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Hegel: Scientificity and Freedom

Filon Ktenides
Doctoral student in the Department of Philosophy
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Komnion 127, P.O. Box: 21594
Panorama 552-36, Thessaloniki
Greece
Email: fktenidi@edlit.auth.gr

Introduction

This paper is an invitation to study Hegel's relation to Husserl's concerns regarding phenomenology and its age, rather than an explication of Hegelian or Husserlian texts. I shall be using as a springboard the collection of Husserl's texts that we usually refer to as *The Crisis*.¹ Husserl's last attempt to offer an introduction to phenomenology is incomplete, yet almost unanimously regarded to be of capital importance not so much in virtue of the answers contained in it, but because it offers an abundance of essential questions that significantly enrich phenomenological research. I do not intend to present a detailed reconstruction or interpretation of the *Crisis*, but simply to outline its main goals and highlight its distinctive character in regard to Husserl's previous introductions to phenomenology. Next I shall present Hegel's introductory comments on the project of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*² of 1807 as these are presented in its (in)famous preface and underscore the two texts' affinities.

Husserl's Crisis

Husserl detects a crisis in the scientific realm of his age. In spite of what seems to be constant

scientific progress, especially in the exact sciences (*strenge Wissenschaften*), he focuses on the character of science in general and notes the following: on the one hand, philosophy is treated as unscientific, the humanities and the social sciences as merely approximating the standard of the exact sciences; but, on the other, even mathematicians and physicists ought to be worried, says Husserl, because they have themselves recently broken away from the models of classical physics and mathematics, thus revealing the historical nature of their own, (supposedly) most exact, type of knowledge. This is coupled with the charge against the tendency of science to become merely factual, a tendency that has led it to ignore questions about the value and meaning of and in the entire world of human existence. A more sober look on science, therefore, is called for and that means a look on the way it *came to be* what it *is*.

Husserl is very serious in his efforts to counter the perennial doubt that skepticism brings against philosophy in many guises. If there are only philosophies, but no philosophy, if there are only versions of truth rather than truth, then what's the point of philosophy as a search for truth? If philosophy cannot be as precise as mathematics, then what's its appeal? If the exact sciences, as well as philosophy, have lost touch with humanity by retreating to the safety and abstraction of eidetic and non-natural modes of questioning and discourse, then what is their real value? These questions (*Crisis*, §§1–2) have also led to the rise of *Existenzphilosophie* (Jaspers, Heidegger), which is for Husserl a covert form of irrationalism – and, as such, obviously unacceptable. What needs to be shown is that philosophy is scientific, yet that it can still deal with the concrete realm of human life and not simply with abstractions of the world. Husserl's claim is that the philosophy fulfilling these criteria is transcendental phenomenology and his aim is to show that such philosophy becomes necessary by way of a teleological-historical reflection (§§6–7). It is important to stress two factors here: firstly, this reflection is not meant to entail a superficial recourse to the history of philosophy, as one would do for, introductory purposes on a difficult topic. It is meant to take up history seriously as part of the topic, to take up *historicity as part of the problem*. Secondly, the inclusion of history in the *Sache* of

investigation is something that was explicitly left out of previous descriptions of the phenomenological enterprise by Husserl (cf. his *Cartesianische Meditationen*).

Essentially related to the problem of historicity is the problem of the *life-world*, to which Husserl claims, all scientific endeavours need to relate – to be more precise: all scientific endeavours cannot but relate to it, yet they need to acknowledge this fact explicitly and reflect on this relation without simply seeking to overcome it (§28). The *Lebenswelt* is the world as pre-given, the horizon within which any theoretical and scientific activity first makes its appearance and within which it always takes place; it spans from the pre-predicative level to the linguistically determined plane of tradition and involves the sphere of the individual subject as well as that of intersubjectivity. Historicity is a trait of the life-world, too: the life-world of ancient Greek science is evidently not the same as that of Descartes. The natural attitude (i.e. pre-scientific attitude, as it is before radically critical reflection takes place) out of which, but also against which, the genius of Euclid grew differs from the natural attitude corresponding to the genius of Galileo. Husserl stresses the importance of carefully studying the *differences and the continuity* involved in the appearance of the scientific and phenomenological attitude out of the natural one.

The issues involved in Husserl's treatment of historicity and the life-world in the *Crisis* are many and I do not pretend to do them justice with what I've merely outlined. Nor am I interested in evaluating his treatment or his solutions to essential problems, such as the paradox of "being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world" (§53). Nonetheless, I hope to have remained faithful to the text and to have adequately shown some of the points that render it still very much relevant for contemporary discussions of scientificity, but also in direct (if tacit) discourse with Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Hegel's Phenomenology

Hegel's age is also an age of crisis: one thinks of the revolution that Kant's *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*

set in motion in 1781, but also of the French Revolution, a display of a different aspect of the crisis of those times. In the wake of Kant's Critiques it was still possible (and much easier than in Husserl's time) to claim that philosophical knowledge is scientific without raising too many dubious eyebrows, yet its closer determination remained a topic of heated debates. What follows aims to show that in the preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel is defending his own philosophical position by attacking various forms of skepticism, irrationalism and formalism – just like Husserl in the *Crisis* defends his own phenomenological project by showing how it is superior to skepticism, the irrationalism of *Existenzphilosophie* and the abstraction involved in the formalism of science based on mathematical thinking.

Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology* bears a secondary title: "on scientific knowing". Hegel, after insisting that a preface can only offer preliminary remarks and no scientific force of argument at all, comments on what he takes to be popular misconceptions regarding science and truth. He argues against a trend of his time that holds that what is important for philosophy is religious enthusiasm or feeling or intuition. He does not wish to belittle their content (he concedes its richness and meaningfulness), but only to warn against the one-sided emphasis of their form, i.e. of immediacy. Truth for Hegel is necessarily reached through the mediation of thinking, since thinking is what allows access to the element of universality. Moreover, the mediation involved in thinking is the only way to achieve understanding of our world: to understand something one needs to reflect on it. And this is what seems to Hegel even more reprehensible in such intuition-philosophies: their goal is to offer *edification* rather than *understanding*, and this means that they have abandoned the path to truth (*Phenomenology*, §§7, 9).

Next, Hegel comments on the regrettable formalism that seems to him to plague many of his fellow philosophers who have not succumbed to the folly of philosophies of edification. In their case, it is common for one to find a fundamental principle of explanation and, in one's desperate clinging to it,

to apply it to the phenomena or the world under investigation in a Procrustean way. Fichte's '*Ich*' and Reinhold's '*Elementarphilosophie*' are typical examples: they disregard, in Hegel's view, the world's diversity by reducing it to an inadequate principle and forcing it to conform with it.

Hegel anticipates his own position by claiming that "the true is the whole" (§20). He insists that the value and essence of science does not lie simply in its fundamental principles or in its results, but in its being carried out, in its execution. If the absolute is a result of development, as is Hegel's claim, then no absolute truth can be found in the beginning (in the form of grounding principles) or be stated as a proposition cut off from its exposition. This development, however, should not be grasped as an infinite approximation of truth (as in the philosophy of his contemporary Romantics) or as a merely regulative principle (in Kantian fashion). The true result of such development can be described in Hegel's logical terminology as a *return-to-self*: the so-called 'end point' is not simply something other than the beginning, but neither is it exactly the same. I restrict myself here to attempting but the briefest explication, using another of Hegel's famous pronouncements from the preface: "reason is purposeful activity" (§22). It is easy to see that purposeful action is a totality: beginning with the goal set by an agent, carrying on with the necessary steps taken by the agent and resulting (one should hope) in the goal being realised. The three stages constitute the whole of the purposeful action, yet they are also distinct: the end result returns to the initially imagined goal by realising it. The focus on truth and knowledge as development introduces Hegel's discussion of historicity and natural consciousness.

"The becoming of Science" (§27) is what Hegel exhibits in the *Phenomenology*. The element of scientific knowledge is "pure self-knowledge in absolute otherness" (§26), yet this element is to be achieved, it is not given immediately. It is Hegel's claim that in his age this element has indeed been achieved, but it is not the *Phenomenology*'s goal to show how this has been necessarily conditioned in the course of history. Rather it offers a *logically necessary* progression of shapes of natural

consciousness (where natural consciousness includes any shape that has not reached the element of science) –from utterly simple (sense-certainty) to highly sophisticated (artistic consciousness or the manifest religion of Christianity)– whose experiences of not being able to achieve what they strive for in the manner in which their shape dictates their relation to their object, leads us from one to another until Hegel’s proposed standpoint of “absolute knowing”, of speculative philosophy, is reached. The shapes of consciousness present in the *Phenomenology* are logical constructs and do not necessarily correspond to historically existing modes of thinking, even though Hegel does offer some of these latter. Hegel’s emphasis on historicity in the *Phenomenology* is logical rather than factual, yet he presupposes the factual kind, too. His phenomenological explication shows how the simplest ‘way’ (or form) of relating to the world necessarily fails and leads immanently to more critical and more sophisticated forms that also fail, until the totality of forms is run through – such a totality is logical (as in the case of the totality of integers: odd and even) yet Hegel claims (and explicates later in the *Phenomenology*) that key waypoints of this logical totality have factually appeared in history. Hence, the *Phenomenology* presupposes history, it occasionally makes reference to it, but is not primarily determined by it.

A few more words on natural consciousness: some shapes have a theoretical orientation towards the world, some a practical orientation, and the more complex ones involve both. Hegel’s goal is to deal with the entire breadth of experiences that a modern subject can relate to in the modern world by the time ‘absolute knowing’ is reached. The modern *Lebenswelt* may not be present in the attitude of each shape; it is, however, presupposed as the one in which each reader belongs and based on which all the experiences and dialectical movements taking place in the book ought to be judged: the life-world of sense-certainty, for example, is not the one of Hegel’s modernity or our own age (given its extreme level of abstraction it could hardly qualify as a “world” at all) and neither is the one of Antigone and Creon. Yet they are (part of) the subject matter of the *Phenomenology* and the phenomenologists do belong in the modern *Lebenswelt*. This may very well mean that for a post-modern reader, the

movements Hegel presents may seem unconvincing – this, however, does not necessarily render his phenomenological *project* null and void.

We have seen that Hegel's dialectic of the shapes of natural consciousness leads to philosophy's true standpoint, falsity leads to truth. Hegel asks: "why occupy ourselves with the false?" (§38) anticipating a very common and natural reaction. The discussion on development should have already hinted at an answer, but Hegel is justified in bringing forward such a question because it is grounded on a very widespread and deeply rooted misconception of the relation of falsity to truth. When this relation is taken to be one of opposition, of *radical otherness*, the nature of truth as development and return-to-self is hard to comprehend – such opposition is also put forward by mathematical knowledge. The 'mathematisation' of the world involves a movement of abstraction: the rich world of experience and life and history is turned into a measurable world ruled by the notion of space and quantity. In such a world of mathematics (and also of empirical sciences that focus abstractly on facts), one can easily assert that (to take another image of Hegel's) the flower is not the bud, that the fruit is not the flower and that each stage contradicts the others (§2); but regarding the truth of the plant, is it not the case that the whole is the truth and that its moments are all true as well as false? Such a response would cause the externally related and opposing notions of truth and falsity to implode, since a developing and self-moving truth is not supported by the presuppositions of abstraction native to the realm of abstract thinking or mathematics. Such an attitude could, nonetheless, be part of a more *encompassing* mode of knowledge, as a moment belonging to it. Another such moment, obviously, would be the skeptical attitude that is so fond of shooting down claims and theories, but also unable or unwilling to shoot down (or at least attempt to check) its own negative stance. That's why Hegel also calls the *Phenomenology* a "self-completing skepticism" (§78). In contrast to other strands of skepticism that take the result of refuting a thesis to be, so to speak, the 'return to square one' and offering a merely negative result, the dialectical movement in the *Phenomenology* is able, according to Hegel, to bring out the positive element of refutation and show

the formation/education (*Bildung*) of consciousness as it undergoes the long process of critique (§§4, 28, 29).

To recapitulate: the basic reason for Hegel's insistence on the experience of the shapes of natural consciousness is the following: if scientific knowledge cannot appear suddenly, it is impossible for it to claim immediately that it is superior to other types of knowledge. Such a claim would be ungrounded and arbitrary; it would essentially be in the same position that any shape of natural consciousness is in, when it holds fast to its immediately assumed concept of truth. Should science wish to avoid the pitfall of being too 'pure' and removed from reality as well as the trap of self-righteous, yet empty, claims to truth, Hegel believes it is necessary for science to be *exhibited* in its development through and out of shapes of natural consciousness whose content span the rich content of the world of experiences (§§3, 76).

I would like to offer some rough suggestions for understanding Hegel's phenomenological project as connected to the concept and value of freedom.³ Hegel states in the preface, having presented his arguments against what he takes to be the threats of irrationalism, skepticism and formalism, that what is required for the study of philosophy is exertion and restraint (§58): he writes that we need to take up the exertion of the concept (the hard work of rationality as developmental and historical) and that the power of argumentative or formal reasoning should be held in check by self-restraint. In other words, scientific thinking (or thinking on the way to becoming scientific) needs to be strong enough to face up to the challenges of ordinary ways of thinking, be they immersed unreflectively in their given content or retreating to simpler and cleaner worlds of abstraction. This strength, this power, is the freedom of rational thought that enables it to detach itself from immediacy and enter the realm of *mediation*, of subjectivity and of critique. Nonetheless, this freedom must be able to *check itself*: critical thinking as truly rational must refrain from becoming abstract, from achieving merely negative freedom and from excluding itself from critique; it must baptise its freedom in the world's content in

order to remain concretely determinate and free.

Conclusion

If Husserl's concerns for phenomenology in the *Crisis* are still relevant today (one can easily detect the continuity in, for example, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle and Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* with the questions of a historical life-world), then Hegel's phenomenological project should not be light-heartedly left out of such discussions – “what can this absolute idealist have in common with phenomenology?” Sadly, work is required on debunking commonplaces about Hegelian philosophy in general, and I hope that I have at least contributed to this goal.

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Walter Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954). Henceforth: *Crisis*.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. H.-F. Wessels and H. Clairmont (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988). Henceforth: *Phenomenology*.

³ A concept also stressed by Husserl, cf. *Crisis*, §§2, 3.