G. W. F. Hegel

Key Concepts

Edited by
Michael Baur

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Abbreviations

Works by Hegel

EnLogic	*The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with Zusätze* (Hegel 1991b)
EnMind	*Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, 1830* (Hegel 1971)
EnNature	*Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, 1830* (Hegel 1970a)
FPS	*First Philosophy of Spirit* (in Hegel 1979)
LFA	*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Hegel 1975a)
LHP	*Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Hegel 1983)
LPR	*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Hegel 1984–87)
LPWH	*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History – Introduction: Reason in History* (Hegel 1975b)
PCR	"The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (in Hegel 1970b)
PH	*The Philosophy of History* (Hegel 1991c)
PR	*Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991a)
PS	*Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977)
SCF	"The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" (in Hegel 1970b)
SEL	*System of Ethical Life* (in Hegel 1979)
SL	*Science of Logic* (Hegel 1969)
TE	"The Tübingen Essay" (in Hegel 1984b)
W	*Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Hegel 1970–71)

Works by authors other than Hegel

CPR	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998); intertextual references are to the page numbers of this edition and also to the page numbers of the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions
MER	*The Marx–Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker (Marx & Engels 1978)

15 Hegel and hermeneutics

Michael Baur

Understood in its widest sense, the term "hermeneutics" can be taken to refer to the theory and/or practice of any interpretation aimed at uncovering the meaning of any expression, regardless of whether such expression was produced by a human or non-human source. Understood in a narrower sense, the term "hermeneutics" can be taken to refer to a particular stream of thought regarding the theory and/or practice of interpretation, developed mainly by German-speaking theorists from the late eighteenth through to the late twentieth century. "Hermeneutics" in its broadest sense dates at least as far back as the ancient Greeks and is linked etymologically to the ancient Greeks' mythological deity Hermes, who was said to deliver and interpret messages from the gods to mortals. "Hermeneutics" in its narrower sense emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, initially for the purpose of addressing problems in the interpretation of classical and biblical texts and then later for the purpose of articulating a more "universalized" theory of interpretation in general. This chapter traces the development of hermeneutics in its narrow sense through the work of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), and then concludes with some observations about what Hegel's own hermeneutical thought might mean against the backdrop of this development.

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher

Hegel and Schleiermacher were not only contemporaries, but also taught at the same time at the same institution – the University of Berlin – for a period of thirteen years (1818–31). Their personal and professional relationship, however, was not especially friendly. As early as 1816, Schleiermacher – already a well-known theologian at the

University of Berlin – did support Hegel's coming to Berlin, but he probably did so only in order to block another philosopher (J. F. Fries) from obtaining a Berlin professorship. When Hegel later applied for admission to the Berlin Academy of Sciences, Schleiermacher successfully manoeuvred to block his admission (Crouter 1980). Hegel and Schleiermacher did not systematically engage one another's thought; but it was generally known that Schleiermacher was suspicious of what he regarded as Hegel's overly idealistic and abstract systematizing, and in turn, Hegel was critical of what he regarded as Schleiermacher's untenable reliance on "intuition" and "feeling".

It was Schleiermacher's thinking about religion that led him to his work in hermeneutics. As a theologian, Schleiermacher saw the need to develop a rigorous account of the conditions and canons of valid interpretation, since the specific content of the Christian religion depends crucially on the interpretation of texts such as the gospels. Prior to Schleiermacher's time, it was common for those engaged in hermeneutical practice to assume that different kinds of texts (e.g. ancient classical texts, Scriptural texts or contemporary poetic texts) called for different and sometimes incompatible canons of interpretation. Schleiermacher's innovation was to begin developing a "generalized" or "universal" hermeneutics; a universal hermeneutics would be a theory of interpretation not tailored to any particular kind of meaningful expression, but aimed rather at articulating the canons and conditions for the interpretation of any meaningful expression whatsoever.

In developing his more generalized hermeneutical theory, Schleiermacher distinguished between two moments at work in interpretation: he called these moments "grammatical" or "linguistic" interpretation (on the one hand) and "psychological" or "technical" interpretation (on the other hand). For Schleiermacher, neither moment alone is adequate to the task of uncovering the significance of meaningful expressions. Through the moment of "grammatical" interpretation, the interpreter focuses on the common and shared features and rules (including philological, syntactical and etymological ones) that govern the uses of words within the language of the text to be interpreted. Through the moment of "psychological interpretation", the interpreter focuses on the unique and individual features of the author who produced the text to be interpreted. Through the interplay of both moments, it is possible for the interpreter to uncover how the "inner" realm of the author's individualized, unique personhood can come to expression in the "outer" realm of a common, shared language.

Operative in the two moments of interpretation – the grammatical and the psychological – is what for Schleiermacher is an inescapable

kind of circularity involved in all interpretation. This circularity, which has since come to be known as the "hermeneutical circle", has to do with the fact that an interpreter cannot understand the individual parts of what is to be understood except by understanding the larger whole within which they are parts; but at the same time the interpreter cannot understand this larger whole except by understanding the individual parts. In the moment of "grammatical" interpretation, for example, one cannot understand an individual textual passage except by understanding the larger whole (e.g. the entire text or the whole literary genre or the language in general) within which the passage is a part; but at the same time one cannot understand the entire text or the whole literary genre or the language in general, except by understanding individual passages. Similarly, in the moment of "psychological" interpretation, one cannot understand an individual thought or idea expressed by an author except by understanding the author's life or worldview as a whole; but at the same time one cannot understand the author's life or worldview as a whole, except by understanding the individual thoughts and ideas expressed by that author.

For Schleiermacher, rigorous interpretation depends on a kind of back-and-forth or "oscillating" movement between the parts and the wholes to be understood; but it also depends on a similar kind of oscillating movement between the "psychological" and the "grammatical" moments of interpretation. One must understand an author's (psychological) "inner" thoughts and ideas in light of the author's (grammatical) "outer" expressions in language; and in turn, one must understand the author's "outer" expressions in light of the "inner" personality that has produced them. The hermeneutical task of oscillating between the "inner" and the "outer" and between the "psychological" and the "grammatical" moments is an infinite one, however, and no interpretation of an author or of a text can be total and complete (Schleiermacher 1998: 11). According to Schleiermacher, a complete and final interpretation is much more a regulative ideal than it is an achievable end, and hermeneutical practice is much more an art than it is a science.

For Schleiermacher, the unique "inner" personality or mental life of an author is available to the interpreter only as mediated through the non-unique features of the "outer" and public language that the author shares with those in his or her linguistic community (or communities). Significantly, the author's thoughts – as expressed and thus in need of interpretation – will inevitably be shaped by the language and linguistic heritage through which he or she expresses those thoughts; by the same token, the interpreter's own language and linguistic heritage will also

shape his or her mental life and thoughts, including thoughts about interpreting others. Accordingly, says Schleiermacher (1998: 22), an interpreter who is engaged in rigorous hermeneutical practice will start from the assumption that misunderstanding will occur as a matter of course and that one must take special care in order to avoid it. Misunderstanding occurs, according to Schleiermacher, either because the interpreter is too hasty in his or her judgements, or else – and more importantly – because the interpreter is caught up in his or her own predilections or bias (*Befangenheit*). In order to arrive at a valid interpretation, the interpreter must minimize his or her own biases and strive to put himself or herself in the place of the author (*ibid.*: 23–24).

While there are many differences which might separate the interpreter from the author to be interpreted (these differences might include linguistic, cultural and psychological differences), it remains possible – says Schleiermacher – for the interpreter to arrive at a valid interpretation of the author's meaning, since there is a common human nature which unites interpreter and author and thus enables the interpreter to surmount the various differences and interpretive obstacles. In fact, argues Schleiermacher, it is even possible for an interpreter to understand an author better than the author understood himself or herself. Such is possible because careful, rigorous interpretation allows the interpreter to reconstruct and thus bring to conscious presence those creative processes which were only unconsciously operative in the author.

Wilhelm Dilthey

Wilhelm Dilthey not only wrote a biography of Schleiermacher but also commented extensively on Schleiermacher's philosophical contributions. Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey was deeply interested in the possibility of a "universal hermeneutics"; but unlike Schleiermacher, Dilthey was not motivated by theological or religious concerns but instead by a desire to establish methodologically and philosophically sound foundations for the pursuit of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) in general. Following the work of what has come to be known as the German Historical School (including especially the work of Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen, famous for their attempts at developing a non-Hegelian account of history), Dilthey sought to introduce a heightened historical sensibility into his hermeneutical reflections. Resisting what he regarded as overly idealistic tendencies in Schleiermacher's thought, Dilthey argued that it is "non-historical" to think that there is an underlying "human nature" which remains "self-identical in its

religious and ethical formation" and only "limited by place and time in a merely external fashion" (1972: 239). With his intensified emphasis on history and the historicity of all human reality, Dilthey can be understood as having radically expanded the idea of a "hermeneutical circle": with Dilthey, the whole within which individual expressions are to be understood is no longer the whole of a text or of a literary genre or even of language itself, but rather the whole of history.[1] But against what he took to be Hegel's excessively rationalistic, metaphysical construction of history, Dilthey insisted on giving due emphasis to the finitude and irrationality of concrete, human existence. Furthermore, because the course of history is never complete (it is always incomplete so long as there is anyone still alive and capable of doing any interpreting at all), it follows that no interpretation can be final or complete, just as Schleiermacher said (but now, with Dilthey, the reason for this inescapable incompleteness is more directly tied to an argument about human history and historicity).

One very suggestive element in Dilthey's attempt to "historicize" Schleiermacher's hermeneutics can be found in his treatment of Schleiermacher's doctrine of the *Keimentschluß*. For Schleiermacher, the *Keimentschluß* – which can be roughly translated as "germinal resolve" – pertains to the originating idea or initial intention to which an author is committed (even if unconsciously so) when he or she starts bringing inner thought to outward expression. It is this *Keimentschluß* that is implicitly operative at the beginning of an author's creative endeavours and that implicitly animates the author's further decisions and choices when bringing thought to expression. It is this *Keimentschluß* that also guides the interpreter's thinking about the inner unity and coherence of an author's work and thereby enables the interpreter to understand individual passages by placing them within the context of a unifying, overall intention that circumscribes the work. This idea of a *Keimentschluß*, from Dilthey's point of view, amounted to an untenable, unhistorical "pre-formationist" theory of meaning and interpretation (1966: 781). For Dilthey, the unity which belongs to a work to be interpreted does not have to be understood in connection with any *Keimentschluß* or any "original productive impulse of the whole". The unity "could just as readily be *brought about* by something that is added from without"; that which is added from without could be a later, retrospective decision by the author, or perhaps even by an interpreter (*ibid.*).

With his critique of Schleiermacher's doctrine of the *Keimentschluß*, Dilthey had begun – though without being fully aware of it himself – to transform what is meant by the idea that an interpreter can

understand an author better than the author understood himself or herself. For Dilthey, the possibility of such "better understanding" is no longer necessarily tied to the Schleiermacherian idea that the interpreter can bring to conscious presence those creative processes which operate only unconsciously in the author. With Dilthey, the suggestion is made that such "better understanding" is possible just because the interpretation occurs within a specifically *temporal* and specifically *historical* context, which is to say that it occurs *after* the author has expressed himself or herself.

But even as Dilthey had begun to "historicize" Schleiermacher's thought, he remained committed in many ways to the basic outlines of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Thus Dilthey retained Schleiermacher's idea that valid – even if incomplete – interpretation is achieved to the extent that the interpreter minimizes the potentially distorting effects of his or her own historical circumstances and thereby brings about a "reconstruction" (*Nachbildung*) of the otherwise inaccessible and alien form of life to be interpreted.

Martin Heidegger

Dilthey's work exercised an enormous influence on the emerging thought of the young Martin Heidegger; indeed, Heidegger observed that key elements of his work in *Being and Time* arose "in the process of appropriating the labours of Wilhelm Dilthey" (1962: 449). However, Heidegger's hermeneutical thought also marked a radical departure from the thought of Dilthey. For Heidegger, interpretation does not consist most primordially in the activity of "reconstructing" an alien form of life to be understood, as Dilthey held; it consists rather in the activity of becoming the *self-interpreting* kind of being that one is in the first place. For Heidegger, human beings (whether they are consciously aware of it or not) are always already self-interpreting beings. This is because human beings, in the midst of all their involvements with things and persons other than themselves, are most primordially concerned about their very own being, and they remain thus concerned, even when their involvements with other beings induce them to overlook or even deny this basic truth about themselves.

Dilthey himself had already touched upon this basic truth when he acknowledged that "life" as such is always self-interpreting. But for Heidegger, Dilthey's account of the intrinsically self-interpreting character of the human being (or of "life") was an inadequate and distorted account, since it was unaccompanied by an ontologically adequate account of the human being as such. Against Dilthey,

Heidegger argued that an ontologically adequate account would reveal that the human being is concerned with its own being not as something present, but always only as something that is (yet) to be: the being about which the human being is most primordially concerned (its very own being) is its potentiality-to-be, which makes sense only as futural. The human being is always already self-interpreting, since it is always already concerned with its own being as a potentiality-to-be (and thus never as something to be found or made present); and it is only because of its concern with its own being as potentiality-to-be (or as futural), that it can be concerned with (and find meanings in) things or persons that are present within its world. It is misleading, then, to think of the human being as a kind of entity (or even as an instance of "life") that can be found or made present among other entities; the human being is better understood as the non-present "place" or "locus" for the coming-to-presence of any being or entity in the first place. Heidegger uses a neologism to convey what, for him, is an ontologically adequate account of the human being: the human being as self-interpreter is to be understood as "Dasein", a term that literally means "there-being", and which is meant to convey the sense that beings or entities come-to-presence or show themselves within the world only "there" where the human being (Dasein) is, as a being concerned about its own being.

Heidegger's "ontological turn" in hermeneutics has at least three important implications. First, according to Heidegger, it is impossible to understand Dasein's activity as an interpreter if one does not understand the radical temporality of Dasein. For Heidegger, Dasein is a being which is primordially concerned about its own potentiality-for-being; it is a being for which its own potentiality-for-being is always an issue. Accordingly, all of Dasein's involvements with things and with persons in its world are what they are, only as "projects" for Dasein, or as "projections" of Dasein upon its own potentiality-for-being. Dasein is thus always already "projective" or "ahead-of-itself" and thus is always already futural. But furthermore, Dasein's being-ahead-of-itself or futurality depends on its pastness, or on its having been "thrown" into a world. Crucially, the world into which Dasein is thrown is not a collection of things within which Dasein finds itself as one entity among others. Just as Dasein's being-ahead-of-itself is not a being-ahead towards anything present or actual at all, so too Dasein's being-thrown is not a being-thrown into a world that is any actual (or empirically given) state of affairs. In a sense, Dasein's being-thrown is simply its being-thrown into the very kind of being that it is, such that it must always take up the task of confronting its own being as an issue for it,

but it must do so by depending on the meanings it is able to find in its engagement with beings other than itself. Heidegger's analysis of the radical, finite temporality of Dasein leads him to his ground-breaking conclusions about being and time: for Heidegger, the presencing or the Being of beings is made available to Dasein precisely because of the temporality (or futural pastness) that Dasein itself is. It is Dasein's temporality – its futural pastness or its thrown projection – that opens Dasein up to the presencing or Being of beings in the first place: "the present arises in the unity of the temporalizing of temporality out of the future and having been … Insofar as Dasein temporalizes itself, a world *is* too" (Heidegger 1962: 417). In short: no beings would "show up" *as* beings within Dasein's world, if Dasein were not concerned about its own being within the structure of its finite temporality or thrown projection.

Second, Heidegger's ontological analysis of Dasein's finite temporality leads to a radically new account of interpretation. Like Dilthey and Schleiermacher, Heidegger holds that there can be no "pre-suppositionless" interpretation; there can be no interpretation that is altogether unconditioned by the living ideas and concerns animating the interpreter's own form of life. But unlike these two, Heidegger denies that the interpreter's own ideas or concerns somehow block the path to successful interpretation. For Heidegger, it is the interpreter's own set of ideas and concerns (founded upon Dasein's status as a radically finite, temporal and thus historical being) that *makes possible* all interpretation. Unlike Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Heidegger holds that successful interpretation does not depend on "bridging" any ontological gaps between interpreter and interpreted, or on "reconstructing" the otherwise alien life-forms that one seeks to interpret. It depends rather on the temporalizing that Dasein itself is: Dasein grapples with the issue of its own potentiality-for-being by drawing meaning from things other than itself and from expressions other than its own self-expressions. For Heidegger, it is misleading to think of Dasein as an entity *within* time or *within* history which thereby needs to bridge a gap that separates it from other things or other persons *within* time or history. It is more accurate to think of Dasein as the openness or the horizon which constitutes temporality or history itself and upon which the presencing or the self-revealment of beings is projected in the first place. For Heidegger, it follows that the "truth" of any interpretation is not a matter of simple "correctness" or simple "correspondence" between what is inside and what is outside the mind of the interpreter (or Dasein). Truth always involves a kind of uncovering or revealment which inescapably happens within the context of

the finite, temporalizing horizon that Dasein is; thus the happening of truth is never an "all-at-once" or an "all-or-nothing" affair. Truth, as it were, always comes in degrees; every expression and every interpretation is "more" or "less" revealing of the matter being expressed or interpreted. Accordingly, every instance of truth or relative revealment is also an instance of untruth or relative concealment; and so every instance of true expression or true interpretation calls for further expression, further interpretation and further revealment and equally engenders further concealment; and so on *ad infinitum*.

Third, Heidegger's account fundamentally transforms the meaning of the hermeneutical circle. For Heidegger, the problem with Schleiermacher and Dilthey was that they discussed the hermeneutical circle as if its significance were limited to the parts and wholes of theoretically knowable objects of propositional discourse (e.g. texts, literary genres, languages, authors' lives or history itself). For Heidegger, the significance of the hermeneutical circle is most primordially understood if one thinks of it in terms of Dasein's own temporal structure as thrown projection: Dasein comes to an understanding of the meaning of its own potentiality-for-being (as a whole) only by understanding the meanings disclosed by particular things and particular persons (parts) within its world; but in turn, Dasein comes to an understanding of the meanings disclosed by particular things and persons (parts) only by understanding these within the context of its primordial concern with its own potentiality-for-being (as a whole). The point can be illustrated through the notion of question-asking: there is no such thing as presuppositionless question-asking; the questioner's posing of any genuine question at all presupposes that the questioner has already understood at least something about the subject matter in question; and this prior understanding in turn is animated and informed by the questioner's own concern about his or her own potentiality-for-being. Now the prior understanding which enables the questioner's questions about a particular subject matter at hand cannot itself be immediately, directly or "all at once" put into question in the questioner's very act of questioning that particular subject matter.[2] But it is possible for the answers obtained through a questioner's particular questioning to lead the questioner *after the fact* to revise the prior understandings (and prior self-understandings) which made possible the particular questioning in the first place. Thus Heidegger's hermeneutical circle is a self-revising circle, always "on the move", so to speak; and since it is a circle grounded in the questioner's own finite temporality, it operates without any claims of privileged access to an overarching "metanarrative" that would provide a final context and final meaning to all events and

expressions in human history. This account of the hermeneutical circle helps to explain the wrongheadedness of Schleiermacher's doctrine of the *Keimentschluß*: an interpreter's initial understanding of what constitutes the guiding "essence" or "core" of a particular expression is always subject to being revised or even jettisoned in light of answers given to the questions made possible by that initial understanding itself. It is always possible that what an interpreter initially takes to be the "essential" message of another's expression might turn out to be "inessential" (and that the "inessential" might turn out to be "essential") in light of further questions and answers. This also helps to explain why it is possible for an interpreter to understand an author better than the author understood himself or herself: not because the interpreter brings to conscious presence those ideas which operate only unconsciously in the author's mind, but rather because the interpreter comes along *after the fact* and is thus able to "wait and see" what the author's meaning might reveal itself to be.

Gadamer on Hegel, and Hegel's hermeneutics

According to Heidegger, Hegel was blocked from giving a genuine account of the human being (Dasein) as interpretive and self-interpretative since his account was based on an "ordinary" or "vulgar" concept of time derived from the entities present within Dasein's world and not from the originary temporal structure of Dasein itself (Heidegger 1962: 480–86). Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger's most influential students and expositors, seems somewhat more generous in his assessment of Hegel. Gadamer acknowledges that Hegel's hermeneutical thought is superior to that of Schleiermacher, since Hegel realized that truthful interpretation does not depend on the bridging of a gap between interpreter or interpreted or on the "reconstruction" of an alien form of life, but depends rather on the "thoughtful mediation" of the past with contemporary life where this mediation does not signify any kind of "external relationship" (Gadamer 1992: 168–69). Nevertheless, Gadamer faults Hegel for having failed to provide a fully adequate account of interpretation. For Gadamer, Hegel mistakenly thought that the radical finitude of our temporally conditioned knowledge could be overcome insofar as history itself could be "superseded" by "absolute knowing" (*ibid.*: 231), meaning the complete unification or comprehension of the whole of human history "in a present self-consciousness" which coincided with the completion of Hegel's systematic philosophy (*ibid.*: 234).

But should Gadamer himself be given the last word on Hegel? Perhaps not. Along with Heidegger and Gadamer, Hegel would readily

acknowledge that the human being, in the midst of all of its involvements with other beings, is most primordially concerned with its own, non-present and non-presentable potentiality-for-being (or not-being) the kind of being that it is. By the early 1800s, Hegel had already developed an account of human existence according to which the human being's freedom is not to be understood in terms of the being or not-being of this or that entity within its world, but rather in terms of the being or not-being of the human being's own self (and thus the being or not-being of the entire world that exists for the human self; Hegel 1975c: 89).[3]

Along with Heidegger and Gadamer, Hegel would also readily acknowledge that the human being's activity of interpreting things other than itself is always bound up with and made possible by the human being's primordial activity of self-interpretation (even when this latter activity remains unacknowledged or opaque). To express the matter in terminology drawn from Hegel's own post-Kantian language: there can be no object *for* a subject if the subject is not *for itself* and no subject *for* itself if there is no object *for* the subject; or alternatively, built into all consciousness of objects is self-consciousness and built into all self-consciousness is a consciousness of objects.[4] But if Heidegger, Gadamer and Hegel seem to agree on this basic point, what leads Hegel to conclusions which Heidegger and Gadamer ultimately wish to resist?

We can begin to address this question by considering the following (if oversimplified) summary of the basic argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Hegel, a determinate (i.e. finite or situated) knowing subject can have knowledge of a determinate knowable object, only because the determinacy which constitutes the knowing subject's own activity as a knower is suited to and indeed makes possible the determinacy which renders the object knowable to it as subject. An object has the particular determinacy and thus the particular knowability that it has *for* a knowing subject, only because the knowing subject in turn has the (reciprocally suited) sort of determinacy that it has. If the knowing subject and the knowable object were not reciprocally co-determined by and thus reciprocally suited to each other in this way, then they would have nothing to do with one another *qua* subject and object; but in that case, it would not be possible for the knowing subject to have knowledge of the known object, or even to recognize the object as knowable in principle. Now Hegel argues that no determinate (i.e. finite or situated) knowing subject can give a fully adequate account of the role that its own determinate activity plays in constituting and thus in rendering knowable the object which it

actually knows. Thus the determinacy in the determinate subject which makes possible the determinacy and thus knowability of the determinate object is a determinacy which necessarily escapes full comprehension by the determinate subject engaged in the act of determinate knowing.[5] It is a determinacy which can be thematized and thus made into an object of theoretical comprehension only *for another subject*. It is for this reason, Hegel argues, that the journey of knowing that takes place in the *Phenomenology* must unfold on the basis of a methodological distinction between "observing" and "observed" consciousness. For Hegel, "we philosophical observers" look on in order to see how "ordinary" ("observed") consciousness encounters various objects as given to it and how this ordinary consciousness tries (though inadequately) to give an account of its knowledge of such objects. The journey of the *Phenomenology* is completed in "absolute knowing" when "we philosophical observers" (a) realize that all such (inadequate) attempts by "ordinary consciousness" have been exhausted and also (b) realize that the "ordinary consciousness" which we philosophers have been observing (the ordinary consciousness which counts as the "object" of *our* observations) is actually not an alien entity outside of us but is in fact the (inadequately articulated) story of the coming-to-be of our own selves as the philosophical observers that we are.

The preceding summary apparently gives some credence to Gadamer's complaint that Hegel ultimately sought to "supersede" human finitude by offering a final, conceptual comprehension of human history in the "present self-consciousness" of "absolute knowing". But perhaps there is another way to understand Hegel; perhaps an essential element in Hegel's account of the coincidence of ordinary consciousness and philosophical consciousness is not just the *comprehension* of the former by the latter, but also the latter's *indebtedness* to the former. For Hegel, philosophical consciousness can be what it is, only insofar as it has come onto the scene *after* its other (ordinary consciousness) has expressed itself and thus made an appearance as an *object for* philosophical consciousness. Philosophical consciousness engages in the activity of "absolute knowing" when it overcomes the appearance of otherness between itself and its object (ordinary consciousness). But it overcomes this appearance of otherness, not so much because it accommodates the other to itself but rather because it accommodates itself to the other; not so much because it fully internalizes the other that has preceded it, but rather because it finds itself indebted to the other that has preceded it. Hegel describes the emergence of "absolute knowing" as consisting in a kind of "renunciation" or "abandonment": it is only when the knower renounces a "subjective characterization" of

its actions and thus abandons the idea that its acts of knowing are wholly determined by itself alone, that it can enter into the activity of "absolute knowing" (*PS* 407–08). For Hegel, to engage in the activity of internalization (*Erinnerung*) which is absolute knowing is to remember (*erinnern*) one's own indebtedness (or "thrownness").

But there is another way in which philosophical consciousness coincides with ordinary consciousness in absolute knowing. Just as the truth of the philosophical knower's activity depends on *what has taken place before* (in ordinary consciousness), so too it depends on *what comes afterwards*. This is because each and every instance of philosophical consciousness (including Hegel's own) must make its appearance as the determinate expression of a finite, situated human being; philosophical consciousness does not lose its determinacy when it engages in absolute knowing. So even if the philosophical consciousness of the *Phenomenology* successfully comprehends its own object (the ordinary consciousness of the *Phenomenology*), this philosophical consciousness must in turn appear to others (including to us) as an instance of ordinary consciousness – that is, as an object to be better and more fully comprehended by subsequent instances of philosophical consciousness (including our own). Contrary to what Gadamer seems to think, the success of Hegel's philosophical consciousness in comprehending its own object does not entail that this philosophical consciousness is fully transparent to itself. Indeed, quite the opposite must be the case: if Hegel's philosophy contained a fully self-transparent and finally determinative articulation of its own meaning, then it would be a dead letter for us, since its meaning would have already been fully exhausted by Hegel's own self-interpretation. But in that case, Hegel's philosophy could not make any difference to us, since any making-of-a-difference would be solely our *own* doing (and not at all the doing of the Hegelian inheritance in us). However, if our own (philosophical, observing) consciousness and Hegel's (ordinary, observed) consciousness were related to each other in this indifferent, external way, then it would be quite literally impossible for us to know what absolute knowing is for Hegel, since for Hegel absolute knowing is the *known* coincidence of philosophical, observing consciousness (in this case, our own consciousness) and ordinary, observed consciousness (in this case, consciousness as expressed by Hegel); but this *known* coincidence is known precisely through the activity of the consciousness that is doing the observing (which in this case would be ourselves as interpreters of Hegel). In other words, our own knowing of what "absolute knowing" is precisely in Hegel's own sense of the term depends on our subsequent understanding of Hegel better than he understood himself.

Hegel once observed (in his early "Fragments of Historical Studies") that "no one has totally performed any action", since an action is truly done only when brought to consciousness as a whole and such consciousness is never present in the individual who acts (Hegel 2002: 102). Hegel would have recognized that this observation applies equally well to his own account of absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology.* Because his own account must appear to others as an expression of what (for these others) is an instance of ordinary consciousness, Hegel realized that he must leave it to others to achieve a better understanding of his own philosophy and to actualize – precisely through this better understanding – what he himself meant by "absolute knowing". In short, Hegel's account entails that Hegel himself cannot have the last word regarding what he meant. Notice, finally, that Hegel's account of absolute knowing entails a kind of circularity: philosophical consciousness finds itself indebted to ordinary consciousness and when philosophical consciousness expresses the truth that it has learned about ordinary consciousness and about itself, it in turn becomes another instance of ordinary consciousness to be interpreted and better understood by subsequent instances of philosophical consciousness. Perhaps in crucial ways Hegel's thinking anticipates Heidegger's later, radicalized thinking about the hermeneutical circle.

Notes

1 Along these lines, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1992: 198–99) suggests that we ought to understand Dilthey as having transposed the hermeneutical circle by applying it to the "universal context of history".
2 One of Hegel's early philosophical collaborators, F. W. J. Schelling, made a similar point in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1978: 54) when he observed that the human knower cannot directly intuit an object other than itself and *at the same time* directly intuit itself as intuiting the object.
3 And like Heidegger, Hegel (1975c: 91) argued that the human being confronts its own freedom in this radical (existential) sense only when it confronts the possibility of its not-being at all (i.e. its own death).
4 As Gadamer helpfully observes, when we know our way around (in German, "knowing one's way around" is "*Sichverstehen*") and thus when we understand how to deal with things in our world, we do so because we understand ourselves: "*all such understanding is equally self-understanding*" (Gadamer 1992: 260).
5 Once again, this is the point that Schelling (1978: 54) makes when he observes that the human knower cannot directly intuit an object other than itself and *at the same time* directly intuit itself as intuiting the object.