

*The Attainment of the
Absolute Standpoint in
Hegel's Phenomenology*

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, immediate sensory consciousness passes to absolute self-consciousness. In each of the many and substantially diverse intermediate transitions, essentially the same rhythm of passage occurs: a certain standpoint or "shape" (*Gestalt*) of consciousness grasps reality as such-and-such, only to find that this grasp is one-sided and cannot be maintained except by the further accepting of what it excludes. Implicit in this finding is a twofold insight fundamental to the *Phenomenology* as a whole. First, every finite standpoint exists only as a determinate aspect or part of a higher, relatively whole standpoint; and second, inasmuch as each finite standpoint, by thus pointing beyond itself, shows itself as a stage or moment in a process of consciousness toward wholeness, this wholeness itself—that standpoint which knows reality as a whole—must in some sense exist as this process itself of determination of itself into various moments or finite standpoints. But this is to say that the arrival of consciousness at the absolute standpoint, the completion of phenomenology, will be the actual recognition by consciousness itself of itself as this process of self-determination—a process that has, as its own culminating moment, precisely the appearance of consciousness to itself as this very self-consciousness of itself as process.

In what follows, we want to explicate and examine this very complex recognition, the culmination of the *Phenomenology*, as it is characterized

by Hegel in the dense, sometimes seemingly chaotic closing chapter of that work. Our discussion is divided into three main sections, in correspondence with the internal structure of chapter VIII itself. First, we want to discuss in detail the attainment of the absolute standpoint, as this is the focus for Hegel in paragraphs 788–97.¹ Second, we want to consider several important discoveries about the temporality and historical aspect of consciousness which emerge in the course of that attainment; and we want to observe Hegel's own characterization of the place of his philosophy—that is, of the absolute standpoint—in the history of philosophy and culture. Those are the basic concerns of paragraphs 798–804. Finally, since the culmination of the *Phenomenology* is the beginning of Hegel's "system" according to his excruciatingly compact remarks in paragraphs 805–8, we will attempt an elucidation of the relation of the absolute standpoint, as it is attained in chapter VIII, to its explication in the "system."

ATTAINING THE ABSOLUTE STANDPOINT

The task of paragraphs 788–97 is to execute the transition from "Revealed Religion" (VII. C) to "Absolute Knowledge." The method of execution involves a gathering up of various moments of all that has preceded; by disclosing what these moments, set in light of "Revealed Religion," essentially *imply*, Hegel generates a shape of consciousness radically different from what they initially and explicitly were. Our procedure shall be to consider first the task, then its execution, and, finally, the character of the emergent absolute standpoint.

In the Hegelian version of phenomenology, as we have already observed, each finite standpoint of consciousness involves a conception of reality which, as its own experience shows, is one-sided. And this means that consciousness, to preserve the "side" which it asserts, must also accept the "side" which it unknowingly at first excludes. But, by this acceptance of both sides at once, consciousness transcends its earlier shape, knowing now a whole where before it was the knowing of only a part. What, then, we may begin by asking, is the one-sidedness of "Revealed Religion"?

"Revealed Religion," as the last part of chapter VII, is the last stage in the development of that shape of consciousness wherein absolute or world-constituting spirit beholds itself through various shapes of human religious consciousness. The obvious tension here arises between absolute spirit's, or God's, knowledge of himself and man's knowledge of God. The remarkable achievement of "Revealed Religion," or consciousness as it

takes final shape in Christian Communion and the church, is that this tension is healed. God here makes himself man, a natural being, and reveals himself as man to men; as man, God assumes the form of consciousness, and as conscious of himself as God who has made himself man, he reveals himself as the action of universal being, in which it opposes itself, as particular natural self, to itself as universal being; this opposition is only a moment, however; because the opposition is internal to God, the opposites must each contain the other; this mutual containment is played out as the event of Resurrection, in which, on the one hand, universal being, God, takes on natural particularity completely and dies, whereas, on the other hand, the natural particular self, in dying, takes on the character of universal being and survives its death as a universal self which knows itself as such, that is, as God's knowing himself to be this whole process of simple unity, self-opposition, and self-conscious reunification. Now, *all this* is the *object* for Christian consciousness; but this means that God, by making himself man and then raising himself as man to the status of divine self-consciousness, has permitted men, by participating in religious knowledge, to know themselves as raised to divine being; or, through God's knowing of himself as man, man may come to know himself as God, as the whole process of simple unity, self-opposition, and self-conscious reunification. *All the same*, Christian consciousness is not absolute, for the process is known as God's, rather than man's own; or, the knowledge of the process is viewed as a gift from God, an alien source; this is reflected by *the form* which Christian consciousness takes: it is a pure thinking of God, representative imagining of Christ, and feeling for the reunification of these opposites in the Resurrection; of these specific modes, feeling most of all overcomes the otherness of God from man, for it least of all presents its object to itself as other—and yet, by contrast, feeling is the most receptive of the modes and hence that in which man, as celebrant, least of all feels his autonomy; yet *what* man feels, his union with God as process of absolute spirit, requires that here most of all he should know himself as autonomous. Thus there is a contradiction: the subject as religious knower remains opposed to what, through religious knowledge, he knows himself to be. The union of God and man which is accomplished in the object of religious knowing is denied by the subject's mode of knowing.

It is this contradiction to which Hegel refers in arguing that the truth of the content of Christianity requires the overcoming of its religious form. The meaning of the Incarnation and Resurrection itself requires a mode of knowing which—by itself overcoming the separation of subject from object—will be adequate to the unity of God and man which is its object.

Hegel discovers the new form or mode of consciousness—which he

will call the concept (*Begriff*)—through a complex reflection. The task, first of all, is to move from object-oriented consciousness to self-consciousness, that is, to a knowing which knows itself, as knowing, as the truth of its object. Now, key to this movement is the revelation that the object of object-oriented consciousness, present to it as other, is really the self of consciousness. Since this revelation has already occurred, in stages, in the course of the *Phenomenology*, the new form or mode of consciousness may be generated by recollection of the relevant earlier moments in the development of consciousness. But that is not all. First, in order for the recollected transformation from object to self-consciousness to relate properly to the transformation of religious consciousness, the object first present as other in the process to be recollected must be shown to coincide in nature and structure with the object of religious consciousness. And secondly, the self which, as a result of the process to be recollected, knows itself to be the reality of its object, must also be shown to include within itself all of what is known in the object of religious consciousness. Hence the whole reflection which generates the new mode of knowing has three basic parts:

1. Hegel begins by showing how the mode of object-oriented consciousness generated by the unity of chapters I–III has a total object whose nature and structure is identical with that of Christian religious consciousness.
2. He then gathers together key moments from chapters V–VI, showing them as moments in a process wherein the truth of the object known in chapters I–III is recognized as the self which does the knowing—and the recognizing of this truth itself.
3. Finally, by setting the last stage of this self-recognition in light of chapter VII, he shows it to be that form or mode of knowing which overcomes the inner contradiction and fulfills the truth of religious consciousness.

Let us retrace these steps.

1. The first step might be understood as a demythologization of the object of religious consciousness. In chapters I–III, or “Consciousness,” natural consciousness knew being, first, as a “this” or universal thing, accessible to immediate apprehension; second, as—in its thinghood—essentially determinate and, thus, divided between its isolated being for itself and its relational being for another, in its presence for perception; and, third, as—in that very dividedness—the self-expression of a supersensible inner, a universal concept known to understanding. Collecting those moments, we see that the object for object-oriented consciousness is, in its totality, the purely thought universal that, opposing itself as a being for

itself to itself as a being for another in perception, is immediately apprehended or felt as a universal individual. Now this total structure is precisely that of the object—regarded formally, apart from its mythic contentual character—which Christian religious consciousness knows: God, as the purely thought, supersensible universal, expresses “it”-self as an object of perception or, for second and later generation Christians, an object imaginatively represented which, in the immediate consciousness or feeling of the rite of Communion, is felt as a universal thing, a being with which all others can identify or in which they can be subsumed.

2. Given this disclosure, namely, that object-oriented consciousness of chapters I–III is a consciousness of—formally speaking—the same object as that of religious consciousness, it becomes all the more remarkable to watch the experiential sequence by which consciousness discovers that its complex object is, at its core, itself. Of course, in one sense this has already happened; when in chapter III consciousness regards the real as, in its ultimacy, a universal concept which expresses itself in the realm of what may be perceived, it essentially takes the real as ego, or as the universal rationality of the phenomenal. But this is not at all to say that consciousness, in its knowing what the real thus understood is, recognizes that knowing itself as real in any substantial sense; and it is this recognition which is necessary for the transformation of object-oriented consciousness to self-consciousness, that is, to consciousness of the self itself, in its consciousness of its object, as the reality of that object. For this transformation, Hegel recalls three key moments from earlier in the *Phenomenology*: “observation” (chapter V. A), in which the things of nature are apprehended as the external expression of ego or (since this is the shape of ego in observational science) rational categorical structure; the development of a basic utilitarianism (“the truth of enlightenment,” chapter VI. B. IIb), in which all things, precisely as appreciated by observational science, and including human persons, are treated as useful, hence as partly natural or self-subsistent and as partly cultural or “for another” in that sense; and, finally, the absolute freedom achieved by, or as, “conscience” (chapter VI. Cc), wherein ego, as pure knowledge of what is universally good, knows itself as the “inner” reality of everything, hence as the ultimate basis for any utilization of things. In these three moments, of course, we see the three basic structures of determinateness which came to light in chapters I–III. Here, however, they have a basically new meaning. Already at the outset of chapter V. A the object has the whole complex of structures worked out in chapters I–III. Here, then, the three basic structures of determinateness, in their distinct appearances in V. A, VI. B IIb, and VI. Cc, mark out not the object as such but rather stages in the subject’s recognition of itself in its object. In “observation,”

the passive disposition towards the object expresses the subject's non-self-recognition; even while nature is externalized ego, it is not ego as knowing this—rather it is a universally rational order essentially indifferent to its being known, hence other than the individual ego which, as scientific consciousness, knows it. "Utilization," by contrast, appropriates as well as observes; in this posture consciousness, by its assertion that the object is partly for itself (natural) and partly for another (for use, cultural), knows its own action as use of the object to be in part the reality of the object. In "conscience," finally, this self-recognition is radicalized: as the knowledge of universal good which is the basis of and expresses itself in the "utilization" of things, "conscience" is that posture which knows itself, *as knowledge of the good*, to be the basic reality of its object. It is here, therefore, that the movement from object-oriented consciousness to self-consciousness appears to be completed; the individual self knows its own knowing to constitute reality.

3. But there is still recollective work to be done. To begin with, there is the question of how a form of moral self-consciousness, which belongs to finite spirit, can correlate with the content of religious consciousness, that is, with infinite spirit represented as God. Hegel responds to this problem by singling out, as the particular form of "conscience" necessary for the transition into absolute spirit, the "beautiful soul." The "beautiful soul" is an extreme form of "conscience"; the moral self, secure in its knowledge that its own knowledge of the good makes up the "inner" reality of everything, preserves and holds to this knowledge in its purity. This has two consequences, the first of which appears to solve the problem of the relation of finite and infinite spirit. The "beautiful soul" knows the *universal* good, and it knows this good prior to its specification in terms of particular things, acts, and interests. But this is to say, the "beautiful soul" is, as a universal knowing which has not yet taken any finite form, an infinite knowing. Hegel already indicated this in VI. Cc when he said of the "beautiful soul," "it is true that God is *immediately* present in its mind and heart, in its self," and then added that "the *immediate* relation, however, means in fact nothing else but the unity of the terms."² In chapter VIII, however, he goes beyond talk of "relation" and "unity of terms"—language which suggests objective identity—and declares,

the "beautiful soul" is its own knowledge of itself in its pure, transparent unity— . . . not only the intuition of the divine but the divine's intuition of itself.³

Thus, through the purity and unmediatedness of its knowing of the good, consciousness as "beautiful soul" appears to be the existence, as subject,

of the universal knowing which is only objectively known as God in religion. But this is not the culmination of the phenomenological movement to the absolute on account of the *second* consequence of the purity of the "beautiful soul." Precisely in order to preserve its purity, consciousness as "beautiful soul" must abstain, withhold itself from all action; for action is determinate and so involves reducing the universal good to some particular and finite significance. Action, however, is the mark of existence and reality,⁴ and thus consciousness as "beautiful soul" is in a remarkable double bind: either it can preserve its status as infinite knowing at the cost of its own existence, or it can give itself over to action and so surrender its claim to infinitude. This impasse and its dialectical overcoming are, of course, not new; as Hegel remarks, the "beautiful soul" is "the one-sided shape we saw before [in VI. Cc] vanish into thin air, but also positively externalize itself and move onward."⁵

This further advance was the process of "forgiveness" wherein the extremes—universal knowing of the good and particularizing, hence selfish, action—are reconciled, and Hegel will now repeat this process. What is new, however, and what makes this more than mere repetition is the newly revealed status of the "beautiful soul." As the existing, as subject, of "the divine's intuition of itself," the "beautiful soul" is now more than a moral structure; it is the fully appropriated life of God in man. On the other hand, insofar as this appropriation is full, that is, insofar as this man is fully consciousness of the life he lives as *his own*, the structure of consciousness which emerges from the process of "forgiveness" is more than religious. The new structure is rather that of philosophical self-consciousness or, in Hegel's terminology, "absolute knowledge."

Consider first the process of "forgiveness," then the form of consciousness emergent from it. The process has three phases. To begin with, to encompass the whole good, the "beautiful soul" must keep himself from all action, for action would, even while objectifying his knowledge, make it partial, set it against the objectified knowledge or action of others; and that, because it would contradict the "beautiful soul's" claim to knowledge of the universal good, the good for all, would set it against itself; hence the "beautiful soul" has a knowledge which must remain inert, unenacted, or in simple unity, in order that its claim to universality be preserved. But—secondly—this means that this knowledge is in itself opposed to particularizing or determining action; that is, the arising of his opposite, the selfish acting self, over against him is itself necessary to his own existence, is itself implied by what he, insofar as he is real, really is; hence, the "beautiful soul" himself opposes to his own knowledge, as simple substantial unity, the particularizing action of the selfish, acting self. Now—thirdly—the internality of this opposition is itself the key to

its resolution. Because the particularizing actor represents the "beautiful soul's" own otherness or opposition to itself, he needs only to recognize himself in, or as, this other, and the double bind we noted earlier is overcome. The "beautiful soul's" acceptance of the necessity of action—the "forgiveness" of selfishness which consummates chapter VI. Cc—now takes on the status of the infinite's recognition of itself in, or as, the finite. The "beautiful soul" ceases to be merely "beautiful," standing aloof from and in contrast to the other, and comes to know himself as that which comprises both—action which determines and objectifies knowledge and knowledge which is determined and objectified through action.

The form of consciousness which emerges from this recollected process is, in Hegel's terms, absolute knowledge or the "concept." On the one hand, the unity which this consciousness knows itself to be unites the same fundamental moments within itself as did the unity known by religious consciousness: simple substance, the self-opposition of this substance, as universal, to itself as particular finite self, and the reunification of these as aspects of one another within this three-phase process. This contentual identity of the two unities is to be expected, of course, since the "beautiful soul," in its uttermost withdrawal from finitude is, according to Hegel, God himself. On the other hand, the new unity also overcomes the fundamental self-alienation of religious consciousness. Not only is it known, but it is also that which consciousness knows *itself to be*: it is thereby the object of religious consciousness *become subject for itself*, and thereby transcending the object-subject separation itself. As such, it is all that 'is,' but existing *as self-knowing*. This is not to say—and the *Encyclopedia* goes on to show this—that substance/subject, God/man, universal/particular, object/subject, being/consciousness become meaningless or illusory polarities. On the contrary, their significance as polarities, that is, as polarizations or differentiations of unity, is only first secured with the disclosure of this unity; and this unity, in turn, exists and explicates itself only through such self-differentiation. In this sense, as the irreducible one which is through self-differentiation, this unity is "absolute," and the knowing or grasping of it which *it itself is and knows itself to be* is "absolute knowledge."

TEMPORALITY AND HISTORY

Temporality and Absolute Knowledge

Hegel's remarks on temporality in chapter VIII must remain obscure so long as they are not appreciated within the context of the fundamental

thesis of the *Phenomenology* as a whole. That thesis, which the work itself is intended to demonstrate, is that consciousness, *qua* object-oriented, necessarily transcends itself and shows itself to be the movement of becoming the concept, that is, of taking within itself the otherness which, regarded naively, appears as the ultimacy of the subject-object separation. In traditional terms, consciousness is the dialectical unity of the four Aristotelian causes. Whereas, on the one hand, in its object-oriented modes it is itself the *matter* that has, as its potentiality and innermost *goal*, to be subject to the *form* of object-subject unity, it is also, on the other hand, both the *agency* for the formative process that achieves this goal and, in this achievement, the actuality of object-subject unity. And if, on the first count, it always has an other external to it that it must take within its thereby ever-expanding self, on the second count it is that fully self-sufficient being that, containing all otherness within itself, must also preserve it in its externality as a pervasive feature of its genesis. In this dialectical unity of the four causes, two characters of the Aristotelian world-view—or, more precisely, of a naive appropriation of that world-view—are overcome. First, as already implied, the object-realm has been grasped as, in its very existence as *object-realm*, a moment of the subject's own being—with the result, however, being not a subjectivism (a one-way subordination of object to subject) but, rather, a grasp of object-subject unity which transcends both traditional objectivism and modern subjectivism. Secondly, any naive conception of maturity as a stage *following* genesis becomes impossible. Though, on the one hand, the standpoint of absolute knowledge or the concept follows and presupposes all of the preceding shapes, it involves, on the other hand, the insight that it itself has been present all along, present as that inherent goal the actual attaining of which is the motion through the preceding shapes to itself. But this is to say: the *presence* of the concept *in* the preceding shapes has the form, in each case, of that shape's *need*—in order that it be validated—to be transformed, to be converted into a higher shape, that shape, in particular, which saves the first shape's truth from that shape's own one-sidedness and partiality. Now, that need, the necessity to become other, is what Hegel means by "time." When Hegel writes,

[Time] is the *outer*, intuited pure self which is *not grasped* by the self, the merely intuited concept,⁶

he gives a characterization, from the standpoint of absolute knowledge, of the appearance of time insofar as it is grasped from a non-absolute standpoint. The need to become other, or the need which consciousness has of proceeding beyond each of its particular object-oriented shapes, as

moments, presents itself to the self—as it exists *qua* one of these shapes—as external. Each shape initially takes itself to be the ultimate shape, that is, the self *in* each non-absolute shape mistakes itself as ultimate, so that the need to become other appears to it to arise *from the outside*, from a source external to consciousness as such. Likewise, the whole sequence must appear as a collection externally linked or in a medium—sequentiality, seriality, or “time,” as such—external to what lies *in* this medium. But, says Hegel, this externality is only a function of the *self's* having not yet achieved full self-consciousness, that is, of consciousness' failure to have grasped *as its own* the necessity of actually becoming what it ultimately is, namely, the concept or absolute self-consciousness as such. Of course, once this “last” standpoint is actually achieved, consciousness will recognize the necessity as its own, will be the very grasping of otherness as internal to it; having actually *become*, through the process of its development, what it ultimately *is*, it will recognize that it *is*, essentially, this very *becoming* or process. It is here, however, that the naive view of maturity as the “last” stage in genesis becomes most deeply problematic. Precisely because this “last” stage entails consciousness' recognition of itself as the process culminating in this stage and of the necessity of this proceeding or becoming-other as its own necessity, this stage transcends the process-character itself. It cannot be grasped merely as “last,” for this implies that it exists *in* time, *in* the medium of sequentiality, whereas, in truth, this very medium, namely, the otherness of process or sequence, exists in it as a function of its own self-relation. Or, more strictly put, to grasp absolute knowledge as the “last” stage is one-sided. Rather, it is *both* true that, as Hegel says, “spirit necessarily appears in time” *and* true that, as he also says, “when [the concept] grasps itself, it sets aside its time-form.”⁷ From a non-absolute standpoint, spirit exists in time—but from the standpoint of absolute knowledge, time or temporality is only the form of spirit's existence for itself as non-absolute, the pervasive mode which, as a *proceeding toward* full self-consciousness, it assumes in its own eyes *before* the completion of this process, *before* its vision has become fully reflexive.

This radical reflection does not, however, make time meaningless, non-existent, mere illusion, and so on. For, as Hegel continues, the process toward self-consciousness is nothing else than the task which constitutes *actual history*.⁸ Hegel's philosophy of history is too large an issue to treat frontally here. Nonetheless, it should be observed that, even while consciousness as the concept or absolute knowledge knows its process as an *internal* necessity, this very insight entails the reflexive recognition, in turn, that it itself presupposes this process. Except as a culmination of historical process, the insight which “transcends”—in the sense of

“grasps as its own and as a whole”—this very process is impossible.⁹ Consciousness, then, relativizes itself to history at the same time that it relativizes history to itself, grasps historicity as its own essential character at the same time that, in this very grasp, it transcends this character.¹⁰

The History of Philosophy and Culture

In paragraphs 803–4 Hegel gives content—both positive and exemplary in function—to his claim that actual history is the process toward self-consciousness. These paragraphs are terse and obscure, but essentially they trace the movement from the posture of consciousness culminative for the Middle Ages, the feeling of Communion, to that which is culminative for the Enlightenment, Hegel's own grasp of the movement of spirit. These paragraphs are interesting not only because Hegel reveals his own conception of the historical place of his own philosophical orientation but also because they both gather together preceding moments of the *Phenomenology* itself and illustrate one of Hegel's fundamental contentions about historical process.

The initial step Hegel notes is the turn from the “alien manner” of self-consciousness represented by Christianity—“alien” because, as noted earlier, feeling implies radical heteronomy, dependence of man on an alien, unworldly power (what Schleiermacher calls “*das schlechthinige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*,” “the feeling of utter dependence,” which is the feeling of God's power)—back into the actual and present world; this is the movement which occurs in the Renaissance and which, as part of the emergence of “insight” out of “belief” (cf. chapter VI. B. I. b, II. a), first takes the form of “observation of nature” (cf. V. A). From this beginning of post-medieval culture, consciousness proceeds through

1. Descartes' rationalist discovery of the unity of thought (*res cogitans*) and existence as extension (*res extensa*), a unity initially formulated in Spinoza's doctrine of the unitary substance,
2. Through the recoiling, opposite assertion—formulated in Leibniz's doctrine of monadic substances—of the primacy of individuality,
3. Through, further, the actual cultural development of individuality which passes from Enlightenment utilitarianism (cf. chapter VI. B. II. b) through the “absolute freedom” of the French Revolution and Terror (cf. chapter VI. B. III) to the explicit assertion of the primacy of “Individual Will” in the moral philosophy of, especially, Kant and post-Kantian Romanticism (cf. chapter VI. C) into, finally,
4. The philosophical revelation of the underlying thought of this movement,

the $I = I$ as articulated first by Fichte (cf. PhS §803), then antithetically by Schelling (cf. PhS §803), and, finally, in a way which both integrates and surpasses these, by Hegel himself (cf. PhS §804).

Of this reconstruction, terse as it is, two interpretive remarks might be made.

(i) Hegel's division of postmedieval history into these four stages reflects, first, what he will say both in the concluding paragraph and in the preface about historical development as "recollective" or a process of "inwardization," within the thematic unity of an epoch, of the self-consciousness achieved in previous epochs. The theme which constitutes the unity of postmedieval Enlightenment culture is this-worldly thinking, the rejection of the "alien manner" of Christianity for the self-responsible rationality which begins in Renaissance "observation." But this rejection and reorientation, a determinate negation of medieval Christian other-worldliness, signifies not a simple rejection of the past but rather the establishment of a new general orientation within which the past will be reappropriated. Hegel explicitly points out that "(a)"—the doctrine, articulated by Spinoza, of the unity of thought and extension as modes of the one substance—marks an "inwardization" and "revival" of the "substance" of the Oriental religion of "Light" (cf. chapter VII.A, especially a); "(b)," in turn, the opposing assertion by Leibniz (himself a Grepophile) of the primacy of the individual, would seem to mark a reappropriation of the individualism which is the underlying theme of the Greek ethical world (cf. chapter VI. A. a, b), expressed in the culmination of its religious art (cf. chapter VII. B, especially c); "(c)"—the primacy of the individual will as conscience—we have already seen to be an "inwardization" of Christianity, first in the social-political (chapter VI. B. III), then in the individual-moral sphere (chapter VI. C, especially b); "(d)," finally, is the rising to explicitness of that which, as the result of the movement which passes through these stages, marks the development of modern consciousness beyond them: the recognition of $I = I$. Seen in this way, modern consciousness represents the culmination of preceding history, a culmination which, as such, presupposes and results from a reappropriation of preceding history.

(ii) The fourth stage, or "(d)," within the interior development of the modern epoch is that which is articulated by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Hegel's remarks on this triad are obscure in their detail, but their general line of thought is visible. $I = I$, firstly, is the philosophical thematization of the essence of reality as this emerges in the assertion of the primacy of individual will in "(c)"; Fichte is the first, and Schelling the second, to bring to light the seminal truth of Kantian philosophy. This truth might

be generally expressed in several ways; for example, the external (extension) is a function of the internal (time), or reality is constituted by the active self-identity of consciousness. But, from Hegel's point of view, the articulations given by Fichte and Schelling to this principle are each one-sided. The absolute self-identity of consciousness, or of the self in consciousness, is, says Hegel, "the movement which reflects itself into itself";¹¹ by this phrase Hegel recalls the dialectical action of self-consciousness; the self-identity of the self in self-consciousness consists in its double action of distinguishing itself from itself (so that it is present to itself as other from itself) and cancelling or negating this distinction (so that it grasps this other as itself, or grasps itself as the unity of itself and the other). Fichte's conception of this process, Hegel's remarks suggest, one-sidedly emphasizes the moment of self-distinction and thus sets ego over against itself as other, emphasizing its character as self or subject constantly confronting itself as other than itself (the Fichtean "non-ego"); the categorical expression of this constant otherness, an otherness constantly "to be" overcome, is the temporality (and, more specifically, the future-orientedness) of experience. (See the preceding remarks on "time.") Schelling, by contrast with Fichte, one-sidedly emphasizes the cancelledness of this distinction, the "absolute unity" of self with itself—to the exclusion of its otherness; hence, for Schelling, the self appears not only as subject but also as substance, or rather as absolutely undifferentiated substance; by consequence, the diversity or otherness of experience must appear as merely contingent and, indeed, must disappear in the "empty abyss of the absolute"—this is the famous "night in which all cows are black." For Hegel, the reciprocal one-sidedness of the two articulations of self needs to be overcome in the recognition of both sides within the context of the whole movement of "spirit." In paragraph 804 he expresses synoptically the insight which underlies the movement of the whole *Phenomenology*, that selfless substance and insubstantial self are abstractions and express themselves as such, each by calling forth the other in a relationship which, precisely because it precedes either moment alone, expresses itself as the overcoming of their distinction in the emergence of a substantial self.

THE THREEFOLD BEGINNING

This emergence, the concluding achievement of the *Phenomenology*, is at the same time a threefold beginning. Hegel devotes his closing paragraphs (805–8) to the explication of this.

First, in having arrived at the concept—that shape of consciousness

which, transcending the distinction of object from subject, is substance become totally self-conscious or (in terms which, should we forget what the *Phenomenology* has brought us to, must sound absurd) being which is the thinking of itself—we are ready for an absolute ontology. In terms of the rhythm of transition and recommencement from chapter to chapter in the *Phenomenology*, we have come to a new shape of consciousness and must let it set forth its conception of reality. What distinguishes this new shape, however, is that, as substance or being become totally self-conscious, its conception of reality will be immediately the same as its self-conception; for the concept is consciousness existing as the very knowing which knows itself to be that which reality is and which is reality. We have arrived, then, at the unity of being and thinking which exists as the thinking which thinks itself and knows what it is. This thinking is the content of the first moment of the “system,” the *Logic*. As thinking, it presents itself in a process through moments; in fact, in its motion from “Being” through “Essence” to “Concept” it presents precisely the motion of God as presented in chapter VII—with the crucial qualification, however, that now there can be no estrangement of consciousness from its object, any inadequacy which will give rise to a new standpoint. Rather, the divine process is presented in its purely conceptual, dialectical necessity, a necessity which, because it derives from the object-subject unity itself and nothing external to it, is equally its freedom or self-determination. The key structural character of the *Logic* is that, in the presentation of each moment of the process of being thinking itself, the process as a whole is apparent and present-to-mind. There is no tension but rather a pure translucence which relates each moment to the process as a whole, such that the latter is fully contained and expressed in the former.

This purely conceptual motion, however, implies its own impurity as well. Or, to put this another way, precisely the unity of object and subject entails their disunity not only as aspects of explicit unity (as in the *Logic*) but also as actually torn apart from one another, as alien or abstract moments in non-philosophical life. That alienness, as the negation of the unity of the moments as moments, is precisely what is negated—and so, as we have seen, also preserved—in the attainment of absolute knowledge. For this reason, the *Logic* points both backward to the *Phenomenology* and forward to the second and third parts of the “system,” the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*.

The *Logic* points back to the *Phenomenology*, first of all, in that the alienness of object from subject will be the *hiddenness* from the subject of the identity it has with itself as object, or with the object which is itself. The result of this hiddenness is that reality appears, to the subject, solely as object. But just insofar as reality *appears to the subject* solely as object,

this very appearance entails the reality of the subject as well. This situation is, of course, that of sense-certainty, which takes being itself as its object and regards itself as a merely contingent, inessential moment. The *Logic*, then, returns us to the beginning of the *Phenomenology*; or, what is the same point, the standpoint of absolute knowledge or self-consciousness preserves within it, as that standpoint whose truth it is, the un-self-consciousness of immediate experience.

At the same time, Hegel also points out that this circle is not broad enough. Being is still, in immediate experience, related to consciousness as its object. But their absolute union for the concept (the last shape of consciousness) entails, as well, the absolute negation of their union, that is, the self utterly externalized. The utter externalization of the self, or of the unity of object-subject, is utter selflessness, and this Hegel identifies as, on the one hand, “nature,” wherein the self is outside of itself in the double sense of existing spread out in space and in continual development, and, on the other hand, “history,” wherein the self is outside of itself in the double sense of existing as a “free contingent happening” and, again, in continual development.

Now, these modes of non-union must, like the very union of which each is the negation, be *for the concept*; that is, the concept must, as the standpoint of *absolute* knowledge, know itself in its own selflessness, its own utter otherness. Precisely this being for itself completes the sense in which the concept *is* the standpoint of absolute knowledge. Hence the *Logic* fits together with the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the three together comprising the complete “system” of absolute knowledge.

This system, finally, is circular in form. This is the logical result of the double sense of selflessness or externality with regard both to space and to time. The concept or self in space, existing as natural being, is not only selfless but in continual abandonment of itself in its very selflessness—but this means: out of nature arises, as initially a natural being, conscious life or subject. Likewise, the concept or self in time, existing historically as “free contingent happening,” is not only selfless but in continual abandonment of its very selflessness—and this means: history is the process toward self-consciousness, the series of epochs or world-forms wherein, through each successive world’s “recollection” or “inwardization,” *Er-innerung*, of the preceding, consciousness gradually becomes self-conscious of itself as spirit and, in culmination of this becoming, attains the shape of the concept. Thus, the *Philosophy of Nature* points, through the *Philosophy of Spirit*, toward the *Logic*.

Our entryway into this systematic circle is, finally and to begin with, the *Phenomenology*, the propaedeutic to absolute knowledge.

NOTES

This essay was first published in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 7.2 (Winter 1978): 195–219. It is republished here with only minor revisions for the sake of clarity.

1. All the paragraph numbers (§) and quotations in this chapter refer to the translation by A. V. Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

2. § 656, p. 398.

3. Ibid.

4. See especially chapter V. Ca for Hegel's argument for this.

5. § 795, p. 483.

6. § 801, p. 487.

7. Ibid.

8. § 803, p. 488

9. Culmination of history does not, of course, mean its end (in the sense of absolute *terminus*). The trivial point to be observed here is that the achievement of absolute knowledge preserves, as its own medium, time; so time must be ongoing. More interestingly, Hegel's doctrine of epochs suggests that there may be a number of culminations and (as the corresponding forms of self-consciousness) relative absolutes. Does this open the way to the possibility that the achievement of absolute knowledge, or the concept, whereas absolute in the sense that it relativizes to itself all that precedes it, may also be partial in relation to a still more comprehensive standpoint that is yet to reveal itself? In pondering this question, it should be noted from the outset that its very language belongs to the history of consciousness of which the achievement of absolute knowledge is the culmination. If Hegel's doctrine of epochs is right, this is inescapable. Whether this implies the negation of the possibility or—what is quite different and may point to its affirmation—to the negation of our present ability to adequately entertain it is another question.

10. It is important to stress that Hegel's grasp of time does not produce a vision of man as atemporal. Though the grasp itself, self-consciously understood as the self-*qua*-concept's grasp of itself as such, transcends time, what it grasps is the fundamentality of time as the character of man-*qua*-consciousness in the process of self-development. What, however, is the specific structure of time? Four remarks might be made here. (1) Hegel does not *focally* address this question in the *Phenomenology*. (2) But, since the process of self-development is the processive reformation of man's relation to himself in experience, and since experience is, phenomenologically conceived, the appearance of this very relation to man himself, time will itself, though not necessarily *as such*, be given to man-*qua*-con-

sciousness. (3) The character of time as itself apparent will depend on the stage of self-development which man has attained. Hence, to construct an example, Oriental man (chapter VII. A) will experience time differently, have a different sense of temporality, than Enlightenment man (chapter VI. B); to make a rough characterization, a man who knows the self as divine nature will experience reality as cyclically repeating itself, whereas a man who knows the self as human fabricator will experience reality as open-endedly progressive. (4) The consciousness that knows itself as concept, finally, that is, as the unity of the process of self-distinction and self-reunion, will know time not only as the mode of the appearance of the self to itself *qua* subject *in* this process but, moreover, will, *as* that subject *in* process, experience reality as the movement of appropriation of substance. As *appropriating*, this subject will be *ongoing* and future-oriented; as *appropriating of substance*, it will be directed toward what it *already* is: thus time will have the structure of a revitalization, in the future, of the past, this itself being the whole character of the present. Notice here the unification of the characters of linear and cyclic motion, that is, of "advancing beyond . . ." and "returning to . . ."

11. § 803, p. 489.