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## Kenley R. Dove, Joseph Gauvin, and the “For Us” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*

In his classic article, “Hegel’s Phenomenological Method” (1970),<sup>1</sup> Kenley R. Dove suggests that in chapters 1–3 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “we” (understood roughly as the readers) actively participate in the dialectic of consciousness. In this paper, I show – drawing on Joseph Gauvin’s work on the “for us” written the same year as Dove’s<sup>2</sup> – that the latter’s account regarding the “we” is inexact. I argue that this misunderstanding stems from a quid pro quo between merely stylistic occurrences of the word “we” and interventions of texts “for us”, i.e. texts that express the particular viewpoint on experience attributed in the *Phenomenology* to its readers.

Beyond the historical interest of reassessing Dove’s commentary, this paper is intended to help readers avoid similar confusions themselves. This, by providing a rule of thumb enabling a more accurate identification of texts expressing “our” point of view. This is important since in the *Phenomenology* texts that are “for us” contain – in contrast to mere appearance “for consciousness” – the philosophical position Hegel considers to be true.

### 1. Preliminary Remarks

One prominent trait of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is its internal division into two points of view. The *Phenomenology*, while describing a single process – the dialectical experience of consciousness – does so from two different viewpoints that alternate all along its course; namely, the point of view of consciousness and “our” point of view. In the text of the *Phenomenology* one may thus distinguish between texts “for consciousness” and texts “for us”. This is done primarily by following the use of the first-person plural, that accompanies mostly, but not always, texts which are “for us”.

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<sup>1</sup> K. R. Dove, “Hegel’s Phenomenological Method”, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* (1970), vol. 23, No. 4, 615–641.

<sup>2</sup> J. Gauvin, “Le ‘für uns’ dans la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit”, in: *Archives de Philosophie* (1970), 33, 829–54.

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PHENOMENOLOGY**

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In his classic article, “Hegel's Phenomenological Method” (1970),<sup>1</sup> Kenley R. Dove suggests that in chapters 1-3 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “we” (understood roughly as the readers) actively participate in the dialectic of consciousness. In this paper I show – drawing on Joseph Gauvin's work on the “for us” written the same year as Dove's<sup>2</sup> – that the latter's account regarding the “we” is inexact. I argue that this misunderstanding stems from a *quid pro quo* between merely stylistic occurrences of the word “we” and interventions of texts “for us”, i.e. texts that express the particular viewpoint on experience attributed in the *Phenomenology* to its readers.

Beyond the historical interest of reassessing Dove's commentary, this paper is intended to help readers avoid similar confusions themselves. This, by providing a rule of thumb enabling a more accurate identification of texts expressing “our” point of view. This is important since in the *Phenomenology* texts that are “for us” contain – in contrast to mere appearance “for consciousness” – the philosophical position Hegel considers to be true.

1. Preliminary remarks

One prominent trait of Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit* is its internal division into two points of view. The *Phenomenology*, while describing a single process – the dialectical experience of consciousness – does so from two different viewpoints that alternate all along its course; namely, the point of view of consciousness and “our” point of view. In the text of

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the *Phenomenology* one may thus distinguish between texts “for consciousness” and texts “for us”. This is done primarily by following the use of the first person plural, that accompanies mostly, but not always, texts which are “for us”.

In order to capture the *Phenomenology's* textual particularity, I suggest terming these two points of view on experience the two *narrative modes* of the *Phenomenology*. For this purpose, I thought it possible to borrow the term of a “*narrative mode*” from French literary theorist Gérard Genette, who used it in his theory of narratology to describe any account written from a certain “*point of view*”.<sup>3</sup> Note that borrowing terms from literary theory was only done here to enable an analysis and subsequently a better grasp of the philosophical function of this textual trait.

Many commentators have mentioned the Hegelian use of “we”, but few have insisted on its analysis. One of the most important commentators to have tackled the issue is Kenley R. Dove. In his article on this subject Dove follows Martin Heidegger in asserting that “we” are those taking a step back in order to observe the dialectic of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Dove's essay is innovatory and precise in clearly designating the relation between the method of the *Phenomenology* (which for him is *descriptive*, and not dialectical) and “our” behavior; i.e., this *stepping back* meant to ensure an objective observation.

However, Dove also argues that this account of an observing “we” is not applicable to all the *Phenomenology*. In his view, the latter develops in two stages; the first is chapters 1-3 and the second is the rest of the work. According to Dove, the first stage is a dialogue between consciousness and “us”, in which “we” do not only observe consciousness but actively participates in its dialectic. It is only in the second stage that “we” assume the position of an observer.<sup>5</sup> This idea of an active “we” has since then been expressed by several other Hegel scholars.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> With his category of *narrative mode* Genette designates, in close relation to the grammatical sense of the word, narrative written from a certain “*point of view*” and depicting events in a “*more or less*” accurate manner (GÉRARD GENETTE, *Discours du récit*, Paris 2007, 164).

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger was apparently the first to have questioned the identity of this “we” (“*Wer sind die „wir“?*”); MARTIN HEIDEGGER, “Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung” in: *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main 1975ff, Bd. 5: Holzwege, 1978, 188–9.

<sup>5</sup> “*These texts suggest that the method of Hegel's Phenomenology is developed in two stages. The first (PhG I-III) is a dialogue between consciousness and the 'we' in which the 'we' participates. The result of this dialogue is that consciousness, through its inversion, comes to present itself to us as the appearance of experience, whose essence (Spirit) 'we' no longer distinguish from its appearance. Since 'we' no longer interfere with consciousness appearance. (as at PhG 81, 85, 95, 103), 'our contribution' becomes 'the pure act of observation' (PhG 72 = HCE 21).*”; DOVE, “Hegel's Method”, 640–1.

<sup>6</sup> For example, WOLFGANG WIELAND, “Hegels Dialektik der sinnlichen Gewißheit”, in: HANS FULDA und DIETER HENRICH (hrsg.), *Materialien zu Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main

The fact that Hegel's method in the *Phenomenology* demands that the philosopher be a mere observer is explained in detail in its *Introduction*. For Hegel, it is only by leaving “our” ideas and thoughts aside, that “we succeed in regarding what is at stake as it is in and for itself.”<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the *Phenomenology*'s method of inquiry is concerned: “all that remains for us is merely to watch what is going on.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to these clear statements, nowhere does Hegel indicate that “we”, philosophers or readers, should intervene in the dialectic, dialogue with consciousness or indeed play any active role. This would have been inconsistent with Hegel's view of the phenomenology as a science employing the method of disinterested observation.

According to his own account, Dove did not derive his thesis regarding “our” participation from Hegel's explicit statements, but rather by reading and analyzing descriptions of an active “we” that appear in chapters 1-3 of the *Phenomenology*:

*For it is only in "Consciousness" (and in subsequent references back to PhG I-III) that the "we" is seen to play the role (zum Beispiel) of the consciousness presented, to speak for it and write for it (PhG 81), immediately and passively observe for it (Phg 85), as well as perceive for it (PhG 95) and actively participate in its Concept (Phg 103).<sup>9</sup>*

Before considering Dove's claim by examining the paragraphs he refers to, three remarks should be made that may call his account into question.

(a) In addition to his statements in the *Introduction*,<sup>10</sup> Hegel begins his chapters on *Consciousness* with a remark expressing a similar methodological prohibition on “our” intervention in the dialectic of consciousness.

*Knowledge which is our object at the outset, that is, immediately, can be nothing but immediate knowledge, knowledge of the immediate, that is, of what is. Likewise we ourselves have to conduct ourselves immediately, that is, receptively. We therefore are to alter nothing in the object as it presents itself, and we must keep our conceptual grasp of it apart from our*

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1973, 77: “Es ließ sich zeigen, daß für diese Art von Dialektik der Gegensatz zwischen zwei Partnern, nämlich dem Bewußtsein in der Weise der sinnlichen Gewißheit und uns konstitutiv ist. Wir können andererseits auch einen Dialog mit ihm führen, schließlich können wir auch darüber reflektieren.”

<sup>7</sup> “dadurch, daß wir diese [unsere Einfälle und Gedanken bei der Untersuchung] weglassen, erreichen wir es, die Sache, wie sie an und für sich selbst ist, zu betrachten.” ; G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg 1980, 59. Cited is Terry Pinkard's translation of the *Phenomenology* available online, and given with paragraph number (tr. §84).

<sup>8</sup> “indem das Bewußtsein sich selbst prüft, uns auch von dieser Seite nur das reine Zusehen bleibt.” ; *ibid*, 61 (tr. §85).

<sup>9</sup> DOVE, “Hegel's Method”, 639. Dove's quotations are from the Hofmeister edition (1952).

<sup>10</sup> «dadurch, daß wir diese [unsere Einfälle und Gedanken bei der Untersuchung] weglassen, erreichen wir es, die Sache, wie sie an und für sich selbst ist, zu betrachten.» ; «indem das Bewußtsein sich selbst prüft, uns auch von dieser Seite nur das reine Zusehen bleibt.» ; HEGEL, *Phänomenologie*, 59 (tr. §85).

*apprehension of it.*<sup>11</sup>

Thus, any interpretation of an active “we” conflicts with Hegel's statements on this subject, not only in the *Introduction*, but also in the relevant chapters.

(b) The idea of an intervention in the development of consciousness seems problematic when we take the actual meaning of observation in the *Phenomenology* into account. This is because “we” are not contemporaries of consciousness, that could have influence on its dialectic, but rather observe its history *post festum*; i.e., after the moments of spirit's “development of cultural education” (*Bildung*) have already become “past forms” (*Vergangenheit*).<sup>12</sup> In other words, “our” participation in the dialectic of consciousness not only implies methodological difficulties, but also logical ones.

(c) From a textual point of view, not all occurrences of the word “we” or its declensions refer to the particular point of view on experience attributed in the *Phenomenology* to philosophers and readers.

For example, near the end of the introduction to the chapter on *Self Consciousness*, Hegel refers to self consciousness as a “I that is WE and the WE that is I”.<sup>13</sup> This statement anticipates the desire of consciousness for *recognition*. It also anticipates the Hegelian conception of *Spirit (Geist)*, which is not an individual, but rather a community. However, it is clear that in this statement Hegel does not use “we” to refer to the “for us” narrative mode.

Given the theoretical difficulties inherent to Dove's participation thesis, I suggest verifying what is intended by the word “we” in Hegel's chapters on *Consciousness*. To do so, a rule of thumb is needed, that will help distinguish between occurrences of the word “we” referring to the “for us” narrative mode and other occurrences of the first person plural which may have different meanings.

To this end I turn to Gauvin's excellent article “Le ‘für uns’ dans la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit”. In his article Gauvin explores the way in which the *Phenomenology's* two viewpoints alternate throughout its text. Furthermore, he states that he attempted to devise a rule in order to “grasp the systematic nature of the uses of the expression *für uns*”.<sup>14</sup> That is, a rule in order to determine where and why this expression is used when referring to the “for

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 63 (tr. § 90).

<sup>12</sup> «Die Aufgabe aber, das Individuum von seinem ungebildeten Standpunkte aus zum Wissen zu führen, war in ihrem allgemeinen Sinn zu fassen, und das allgemeine Individuum, der Weltgeist, in seiner Bildung zu betrachten [...] Diese Vergangenheit durchläuft das Individuum [...] die Bildungsstufen des allgemeinen Geistes, aber als vom Geiste schon abgelegte Gestalten, als Stufen eines Wegs, der ausgearbeitet und geebnet ist.“ ; *ibid*, 24–5 (tr. §28).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 108 (tr. §177).

<sup>14</sup> Gauvin stresses that this rule is only hypothetical or intuitive (“*sentie plutôt que saisie*”), but his hypothesis is a strong one, and can serve here as a working hypothesis (GAUVIN, “Le ‘für uns’”, 852).

us” narrative mode. This rule reads as follows:

*The expression „für uns” intervenes [systematically] wherever the examined spiritual reality, in the precise moment of examination, is not and cannot be „für sich” – this, unless it is most explicitly stated that this is not the case but rather that we encounter precisely the opposite.*<sup>15</sup>

With this contextual reservation, Gauvin's rule of thumb states that an occurrence of “we” is systematic; i.e., that it refers to the “for us” narrative mode, only when it designates a difference between what is “for consciousness” (*für sich*) and what is “for us” (*für uns*). This seems to be tautological: the word “we” designates a difference in point of view, only when it implies a difference in terms of knowledge. But this tautology proves very useful in practice, because it reminds the reader that the content visible from “our” viewpoint remains always “behind the back of consciousness”.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. The “for us” in Consciousness

We can now turn to the paragraphs mentioned by Dove in relation to his participation thesis and focus primarily on the very first section of the *Phenomenology*, the dialectic of *Sense Certainty*. In this section, the object of consciousness is what appears at the start to be *most true*, because it is *most immediate* – the *sensible object*. But whenever consciousness attempts to express this most concrete of objects – whenever it says “*this*” – it actually expresses that which is most *abstract*. This unexpected transformation of its object is the first obstacle in the dialectic of consciousness, and is so to speak its first *crisis*.

To explain this transformation Hegel turns to two basic characteristics of a sensible object: the *here* and *now*. Note his use of the first person plural during this explanation.

*To the question: “What is the ‘now’?”, we answer, for example, “The ‘now’ is the night.” In order to put the truth of this sense-certainty to the test, a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth; a truth cannot be lost by being written down no more than it can be lost by our preserving it, and if now, this midday, we look at this truth which has been written down, we will have to say that it has become rather stale.*<sup>17</sup>

In this passage Hegel shows how the *here*, just like the *now*, are not immediate or simple terms, but rather that this illusion of immediacy disappears when examined. Hegel continues this explanation in the following paragraphs.

*We also express the sensuous as a universal, but what we say is: This, i.e., the universal*

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> «Nur diese Notwendigkeit selbst, oder die *Entstehung* des neuen Gegenstandes, der dem *Bewußtsein*, ohne zu wissen, wie ihm geschieht, sich darbietet, ist es, was für uns gleichsam hinter seinem Rücken vorgeht.» ; HEGEL, *Phänomenologie*, 61 (tr. §87).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65 (tr. §95).

*this, or we say: it is, i.e., being as such. We thereby of course do not represent the universal “this” or “being as such,” but we express the universal, or in this sense-certainty we do not at all say what we mean.*<sup>18</sup>

Hegel's point in this these paragraphs seems to be clear: whenever uttered, the *sensible* becomes *universal*. Language, and hence knowledge, imply necessarily universal and hence subjective components.

But beyond this point the question of Hegel's use of the first person plural remains. It seems at first sight that Dove was right in saying that in this text “we” *write and speak* for consciousness. Yet it is still unclear what is intended by this use of the first person plural. Gauvin's rule of thumb leads to the following question: does this use of “we” designate a difference between “our” point of view and that of consciousness?

A close reading of the paragraphs on *Sense Certainty* answers this question in the negative: this use of the first person plural does not imply such a difference; namely, it does not refer to the “for us” narrative mode.

In the lines following the passage cited above, Hegel concludes the transformation of the sensible object (“this”) with the following remark: “*To this sense-certainty, since in itself it has proved that the universal is the truth of its object, pure being therefore remains as its essence, but not as immediate. Rather, it remains as that to which negation and mediation are essential.*”<sup>19</sup> This time, it is “for consciousness” that the sensible object is revealed to be universal. It is “for consciousness” that it becomes abstract. Insofar as the same experience previously attributed to “us” is only a page later attributed to consciousness, this use of the first person plural does not imply any difference in terms of knowledge between the two. Far from indicating such a difference, the term “we” seems here to be synonymous with consciousness. This is clarified in other places of the text as well.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, later in this section this same experience of the sensible object is attributed in a similar way to an “I” (*ich*), which Hegel explicitly identifies with consciousness in *Sense*

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 65 (tr. §95).

<sup>20</sup> “The truth of the sensuous this for consciousness is supposed to be a universal experience, but to an even greater degree, it is the opposite which is a universal experience. Each consciousness once again sublates such a truth as, for example, here is a tree, or now is midday, and declares the opposite: Here is not a tree, but rather a house.” *Ibid.*, 69 (tr. §109). Here Hegel indicates that the transformation of the sensible object does not happen behind consciousness' back, but rather that it is visible for “each consciousness”. Insofar as this same transformation was previously visible to “us”, the latter appears to be synonymous with “consciousness”.

*Certainty* (referring to it as *Ich als Bewußtsein*).<sup>21</sup> Again, the same experience attributed to “us” is attributed soon after to this *I*: “For example, here is the tree. I turn around, this truth vanishes, and it has turned itself topsy-turvy into its contrary: Here there is not a tree but rather a house.”<sup>22</sup> Just like the “we” before it, the term “*I*” seems here to be synonymous with consciousness.

In conclusion, the occurrences of the first person plural that were read by Dove as suggesting “our” active participation are not to be read as referring to the readers of the *Phenomenology*; i.e., they do not indicate an intervention of the “for us” narrative mode. This use is rather of a purely stylistic function and refers to sensible consciousness. In this respect Gauvin's direct remark on this subject is particularly telling: even though the “*I*” and the “we” appear abundantly as the subject of experience in chapters 1-3, it is “to consciousness that results are attributed”.<sup>23</sup>

Again, It is no less important to acknowledge that Dove's reasoning concerning “our” participation – that can no longer be supported – was formulated in order to resolve a real difficulty in the text of the *Phenomenology*; namely the ambivalent meaning of Hegel's use of the word “we” and its declensions. However, instead of making sense of this use by distinguishing between the different meanings that this word can have, Dove attempted to produce a single explanation for all of them. This came at the price of segmenting the *Phenomenology* itself, and calling its methodological unity into question.

This paper ends with a practical suggestion. Whenever one encounters an occurrence of the word “we”, whose precise meaning is hard to determine, the following rule of thumb should be of service. The word “we” refers to the “for us” narrative mode (i.e., to the specific viewpoint on experience attributed to readers of the *Phenomenology*) only when it marks a difference between what is “for consciousness” and what is “for us”, in other words only when the reader is receiving information unknown to the phenomenological consciousness. If such a difference is absent from the text, the “we” is bound to have another meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 63 (tr. §91).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 65 (tr. §98).

<sup>23</sup> Gauvin, “Le ‘für uns’”, 853.