistemology, or that have generated serious misunderstandings that have precluded either recognition or serious philosophical consideration of Hegel's epistemology.

Three specific issues among these are that Hegel anticipated by 150 years the recent rejections in epistemology of concept-empiricism (below, §§12, 13.5, 21, 22) and of individualism (§§32ff.). More importantly, Hegel showed how rejecting these positions does not require rejecting epistemological realism about the objects of empirical knowledge. Hegel achieved this insight, in part, by rejecting "internalism" about mental content (§§5, 13.6), semantic meaning (§19), and justification (§§10.2, 10.5, 12.2, 18, 28).⁷ The recent wave of anti-Cartesianism in epistemology and philosophy of mind has much to learn from Hegel. Benefitting from Hegel's insights and analyses, however, requires understanding just what were Hegel's aims, methods, and arguments in epistemology. These, however, have eluded most commentators, whether critical or sympathetic. So I begin with Hegel's expository and philosophical methods (§§1–11).

Please note two *caveats*, one substantive and one methodological. In focusing this book on Hegel's epistemology in the *Phenomenology* I do not claim that epistemology is Hegel's sole concern in the *Phenomenology*, which also includes rich discussions of moral philosophy and Occidental cultural history (including its Oriental roots). Hegel's concern with *Kultur-Kritik* does lend his book many important narrative aspects. These have been analyzed especially well by Henry Harris (1997) in *Hegel's Ladder*.⁸ These

⁷Section numbers like these are internal references within this book. Section numbers that refer to any other works are preceded by a reference to the relevant work(s). The technical terms just used are defined when these issues are discussed in detail in the indicated sections. It should be no surprise that Hegel espoused various "externalist" views, that factors of which someone is unaware affect, e.g., what he or she means, or whether what he or she means is justified. Kant's transcendental analysis of the necessary *a priori* conditions for the possibility of unified self-conscious experience is externalist, *avant la lettre*, because it concerns a set of conditions that must *be* satisfied if and whenever we are self-conscious, regardless of whether we are aware either of these conditions or of their satisfaction.

⁸For discussion, see Westphal (1998c).

crucial strands of Hegel's *Phenomenology* ultimately do bear on his epistemology. However, these topics are vast and intricate, and can only be touched on in this brief conspectus (mainly in chapters nine and ten).

Because this book provides a philosophical overview of some central aspects of Hegel's epistemology, many important points can only be discussed in their barest essentials. I have not shied away from stating the issues and Hegel's stand on them directly. I am keenly aware of the contrast between this approach and the requirements of a full-dress exposition and defense of a philosophical position. I have endeavored to meet those requirements elsewhere, and in parts of the following. Chapters two and five through seven are summary in character; the remainder are not. Chapters three and four, on Hegel's method, are entirely new. Chapters nine and ten consider some important social aspects of Hegel's epistemology much more closely than I have previously.

A full-dress treatment of any significant philosophical issue makes for demanding reading. Understandably, philosophers want and deserve some advance assurance that such reading rewards the effort. This demand is especially urgent in areas where philosophical rewards are least expected. Notoriously, this is the common view of Hegel's philosophy. I hope that the present introduction, synoptic (even sketchy) as it often is, may help students and non-specialists to see that studying Hegel is deeply rewarding philosophically, even or especially when it is most philosophically challenging. I hope it may also help Hegel scholars see that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is deeply philosophically rewarding in ways they had not anticipated. Finally, I hope the following may suggest some fruitful ways in which the "Continental" and "Analytic" traditions of philosophy can engage, illuminate, and benefit each other.

Before delving into these rich issues, I might suggest one central thought guiding the vigorous mix of contemporary, historical, analytic, and continental philosophy advocated (I hope also exhibited) in this book: such multi-perspectivalism aims to increase our acuity in understanding and assessing philosophical views and thus to mitigate, so far as we are able, a grave professional liability. This liability has been put very well by James Griffin:

One might succeed in making every argument that one actually deployed watertight. But one does not usually go seriously wrong in philosophy over the details of one's argument. One goes seriously wrong in the biggest things, in the things one does not even think of, in one's whole orientation. At the very best, one's orientation will allow one a glimpse of an important truth or two, but it will also certainly be responsible for one's overlooking a dozen others. In philosophy generally ... we are at present, and always shall be, groping in the dark simply

to get a sense of some of the large contours of our subject. One's only reasonable hope is that, by groping, one will find something, and that others will take a look. (Griffin 1996, 2)

In a notoriously fractious field, we can all benefit by this kind of inquiring modesty, which whets the appetite and the acumen for philosophy far more than do faction and favoritism.

Endorsements

“A reader-friendly, yet philosophically sharp and textually reliable introduction to one of the classics of Western philosophy. Westphal shows why the dramatic, quasi-historical, structure of Hegel’s work is not accidental to it, but is rather required by the reflective, self-critical, nature of *judgment* that Hegel assumes from the beginning. The book will be of interest to readers who approach Hegel with analytical as well as phenomenological preconceptions, and of use (though for different reasons) to undergraduates and graduate students alike.”

–GEORGE DI GIOVANNI, McGill University

“Westphal argues that epistemological realism is compatible with a social and historical constructivism, and that Hegel shows us how a self-critical community of human knowers can achieve (and reflectively appreciate) knowledge of the world around them and their place in it. Almost 200 years ago Hegel had the kind of epistemology we now know we need! I hope this book will put Hegel back into the canon of epistemology.”

–WILLEM DE VRIES, University of New Hampshire

“Philosophically, the most satisfying and sophisticated account of the *Phenomenology* yet.”

–FREDERICK BEISER, Syracuse University

“For philosophers interested in reading across the Continental/Analytic divide, this book opens new facets of Hegel’s philosophy.”

–DONN WELTON, State University of New York, Stony Brook

“Anyone seriously interested in epistemology, and especially anyone who doubts Hegel’s importance for contemporary epistemology, should read Ken Westphal’s elegant and insightful book.”

–JOSEPH ROUSE, Wesleyan University