

HEGEL'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL REALISM

A Study of the Aim and Method
of Hegel's
Phenomenology of Spirit

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—C. S. Peirce

I am convinced that progress in philosophy, as in science, can come only through continual mutual criticism, self-criticism, and attempts at improved approaches.

—R. Carnap



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PREFACE

The scope of this study is both ambitious and modest. One of its ambitions is to reintegrate Hegel's theory of knowledge into main stream epistemology. Hegel's views were formed in consideration of Classical Skepticism and Modern epistemology, and he frequently presupposes great familiarity with other views and the difficulties they face. Setting Hegel's discussion in the context of both traditional and contemporary epistemology is therefore necessary for correctly interpreting his issues, arguments, and views. Accordingly, this is an issues-oriented study. I analyze Hegel's problematic and method by placing them in the context of Sextus Empiricus, Descartes, Kant, Carnap, and William Alston.

I discuss Carnap, rather than a Modern empiricist such as Locke or Hume, for several reasons. One is that Hegel himself refutes a fundamental presupposition of Modern empiricism, the doctrine of "knowledge by acquaintance," in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*, a chapter that cannot be reconstructed within the bounds of this study. Second, philosophers still tend to turn positivist when criticizing Hegel. Thus it is important to show that Carnap's program fails to handle the relevant problems. Third, I believe that Hegel has much to offer the contemporary philosophical scene. In this regard it is important to show that Hegel and (*e.g.*) Carnap are, after all, working within the same philosophical arena. Finally, Carnap is the last figure in the analytic tradition who addresses the relevant issues as issues in (or at least about and against) epistemology rather than formulating them mainly as issues in philosophy of language. Pursuing the issues of this study into contemporary philosophy of language would exceed manageable bounds.

Hegel's expositors face a difficult dilemma. Hegel's corpus is so vast that it is well nigh impossible to cover all the texts relevant to the issues of any particular investigation or to any one Hegelian text, so that an expositor risks omitting something crucial. On the other hand, attempting to treat Hegel's views synoptically inevitably leads to a superficial treatment of his particular statements and arguments, thus leaving an expositor at risk of misconstruction. It is my firm conviction that Hegel has suffered far too much from this second shortcoming. Attempts to treat his philosophy, or even one of its major components, synoptically has led expositors to misconstrue Hegel's views, sometimes drastically. Hegel insists that there is no way to understand the very pungent and suggestive (and sometimes absurd) statements he makes in the latter parts of his expositions without understanding how the meaning of his terms and the justification of his statements have been developed from the beginning of his discussion. I'm convinced that Hegel needs to be taken at his word about this point. To do this, however, requires understanding how he proposes to develop his points from the beginning to the end of any one of his expositions. To follow his development of his views thus requires what has seemed most difficult of all: to follow the development of his arguments from one statement to the next, and from one paragraph to the next.

This study provides a complete, detailed analysis and reconstruction of an important portion of one of Hegel's most important texts. The portion I consider, principally the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, concerns Hegel's philosophical aims and method in the *Phenomenology*. Thus the purpose of this study is to provide a detailed understanding of his procedure in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

an interpretation intended to facilitate an exacting and philosophically sensitive reading of Hegel's very interesting book. The modesty of the present study lies in its subtitle: It is a study of the aim and method of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and not an exhaustive treatment of his whole book.

What many may find surprising is my contention that the "absolute idealist" Hegel defends the view that there is a way the world is that does not depend on our cognitive or linguistic activity and that we can know the way the world is. Hegel's idealism is an ontological holism that is, and is intended to be, consistent with what I call "epistemological realism." This view is obviously a realism. I call it "epistemological realism" in order to draw attention to the fact that this view involves both an ontological thesis—there is a way the world is which does not depend on our cognitive or linguistic activity; and an epistemological thesis—we can know the way the world is. Providing this label distinguishes this view, as an issue in epistemology, from what is called "scientific realism," the view that the theoretical entities posited by scientific theories exist. Hegel has views which bear on the issue of scientific realism, but they cannot be discussed at length in this study. Hegel's issue is the Modern issue of the "external world," the existence of which is typically granted in debates about scientific realism. This is also to say, Hegel's issues are prior to those concerning scientific realism. It is thus important to note that Hegel's criterion of truth analyzed in this study concerns the truth of epistemological theories of knowledge, and neither does nor is designed to apply to problems of theory selection or the underdetermination of theory by observation.¹

Those who find incredible my contention that Hegel is an epistemological realist might first read G. W. Cunningham's essay, "The Significance of the Hegelian Conception of Absolute Knowledge."² Cunningham valiantly attacks numbers of mistaken impressions of Hegel's philosophy, many of which still have unwarranted currency today. Henry Harris, Hegel's most dedicated and sensitive expositor, remarks:

The balance of social influence has shifted so drastically between Hegel's time and ours ... from the religious to the scientific establishment, that Hegel's own contribution to this shift has itself become an obstacle to the right understanding of what he said. *He* wanted to swing religious consciousness into full support of a scientific interpretation of human life His own choice of language was conditioned by the Christian teaching, but also by the knowledge that the Christian doctrine of spirit was derived from Stoic sources.³

The Stoics were, of course, thoroughgoing materialists and naturalists. Strong evidence of Hegel's epistemological realism is interlaced throughout Harris's magnificent reconstruction of Hegel's early metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of nature. The present study aims to establish a proper understanding of Hegel's mature approach to defending epistemological realism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and so to provide access to Hegel's very interesting views about empirical knowledge and its philosophical analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Is there a way the world is regardless of how we think about it? If so, can we know the way the world is? Is knowledge a socio-historical phenomenon? Various philosophers in various periods have answered these questions differently, but rarely has it been thought that all three questions could be answered affirmatively. Hegel holds the controversial position that all three questions can be answered affirmatively. In so doing, Hegel rejects both skepticism—there may be a way the world is, but we can't know it—and what I call “subjectivism”—we can know the way the world is, but its structure or characteristics depend upon our cognitive or linguistic activity. I argue that Hegel defends what I call “epistemological realism”: we can know the way the world is, even though it is not dependent upon our cognitive or linguistic activity. Many may find my contention surprising, but what is interesting is that he defends this realism by grounding it in a social and historical account of empirical knowledge.

Hegel recognizes that his position is controversial, and he recognizes that any position on these issues makes claims to know what empirical knowledge is. For these reasons, Hegel addresses a question that no one else has faced so directly: How can a theory of empirical knowledge be shown to be true, and so end the controversy within epistemology, without begging the question? One aim of Hegel's Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to pose this question in the course of enumerating some desiderata of any successful theory of empirical knowledge. The chief aim of his Introduction is to sketch a method for answering this question while providing an account of empirical knowledge that meets the desiderata he establishes. The main aim of the present study is to elucidate the desiderata Hegel establishes for the adequacy of any theory of empirical knowledge and to reconstruct the method Hegel proposes for meeting those desiderata.

Reconciling epistemological realism with a socially grounded theory of knowledge is a large project. It is a project that Hegel carries out not only through the whole of the *Phenomenology*, but also in his philosophy of mind and social philosophy.⁴ The full sweep of Hegel's project cannot be adequately recounted within the bounds of a single study. However, three important steps towards reconstructing Hegel's theory of empirical knowledge are made here. The first of these is to show that Hegel's project is to reconcile realism and a socio-historically grounded theory of knowledge. The second is to note several theses about knowledge and theories of knowledge, implied by Hegel's methodo-logical considerations in the Introduction, which are important for reconciling realism with a socially grounded theory of knowledge. The third is to set out the structure of Hegel's argument in the *Phenomenology* for a socio-historically grounded realist theory of knowledge.

Hegel's approach to these issues can best be understood by examining them in relation to three familiar, classic theories of knowledge: Rationalist Foundationalism, Critical Philosophy, and Empiricism. Hegel derives his epistemological desiderata from reflection on earlier theories of knowledge and on the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus. After summarizing Sextus's skeptical challenges to empirical knowledge and to epistemological claims about empirical knowledge, I show that, consciously or not, Descartes, Kant, Carnap, and William Alston each respond to the skeptical problems Sextus poses. Demonstrating that these skeptical challenges are common concerns among Hegel and these other epistemologists helps reintegrate Hegel's views with the main stream of theory of

knowledge. I further emphasize the importance of Sextus's challenges by showing that Descartes, Kant, and Carnap each failed to handle them. I argue further that William Alston's view of the justification of epistemological claims about empirical knowledge fails to rebut Sextus's challenges to the justification of such claims and that his view supplies insufficient answers to some important questions. I then show that Hegel's method for analyzing empirical knowledge can handle both Sextus's challenges to empirical knowledge and his challenges to the justification of epistemological claims about empirical knowledge, and that it supplies more thorough answers to the questions left unresolved in Alston's view of the justification of epistemological claims.

Two more benefits are offered by examining these other theories of knowledge here. I argue that in their failures to answer Sextus's challenges, Descartes, Kant, and Carnap violate one or another of the desiderata Hegel establishes for epistemology. This shows that Hegel's desiderata carry important philosophical weight. One charge Hegel makes against traditional epistemology is that epistemologists have answered Sextus at the first-order level of concerns about empirical knowledge only to fall prey to Sextus's charges of circularity, dogmatism, or question-begging at the second-order level of concerns about the status of philosophical theories of knowledge. I show that Descartes, Kant, and Carnap are guilty of Hegel's charge. Part of Hegel's response to this is to hold that philosophical theories of knowledge must be knowable in accordance with their own principles.⁵ I show that Hegel's requirement of reflexive self-consistency undoes both Kant's and Carnap's rejections of realism.

A key tenet in Hegel's program for overcoming "subjectivism" (the view that the way the world is depends upon our cognitive or linguistic activity) is to reject the common tendency within epistemology to hold empirical knowledge claims answerable to philosophical theories about what empirical knowledge is. This tendency is due to granting epistemology priority over ontology. I show that Descartes, Kant, and Carnap did grant epistemology priority over ontology, and that this priority generates subjectivist accounts of knowledge in each of these cases.

Examining the failure of each of these theories of knowledge also provides an occasion for explaining and defending some important substantive points in Hegel's own theory of knowledge. Discussing the failure of Descartes's foundationalism allows me to show Hegel's rejection of the Modern Way of Ideas, and it allows me to show that Hegel's theory of knowledge is a deliberate alternative to foundationalism, in part because he rejects the ideal of incorrigibility and adopts fallibilism. Discussing Kant allows me to show that Hegel rejects transcendental idealism, an important point for understanding Hegel's own brand of "idealism," and also to suggest that transcendental *arguments* might be made independently of transcendental *idealism*, which is what Hegel proposes to do. Discussing Carnap allows me to show that there has been considerable confusion concerning "correspondence" as a criterion of truth and as an analysis of truth. Rejecting the former does not entail rejecting the latter. More importantly, I show that Hegel was well aware of the issues in philosophy of mind that engendered this *non sequitur*, namely, the recognition that we're incapable of "knowledge by acquaintance" and so are incapable of using correspondence as a criterion of truth. It is an explicit aim of Hegel's argument to reconcile a correspondence analysis of truth with a complex social philosophy of mind, a philosophy of mind incompatible with "knowledge by acquaintance." A final important point, implied by Hegel's analysis of self-criticism, is the rejection of descriptionalist theories of reference, that is, of the linguistic heirs to the Fregean slogan that "sense determines reference." Such theories of reference figure prominently in many current arguments against realism. Hegel holds that this is only part of the story concerning reference, and that because it is only part of the story, we're in a position to critically revise the descriptionalist "senses" of our terminology.

The third step towards reconstructing Hegel's theory of empirical knowledge made in this study is to outline the structure of his argument for epistemological realism and its social bases as he

propounds it in the *Phenomenology*. On Hegel's view, knowledge as a social phenomenon is possible because it is an activity engaged in a naturally structured world. By explicating this natural basis, Hegel avoids subjectivism in the course of developing his social account of empirical knowledge.

Hegel's Introduction divides into three parts. The first part sets out the problems Hegel address in the *Phenomenology* and his desiderata for their successful solution. A second part sketches the structure of Hegel's "phenomenological" program answering these problems and meeting these desiderata. A final part concerns the course and results of Hegel's argument as it is carried out. Hegel's Introduction is as brief as it is wide-ranging, so that considerable stage-setting and reconstruction is required in order to understand it. This study attempts to provide that reconstruction, and thus to provide access to Hegel's very interesting views about empirical knowledge and its philosophical analysis presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The problems Hegel addresses and his desiderata for their solution are set out in Chapter One. This chapter analyzes the first part of Hegel's Introduction in connection with some general features of Modern epistemology and in close consideration of Sextus Empiricus. The character and significance of Hegel's issues are elaborated in Chapters Two through Five, which examine his problems and desiderata by analyzing their bearing on Descartes, Kant, Carnap, and Alston. The second and third parts of Hegel's Introduction, concerning the structure of his "phenomenological" program and the course of the argument he presents in the *Phenomenology*, are analyzed and reconstructed in Chapters Six through Nine. Chapter Ten sketches Hegel's basic ontology, showing that Hegel's "idealism" is an ontological holism that is, and is intended to be, fully consistent with epistemological realism. Chapter Eleven analyzes the structure of Hegel's argument presented in the *Phenomenology* for epistemological realism and the social and historical bases of empirical knowledge.



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