

Winckelmann and Hegel on the Imitation of the Greeks

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Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) is generally acknowledged to be the founder of German neoclassicism – and with good reason. It was largely under the spell of his writings that many German thinkers, including those who went on to influence Hegel, began to develop an appreciation for the ancient Greeks. Herder, for example, recalls the invigorating effect that Winckelmann’s writings had on him: ‘I read them with a feeling like that of a youth on a fine morning, like the letter of a far-distant bride, from a happy time that is past, from a happy zone.’¹ In his autobiographical work, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe recalls the period of excitement during which anyone interested in art or antiquity ‘always had Winckelmann before his eyes’;² and during his famous trip to Italy, Goethe carried Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art* with him as his constant travelling companion. Lessing also marked his indebtedness when – after hearing of Winckelmann’s untimely death – he wrote that he would have gladly given several years of his own life so that the great man himself might live longer.³ While Winckelmann was not the first to recognize the significance of ancient Greece, he certainly articulated the meaning of the Greeks more vividly and convincingly than anyone had done before him. Without him, there would be no sense to Goethe’s dictum: ‘Jeder sei auf seine Art ein Grieche, aber er sei’s.’⁴

While few would dispute the far-reaching influence that Winckelmann had on the German intellectual climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some would question whether this influence allowed for a genuinely healthy understanding and appropriation of the Greek legacy. Indeed, a number of facts seem to suggest that Winckelmann’s own comprehension of the Greek ideal was rather shallow and empty. For example, Winckelmann continually emphasized direct experience over book-learning; but he never actually reached Greece in his travels, even when he was given the opportunity to do so. In his analysis and evaluation of classical Greek art, he relied almost entirely on Roman copies, and

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 AN: 468182 ; Harris, H. S., Baur, Michael, Russon, John.; Hegel and the Tradition : Essays in

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in many cases he misidentified the works in question. Most significant of all is his misidentification of the group sculpture called the *Laocoön*. Winckelmann praised the *Laocoön* as one of the greatest and most representative examples of classical excellence, but this work does not date from the classical period at all.⁵

According to some critics, the putative superficiality of Winckelmann's appropriation of the Greek legacy is just one instance of the emptiness that characterizes the appropriation of the Greeks by the Germans in general. Thus Eliza Maria Butler has spoken of the 'tyranny of Greece over Germany': 'If the Greeks are tyrants, the Germans are predestined slaves ... The Germans have imitated the Greeks more slavishly; they have been obsessed by them more utterly, and they have assimilated them less than any other race.'⁶

Not coincidentally, the putative freedom or unfreedom of one's appropriation of the Greek ideal is one of the basic problems at issue in this chapter. In the following pages, I argue that Winckelmann not only understood this basic problem but also touched on its actual solution, albeit in an inadequate, aesthetic manner. I go on to suggest that Hegel articulated this solution in an adequate and properly philosophical manner. But before addressing these larger issues, we must first consider the reasons for Winckelmann's admiration of the Greeks and the substance of his 'Greek ideal.'

It should be no surprise that what Winckelmann admired about the Greeks depended largely on how he approached them in the first place; part of his achievement lay in his ability to teach the Germans how to look at the Greeks in the right way. Combating what was a dominant tendency at the time, Winckelmann showed that art history should be much more than an arid taxonomy of cataloguing, numbering, and describing. For him, art should be treated as the spontaneous self-expression that arises from a people's particular situation, not as an external production that transpires above and beyond the flow of life itself. Thus in his two great works – *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* and *History of Ancient Art* – he shows that genuine appreciation of art cannot abstract itself from the historical, ethnic, geographical, climatic, social, and political conditions that give rise to art in the first place.

In spite of his sensitivity to the situatedness of the Greeks' self-expression in art, Winckelmann believed that any merely relativistic or subjectivistic understanding of artistic production would be entirely inadequate. For him, the Greek expression of beauty – though conditioned by many factors – is not to be understood as something arbitrary and idiosyncratic; classical Greek art is imbued with universal significance, and even truth. Accordingly, he despised the subjectivistic and eccentric art of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially that of Bernini and his followers. This kind of art tries to portray itself as being genuinely free and spontaneous, but it really only manifests the false

freedom of caprice and conceit. Thus Winckelmann speaks of contemporary artists with disdain: 'Nothing gains their approbation but contorted postures and action in which bold passion prevails. This they call art executed with spirit, or *franchezza*. Their favorite term is *contraposto*, which represents for them the essence of a perfect work of art. In their figures they demand a soul which shoots like a comet out of their midst.'⁷

The bivalence that Winckelmann knew and admired in Greek art – its situatedness and universality – points to the unique and overriding feature, which, according to him, made the Greeks great as a people. This was their enjoyment of what we might call 'situated freedom.' The freedom of the Greeks was not an empty and abstract ideal that had to be imposed on an otherwise unfree actual life; the Greeks' freedom was an essentially rooted freedom, growing naturally out of their lived sense of harmony with the world. This is why it expressed itself as spontaneous joy and love for life. The Greeks were great because theirs was a concrete universality and freedom that allowed for – in fact, implied – feeling and attachment. This unique harmony of self-determination and passion, composure and vitality, is what Winckelmann meant by the 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' (*edle Einfalt und stille Grösse*) of the Greeks.⁸

Given the substance of his Greek ideal, it is no wonder that Winckelmann continued to think of the Greeks on the basis of an essentially aesthetic paradigm. As Winckelmann showed, the freedom of the Greeks was natural and spontaneous, requiring no theoretical mediation or justification; and so it expressed itself naturally in the form of art. In his attachment to the Greeks, Winckelmann never departed from this aesthetic paradigm.

While many of Winckelmann's early followers may have had questions about the historical accuracy of his writings, few would have challenged the desirability of what he was espousing in those writings, namely, the harmonious unity of feeling and universality. The Greeks were great because of their situated freedom: what the Greeks knew as rational, free beings stood in natural harmony with what they felt as living, breathing beings. Though Winckelmann articulated his Greek ideal mainly in relation to the art of the Greeks, few contemporary Germans could resist thinking about this ideal in relation to their own society and its possible regeneration. Thus a common issue for Germany's contemporary *Volkserzieher* was that of overcoming the sense of alienation and purposelessness that accompanied modern detachment and artificiality.

As a young man, Hegel also aspired to be a *Volkserzieher* in the tradition of thinkers such as Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Schiller – all admirers of Winckelmann. And thus it is not surprising that Winckelmann's vision of Hellenic 'noble simplicity' should have found expression in the writings of the young Hegel. In

a school essay from August 1788 ('On some characteristics which distinguish ancient writers ...'), Hegel borrows several ideas from Christian Garve – another follower of Winckelmann – to express the essential difference between the Greeks and the moderns. The naturalness and simplicity of the Greeks, Hegel writes, make them superior to us moderns; while the Greeks could freely breathe the ether of their own, home-grown categories, we moderns must live on the alien and artificial turf of borrowed categories: 'Their whole system of education and *Bildung* was so constituted that everyone had derived his ideas from direct experience and 'the cold book-learning that is just expressed with dead signs in one's mind' they knew nothing of ... We learn, from our youth up, the current mass of words and signs of ideas, and they rest in our heads without activity and without use; only bit by bit through experience do we first come to know what a treasure we have and to think something with the words, although they are forms for us according to which we model our ideas; they already have their established range and limits, and are relations according to which we are accustomed to see everything.'⁹

Throughout his life, Hegel continued to be interested in the difference between the naturalness of the Greeks and the detachment of the moderns. In the 'Preface' to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel once again asserts this distinction: 'The manner of study in ancient times differed from that of the modern age in that the former was the proper and complete formation of the natural consciousness. Putting itself to the test at every point of its existence, and philosophizing about everything it came across, it made itself into a universality that was active through and through. In modern times, however, the individual finds the abstract form ready-made.'¹⁰

While reaffirming the basic difference between ancients and moderns, the author of the *Phenomenology* does not merely reiterate what he had claimed before. Now, instead of conceding the superiority of the Greeks, Hegel goes on to argue that modern abstractness and indirectness constitute a potential advantage. Clearly, some significant change took place in Hegel's thought between 1788 and 1807. The *Bildungsroman* that tells the complete story of that change is the two-volume work by H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development*. While the scope of the present chapter does not allow for any detailed treatment of that development, the trajectory of this development helps us understand Hegel's unique appropriation of Winckelmann's 'Greek ideal.' Two of Hegel's works from the 1790s can serve as signposts for us.

In his 'Tübingen Essay of 1793' (*Religion ist eine ...*), Hegel grapples with the question of how a folk-religion ought to be constituted. Among other things, Hegel writes, 'Its doctrines must be grounded on universal Reason,' but 'Fancy, heart, and sensibility must not thereby go away empty.'¹¹ Clearly, Hegel's basic

concern here is the possibility of recapturing, or perhaps even in some sense imitating, the original Greek unity of life and thought, of subjectivity and objectivity. After discussing his requirements for a properly constituted folk-religion, Hegel concludes this essay by suggesting a rather stark contrast between the Greeks and the moderns. In the final paragraph, he paints a sorry picture of what the modern world has become: 'A different Genius of the nations has the West hatched – his form is aged – beautiful he never was – but some slight touches of manliness remain still faintly traceable in him – his father [i.e., the historical tradition behind modern society] is bowed [with age] – he dares not stand up straight either to look round gaily at the world nor from a sense of his own dignity – he is short-sighted and can see only little things one at a time – without courage, without confidence in his own strength, he hazards no bold throw, iron fetters raw and ... [end of manuscript].'¹²

It is significant that Hegel returned to this final, unfinished paragraph and deleted it. This deletion suggests that in 1793 Hegel was beginning to realize that such a stark contrast would imply the impossibility of imitating the Greeks; and this in turn would suggest the futility of the *Volkserzieher's* task. Instead of drawing such pessimistic conclusions, Hegel sought a new way of conceiving the difference between the Greeks and the moderns. It is no accident that this renewed search coincides with an attempt by Hegel to move beyond the Kant-inspired moral-religious paradigm that governs the Tübingen essay.

Three years later, in a poem that he wrote for Hölderlin ('Eleusis,' composed in August 1796), Hegel once again touches on the issue of imitating the Greeks. In the main section of this poem (following the proem addressed to Hölderlin) Hegel addresses Ceres and recognizes that the original spirit of Greece is gone:

Doch deine Hallen sind verstummt, o Göttin!
 Geflohen ist der Götter Kreis zurück in den Olymp
 Von den geheiligten Altären,
 Geflohn von der entweihten Menschheit Grab
 Der Unschuld Genius, der her sie zauberte!

The natural wisdom of Greece cannot be recaptured by any 'Forschers Neugier,' or repetition of formulae. But while reflection (*der Gedanke*) is incapable of capturing what has been lost, there is a kind of intimation (*Ahnung*) that can be felt even in the modern period. Hegel thus concludes the poem on a hopeful note, as he senses the everlasting presence of the Goddess:

Du bist der hohe Sinn, der treue Glauben,
 Der, eine Gottheit, wenn auch Alles untergeht, nicht wankt.

Hegel's earlier contrast between the Greek world and the modern world is now moderated: while the spirit of Greece is not recoverable as the same actuality that it was for the Greeks, it has not vanished altogether. Furthermore, Hegel is now beginning to think of the possible imitation of the Greeks no longer in terms of a primarily moral-religious paradigm but in terms of an aesthetic paradigm. This aesthetic turn is confirmed not only by the poetic presentation of Hegel's thought here, but also by an observation that he made during that same year: 'I am now convinced that the highest act of Reason, the one through which it encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness only become sisters in beauty* ... Poetry gains thereby a higher dignity, she becomes at the end once more what she was at the beginning – *the teacher of mankind*.'¹³ If Kant's moral-religious outlook was the dominant paradigm for Hegel's expression of the Greek ideal in the Tübingen essay, then it is Schiller who informs Hegel's basic orientation in 1796. Just one year before his composition of 'Eleusis,' Hegel had read Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* with great enthusiasm and reported to Schelling on this work: 'It is a masterpiece.'¹⁴

These two works of Hegel from the 1790s suggest the importance of two interrelated questions with which he was struggling, and which helped to determine the eventual direction of his thought. Is it possible for us moderns to be like the Greeks? If so, how is this possibility to be envisioned – morally-religiously, aesthetically, or according to some other paradigm?

Before trying to answer these questions, we should consider the basic difficulty involved in the possible imitation of the Greeks by us moderns. It would seem that the very ideal that makes us admire the Greeks and want to be like them – their situated freedom – also makes it impossible for us to imitate them. When we ask how we can imitate the Greeks, we are asking how we can achieve a harmonious unity of objectivity and subjectivity, life and thought, belonging and universality, situatedness and self-determination. These are the harmonies that are lacking in our artificial modern society; if these were already actualities for us, then there would be no point in asking how we can imitate the Greeks. But since we are unlike the Greeks – and we are indeed unlike them, in so far as we are asking how we can become like them – then our imitating them would seem to rule out the possibility of our being free and self-determining, for following some exemplar that is external to us amounts to heteronomy, or unfreedom. The obvious implication is that we can never succeed in imitating the Greeks: they were free and self-determining, but in the very act of trying to imitate them, we would be heteronomous.

But the difficulty seems even more intractable than just this: even if we grant – for the sake of argument – that our following of the Greek ideal could be called free – in some sense, this freedom would be very different from the

situated freedom of the Greeks. Their freedom was spontaneous and unreflective (in Schiller's words, 'naïve'), arising naturally out of their lived world. This is why the freedom of the early Greeks stood in natural harmony with a sense of belonging; this is why the early Greeks did not have to address the problem of reconciling thought and passion, universality and attachment, objectivity and subjectivity. Their situated freedom was natural and spontaneous because it did not have to be achieved; it was not the result of any explicit reflection or deliberation. But the situation is quite different for us moderns, who address this issue as an explicit problem. As long as we have already raised the issue of *achieving* a situated freedom, then no matter what we do, any 'freedom' that we achieve will be a *result*; and for this reason, it will necessarily differ from the natural and spontaneous freedom of the Greeks. And without a genuinely situated freedom, there can be no true harmony between thought and passion, universality and attachment, subjectivity and objectivity. Thus no matter how we try, we seem to be condemned to the dualistic bind (in Schiller's terms, the 'sentimentality') that we moderns want to overcome in the first place. In fact, it is our very *trying* that condemns us to be *unlike* the Greeks.¹⁵

Despite his apparent obliviousness at times, it seems that Winckelmann himself was well aware of this difficulty. In perhaps his most famous statement of all, he presents a paradox: 'The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the Greeks.'¹⁶ Clearly, if we are not yet inimitable, and if we can putatively become so only through our imitation of the Greeks, then it would be impossible for us ever to become inimitable. For if there is not already something about us that makes us inimitable, then the procedure or technique that we would follow in becoming like the Greeks could in principle be followed (imitated) by someone else; and in that case we would not be inimitable. In other words, if we are to become inimitable by imitating the Greeks, then we ourselves could be imitated by someone else – unless, of course, there is already something about us which makes us inimitable; but this is not the case, since the very issue we are addressing is the issue of *becoming* inimitable.

The basic conundrum here is the same as the issue of freedom articulated above: the manner by which we would putatively become like the Greeks is the very thing that guarantees that we can never really be like them. The act (imitation) by which we would seek to be inimitable like the Greeks is the very act that guarantees that we cannot be inimitable (since, if we are not already inimitable, our imitating could itself be imitated). Similarly, the act (imitation) by which we would seek to be free like the Greeks is the very act that guarantees that we cannot be genuinely free (since we would only be following the lead of an exemplar outside ourselves).

If Winckelmann was aware of the basic difficulty at hand, he also seems to

have touched on its solution. Ironically, this solution emerges in what appears to be a statement of despair concerning the distance between the Greeks and ourselves. Winckelmann concludes his *History of Ancient Art* with reflections on the decline and disappearance of ancient Greece: 'Although in looking at this decline I felt almost like a person who in writing the history of his own fatherland had to touch on its destruction which he himself had experienced, I could not abstain from following the fates of these works as far as my eye would reach – just as a girl, standing on the shore of the ocean, looks with tears in her eyes after her departing lover, without any hope of ever seeing him again, believing to see his face in the distant sail. Like this girl, we have, as it were, only a shadowgraph of the object of our desire, which for this reason awakens an all the stronger longing.'¹⁷

There are several points worth noting here. First, by comparing himself to a girl as she watches her beloved sail away, Winckelmann expresses a certain scepticism and despair. Just like the tearful girl on the shore, he has no hope of seeing the object of his desire, no illusions concerning the inevitable pastness of the ancient Greek world. But this despair does not have a merely negative significance. In fact, the scepticism and despair actually point to their own overcoming. For as Winckelmann goes on to say, the very emptiness and insubstantiality of the object as such – the fact that it is a mere 'shadowgraph' for us – arouse our desire for the object all the more. In other words, our desire is not simply caused by an otherwise independent object or substantiality outside us; instead, it is bound up with the very emptiness or nothingness of the object as such.¹⁸ Thus our longing and desire are ultimately a function of who we ourselves are; there is something about us that explains our longing and desire for the lost object. But then who are we?

Winckelmann suggests an answer to this last question when he refers to the lost Greek world as his 'own fatherland.' In other words, we are offspring of the Greeks and already stand within the tradition initiated by them. Accordingly, the very emptiness and nothingness of the desired object – the apparently unfathomable distance between us and the bygone Greek world – tell us that this object does not stand entirely outside us after all. In fact, the feeling of distance and longing is possible for us only because a prior continuum of meaningfulness still binds us to the Greeks. If we did not already stand within such a tradition or continuum – if the object were a completely independent and alien other – then the object would have no significance for us; it would not be an object *for us* at all. But if that were the case, then we could not even appreciate the object, and thus the question of recovering or imitating the 'lost' object would never arise for us in the first place.

With this observation, the entire problematic of 'imitating' the Greeks is

transformed. In its immediacy, the notion of 'imitation' implies that there is some independently existing model or exemplar that we might decide to copy. It is precisely this conception of the issue that gave rise to the related problems of heteronomy and artificiality in the first place. But now, starting from Winckelmann's hints, we can see that this conception is wrong-headed; our 'imitation' of the Greeks cannot be a matter of following any model that is already given and essentially other than ourselves. Instead of following any alien other, we really follow only ourselves; but, contrary to the Enlightenment notion of freedom, this following of ourselves is not the hollow pursuit of an empty, abstract, and detached centre of subjectivity. We follow ourselves through the mediation of an other. In following ourselves, we are really only following the Greek legacy that is already alive in us. No matter how we might misconceive our longing for the Greeks, the fact remains that such longing presupposes a fundamental continuity between ourselves and the Greeks. Similarly, no matter how we might misconceive our own freedom, the fact remains that this freedom is already a situated freedom, such that our own self-determination is always actualized by virtue of the hidden legacy of the Greeks. This account thus reconfirms the basic truth already implied by the Platonic doctrine of Recollection: we could not follow the lead of an object outside us if that externality did not resonate with an ideal or exemplar already operative within us; and conversely, we could not recollect the ideal that is operative within us without the help of some external prompting or reminder.

Following Winckelmann's suggestions, we can see that the fundamental problem is the erroneous self-understanding implicit in modern subjectivism. Modern subjectivism sees the individual subject as essentially separate from all tradition and otherness; as a result, any act of freedom and originality by this subjectivity is necessarily understood as an act of arbitrariness or idiosyncrasy. The basic problem of modern subjectivism, then, is its inability to comprehend the essential unity of freedom and tradition, self-determination and otherness, spontaneity and receptivity, subjectivity and objectivity. Of course, Winckelmann does not use such terminology to explain the problem; but he does touch on these issues in his writings on aesthetics. Thus, contrary to modern subjectivism, he tries to express the possibility of a kind of following that is equally a form of self-following. In his 'Remembrance on the Observation of Works of Art,' he distinguishes between mere copying (*Nachahmen*), which is incompatible with genius and originality, and imitation (*Nachahmung*), which is compatible with these.¹⁹ In his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works*, he says that we are genuinely free only in so far as we follow the Greeks; thus the artist, in allowing the 'Greek rules of beauty to guide his hand and mind,' can 'become a rule unto himself.'²⁰ Does this following of the Greeks mean that we must follow some

pre-given method or set of rules? Not at all. We are free and capable of moving beyond any explicit set of guidelines given to us from the outside, precisely because we can recollect the Greek legacy that is already at work in us implicitly. Even Bernini – who erroneously taught his students to seek beauty primarily in nature – learned how to discover such beauty only through his prior acquaintance with Greek-inspired art: ‘It was this [Medicean] Venus therefore that taught him to discover beauties in nature which he had previously seen only in the statue and which, without the Venus, he would not have sought in nature.’²¹

Thus the expression of true freedom and originality in art – the ability to move beyond what is merely given in nature – is made possible by virtue of the Greek vision that we have inherited. Conversely, the abstract freedom of modern subjectivism reveals itself ultimately as a false freedom: in so far as it seeks to detach itself from every possible context, modern subjectivity is able to find real content for its own thinking and acting only in sources essentially external to itself. Thus the abstract freedom of modern subjectivism becomes the wayward freedom of detached caprice and conceit.

Winckelmann’s writings on art and aesthetics suggest that imitating the Greeks cannot be a matter of following some alien method or set of rules that we arbitrarily happen to adopt; or what amounts to the same thing, such imitation cannot consist in jumping out of our own subjectivity in order to emulate something external. Such an erroneous conception of the issue arises only if imitation is seen as a merely subjective act, which must be accomplished in a hermeneutical vacuum, and not as part of the self-explication of the very tradition to which we already belong. Indeed, if there were no continuum of meaningfulness between the Greeks and ourselves, then we could not imitate them. But then again, if there were no such continuum, we could not even understand the Greeks; and in that case, we could not even appreciate them, and thus the whole question of how we can be like them would never arise in the first place. The point is not to bridge a gulf between our own subjectivity and some external, desired objectivity, but rather to see the essential harmony or continuity of subjectivity and objectivity, of freedom and tradition.

Though Winckelmann had suggested the basic solution to the problem of ‘imitating’ the Greeks, he did not articulate this solution adequately. Remaining within the limits of his aesthetic paradigm, Winckelmann could express this solution only by pointing to various works of art, praising the Greek ones and criticizing the modern ones. To say that Winckelmann’s aesthetic orientation is limited does not mean that it is somehow ‘wrong,’ nor does it mean that an aesthetic sensibility is not necessary for genuine thought.²² To say that the aesthetic orientation is limited is to say that it is not adequate to the needs of the time, the needs of the modern period, which presupposes the priority of rational

subjectivity. To modern subjectivity, Winckelmann's mere pointing to the excellence of Greek art could only appear as subrational and dogmatic, for such pointing presupposes that the audience already feels the essential harmony of reason and tradition, freedom and belonging; but it is precisely this felt harmony that is missing in the modern world. Winckelmann's aesthetic paradigm is thus inadequate, since it cannot speak to the needs of the time; his mere pointing will appear to the modern mind as aristocratic, impersonal, and antipathetic to individuality and rational protest.

In so far as Winckelmann seeks to show the essential harmony of reason and tradition, subjectivity and objectivity, by merely pointing to great works of art, he remains insufficiently Platonic (in spite of his deep sensitivity to so many Platonic themes and tropes). Unlike Winckelmann, Plato does not begin by presupposing in his intended audience a felt harmony between subjectivity and objectivity. Plato begins rather with the standpoint of the unconverted knower: this is the standpoint of difference, limitedness, and alienation. According to this standpoint, the individual knower claims to possess determinate knowledge about a determinate object which remains essentially different from, and external to, the knower. Plato starts with this assertion of difference and shows how this difference could not be known as a difference (and the unconverted knower could not claim to have knowledge of anything at all) without a prior, non-mediated harmony between the knower and what is knowable. More specifically, Plato's procedure is to begin with the standpoint of alienated, one-sided subjectivity and to show discursively (in terms intelligible to such subjectivity) that such a standpoint is in fact one-sided and partial.

Following Plato, we can make some general observations about the similarities and differences between philosophy and aesthetics. Like the aesthete, the philosopher's task is to present an intuition of the fundamental continuity between the self and its other; but unlike the aesthete, the philosopher must present this intuition in the medium of conceptual articulation (in the medium of discursivity and difference). The philosopher and the aesthete aim towards the same subject-object unity, but the philosopher provides the discursive, conceptual ladder by which the unconverted individual subject might also head towards this goal.²³ It is only with the help of such a ladder that the unconverted individual knower can consciously and deliberately (without ceasing to be an individual knower) think and act in accordance with the subject-object unity that is necessary for its own knowing.

Against what has been said above on behalf of philosophy, the aesthete might argue that the kind of subject-object continuity or unity at issue here is simply incompatible with discursive articulation, that the giving of reasons necessarily

conditions, limits, and relativizes a subject-object unity that is supposed to be immediate, underived, and absolute.²⁴ Accordingly, the aesthete may contend that the philosopher's task of presenting an intuition of the continuity of the self and its other in the medium of conceptual articulation is impossible. If the aesthete's objection holds, then it would indeed be impossible to demonstrate the one-sidedness of modern subjectivity in terms that are intelligible to that subjectivity.

Against the aesthete's objection, the philosopher can have only one proper response: one cannot demonstrate that the philosopher's task is possible without enacting that task as an actuality. To use an Aristotelian turn of phrase: the possibility of the desired presentation is to be shown only by its actuality. This is exactly how Fichte argues in his 'First Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*': 'Proofs of the impossibility of a project that will be accomplished, and in part already is so, are simply ridiculous. One has only to attend to the course of the argument, and examine whether or not it fulfills its promise.'²⁵

Following Fichte, we can begin to understand how philosophy is able to present a discursive, conceptual articulation of the subject-object continuity to which Winckelmann merely points. But first, we should not overlook the fact that Winckelmann and Fichte are strikingly similar in their basic questions and answers. Winckelmann's central question is that of how we can be free and yet also follow an ideal or exemplar that is apparently external to and different from ourselves (the ancient Greeks). Fichte's central question concerning the conditions of the possibility of knowledge exhibits the same logical structure as Winckelmann's question. Fichte asks: how can the I be absolutely for-itself, self-related, free, and self-positing (I=I) and yet also have an object (not-I) present to it that apparently provides all determinate content for the I's knowing and acting?

The answers that Winckelmann and Fichte give to their respective questions are fundamentally the same. Winckelmann suggests that we can imitate the Greeks and still be free, because our orientation towards the Greeks is not caused by any alien or independent objectivity; in fact, we could not desire to be like the Greeks if there were not already a continuum of meaning that binds us to them. Our freedom is always a situated freedom, and thus our following of the Greeks is actually a self-following: in following the Greeks, we are really only following the Greek legacy that is already alive in us. Fichte also denies any ultimate difference or discontinuity between subjectivity and its intended object. He argues that the appearance of the otherness of a not-I for the I cannot be explained adequately by an appeal to a thing-in-itself that is completely alien to the self-positing I; if the object were an entirely independent other, then it could never appear as an object for the I. In denying the existence of a thing-in-itself,

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Fichte implicitly affirms a fundamental continuity between subjectivity and objectivity. As with Winckelmann, his question is not that of how one can move from within the confines of one's own subjectivity towards an alien object on the outside; it is rather that of how one can articulate (finite) subjectivity properly, in a manner that allows for the fundamental continuity between subjectivity and objectivity.

Both Winckelmann and Fichte affirm that the other could not appear to the self as a genuine other without some prior continuity or unity between subjectivity and objectivity. But while Winckelmann merely points to the existence of this continuity, Fichte (the philosopher) must problematize it. For Fichte, the unqualified assertion of this continuity would imply the destruction of consciousness; for consciousness requires a difference between knower and known, between subjectivity and objectivity. This difference, however, seems to contradict the subject-object continuity that is equally a necessary condition of consciousness. The identity and difference of subjectivity and objectivity (both necessary conditions of conscious selfhood) seem to be fundamentally incompatible; and thus the possibility of consciousness itself appears to be undermined. Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is an extended reflection on how consciousness is possible, if it requires the difference and non-difference of subjectivity and objectivity. And Fichte's answer takes him beyond the limits of Winckelmann's aesthetic intuitionism.

Fichte argues that the fundamental identity-in-difference of subjectivity and objectivity cannot be presented adequately in the form of a simple, fixed intuition or proposition, but can be expressed and conceived only as an ongoing activity. In this regard, Fichte is like Plato, who showed that the Forms could never be encapsulated once and for all in simple, fixed definitions but must be manifest in the ongoing activity of the soul's eternal dialogue with itself. Also like Plato, Fichte argues that the ongoing activity that manifests the fundamental identity-in-difference of subjectivity and objectivity is essentially recollective: the philosopher must always work backward, from conditioned to conditions, and thus Fichte describes his entire *Wissenschaftslehre* as 'a pragmatic history of the human mind.'²⁶ For both Fichte and Plato, the philosopher's task is to provide a discursive, conceptual articulation of a subject-object unity that is not relative or conditioned, and the only way that this can be achieved is through ongoing, self-recollective activity.

While Fichte moves beyond the limits of Winckelmann's aesthetic presentation of the continuity of subjectivity and objectivity, he falls short of a completely adequate conceptual presentation of that continuity. As we have seen, Fichte's denial of the existence of the thing-in-itself amounts to an affirmation of

a fundamental continuity between subjectivity and objectivity; if there is no thing-in-itself, then there can be no absolute divide between subjectivity and objectivity. According to Fichte, however, one can arrive at knowledge of this subject-object continuity (and of the non-existence of the thing-in-itself) only by virtue of a purely subjective act, which is independent of and indifferent to all objectivity; this purely subjective act is not a 'leap' into the aesthetic intuition that Winckelmann affirms, but rather a 'leap' into the 'intellectual intuition' of one's own freedom. Accordingly, Fichte argues that the two philosophies of dogmatism and idealism are absolutely incompatible²⁷ and that reason itself can provide no principle for choosing between idealism (according to which there is no thing-in-itself) and dogmatism (according to which there is a thing-in-itself).²⁸

In arguing this way, Fichte manifests his failure to present a fully adequate, discursive articulation of the continuity between subjectivity and objectivity. Fichte argues against the existence of a thing-in-itself and thus affirms the basic continuity of subjectivity and objectivity; nevertheless, he also argues that the individual's coming to know of such a continuity can take place only through a purely subjective act, entirely independent of and indifferent to the objectivity with which one's subjectivity is allegedly continuous. In arguing for idealism, Fichte affirms the basic continuity of subjectivity and objectivity, but in requiring a 'leap' into the standpoint of idealism he reaffirms their discontinuity. In spite of his great achievement, Fichte remains trapped within the confines of modern subjectivism.

In order to affirm the continuity of subjectivity and objectivity (and do so in a manner consistent with the demands of conceptual articulation), one must show that the individual subject's own coming-to-know of that continuity is not just a purely subjective act (as it is in Fichte), but is equally a development of objectivity itself. Furthermore, if one remains true to the essential continuity of subjectivity and objectivity, then one must also acknowledge that a transformation in one's own self-interpretation (one's own coming-to-see the basic continuity of subjectivity and objectivity) necessarily entails a transformation in the objectivity in relation to which one understands oneself. Just as we moderns are not completely separated from the legacy of the Greeks, so too the content of the Greek experience is not entirely different from the content of our own modern experience.

Thus, contrary to the sentimental view of the Greeks implied above, we must acknowledge that the Greek experience does not preclude all possible struggle and effort. In other words, the situated freedom of the Greeks does not amount to a complete identity of subjectivity and objectivity. Indeed, if the Greek experience entailed the complete identity of subjectivity and objectivity, then it could

not be called conscious experience at all. The ancient Greek experience differs from our modern experience, but not because the Greeks were somehow immune to all struggle and effort; the possibility of such struggle and effort is a necessary accompaniment to the unity-in-difference of subjectivity and objectivity, which in turn is the necessary condition of all conscious experience. It is by virtue of this subject-object continuity that both the Greeks and we can enjoy our situated freedom. The real difference between them and us is that we moderns have been alienated from our natural existence and can now articulate and justify the universal validity of such situated freedom over against all other ideals of human knowing and acting.

It is no coincidence that the movement that has just been enacted in this essay replicates the fundamental movement in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The *Phenomenology* articulates a movement whereby we readers observe the articulated coming-to-be of the identity-in-difference of philosophical (observing) consciousness and the object of philosophical consciousness (ordinary consciousness); but this movement is the same movement that manifests the coming-to-be of the identity-in-difference of ordinary consciousness and the object of ordinary consciousness. In this essay, we have learned of the continuity (identity-in-difference) of ourselves (as modern philosophical consciousness) and the ancient Greeks (as ordinary consciousness). But we could not consistently conceive of this continuity without acknowledging the identity-in-difference of Greek subjectivity (ordinary consciousness) and its objectivity (the object of ordinary consciousness). In acknowledging this latter identity-in-difference, we have had to acknowledge the possibility of struggle, tension, and effort, even within the Greek experience, and thus we have had to abandon our idealized and sentimental notion of the Greeks.²⁹

The modern manner of imitating the Greeks must be actualized principally through the comprehension of freedom and tradition together in genuine self-knowledge. This is precisely the approach that is developed in Hegel's 'science of the experience of consciousness.' By 1807, Hegel realized that our possible imitation of the Greeks must be comprehended philosophically. As Socrates had shown over two thousand years ago, the *Volkserzieher* must be a philosopher, for only philosophy adequately combines an intuition of the continuity of ourselves and tradition (subjectivity and objectivity) with conceptual articulation of such continuity (an articulation that presupposes distance and difference). It is significant that Hegel did not learn this lesson directly from Socrates. He developed this position only in the early 1800s, as he was beginning to reconceptualize the meaning of Christianity and its significance for modern self-consciousness.³⁰

Throughout the 1790s, Hegel had generally felt that the interiority and other-

worldliness of Jesus made the Christian ethos inferior to the public life-style of Socrates. But by the early 1800s, Hegel had realized that humanity must follow Jesus in breaking away from its natural and immediate attachment to the world. Consciousness must alienate itself from its natural and unreflective existence in order to know itself in its universality.

This realization also explains another significant transformation in Hegel's thought leading up to 1807. As we saw above, the early Hegel felt that the abstractness and detachment of modern consciousness made it inferior to the natural spontaneity of the Greeks. But now, this abstractness and this detachment are seen to give modern consciousness a potential advantage; for it is only through such separation or alienation that we can grasp consciousness in its universality and absoluteness. We moderns can articulate the meaning of subjectivity with a conceptual universality that was simply not possible for the ancient Greeks.

Because of its lack of reflectivity, the natural consciousness of the ancient Greeks could see the emergence of subjectivity only as a threat to its own life, and so Socrates had to be put to death. Conversely, the French Revolution had to result in the deadly Terror because the empty and abstract subjectivity that inspired it refused to acknowledge the finitude and death that belongs to its own universality. Now, following Hegel, we can comprehend an absolute subjectivity that necessarily acknowledges finitude and death within itself, and it is precisely through this acknowledgment that we can have everlasting life. Ironically, some of the most basic elements of Hegel's Christian philosophy were already suggested by the staunchly pagan and unphilosophical Winckelmann. And thus what Winckelmann wrote of the artist is equally true of his own achievement: he has been able to 'leave our minds with more than he has shown our eyes.'³¹

Notes

- 1 Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Denkmahl Johann Winckelmanns 1778,' in *Sämmtliche Werke*, hrsg. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1892), VIII, 441.
- 2 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Werkausgabe*, V; *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1981), 295.
- 3 Letter of 5 July 1768 to Friedrich Nicolai, in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämmtliche Schriften*, hrsg. Karl Lachmann und Franz Muncker (Stuttgart: Göschen Verlag, 1886–1924), XVII, 255.
- 4 Quoted in Henry Hatfield, *Aesthetic Paganism in German Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 4–5.
- 5 See Wolfgang Leppmann, *Winckelmann* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 117.

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- 6 E.M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 6.
- 7 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), 37.
- 8 Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 33.
- 9 Quoted in H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development I: Toward the Sunlight (1770–1801)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 37–8.
- 10 *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.
- 11 This essay is printed as an 'Appendix' to Harris, *Toward the Sunlight*, 481–507.
- 12 Printed in *ibid.*, 152 and 507.
- 13 G.W.F. Hegel, 'Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism' ('Eine Ethik'), translated and printed as an Appendix to *ibid.*, 510–12.
- 14 G.W.F. Hegel, Letter of 16 April 1795, in *Briefe von und an Hegel*, hrsg. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 1, 24.
- 15 The question concerning how we should try to imitate the Greeks is similar to Rousseau's question about how the particular will of the individual can fully alienate itself and thereby subject itself entirely to the general will of the body politic. The problem seems intractable: as long as the particular will acts consciously and deliberately (as a particular will) at all, then it falls short of subjecting itself entirely to the general will; for such consciousness and deliberation entail that the particular will withholds at least one thing from the general will – namely, its own decision-making capacity. Variations on this problem appear throughout Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. See, for example, Hegel's treatment of the Changeable in relation to the Unchangeable (in the section on the Unhappy Consciousness) and his discussion of the 'education' of the individual consciousness to the point of view of universal (cosmopolitan) consciousness (in the section on *Bildung*). In this chapter, I follow Hegel in trying to show that what is antinomic for the understanding (in this case, the notion of imitating the inimitable) can become the starting point for genuinely speculative thought.
- 16 Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 5.
- 17 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums nebst einer Auswahl seiner kleineren Schriften* (Heidelberg: Weiss, 1882), 298.
- 18 According to some critical observers, this implies that the German fascination with the Greeks is fundamentally narcissistic. The charge of narcissism bears on several significant issues pertaining to neoclassicism, romanticism, and idealism; however, the narrow scope of this chapter does not allow for adequate treatment of these issues.
- 19 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 'Erinnerung über die Betrachtung der Werke der
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- Kunst,' in *Sämtliche Werke*, hrsg. Joseph Eiselein (Donauöschingen: Verlag deutscher Classiker, 1825–9), I, 206.
- 20 Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 21–3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 22 As H.S. Harris has shown, an aesthetic sensibility is indeed required for genuine thought; Harris has demonstrated this both performatively (through his manner of interpretation) and more specifically in his analysis of Hegel's famous statement of 1796: 'I am now convinced that the highest act of Reason, the one through which it encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness only become sisters in beauty* – the philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet.' In his later thought, Hegel no longer considered the highest act of Reason to be aesthetic, but he 'never retreated from the view that the philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as a major poet.' See H.S. Harris, 'The Resurrection of Art,' *The Owl of Minerva*, 16 (Fall 1984), 5–20.
- 23 See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 14.
- 24 What the aesthete says here about the underived unity of subjectivity and objectivity echoes what (according to Hegel) Sophocles says in *Antigone* about the unwritten and infallible laws of the gods: 'They *are*. If I inquire after their origin and confine them to the point whence they arose, then I have transcended them; for now it is I who am the universal and *they* are the conditioned and limited.' See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 261.
- 25 J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 28.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 198–9.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 29 In arguing thus, I am echoing what Patricia Fagan says, in chapter 1, above, about philosophical history: 'History in the fullest sense must see its object both as itself and as external to itself.'
- 30 See H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development II: Night Thoughts (Jena 1801–1806)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 558–9. It is possible that Hegel's work on logic during the early 1800s forced him to reconsider the significance of Christianity for modern self-consciousness; however, an exact determination of the relevant influences is a matter for further research.
- 31 Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 69.