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Freedom and Thought: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness

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1 Introduction

Section B of the Self-Consciousness moment is subdivided into three figures (*Gestalten des Bewußtseins*): Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness. According to Hegel's intentions, they are presented as further specifications of the section's general theme "Freedom of Self-Consciousness." In Hegel's introductory outline of this theme, the word "freedom" does not appear. Rather Hegel uses the adjective "free," once to qualify self-consciousness and once to qualify thought. In effect, thought constitutes the central theme of the introduction. It may seem strange that only at this point in Hegel's phenomenological investigation is thought made an explicit theme. In reality, looking back at the phenomenological figures that have already been presented, one can find some good reasons why thought, in its specifically Hegelian sense, doesn't constitute a manifestation of figures of consciousness such as "Sense-Certainty" or "Perception." It seems rather more difficult to accept the absence of thought in a figure like "Understanding." And yet, as Hegel shows, as long as the understanding or intellect is identified with the activity that abstracts, that separates the subject from the object, that isolates parts from the whole and crystallizes them into mutually independent entities, it is correct to say that the intellect does not exactly think. The activity of thought, as conceived by Hegel, is presented as the complement to the workings of the intellect. Thought in fact aims to gather and express the unity of the being and of the knowledge of it, of the subject and the object, and the multiplicity of the parts within a totality which is articulated in itself and by itself. Even in the figures of section A of Self-Consciousness, thought is still latent, both in the more natural aspects of life and in the movement of desire and longing, as well as in the struggle for recognition, and in the dialectic of the lord and the bondsman. Yet precisely through this dialectic all these elements mature, in the

experience of the observed consciousness, and once they are reintegrated, they make possible the manifestation of thought.

The elements brought into play by the dialectic of lord and bondsman are the following: on one side there is the lord as “being-for-itself,” meaning a consciousness which is in immediate relation with itself while enjoying the fruits of the bondsman’s labor; on the other side there is the servile consciousness which, through work, impresses its own form, “being-in-itself,” on things and upon objectivity in general. The more the servile consciousness has been fearful before the lord, not for this or that particular thing but because its whole being has been seized with dread, the more its work not only deals with the individual particular thing, but concerns the whole field of objectivity and is a universal configuring. The crux upon which the fashioning of thought depends is mainly the servile consciousness. When it becomes aware that the “being-for-itself” of the lord is no longer something outside of itself, but is within itself in the form of an absolute negative (the fear of Death), and when in the “being-in-itself” of the objectivity formed by its own work it becomes aware of its own form and thus is aware of itself in a positive significance, then through this unification of the “being-for-itself” and the “being-in-itself” thought may be fashioned. For there to be thought requires that the “being-in-itself” of things and the “being-for-itself” of consciousness are no longer distributed into separate and independent entities; it requires that they are recognized as identical in the unity of consciousness. Only when “the aspect of being-*in-itself* or *thinghood*, which the form receives through work, is no other substance than consciousness,” says Hegel, is a new figure of “self-consciousness . . . born” (PS 116.22–25/M 120).¹ The essence of this new figure does not depend on another consciousness or on thinghood in general, as is the case both with the lord and the bondsman, who depend reciprocally upon each other and on things. Since this consciousness is solely indebted to its own essence and this essence is expressed as “infinity, or the pure movement of consciousness” (PS 116.25–26/M 120), the consciousness which is now present is one “which *thinks*, or is free self-consciousness” (PS 116.26–27/M 120).

Consider the equivalences Hegel here proposes on the one hand between the infinitude of consciousness and the pure movement of consciousness, and on the other hand between consciousness which thinks and free self-consciousness. Both equivalences help clarify what for him is the essence of thought. We know that for Hegel, especially in his Jena years, infinity is a key word in his dialectic.² The infinite for Hegel is not “something” to be placed alongside or outside the finite, rather it is the act with which everything finite, and thus every limit, transcends itself in its being. Thus the infinite is movement, it is the absolute dialectical unrest that does not allow the finite to remain satisfied by itself, but drives it beyond itself, to integrate it with its proper opposite. This movement of self-transcendence gives the purest insight into consciousness, not as one special property among others, but as constitutive of its essence. In fact, consciousness could not possess knowledge of limits or of finitude if the unlimited and infinite were not present in it. This then is thought. It is not possible to limit thought (to paraphrase Wittgenstein 1922, Foreword), because it would be necessary to think of both

sides of the limit and then go beyond the limit we have set. In as much as consciousness gains independence, this movement to overcome the limited and the finite is no longer subject to an external power; it is self-consciousness acting freely. As we can see, the key to the passage to free self-consciousness and to thought lies in the relationship of consciousness to objectivity. First consciousness must form the things, be aware of itself in those things through itself, and only then may it grasp itself as self-consciousness that thinks (see Westphal 1989, 160–2).

At this point Hegel can present the definition of thinking:

For not as *abstract* “I,” but as “I” which at once has the significance of being-*in-itself*, to be to itself the object, or to relate to the objective essence in such a way that this objective essence has the significance of the *being-for-itself* of the consciousness for which it is, is called *thinking*. (PS 116.27–30/M 120)

This is a very important definition, which epitomizes the result of the lord–bondsman dialectic. In thinking, the I is the object of itself, though not like the abstract “I think” that accompanies, as Kant says, all of my representations (CPR B131). It is an I that finds itself in objectivity and, conversely, deals with objectivity as characterized by the same movement of the “being-for-itself” which belongs to the I. This identity of the subjective and the objective, in which the form of subjectivity expresses the same constitution of objectivity, is what Hegel calls “concept” (*Begriff*). Hegel stresses both sides of this identity.

About a concept’s identity with objectivity Hegel states:

To thought the object moves . . . in *concepts*, that is, in a differentiated being-in-itself, which for consciousness is immediately nothing different from consciousness. . . . a concept is at once something *extant*, – and this distinct [being], insofar as it is in itself, is the concept’s determinate content, – however, in that this content is at once conceptually comprehended (*begriffen*), consciousness remains *immediately* conscious of itself in its unity with this determinate and differentiated extant being . . . (PS 116.30–117.6/M 120)

As one can see, according to Hegel the concept is not abstract and empty, but is determined and differentiated in itself. Its differences, immediately present to consciousness, are nothing different from the concrete articulations of what *is*, what exists in the world.

Here, as in every other place of his thinking, Hegel neatly distinguishes between “concept” (*Begriff*) and “representation” (*Vorstellung*). This distinction does not imply that these two notions, concept and representation, are mutually extraneous; on the contrary, for Hegel the duty of philosophy consists essentially of the transformation of representations into concepts. It is particularly significant that he mentions this relationship precisely at the moment in which self-consciousness, being free, is raised to thought. A key characteristic of representation, according to Hegel, is that in it consciousness must especially bear in mind that a determinate representation is “its” representation (PS 117.6–8/M 120). Consciousness is aware of the content of a representation as “placed before” it (*Vor-gestellt*), as something other than itself, something found and external. A special mediation is

necessary before consciousness takes up that content into itself as its own product. Having a representation requires connecting the internal image of something to the memory of the external, sensory intuition that occasioned its manifestation. Only by recognizing that the image, the memory of the intuition, and the process that connects one to the other belong to its intrinsic being, can consciousness repossess the representation from the external being and posit it as “its” own. Completely different from this is the way in which a concept is present in consciousness. A concept is pure thought, not mixed with representations or sensory images; it has a determinate content which constitutes its “being” distinct from consciousness. In as much as the content is grasped as a concept (and not as a representation), it is not distinct from consciousness and is immediately unified with it. In other words, with concepts consciousness has no need to institute a special reflection to recall that the representation “has the form of being something other”; a concept is consciousness’s own production: “the concept is to me immediately *my* concept” (PS 116.30–117.8/M 120). For this reason consciousness raised to thought is not only self-consciousness but free self-consciousness. It is “free,” because that which, as a determinate content of thought, is distinctive and different from consciousness, is nevertheless something that within which consciousness is aware of and is in unity with itself. Thus, according to Hegel, what is free is what is able to recognize itself in its otherness and thus to remain by itself even in that which it presents as other:

In thinking I am *free*, because I am not in an other, but remain simply with myself, and the object, which to me is the essence, is in undivided unity my being-for-myself, and my movement in concepts is a movement within myself. (PS 117.8–12/M 120)

According to this particular dialectic, which is active throughout the entire phenomenological process, Hegel takes care to underline that the identity of thought and being is manifest only *in itself* or *for us* (PS 116.20/M 120), which is to say, this identity is apparent for knowledge that is not a prisoner of the limitations of consciousness but which already moves at the level of absolute knowledge. The observed consciousness, on the other hand, has a long way to go before it can reach that goal and thus the identity of the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself is presented here in a very general way. Consciousness is object to itself as “*thinking* consciousness in general”; it is far from knowing how to develop its objective side in the fullness of its articulation, “in the development and movement of its manifold being” (PS 117.17–18/M 121). It considers thought “initially only as universal essence in general” (PS 117.16–17/M 121). Historically, this speculative position has been realized in Stoicism, the first phenomenological figure of this section.

2 Stoicism

The reference to the historically determinate philosophical positions of Stoicism and Skepticism is unique in Hegel’s phenomenological process, which is replete

with uninterrupted dialogue with traditional philosophical thought. However, even when the identity of Hegel's interlocutor is sometimes absolutely evident, Hegel generally avoids explicitly identifying philosophers or schools of thought. The *Phenomenology* is not a work of philosophical historiography, but the philosophies which appeared historically are used as examples of figures of consciousness which may appear in different epochs.

The exemplary value of Stoicism consists primarily in its principle, which announces the correct conviction "that consciousness is essentially a thinking being, and something counts for it as essential or true or good only insofar as within it consciousness relates to itself as a thinking being" (PS 117.21–23/M 121). However, this has as an immediate counterpoint: "to the question put to it of what is good and true, it replies by repeating the *contentless* thought, that the true and the good consist in rationality" (PS 118.29–31/M 121). Thus Stoic thought does not take intimately concrete form in the living world; instead it is thought in general which has abstracted from the differences among things and has withdrawn into its pure form, "in which nothing determines (or specifies) itself" (PS 118.32–33/M 122) and which is "*indifferent* regarding natural existence" (PS 118.11–12/M 122). For this reason, because it is affected by the unresolved duality between the pure form of thought and the world that actually exists, Stoicism is a form of *consciousness*; it is characterized by the dualism of subject and object, which typifies consciousness as such.³

Stoicism behaves negatively towards the immediately preceding figures, the lord and the bondsman. It does not in fact identify with either the lord, in the moment that he who commands finds himself in some way dependent on he who is commanded, or with the bondsman who is subjected through fear to the service of the lord. The stoic knows that to be truly free one cannot command or be commanded and he believes it possible to achieve this condition only if "it constantly *withdraws* itself out of the movement of existence, out of effects and out of passions, into *the simple essentiality of thought*" (PS 117.37–39/M 121). Through this withdrawal from the world, the stoic is "to be free, whether on the throne or in chains, within all the dependency of his individual existence" (PS 117.36–37/M 121). This does not mean that Stoicism is completely disengaged from the lord–bondsman dialectic; on the contrary, its negative behavior towards it indicates its persistence in an essential relationship with it. Just how much this is so Hegel renders explicit when he underlines this withdrawal into a pure universality of thought "that could appear as a universal form of the world-spirit only in the time of universal fear and bondage, though also universal culture which has achieved the level of thought" (PS 118.3–6/M 121).

Even if the phenomenological figures do not generally indicate so much of an historical pathway as a "trajectory of essence" (Sherman 1999, 104), it is evident that the epoch of general fear and slavery to which Hegel here alludes, is that age of Roman history in which, alongside imperial despotism, a rich cultural life bloomed, including philosophy. In reality it has to do with a philosophy which is imported, in a manner of speaking, because it was born elsewhere. It was born in Greece and at the moment of its formation it was in a certain way foreordained

for a world yet to come. The philosophy of the great stoic, skeptic, and epicurean masters was in fact able to conform perfectly to the Roman world, and in particular to the imperial age. When the state structure became oppressive and autocratic enough that the more noble spirits felt disgust for the reality at hand, there emerged the need to search within themselves for the good and just things trampled under in real life. The harmony cultured Roman classes felt with Stoicism was based upon finding the freedom of which they had been deprived inside their own consciousnesses and in the abstract universality of thought. But this consciousness had by now lost the capacity for producing bonds in the community where they could recognize each other and also be recognized by them. What took its place was the need to withdraw into themselves in order to try to maintain their individuality by anchoring it to thought in its pure form (*PS* 261.16–33/*M* 290). But because pure thought lacks “the fullness of life” (*PS* 118.14/*M* 122), freedom of thought obtained in this manner was only the thought of freedom, incapable of actualizing itself in any concrete form.

Taking refuge from the actual world in the abstract thought of freedom constitutes the fundamental limit of Stoicism, according to Hegel. This limit was made embarrassingly evident because it fell apart when asked about the criteria of truth regarding the contents of thought. Once Stoic thought had made every content abstract, it could respond with nothing more than empty, boring platitudes (*PS* 118.27–36/*M* 122). The indifference to reality, the radical detachment from passions and from particular goals, in fact results in leaving things as they are and thus constitutes no genuine negation of the extraneousness of the world, though this negation is required by the essence of Stoic thought. To be genuine, this negation would have to penetrate the totality of its natural being in such a way as to eliminate every remnant of extraneousness and to allow consciousness to become filled with the wealth of concrete life. In reality, because consciousness is withdrawn into itself from its being, “it has not achieved the absolute negation of otherness within itself” (*PS* 118.38–119.1/*M* 122). The experience of the negativity of the thought, which presents itself in Stoicism as a unilateral and unfinished fulfillment of freedom, is brought to full expression in the second figure of this section: Skepticism.

3 Skepticism

Compared to the preceding phenomenological figures, Stoicism corresponds to the independence demanded by the figure of the lord, while Skepticism corresponds to those attitudes in which consciousness achieves a negative behavior toward otherness, in particular toward the appetites and the fashioning of the bondsman. Yet, as Stoicism in abstract thought reaches a first stage of that independence which is merely prefigured by the lord, Skepticism overcomes incapacity both in appetite and in the fashioning of the bondsman to achieve a total negation of whatever is other than consciousness. Skepticism may finalize the dissolution of otherness and the independence of things, because it does not regard

them from an initial finite, limited position, but rather from what has been demonstrated to be the essence of self-consciousness: “*thought*, or infinity.” To the infinity of thought, all independent existences and their differences, “are only as vanishing quantities” (PS 119.12–22/M 123). The expression “vanishing quantities” is taken by Hegel from Newton’s lexicon of infinitesimal calculus, in which it signifies the moment in which a quantitative determination is removed: in the moment of its disappearance a quantity is, at the same time and in the same manner, nothing and not nothing; thus it is the existing contradiction or (in Hegel’s lexicon) infinity, as the integration of opposites.⁴ The disappearance of whatever has a determinate existence is the universal working of Skepticism. It is able to demonstrate to consciousness the effective nullity and inconsistency of every existing reality. In Skepticism, “thought achieves the complete annihilation of the being of the *manifoldly determinate* world, and the negativity of free self-consciousness achieves, in this manifold formation of life, real negativity” (PS 119.9–12/M 123).

In the preceding figures of consciousness, it merely “*happens* to it, without its knowing how” (PS 61.21/M 56) that “its true and real disappeared” (PS 120.1–2/M 124). Skeptical self-consciousness, however, turns its negative energy not only against the objectivity of the world as such and its relationship to it, but against itself. Thus “through this self-conscious negation it creates *for itself the certainty of its freedom*, it brings forth the experience of this certainty, and thus raises it to truth” (PS 119.39–120.9/M 124). From this affirmation it is easy to understand the absolute importance Skepticism has within Hegel’s epistemology. Once liberated from the unilateralness and the admixture of empirical and intellectual elements that make it a figure of consciousness, skepticism constitutes a central moment of the dialectic and thus of the properly philosophical understanding of reality. In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel takes care to neatly distinguish the skepticism which makes “spirit first able to assess what truth is” (PS 56.31/M 50), which is thus constitutive of philosophical science, from skepticism as a particular figure “of imperfect consciousness” (PS 57.5–6/M 51). This distinction has everything to do with the meaning and the role attributed to skeptical negation, which presents itself as an abstraction in skepticism as a figure of consciousness, though as a determinate negation in that special “self-completing skepticism” which Hegel identifies with his phenomenological science (PS 56.12–13/M 50). Skepticism, as the figure of imperfect consciousness, processes for the sake of negation. But in negating something it perceives nothing other than pure nullity, in which every determinateness disappears. That from which it abstracts, and which thus renders its negation abstract, is the fact that this nothingness “is the nothingness *of that from which it results*” (PS 57.8–9/M 51), and is thus “something *determinate* and has a *content*” (PS 57.11/M 51). If we take the result of a negation for what it is in its truth and completeness, that is to say, “as a *determinate* negation,” then “thus appears immediately a new form” (PS 57.15–16/M 51). In contrast, “the skepticism which ends up with the abstraction of nothing, or with emptiness, cannot proceed any further from this but must wait and see whether anything new presents

itself to it, and what this is, in order to cast it into the same empty abyss" (*PS* 57.11–14/*M* 51).

The fecundity of determinate negation is based on a fact that is for Hegel easily comprehended. In order to exist, something must be determinate: of the completely undetermined it is impossible to say or to know anything. Determination, as Spinoza teaches, is negation, "*determinatio negatio est*" (Spinoza 1995: Letter 50), because whatever individuates something distinguishes it from all others by contrast. However, these contrasting others, which are its determinate negation, may not be eliminated as inessential. On the contrary, only by including within the determination of any one thing also that which determinately negates it, can we know the thing in its entirety and truth. The fact that in the affirmation of something we must also comprehend its negation does not constitute a contradiction that results simply in nothingness. It permits us to reach a higher content where both the abstract affirmation of something and the necessary relation to that which negates it flow together in unity.⁵

This is the method gleaned from Skepticism, which already in his early Jena article, "The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy," Hegel incorporates into the dialectic as its essential moment. In this article, Hegel deals with a skepticism epitomized in the *Parmenides* of Plato, and that in its scientific function is implicitly present, according to Hegel, within every genuine philosophical system (*Skept.*, *GW* 4:207.15–209.3). He recognizes that what originates Skepticism and guides it in every phase of its development is the principle of equipollence (*isostenia*), the equal force with which any discourse may be opposed by a contrary discourse in such a way that they annul each other. This principle is the basis of Pyrrho's skepticism and of his immediate followers; it has the typical dialectical weapons of the so-called ten tropes and is directed, according to Hegel, not so much against reason and philosophy, but against the certainties of commonsense consciousness and the finite determinations of the intellect (*Skept.*, *GW* 4:213.27–217.34). The theoretical strength of this principle, also used in the *Phenomenology*, corresponds to the so-called trope of relativity, which consists in showing how every determination, every finite existence, and likewise each of their differences, cannot be taken as anything solid and immutable because their essence is always and only found in something other than themselves. Absolute nothingness may thus be found at the level of finite determinations, because anything that is posited as distinct and separate from something other finds itself implicated by this something other precisely through the relationship of exclusion that precludes it from existing as something absolute unto itself. That which disappears is precisely the difference between absolute and relative, and this difference "*must disappear to thinking*, because that which is differentiated is just this, not to be *in itself*, but only to have its essentiality in an other" (*PS* 120.10–14; cf. 80.24–81.14/*M* 124, cf. 78–79).

This turning into the exact opposite, to which every determination is subject, demonstrates according to Hegel how the experience of freedom is fundamental to skepticism: "Skeptical self-consciousness thus experienced, in the change of everything that wants to be fixed for itself, its own freedom as given and retained

by and through itself” (PS 120.16–18/M 124). Only an act of freedom can disengage consciousness from enslavement to the finite and thus bring thought into knowing possession of its essence. Hegel explicitly names “imperturbability,” the “ataraxia of thinking of itself” (PS 120.18/M 124), as the form in which skeptical self-consciousness obtains “the unchanging and *truthful certainty of itself*” (PS 120.18–19/M 124). Self-consciousness achieves this result without leaving behind or forgetting how it achieved it, even if this way exhibits characteristics opposed to the immutability and veracity of the certainty of itself, and instead presents itself as “*absolute dialectical unrest*” (PS 120.22/M 124).

Imperturbability and absolute unrest are the two movements within skeptical self-consciousness. Ataraxia constitutes the positive side of Skepticism that does not crystallize into a particular doctrine, but offers itself as an *agoghé*, a way of life. It is the absolute tranquility that contains and dominates the negative and nullifying side of the incessant self-annulling of finite determinations. This way of life does not privilege one determination over others, but reduces all of them to their finitude. This is possible because in its positive existence Skepticism expresses the freedom of reason. This aspect of Skepticism Hegel affirms in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, where the complement to the incessant dissolving of the experiences of observed forms of consciousness is the imperturbability of our “pure observing” (PS 59.30/M 54). This pure observing abstains from intervening with its findings or its particular thoughts about the experience had by observed consciousness. It leaves these aside; in exchange it obtains the power to consider the life of observed consciousness as it is in itself and for itself (PS 59.22–25/M 53–4).

Hegel’s proposal that skeptical self-consciousness is infected by a dualism between ataraxia and the immutable certainty of itself, on the one hand, and the incessant change and absolute unrest on the other, constitutes an important moment in the development of this section, because it first announces the polarity which characterizes the final figure, the “unhappy consciousness.” Skepticism of the imperfect, observed consciousness (not the skepticism that is a constitutive moment of the dialectic) is divided between these two extremes that it cannot unify: the universal consciousness identical to itself which experiences the freedom of being raised above everything incidental and finite, and the empirical side of itself which is forced to live according to everything that has for it no reality or essentiality and to busy itself with confusing mixtures of sensible representations and thoughts (PS 261.34–262.27/M 291–2). Hegel does not restrain his sarcasm about this form of skepticism that ends up prisoner to the inconsistency and misery of that which it negates. From the moment that negation constitutes its essence, it needs to feed and incessantly seek out incidental and inessential determinations precisely in order to continue to negate them. The skeptical consciousness “in this way counts to itself as a *singular, contingent*, and indeed animal life and *lost self-consciousness*” (PS 120.32–34/M 125); it “is thus this unconscious twaddle shifting back and forth between the one extreme of self-identical self-consciousness and the other extreme of contingent, confused, and confusing consciousness” (PS 120.39–121.3/M 125). In this way, despite being aware both

of its immutable and its inessential sides, it continues to keep the poles of this contradiction separate from each other and thus cannot experience itself as a consciousness which contradicts itself *within* itself: the skeptical consciousness is contradictory “in itself,” but not yet “for itself.” When the two extremes that Skepticism keeps separate are connected by consciousness within a single individual experience, then this is a new kind of phenomenological figure, the “Unhappy Consciousness.”

4 The Unhappy Consciousness

The two modalities of a free and unchangeable consciousness and of a consciousness which confuses and inverts itself absolutely are now recognized as aspects of one single consciousness aware of its own contradiction. Recapitulating the path followed up to now in an extremely synoptic way, Hegel puts the accent on freedom as a character of thought, to which self-consciousness is raised. In Stoicism, “self-consciousness is the simple freedom of itself” (*PS* 121.31–36/*M* 126), whereas in Skepticism stoic freedom emerges from abstraction and is realized as an active negating of every determinate being; at the same time, raising itself above that which it negates, the skeptical consciousness exhibits its internal duality and thus lays the ground for the duplication of self within itself: this is the Unhappy Consciousness. In the preceding figures Hegel has always distinguished the “ontological” meaning of those factors which are “in themselves” or “for us” from their “phenomenological” meaning for those who, as observed forms of consciousness, subjectively experience “for themselves” (this last presents as defective the truth values of the phenomenological figures). This same now happens for the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness. Within it has matured “in itself” or “for us” an act which “is essential to the concept of spirit” (*PS* 121.36–37/*M* 126), and yet consciousness experiences it as generating a contradiction that it cannot overcome. Precisely this incapacity constitutes its unhappiness.

To understand the sense in which this final figure of self-consciousness is something essential to the concept of spirit, consider how it develops. As we will see, characteristic of this figure is not merely the reunification of what in the dialectic of the lord and bondsman was distributed between two separate consciousnesses, or what in Skepticism came to be kept apart (*PS* 121.32–35/*M* 126). The unchangeable side and the changeable side now develop so that each of them appears *within* the other: even in their radical opposition, they become unified, because in each of them is posited its unity with the other. Now this is exactly what is necessary for the concept of spirit. Figuratively expressed, Hegel contends that spirit has the capacity to find itself in its own radical otherness. Thus it has the capacity to receive, maintain, and overcome the contradiction within itself; the contradiction is maintained and mastered when each of the two contradictory opposites is essential to fashioning the other. This formal structure of the concept of spirit also plays a fundamental role in the speculatively more important movement of Hegel’s epistemology. The dialectic completely unfolds its epistemic

potential when it takes the conceptual determinations of reality out of their mutual isolation in which they are maintained by an abstract intellectual consideration and is able to show how a precise, concrete understanding of the real must know how to grasp the whole development of the negativity that everything, insofar as it is determinate, includes within itself. This development now has its culminating moment, as has been said, where each of the two opposed determinations is found to be essential for fashioning the other.

Precisely because the final figure of the self-consciousness realizes this development “in itself,” Hegel can affirm that with it the concept of spirit, having become vital, has come into existence (*PS* 122.5–7/*M* 126). Indeed, what happens in it is that, as an unchangeable consciousness, it also always has within it the changeable consciousness,

as One undivided consciousness it is a doubled consciousness; it itself *is* the gazing of a self-consciousness into another self-consciousness, and it itself *is* both of these, and the unity of both is also to it the essence, though *for itself* it is not yet to itself this very essence, not yet the unity of both. (*PS* 122.7–11/*M* 126)

This persisting limitation and insufficiency, which make this consciousness as such *unhappy*, results from the development and the strengthening of the contradictions of the skeptical consciousness. The fact that it originates from skepticism should caution us against overemphasizing the role of this phenomenological figure or of overestimating its importance to the point of assuming it is a key to reading the *Phenomenology*, if not indeed to Hegel’s philosophy in its entirety, *pace* Jean Wahl (1929). Consciousness is in fact unhappy because it remains a prisoner of an unhappiness of which it is the cause. This often provides reasons for those aspects of the dialectical movements which Hegel at times parodies.

Initially, the Unhappy Consciousness finds itself living in this situation: It *immediately* unites within itself the two modes of consciousness inherited from Skepticism, though they do not have equal value for it. Instead, their opposition is present as a subordination of one to the other. The simple and unchangeable side of the opposition is for it what is essential, the same consciousness of the divine, to which Unhappy Consciousness subordinates its continually changeable and accidental side, which it attributes to itself, thus condemning itself to its own unhappiness. But because an essential side is present and acts within it, Unhappy Consciousness liberates itself from what is inessential and the source of unhappiness. However, this signifies that the Unhappy Consciousness must free itself by itself. However, it is precluded from such a liberation because eliminating the inessential would be its own doing, which would be spoiled by the inessentiality and contingency that constitute it: the liberation would thus be inessential and incidental. The consciousness is unhappy, because it is torn within itself between its consciousness of the divine and its consciousness of itself as a non-essence. Thus Unhappy Consciousness

is only the contradictory movement in which the opposite does not come to rest in its opposite; instead, it only produces itself anew as an opposite within its opposite.

Thus there is a struggle against an enemy in which victory is instead defeat, to have reached the one is rather to have lost it within its opposite. (*PS* 122.28–33/*M* 127)

Thus the way in which the Unhappy Consciousness undertakes to raise itself to the divine and unchangeable has its prospects for success spoiled in the beginning by being aware that its consciousness contains its own nullity: every attempt will be the non-attempt of a nullity that will be thrown back into its proper singularity, separated from and opposed to the unchangeable consciousness.

The Unhappy Consciousness is unaware that it has effectively within its reach the possibility of overcoming the contradiction between the two consciousnesses which constitute it. If their contrast is considered in its development, it is not difficult to discern that each of the opposites – the single individual changeable consciousness and the pure unchangeable consciousness – appears in the other as what essentially constitutes its existence. In this movement “it experiences precisely this *coming forth of individuality WITHIN the unchangeable*, and *of the unchangeable WITHIN the individuality*” (*PS* 123.5–6/*M* 127–8). However, so long as the Unhappy Consciousness holds firm to their inequality, this originating of the singularity in the unchangeable and vice versa will not restore unity of these opposites, but will perpetuate within each of them the unhappiness of an insurmountable division.

Hegel specifies three possible modes in which the singularity of the individual consciousness can relate itself to the unchangeable consciousness. In the first the unchangeable appears to the single individual as an external, separate, and hostile essence that judges and condemns it. In the second the unchangeable assumes the figure of singularity. Hence it is no longer distinct from it (at least in kind), even though the opposition between the two singularities remains. Finally, in the third the opposition is overcome, the observed consciousness transforms itself out of its unhappiness into a consciousness *happy* to find itself in the unchangeable “and becomes to itself conscious that its individuality is reconciled with the universal” (*PS* 123.21–22/*M* 127). When this happens, consciousness has made itself spirit, although to fully reach this level, as announced many times by Hegel, it must traverse a range of experiences that transcends the limits of the Self-Consciousness moment (*PS* 123.11–22/*M* 128).

Although Hegel provides no concrete historical indications, it is evident that the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness *prima facie* represents the religious attitudes of the believer. The attitudes he presents here are their defective aspects, that is to say, faith as it originates from a consciousness enclosed in its singularity and torn by the opposition between finite and infinite; certainly not faith as it is in itself in its truth. Authentic faith in the *Phenomenology* awaits the concluding phase of the moment Religion, where faith is no longer the attitude of a single individual consciousness, but originates from the community of believers. At this stage it is only possible to take the decisive step towards the divine, a step that is impracticable for the Unhappy Consciousness and yet will allow the community of believers to open the passage to absolute knowledge.

It is easy enough to recognize, in the first of ways in which the Unhappy Consciousness relates to the divine, Hegel's interpretation of the Jewish religious attitude, wherein God is conceived as an outside power that exists as the incarnation of the law that judges and absolves or condemns. In the second mode Christianity is recognized, wherein incarnation is represented by God assuming human form in the Son, who is identified with the singularity of Christ as an historical individual. Finally, in the third mode, the age of the Spirit is recognized, wherein the total reconciliation and identification of the single individual with the universal, of man with God, is actualized.

The relationship that Unhappy Consciousness establishes with these modes of divine manifestation is marked by its own unhappiness: because it is divided within itself, it reflects that division into any aspect of the divine with which it comes into contact. This is most naturally true for the first two modes, because the third is still far out of reach. Beyond forced and parodistic tones, what Hegel presents in the figure of the Unhappy Consciousness is a fundamental character of human subjectivity. In consciousness both the awareness of its own finiteness and, by virtue of this same awareness, the idea of the infinite are present. A limit, as mentioned above, may be known as such when one can look at both of sides of the limit – what it contains and what it excludes – though such knowledge surpasses that limit. This capacity for going beyond the limit, which is characteristic of consciousness, bears witness to the idea of the infinite in us.⁶ Once the finite and the infinite have been identified as constitutive of consciousness, the way in which they articulate their relationship becomes crucial. One of these ways might be to take this surpassing of every limitation as an infinite characteristic of consciousness: the infinite is not something other than consciousness. It is not a kind of guest foreign to its nature, but is consciousness itself constantly transcending the limited. The transcending of every finiteness is the immutable character of the infinity of consciousness. What Hegel states in the Jena *Logic*, “this alone is the true nature of the finite: that it is infinite, that it sublates itself in its being” (*L&M* 35), might very well be extended to the ontological structure of consciousness. Yet it does not coincide with the way in which consciousness experiences itself as unhappy. Here consciousness has disavowed its own nothingness and has opposed to its own accidental nature the infinite and unchangeable, thus cutting off the possibility of transcending its own finiteness and of finding itself in unity with infinity. This makes not only the representation of itself partial and incomplete, but also its representation of the divine as well. What is manifest is not “the unchangeable *in and for itself*,” but “the unchangeability as the unchangeability of consciousness, which is thus not the true, but rather is still trapped within an opposition” (*PS* 123.32–34/*M* 128). Hence the unchangeable and the divine are present in consciousness, though they are characterized by being divided and by opposition to the single consciousness. In this way, as the infinite opposed to the finite, it itself becomes something limited, hence here too the unchangeable acquires the figure of the singularity, the very one to which it is opposed (*PS* 123.38–124.1/*M* 129).

Hegel now concentrates almost exclusively on the second mode of relationship with the unchangeable consciousness, that which corresponds to Christianity and

to the incarnation of Christ. That the divine assumes human form could be an essential step in the genuine reconciliation of the finite and the infinite. In reality, because this event is experienced within the unhappy consciousness, the incarnation cannot at all bring God to the single individual consciousness. On the contrary, precisely by identifying itself with an historical existence, the divine becomes even more impenetrable, distinctive, and transcendent with regard to consciousness. Furthermore, from the moment that, because it is historical, God suffers death and leaves the world, nothing but an infinite longing for a desired and indefinitely postponed reunification is left to the single individual consciousness (*PS* 124.1–19/*M* 129). The single individual consciousness thus comprehends that the true obstacle to overcome is its presupposition that its division from the Divine is irremediable. Hence it undertakes a series of attempts to achieve unity with the God that became man, attempts which Hegel highlights in three consecutive steps (*PS* 124.20–37/*M* 129–30).

The protagonist of the first step is “pure consciousness,” which Hegel states is incapable of raising itself to the thought of effective identity between its own singularity and the God who assumed human form. Consequently, it seeks unity with God by entrusting itself to an unsuitable means, to the immediacy of feeling, which, in the best of cases, is not so much a thought as a movement towards thought expressed as “devotion”: “its thinking as such remains the formless chiming of bells or a warm fog of satisfaction, a musical thinking that does not achieve the concept, which would be the only immanent and objective route” (*PS* 125.26–29/*M* 131). This incapacity to think of Christ, as an historically existing man, joined to the universality which belongs to him as man–God, insures that its attempt to join itself to his unchangeable singularity fails, because he remains an unreachable beyond: “wherever it is sought, it cannot be found, because it is to be *a beyond*, such a being as cannot be found” (*PS* 126.9–11/*M* 131–2). Once Christ has been sought as something that is given sensibly, as an object of sense-certainty, it has already been lost and in its place only the empty sepulcher may be present to the unhappy consciousness. Outlining the adventures of the Crusades, Hegel observes that even the sepulcher is something empirical and cannot possess any stability or assurance of anything lasting; thus “even this presence of the grave is only a toiling struggle which must be lost” (*PS* 126.15–18/*M* 132). On the other hand, consciousness becomes well aware of the evanescence of the empirical testaments provided by a sepulcher or by the very figure of Christ as an empirical figure. It thus abandons its attempt to join itself to the divine through mere feeling and devotion, and tries instead to learn from its experience by giving up its search for any *actual* unchangeable individuality, or its fixation upon something vanished, or its taking repose in its feeling, which in itself is its feeling of itself; it feels itself to be a pure consciousness that thinks purely of itself in its own singularity and thus posits itself as a universal and conceived (not merely felt) single individual.

In the second step, the protagonist is the consciousness which has returned back into itself. To attain the certainty of its own salvation and its own union with God it relies on its own forces or original capacities: desire and work. Developing a dialectic which in certain aspects seems to anticipate Weber’s (1930) thesis in

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Hegel shows how consciousness turns to the world, which, once God made himself flesh and assumed a mundane form, is a world consecrated in the totality of its aspects (cf. *PS* 127.5–11/*M* 132–3). If consciousness were not intimately torn, working, and appropriating to itself worldly reality, it would draw from the consequent success of its own work the certainty of living in unity with the divine within a consecrated reality. It would thus also be reassured about attaining its own salvation. Yet this consciousness is again thrown out into uncertainty and the misery of its own unhappiness, because everything that it achieves, like the holiness of the reality upon which it works, is for it uniquely a gift that comes from beyond. It is a generous gift for which it renders thanks and over which it has no control (*PS* 127.12–27/*M* 133). Thus it “forsakes the satisfaction of its consciousness of its own self-sufficiency” (*PS* 128.9–10/*M* 134) and its unity with the sacred and the divine “is affected by the separation, in itself it is again broken, and from this emerges again the opposition of the universal and the singular” (*PS* 128.13–15/*M* 134). This incapacity to realize a true unification stimulates its awareness of its unhappiness, because it understands very well that if it also refuses the fruits of its own work, it submits itself completely to the divine through giving thanks and renouncing itself and its proper essence before the divine omnipotence. In reality even these acts of renunciation continue to be works of consciousness, an individual initiative that can only replicate its misery, its separation from the divine, and the unreachability of its unity with it: in giving thanks, “consciousness feels itself as this singular individual, and doesn’t allow itself to be deceived by the appearance of its renunciation, for in truth consciousness has not renounced itself” (*PS* 128.27–29/*M* 134).

From here begins the third and final step, through which consciousness tries to overcome effectively its own unhappiness by creating a new and radical experience of its own nothingness. It now undertakes mortification, first as the mortification of the flesh, which Hegel describes mercilessly as one of the most wretched obsessions of Christian ethics. Instead of simply fulfilling our animal functions, without exaggerating their importance, the desire for mortification makes an object of its own zeal, transfiguring those functions into an obsession. Trapped in a struggle against an enemy that becomes much larger the more it is defeated, far from being free from it, it affixes it to itself as an unessential singularity that is a continual source of pollution (*PS* 129.14–27/*M* 135–6). What we see is thus “just a personality restricted only to itself and its petty acts, as unhappy as it is impoverished” (*PS* 129.29–30/*M* 136).

In devotion, work, enjoyment, and mortification the Unhappy Consciousness has until now only experienced immediate ways to actualize its unity with the divine. Now it has the experience of inserting a mediator, a minister or priest, between itself and the unchangeable divine essence. In this way what the minister does and what he represents to the Unhappy Consciousness is the same as what he does and represents to God (*PS* 129.38–130.8/*M* 136). Now the Unhappy Consciousness really takes the road to a genuine and total self-abnegation. It begins by alienating *in toto* its own will to the minister, obeying solely his advice; in this way it is able to unload upon him all the blame derived from his work;

through fasting and punishments it renounces even the fruits of its own work (*PS* 130.9–24/*M* 136–7). At this point the Unhappy Consciousness has abandoned every vestige of independence so that, following the directions of the clergy, it does things completely alien and incomprehensible, such as using symbolic gestures or ritual language. In this deadening of itself and of its faculties consciousness “has alienated its certainty in the truth of itself, of its ‘*T*, and has made its immediate self-consciousness into an objective being” (*PS* 130.29–31/*M* 137). However, by reducing itself to a thing, by renouncing the independence of its own singularity and action, consciousness finally achieves freedom even from the unhappiness deriving from its work (*PS* 131.1–3/*M* 137). Even in this extreme renunciation, consciousness keeps for itself only the negative aspect of the annulment and does not realize that precisely in its capacity to sacrifice itself completely can it experience “internal and external freedom” (*PS* 130.27–28/*M* 137).⁷ At the same time, through the mediating work of the minister, everything that it renounced has been transferred to the divine unchangeable essence (*PS* 131.3–26/*M* 137–8). Hence this divine being comes to have the same content which earlier belonged to the singular, individual consciousness. In this way, this is the movement in which each of the two opposed extremes, the Unhappy Consciousness and the unchangeable consciousness, having reached maturity, each finds within itself the opposite of itself: consciousness has now within its reach the experience of internal and external freedom and of the infinite power of thought; the unchangeable has taken upon itself the entire travail of consciousness. Even if consciousness persists in taking root in the negative side of its separateness and unhappiness, in reality it is now ready to approach the horizon of reason, where it is certain “in its individuality of being *in itself* absolute, of being all reality” (*PS* 131.30–31/*M* 138).

Notes

- 1 All translations from Hegel are by the editor. – *Ed.*
- 2 In the *Phenomenology*, “infinity” is first introduced in “Force and Understanding”; see above, pp. 22–23. – *Ed.*
- 3 In the Introduction, Hegel states: “consciousness *distinguishes* from itself something to which it at the same time *relates* itself; or, as this is expressed, this something is something *for consciousness*. The determinate side of this *relation*, or the *being* of something *for a consciousness*, is *knowledge*. From this being for an other, however, we distinguish the *being in itself*; that which is related to knowledge is at the same time distinguished from it and is posited as *existing* also outside this relation. The side of this in itself is called *truth*” (*PS* 58.25–31/*M* 52); see above, pp. 4, 193. – *Ed.*
- 4 For discussion of Newton’s vanishing mathematical quantities, see De Gandt (1995), esp. pp. 202–44, though the whole of chapter 3, on Newton’s mathematical methods, is relevant.
- 5 This point is first argued for in “Perception” and is argued further in “Force and Understanding” (*PS* 99.9–100.28/*M* 99–101); it concerns the integration of contrasting or opposed moments within or among things, which is the key to Hegel’s distinction between a genuine concept (*Begriff*) and abstract universals, which are a species of *Vorstellung*; see above, pp. 10, 15–16, 23–24. – *Ed.*

- 6 This issue is not limited to religion or theology; consider, for example, one of Descartes's premises for his first argument for the existence of God in *Meditation 3*: "And I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?" (AT 7:45).
- 7 There is a significant parallel here between the Unhappy Consciousness and the servile consciousness: neither the Unhappy Consciousness nor the bondsman is able to go beyond its limit, since neither achieves, nor even attempts, the radical negation of whatever is other than consciousness. (Also, both of these figures of consciousness are self-negating; cf. pp. 48, 51. – *Ed.*)

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