

Lecture given October 10, 2014 by Jonathan Hand at St. John's College, Santa Fe, entitled "The (Plato's) Cave, and the Cave beneath the Cave, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*"

[acknowledgements to Hegel study group]

This should take about an hour and 10 minutes, for which I ask your indulgence.

Hegel is famous or rather infamous as a *luftmensch*, one of those who dwell high above--and some might say disconnected from--the earth, from things solid, concrete, specific. Therefore, as your flight attendant, I wish to inform you that the exits are clearly marked--[point]--one in the rear, one in the front. If we experience a drop in cabin pressure due to a complete lack of intelligibility, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Please put on your own mask before helping your children.

I'm going to begin *gently*, by reminding you of things that are familiar. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates gives his famous image of the cave as “an image of our nature (φύσις) in its education and want of education” (514a). Nature, φύσις, is a word that Plato does not use carelessly. We might well ask: is the image still apt? Is it true that most human beings are by *nature*, i.e. everywhere and always--except for a lucky few whose souls are turned around and led out of the cave-- subject to “bonds and folly” (515c4: δεσμοι και αφοροσυνη) ? Maybe the cave of public opinion can be changed, progressively more enlightened. Such, certainly, was the hope of those philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century—Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, and Montesquieu, to name a few—upon whose projects our political regime, liberal democracy, and our regime of knowledge, modern science, are based. Even if, or maybe precisely because, science doesn't have,

or even claim to pursue, "absolute truth" about nature, isn't it always coming up with, and disseminating to the public, better and better models of the world? As far as society is concerned, and our relations with each other, aren't we now in the process of, if not yet entirely successful at, throwing off the hateful prejudices of the past that stand in the way of the individual's self-defined pursuit of happiness, such as—to use the terms of today's unholy trinity-- racism, sexism, and homophobia?

Or, are we moderns, inhabitants of "the West," perhaps only in a different kind of "cave", a "cave beneath the cave," as one famous 20th century student of Plato's put it? In 1931, Leo Strauss [now I have your attention] wrote the following:

Bearing in mind the classical representation of the natural difficulties involved in philosophizing, in other words, the Platonic figure of the cave, one can say that today we are in a second, much deeper cave than the fortunate ignorant persons with whom Socrates was concerned. We need history first of all in order to climb up into the cave from which Socrates can lead us to the light. We need a propaedeutic, something the Greeks did not need, namely book learning. [cited Smith p. 95; from Strauss's review of Julius Ebbinghaus, GS II.439].

As is pointed out in Steven Smith's noteworthy recent book on Strauss<sup>1</sup>, from which I take this quote, the image of modernity as a second cave—a deepening of the educational problem created, paradoxically, by the transformative effect of modern philosophy on the world-- is central to Strauss's thought. 15 years later, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss returns to the "same metaphor":

If one of [Plato's] descendants desired to ascend to the light of the sun, he would first have to try to reach the level of the natural cave, and he would have to invent

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

new and most artificial tools unknown and unnecessary to those who dwelt in the natural cave.” [Smith p. 95; citing PAW 155].

The image of a second cave, and of our thus now needing to ascend first to a “natural cave,” whatever that might be, is provocative, and is, as far as I know, original to Strauss. However, Strauss was hardly the first to see the phenomenon, i.e. the modern educational problem to which the image refers. That problem can be stated as a question: In our time, for education, what is the one thing most needful? An ever more complete fulfillment of the project of Enlightenment--namely the dissemination of the results of natural science, an ever increasing secularism, and a continuing deconstruction of all obstacles to the freedom, meaning autonomy or self-definition, of human beings? Or, a reconsideration of pre-modern thought, in order to illuminate those aspects of a full humanity—meaning primarily an awareness of the full or natural range of human questions—an awareness somehow put at risk by the modern Western condition?

This question, it seems to me, lies at the center of Hegel’s thought. So, given the alternatives I have just stated, what is Hegel's answer? Not surprisingly—at least not surprising to those who know him--both. On the one hand, it appears that Hegel is in partial agreement with his pupil (how good a pupil is up for discussion) Marx, namely Marx’s dictum [*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*] that "to be radical is to grasp things by the root--and for man, the root is man himself." What could be more modern than that? For Hegel, the philosophical kernel of truth in the Christian symbol of God becoming man is that the human spirit, as it evolves through time, becomes divine just as much as the divine becomes human. It must be noted that Hegel’s is divinity understood more in Aristotle's terms—thought thinking itself—rather than in the Biblical terms of particular providence and individual, carnal, salvation.

Hegel, in all his thought, tried to fulfill the Enlightenment project--and not just in his thought. In his youth, while a student in the Tubingen theological seminary, Hegel was a supporter of the French Revolution, and claimed to remain (if in a more nuanced way) a supporter into his mature years. He continued to see that Revolution, despite the horrors of the reign of terror, as a necessary event for the further progress of society, and of thinking, including his own thinking.

On the other hand--and with Hegel there is always an "other hand"--in the *Phenomenology* Hegel critiques the modern revolutionary mentality in the strongest possible terms, tracing a direct line of descent from the Enlightenment to the Reign of Terror. In the section of the *Phenomenology* entitled, appropriately enough, "Absolute Freedom and Terror," Hegel shows in effect that from the modern philosophy of the likes of Descartes, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Voltaire, there is a slippery slope to Robespierre and the Guillotine. The French revolution produced a slaughter different in kind from any the world had seen, certainly unknown in antiquity: political murder in the name of reason and progress, in the name of "philosophy." Starting in September 1793, and continuing until July 1794, heads were lopped off by the thousands, "like cabbages," Hegel says [590]<sup>2</sup>, in an attempt to root out all enemies of the revolution, all obstacles to progress. Writing only a few years later, in 1807, Hegel argues that this apparently senseless slaughter appeared for a reason: it was an attempt to satisfy the demands of the modern self.

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Terry Pinkard, available online at <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html>. Cited by paragraph number.

The modern self, that is the self whose self conception is based on the principles of universal freedom and equality is, above all, an *abstract* self. Such a self has no tolerance for distinction or inequality. Such a self insists on defining itself, of accepting no "content" given to it by nature or history. It is always an "ideal" to be achieved in the future, an ideal always in the distance because in fact incompatible with actual concrete selves, which are, necessarily, given content by their historical context, by their specific role in society and their natural basis in the consciousness of an actual living human being. Any concrete, actual society which exists, as Plato would put it, in deed as opposed to merely in speech, has distinctions, definitions, and inequalities. This necessary incompatibility between the revolutionary ideal and reality resulted in, Hegel argues, a "fury of destruction" [589].

So, if Hegel remained to the end of his days a supporter of the principles of 1789-- if he remained, in short, a "modern"--he is one of a most peculiar kind. What, then, is Hegel's stance towards the Enlightenment? Well, the Enlightenment must be both fulfilled AND overcome. In short, the Enlightenment must be *aufgehoben*, the past participle of the verb *aufheben*. This is Hegel's favorite verb--any reader of footnotes to Hegel translations soon encounters it--and among its meanings in ordinary speech are to lift up, to cancel, to preserve, and to supersede. For Hegel, how is this *aufhebung*, this raising, canceling, preserving, superseding of the Enlightenment accomplished? In practice, in the person of Napoleon--who Hegel calls "the world spirit on horseback"-- who is part of the group that stops the reign of terror but, at the same time, while ending the republic instantiates the principles of liberty and equality in the law, in the Code Napoleon. Philosophically, however, Hegel accomplishes the overcoming of the

Enlightenment in the chapter of the *Phenomenology* called "Reason," Vernunft, a chapter which constitutes Hegel's immanent critique, that is, a critique from within, of the self-understanding—or rather the various self understandings—that constitute that moment in place and time known as the Enlightenment.

The Reason chapter ends with a transition to that fuller form of subjectivity Hegel calls Spirit, *Geist*. Despite the name there is nothing ghostly about *Geist*. Very much unlike "Reason," which asserts its timelessness and universality, "Spirit" is human thought understood as social and historical, as embodied and in time, all the way down--Hegel uses the term "Spirit" as it is used in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*.

Now, in our time, we frequently say, unthinkingly, that “all thought is relative to its time.” Hegelians without having read Hegel, we do not see, as Hegel does, that *that* thought—because it is a claim about *all* thought—cannot—if true—itsself be a relative thought. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is Hegel’s *philosophical* demonstration of the connection between thought and time. It is Spirit gradually coming to the knowledge—to both the certainty and the truth—that it is Spirit, a knowledge Hegel calls Absolute Knowing.

The *Phenomenology* has often been described as a *bildungsroman*, a novel of education wherein a character I’ll call Mr. or Ms. Consciousness learns through “experience,” which for Hegel means reflection on its own thoughts. The story starts with Consciousness as pure sensuous immediacy, and proceeds through 8 chapters, through 8 progressively more reflective and concrete ways of knowing. [See the Table of Contents]. Within that movement of the *Phenomenology*, the movement of the Reason

chapter looks very much like an ascent to a "natural cave," i.e. the Greek world described as the first section the next chapter, a world Hegel entitles "True Spirit." The critique of the Enlightenment in the Reason chapter, chapter V is thus of a very different order than the global critique in the Spirit chapter, chapter VI. The latter shows how the Enlightenment as a whole, in its first incarnation as spirit, i.e. an actual historical world, imploded, through a demand for absolute freedom, in the Reign of Terror. By contrast, the critique of chapter V does not proceed chronologically, or on the level of society as a whole, but by thinking through the claims of various forms of modern "selves." on their own terms. Hegel starts with the scientist and goes through Romantics and pleasure seekers, leaders of moral reform and rebels who live on the fringes of society, Machiavellian pragmatists, and intellectuals. Each one of these forms of life, or type of soul, is shown to fail on its own terms: its understanding of the world, and of itself, is self contradictory. One could call such a procedure "Socratic," or as Hegel calls it, dialectical.

Many of the "characters" of chapter V, if you could call them that, do not seem terribly "reasonable." What are they all doing in chapter V? Well, all of these "forms of self" have one thing in common, which puts them (including, strangely, a self like Goethe's Faust, who explicitly rejects science in favor of life experience) all in this chapter--they claim to derive their criteria of the true, the just, and the good a-historically, from their own thinking. Thus, they fail to see what Hegel sees as the essential truth about thought and the self—that thinking subjectivity is, as Spirit, an "I that is a we, a we that is an I." One could say that the "we" part in that formula is the cave, the cave that is natural to humans.

In Hegel's presentation, Spirit moves beyond all individualistic perspectives...and yet Hegel catalogues these perspectives so exhaustively because, I suspect, for Hegel such perspectives will be a permanent feature of the modern landscape. The "characters" that people the Reason chapter are all "abstract" selves in the literal sense that they all leave out, have something "taken away," ab-stracted, in their understanding of the world and themselves—and this is why these modern selves come in so many shapes and sizes. Their common defect comes *despite*, or perhaps because, of the fact that they are all selves that claim--in a way that say, Creon and Antigone do not--that they *are* most fundamentally, "selves," individuals. One should note that Antigone appeals to the divine law that everyone knows, not to her conscience or individual "conviction." Such a self--the self-proclaimed *individual* self--first arose, Hegel suggests at the beginning of the Reason chapter, in Europe around time of the Renaissance and the Reformation. For Hegel, Martin Luther's "Here I stand, I cannot do other" and Descartes's "I think therefore I am" are very much of the same epoch.

Understanding the Reason chapter as an "ascent to the natural cave" helps to explain something which might appear strange to the first time reader of the *Phenomenology*, namely that a book that purports to demonstrate not just the historicity but the progression of human thought, that thought not just moves in time, but becomes fuller in time, treats the various forms of modern thought (Chapter V) before it treats the Greek world (Chapter VI.A).

In the remainder of our time together I want to do three things. 1. To look at the first modern character who appears in the Reason section, the natural scientist; 2. To sketch how Reason grows dialectically into Spirit. 3. To say a just a few words about

why Hegel uses the Greek world as the example of "true Spirit" (and not, say, ancient Egypt, Persia, Israel, India or China). I will conclude with a few brief remarks about why all of this matters...i.e. matters to us now, to Americans living in the 21st century.

## I. Modern natural science

Hegel says several times in the beginning of the Reason chapter that reason is the “certainty,” the *gewissheit*, of being all reality. Certainty, however, is not the same thing as truth. Reason, in the same way as all the other shapes of consciousness described in the *Phenomenology*, is inherently driven to prove that its particular form of certainty, that there is nothing “absolute other” than reason, is justified. Thus, Hegel says (para **239**):

“...as merely the *certainty* of being all reality, it [reason] is aware within this *concept* that, as *certainty*, as the *I*, it is not yet reality in truth, and it is thus driven to elevate its certainty into truth, and to bring to fruition that empty “mine.”

The sequence of the various ways that the self tries to do this—and the various constructive failures it has along the way, the “experience” by which it learns—form the story line of Chapter V. For obvious reasons—the chapter is nearly 200 closely argued pages—I can only touch on a few of the high spots.

Looking at the table of contents, we see that the first major section of the chapter, Hegel calls “Observing Reason”—and the first major part of that section, “Observing Nature.” Hegel, in trying to get a critical perspective on the Enlightenment, goes immediately for the citadel, the most heavily fortified position, the very center of the Enlightenment’s self confidence: science, and in particular natural science. Whatever

doubts we might have about the modern age, we can always say: well, those people in the bad old days didn't know the earth moved. They didn't know about the chemical elements...or electricity...or a lot of other things.

One must avoid misunderstandings. Despite what some allege, Hegel is most definitely NOT trying to “refute” science, or to place it within some straightjacket made up of preconceived ideas. Rather, he is engaged in a “critique” of science in the Kantian sense of “critique”—to set out the limits, so as to see the shape or nature of something. The Greek origin of “critique” is the verb κρινω, which means both to cut, and to judge, such when one has discriminating taste. However, unlike Kant, Hegel is not engaged in building a “theory of knowledge,” a clear distinction or discrimination of what we can know from what we can't. Rather: the central question for Hegel is one of motive. *Do the scientists understand why they do what they do, and what they are in fact looking for?* We readers of the *Phenomenology* have known, since going beyond the Consciousness section, that human subjects are not, and cannot be conceived as, disembodied minds. Hence, as a living consciousness man does not want mere knowledge, but *satisfaction*. What would satisfy these men of science?

The term that Hegel uses for Reason understood as science, “observing reason,” *beobachtende Vernunft*, is revealing. The related verb, *beobachten*, means to “see, notice, observe, watch.” Thus, for example, to be under police surveillance is to be *von der Polizei beobachtet*. Observation connotes that cool detachment that gives a certain superiority, especially if one observes without being seen. The term's ordinary sense of watching reminds one of the etymology of “theory” from the Greek verb θεωω, to see, also the root of the word “theatre.”

Now, it is just this “coolness,” the calm self possession and self-awareness of the detached observer, that is at stake. Just before the beginning of the Observing Reason section, Hegel says [para 239] that reason, in trying to raise its *certainty* of being all reality to *truth*, remains a “restless or disquieted seeking,” *ein unruhiges suchen*. Just a few paragraphs later, near the beginning of the “Observing Nature” section [para 245], Hegel refers to Observing Reason’s “restless, disquieted, *instinct*,” --*rastlosen, unruhigen Instinkte*. The last term, instinct, which Hegel repeats several times, is almost a slap in the face to the self-proclaimed “observer,” i.e. the man claiming calm self-awareness. Isn’t reason supposed to raise us above instinct, to be human as opposed to being animal? As we shall see, the residual unreflective instinctiveness of the scientist is going to come back at the end of chapter V in a section humorously called “the spiritual animal kingdom,” which is Hegel’s treatment of that modern class type now known as “intellectuals.”

Lest any take umbrage, perhaps I should remind you: the shapes of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* are not real people in all their complexity and individuality. They are “ideal types,” alternative “positions” or types of self .... The *pure* man or woman of science, Mr./Ms. Observer, seems to be in the grip of something he or she does not understand, an *instinct*, an instinct that can find no satisfaction, no peace. Whence the problem? Well, reason inherently tries to raise its certainty to truth—that is, it tries show that it is all reality, i.e. to find itself in the world. But: it **can’t**, not at this stage in its development. Here, Hegel is, uncharacteristically, eloquent:

**241.** But if reason rummages around through all the innards of things, and opens all their veins so that reason might encounter itself gushing out from them, then it

will have no luck or happiness [*Glucke*] ; rather, it must have, at an earlier point perfected itself in itself in order to be able to experience its perfection.

Later, Reason as “perfected,” that is, as coming to knowledge of itself as Spirit, will achieve satisfaction because it will experience its own motion in the logic of world history, the logic of its own progressive embodiment and self-awareness. Why can’t *observing* reason find any such happiness, “Glucke”? Well, it can’t come up with a coherent self-understanding, and thus engages in a certain equivocation. Observing reason is by its very nature—an example is the antinomy of Hume and Kant—torn between empiricism and idealism...so, it shuttles back and forth between two self-interpretations.

On the one hand, it is a point of pride of modern natural science that it is, far more “empirical” than, say, Aristotle’s science. The reality, however, as Hegel points out, is messier:

**244.** However much the unthinking consciousness speaks of observation and experience as the source of truth, still its words may make it sound as if the whole business were merely a matter of tasting, smelling, feeling, hearing, and seeing. But in the enthusiasm with which it recommends tasting, smelling, etc., it forgets to say that it also in fact has no less essentially already determined the object of this sensation, and that in its eyes this determination counts for at least as much as that sensation. It will also without further ado admit that it is in general not that much concerned with perceiving, and that, for example, the perception that the penknife lies next to this tobacco-box will not count for it as an observation. The meaning of what is perceived should at least be that of a *universal*, not a *sensuous this*.

Science searches for the universal, for laws, but the natural world is an infinity of particulars, of facts: “that tree over there.” Thus, Hegel argues, the task of science is infinite: “This restless, unceasing instinct,” he says, “can never run out of material” (245). For Hegel as for Kant, modern natural science proceeds, and must proceed, by

progressively more conceptual versions of nature... and there is nothing in nature that will stop this. An example Hegel gives should be familiar to our seniors:

**251.** Because at the same time the law is *in itself the concept*, the instinct of reason [*Vernunftinstinkt*] of this consciousness necessarily sets itself to *purifying* the law and its moments *into concepts*, but without knowing that this is what it wants to do, and it thus sets up experiments about the law.... For example, negative electricity more or less first makes itself known as *resin*-electricity, just as positive electricity more or less first makes itself known as *glass*-electricity. By way of experiment [*Versuche*], both entirely lose this significance and become purely *positive* and *negative* electricity, neither of which is any longer bound up with things of a particular kind....

Hegel's use of the term "experiment," *Versuche*, literally "attempt," and derived from *suchen*, to search, reminds us that modern science does NOT proceed by mere observation or "gathering data," but by experiments, sometimes revealingly called "controlled experiments," i.e. observations that are designed to answer a pointed question we are putting to nature.

From a perspective that is purely "scientific"—that is to say, purely "observational," not sufficiently reflective or philosophic--the "status" of what these experiments show is not entirely clear to the experimenters. On the one hand, they tend to suppose they are "discovering" laws of nature that are some how out there, and not a product of their own minds:

**250. (a)** That the truth of law is essentially *reality* becomes for the consciousness which sticks to observation once again an *opposition* to the concept and to the universal in itself, or, in its eyes, such a thing as its law is not an essence that stems from reason. In that law, it supposes that it has received something *alien*.

That view, however, cannot stand. Hegel goes on:

**(b)** Yet it refutes its own supposition in its act of taking its universality not to mean that *all singular* sensuous things must have provided evidence for the appearance of law in order for it to be able to assert the truth of the law. The

assertion that, “if you pick a stone off the ground and drop it, then it falls,” does not at all require the experiment to have been made with all stones... Consciousness thus has in experience the existence of the law, but it likewise has it there as *concept*, and only *on account of both circumstances* together is the law true in its own eyes. The law counts as law because it exhibits itself in appearance and at the same time is in itself the concept.

At this point, a very reasonable objection to Hegel’s critique of observing reason might be made: so what? That is to say, so what if the scientists can’t quite settle on what it is they are doing—is it discovery or invention, fact or concept--or why they are doing it? Just let them do it...especially since scientific knowledge seems the only kind of knowledge of nature that is available, and it produces so many nice gadgets like I-phones. It is very tempting to just stay at the “observing reason” stage and go no further, putting a “going out of business sale” on the door of philosophy. Many of our modern research universities are close to doing such...even if, via inertia, lip service continues to be paid to the “humanities.” But to give in to that temptation would be to be content with living in an unreflective condition. It would be to content oneself with living in a cave, or perhaps—given the difficulty of finding an exit—a cave beneath the cave. The key point: for Hegel, modern science’s, observing reason’s, inability to understand itself is only part of a deeper limitation, namely its constitutional inability to understand what, or rather who [since man is not just a “what” or object] man is. Reason’s self-knowledge will require something more than controlled experiments, such as those done by psychologists.

The oscillation of observing reason between concept and fact, between idealism and empiricism, is for Hegel just the first sign of a deeper, more massive problem.

Observing reason is the grip of “instinct” because reason has, as I have already mentioned, an inherent telos or desire, namely to grasp *itself*. Hegel says:

**242.** Consciousness *observes*, i.e., reason wants to find itself and to have itself as an existent object, as an *actual, sensuously-present* mode. Observing consciousness supposes and even says that it wants to learn from experience *not about itself* but rather about *the essence of things as things*...Reason, as it *immediately* comes on the scene as consciousness' certainty of being all reality, grasps its reality in the sense of the *immediacy of being*...However, its actual activity contradicts this supposition, for it *knows* things, and it transforms their sensuousness into *concepts*, i.e., precisely into a being which is at the same time the I...

What does it mean that reason “wants to find itself as an object, as an actual, sensuously present mode”? What is observing reason, via its instinct, in its restless motion, trying to grasp? What it can't seem to get ahold of, to comprehend in the way a monkey's prehensile tail grasps a branch...is reason's own free, concept making activity.

This instinctive searching after itself is the basis of the plot line of the whole long Observing Reason section. In Hegel's presentation, the modern scientific consciousness starts its journey as a physicist--and isn't mathematical physics the ultimate foundation of the rest of modern science, chemistry resting on physics, biology on chemistry? As a physicist, it looks for laws (or as we might say, formulae). However, this hypothetical reflective consciousness who is the protagonist of the *Phenomenology*, who is continually being educated through experience, senses, instinctively, that the deterministic, billiard ball world of physics--of masses, forces, and velocities--does not seem to have room it for something as free or self-determining, and hence reflective, as thought. Via that dissatisfaction, the Observing Reasoner leaves physics and becomes a biologist, looking to the organized and purposive activity of living things, of animals which are self-moving wholes that change while remaining themselves, as the royal road to wisdom. For Hegel life [which Hegel calls the organic] is somehow more congruent than non-life to the free

nature of thought, which stays the same—i.e. stays my thought—even as its content changes. [e.g. paragraph 254]

However, biology, too, for reasons which unfortunately I must summarize very superficially, proves not to be the answer, the “organic world” being not a sufficient means by which observing reason can “find itself as a sensuous object.” Hegel’s argument, as I understand it, boils down to this. It’s all very well to insist—one thinks of Hans Jonas here--that living things are not machines, but self-moving wholes. However, can a new insistence on wholeness, a neo-teleology as it were, really change the content of the science of biology, which like other natural sciences proceeds by resolving wholes into parts, such as DNA? Hegel argues that all insistence on the purposive unity of living beings is something added on to natural science, not changing the deepest tendencies of science because—he follows Kant here—purposiveness is not something reason can *observe*. Organisms, and our reflection about them, lead to us think: the organism, and its organs, function *as if* they were governed by purposes, by a deliberate design. However, as Hegel says, [258] any purpose has to be referred to “another intelligence,” i.e. God, because the existence of a design or designer is in principle unknowable, and *as such* excluded from science. *Knowledge* of nature as an *object*—all that is “not us”—is, still, limited to laws, to mute inorganic truths like H<sub>2</sub>O.

Biology then, just as did Physics, fails in its bid to be the master science, the archi-techne. Other failures, albeit constructive failures, follow. Much like a confused undergraduate trying to chose a major, Mr./Ms. Observing Reasoner, in its instinctive self-seeking, goes through many other sciences, none of which quite fit the self-knowledge bill. To make a long story short, I will—as they say in Hollywood--cut to the

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chase. The last stop on Observing Reason's odyssey—before Mr./Ms. Consciousness jumps the Observation ship altogether, and tries something more active--is Phrenology, that long forgotten, and much ridiculed, science of understanding someone's psyche by interpreting the bumps on the skull. At the end of the Observing Reason section, Hegel presents Phrenology as *the* reductio ad absurdum of observing reason's implicit claim that it knows, or in principle, can know all of reality, or rather what is essential about reality. How did we get *here*?

Considering the movement of the Observing Reason section as a whole, the devolving of observing reason into phrenology makes a certain crazy sense. In Hegel's dialectic, three is the magic number. The first, very long, part of "Observing Reason" is "Observing Nature," where, in effect, the self is trying to find itself in an *object*, in German *gegenstande*, standing against, i.e. something outside and standing against the self. When Hegel speaks of the natural consciousness, what he means is that "objectification," getting a correct picture or "representation" [*Vorstellung*, literally "placing before"] of reality is always the first place the self or subject wants to go. Not finding itself outside itself, observing reason, reasonably enough, turns back on itself, trying to find, in logic and psychology [V.A.b.], a science of the subjective.

But, this inward turn is not sufficient—the fact that there are *two* sciences of the subject, logic and psychology, is indicative of the problem. There are two different kinds of "laws" (and remember, science, understood as observing reason, is the search for law) that thought follows, but of different orders: emotional and rational. The self has fallen apart once again, and moreover, isn't the "subjective" as such just as much of an abstraction as the "objective"?

What observing reason really wants, in the end, is a science that is “objective” and “subjective” at the same time [V.A.c.]. So, phrenology makes its appearance—is one of the “phenomena” that the Phenomenology describes—because its promise fits the bill.

Here’s Hegel:

**334....** if a conscious mode of spirit has its feeling in a determinate place on the skull, then perhaps this place on the skull will indicate by its shape that mode of spirit and its particularity. For example, when engaged in strenuous thought, some people complain of feeling a painful tension somewhere in the head, and sometimes they complain even when they are *thinking* at all; likewise, *stealing*, *committing murder*, *writing poetry*, and so forth might each be accompanied by its own proper feeling, which moreover would have to have its own particular location as well. This location of the brain, which in this manner would be more in motion and be more activated, would most likely also even further develop the neighboring location of the bone. [Hegel’s italics].

Now, the idea that one could know a person by the bumps on his head is pretty funny, and we laugh when we see those old maps of the skull used by phrenologists. But, this physical approach to the psyche—and the relevance of Hegel’s critique of it—has not gone away—far from it. The phrase “location in the brain” should ring a bell, Pavlovian or otherwise. Neurophysiology, and the related discipline of psychopharmacology, are among the hottest things going, the holy grail of modern science, and precisely for the reason that Hegel indicates. The promise of a final, complete self-knowledge is--now as always—the telos. Could self-knowledge be achieved in a purely “scientific” way? That is to say: could the psyche be understood “objectively” in both senses of that term: as an object we stand over and observe, something *gegenstandliche*, and as an understanding that is impartial, not colored by a particular observer’s own biases and interests?

If some of what Hegel says on the subject is very dated, other arguments of his—especially if one has a little imagination, and construes and develops these arguments in a

charitable way—have a contemporary resonance which is almost eerie. But, perhaps it is better to take a contemporary example, which I found in 15 seconds on Google with the search terms psychopath brain abnormality. [see <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iop/news/records/2012/May/The-antisocial-brain.aspx>] In a recent study done at King’s College, London it was shown that, among a population of violent criminals, the ones showing a *truly* psychopathic lack of empathy [as opposed to being just really angry]

“displayed significantly reduced grey matter volumes in the anterior rostral prefrontal cortex and temporal poles..”

Well, it’s hard to argue with science. But, such a study raises all sorts of questions, such as whether all people who have such a reduced amount of critical gray matter lack empathy, or whether all those who are psychopaths lack grey matter. Hegel warns that any physical view of the self suffers from this kind of uncertainty, as far as being able to predict what a real individual will do, think, or feel, and thus must engage, in making its claims, in “subterfuge” or equivocation. That is to say: observing reason has to argue BOTH that the outer, or behavior, *expresses* the inner physical reality, AND that said inner physical reality might never be expressed, because it is only causes a “disposition” [338]. What the view of “self as brain” leaves out is, paradoxically—and grasping how these two fit together is necessary to grasp Hegel’s thought—BOTH the freedom of the self, and its determination by the individual circumstances of its historical development.

For Hegel, the equivocation of speaking of ‘dispositions’ [Anlage] or tendencies points to the deepest problem of observing reason, namely its constitutional inability to grasp what Spirit is, hence what IT in fact is. In our day, with MRI’s we have pretty

good at figuring out which part of the brain lights up when we think or feel something. Does this explain what thought is? Objections to the idea that neuroscience could “explain” thinking are usually met with “but the science is still in its infancy.” But, nevertheless, it is worth asking now—maybe before we forget how to ask, and become completely enraptured by science fiction fantasies such as the willful computer HAL in the movie 2001—such questions as: Would a complete neural map of the brain, assuming such a thing were possible, be any help in distinguishing a good argument from a bad argument? Would such a map tell us why we do science, or what science knows? Could any purely physical reading of someone’s brain (as opposed to speaking with them) tell us what language they spoke, or what views of the world, or of themselves they held? [Let alone whether these views were reasonable]. Could a computer ever genuinely, i.e. spontaneously, without being programmed to so, worry that it was just a computer, and write the Critique of Pure Computation?

Hegel’s answers to all these questions would be, of course, “no”—and I think he helps us understand why we should not worship neuroscience as the final solution of the consciousness question. Hegel preserves the importance of the human. Science is human activity, an activity of Spirit, and Spirit is not, Hegel claims, any kind of “being” or thing. To those who would assert otherwise, reducing what is high, Spirit, to what is low, mere matter, Hegel is rather cutting, even crude, in effect responding in kind:

**346.** The *depth* from which spirit pushes out from its inwardness but which it manages to push up only to the level of *representational consciousness* and which lets it remain there – and the *ignorance* of this consciousness about what it says are the same kind of connection of higher and lower which, in the case of the living being, nature itself naively expresses in the combination of the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ of generation – with the organ of urination. – The infinite judgment as infinite would be the fulfillment of self-comprehending life,

whereas the consciousness of the infinite judgment which remains trapped within representational thought conducts itself like urination.

This is strident rhetoric—strident I think because Hegel judges, correctly in my view, that the contemporary worship of science, facilitated and abetted by the self-confidence of the scientists, is *the most recalcitrant*, because the least obvious, obstacle to education in the fullest sense. Nevertheless, Hegel is not “anti-science,” reactionary, or willfully ignorant. The goal of the Observing Reason section of the *Phenomenology* is to put science in *perspective*, something science cannot do any more for itself any more than one can edit one’s own writing. But reason, including but not limited to science or observing reason, can only be seen critically, as a whole, from the larger perspective of spirit.

## II. From Observing Reason to Spirit

Rather than being a thing, spirit is activity, self-moving activity. For Hegel, spirit’s non-thing like character can only be fully seen when we see that Spirit is social and historical “all the way down.” As such, it cannot just be individual like Descartes’ cogito or simply constituted by the workings of physical and chemical processes. Now, Hegel had prepared the ground for the understanding of Spirit as social and historical, relational and time bound, earlier in the *Phenomenology*, in chapter IV. “Self-Consciousness,” Hegel claims [PhG 175; 177], “exists only for another self-consciousness.” Following the path opened up by Rousseau’s analysis of *amour propre* in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Hegel argues that being a self—i.e. a self conscious that it is a self—requires, at a minimum, a recognition of my selfhood, that I am not a thing but free, on the part of another self recognized as such by me.

This claim about the inherently relational character of self-consciousness is the necessary—but not the sufficient—basis for the claim that consciousness is Spirit. Even the long “Observing Reason” section does no more than argue that the mind is not a thing, an “object” that can be observed. There is still much of the Reason chapter left—and much work to do—in demolishing all conceivable modern claims on the part of the individual to be self-sufficient, i.e. to achieve self-determination by a combination of thought and action. Immediately following observing reason’s comeuppance, the next phenomenon to appear in chapter V is Goethe’s character Faust, who rejects the life of the mind in favor of experience, indeed in favor of pleasure. Given that modern science has none of the answers to life’s big questions, consciousness has now

**360** “...left behind the law of custom and existence, the knowledge acquired through observation and theory, as a grey shadow which is in the act of passing out of sight...”

**361** “It plunges therefore into life, and indulges to the full the pure individuality in which it appears...”

Hegel thus finds Faust’s rejection of science, and even morality, almost reasonable, and certainly understandable. But this path too...even though it has put the last nail in the coffin of detached observation... is a dead end, self-contradictory,

I am getting close to the end, so I must move rapidly. The Reason chapter ends with taking up the claim of Kant’s Pure Practical Reason, that is, the claim that Reason can, on its own—independent of the facts of human nature, psychology, or history—give itself laws, that is, come up with timeless and universal moral principles or “oughts.”

Hegel argues that this, Reason’s last stand as it were, cannot work, because reason’s pure formalism—familiar to us in Kant’s categorical imperative—will fail to give itself

content. Ethics, as Aristotle would put it, is part of Politics, moral principles not being comprehensible independently of the social world of which they form a part. The movement at the end of the Reason chapter parallels the movement in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* from “morality” to the “ethical world.”

However, just before the concluding sections on “law giving reason” and “reason as testing laws,” there is a section which is capital to understanding why the next place Mr./Ms. Consciousness will go, after finishing up with Reason, is Spirit. This section has the very strange title “The Spiritual Animal Kingdom and Deception, or the Thing that matters,” *Das geistige Tierreich und der Betrug oder die Sache selbst*. Its subject matter is that strange modern species, the intellectual. “Tier” is not only animal, but beast, wild: *das Tier im Menschen* is the “beast in man.” It’s as if we were now in The Wizard of Oz, going with Dorothy through the dark forest, chanting “Critics and Writers and Artists, oh my!” Just who are these spiritual beasts—and what’s beastly, and spiritual, about them?

The selves in the spiritual animal kingdom—unlike the observing reasoners—do not claim that they have an objective science of everything. They are, one might say, too sophisticated for such a claim—that kind of confidence is just *so* last century! Besides, every form of “self” after “observing reason” has been left behind has an element of action, of “self-realization,” rather than being just a point of view. What the spiritual animals have is not the truth—that naïve word embarrasses them. What they have is their *work*, which they feel compelled to do because it realizes *their nature*, their own *individual* nature. One sees this in the etymological connection between “genius” and “generation.” This form of self allows, one might say, more individuality than the previous forms of self: true painters feel compelled to paint, musicians to compose,

physicists to make equations and experiments. They all have their work: the thing that matters, *die sache selbst*, literally “the matter itself,” “matter” understood in the sense of subject matter.

Sounds great—almost like one of those idyllic pictures by the artist known as Le Douanier Rousseau, where all the animals, even sheep and lions, are sitting there calmly together. But, there is a nagging question about the thing that matters: matters to whom? The artist, or writer, or physicist might say: what matters is that I am *satisfied* with my work. Who cares if anyone sees it, or thinks it is beautiful or important or good or true? However, anybody who knows one such soul knows that such an answer is an exercise in self-deception. It’s just not that simple. The production of a work is a production of something that is available to others, hence to their criteria. The producer—and for Hegel that includes every form of intellectual life, including his own—must care about the “reception” of their work. This is not a psychological fact, the consequence of human vanity, but an inherent consequence of intellectual production. You have to convince *someone* else that what you say or make is beautiful or important or good or true. Otherwise, you might just be crazy, an idiot in the original Greek sense, ἰδιος meaning ‘private’ or ‘particular,’ living in your own private Idaho, like a wild potato.

This dependence on others—on their appreciation and criticism—is as much ‘animal’ as it is spiritual. It’s not just that in the world of the intellect there is now competition, a near Darwinian struggle as it were, for prominence and influence. There is also a kind a “feeding” that takes place. Are you the best judge of your own work, of its significance? Maybe not. Say you write a novel. I read it, and perhaps I see its importance for our time more clearly than you did—and even write another novel that

takes advantage of the artistic possibilities that you opened up (I'll put you in the acknowledgements) . I've digested you, and moved on. What's worse—that you will write something no will see—or that you will write something that others will appreciate better than you did? As a spiritual animal, you must ex-press yourself, aus-drucken—but once your work is out there, you no longer have control of it, and it is no longer just “you.”

What Hegel says in the section on the Spiritual Animal Kingdom constitutes his strongest argument that all thought is Spirit, or, as he puts it, “an I that is a we, a we that is an I.” We are individuals who are social all the way down, and vice versa. I do not know whether this vision, and its consequence, that philosophy can be nothing more than the highest self-consciousness of its time, is true. What I am fairly confident of: philosophy must be that at the very least. That is to say: liberal education, as liberating education, must pose the question of Spirit: what time is it?

### III. Why Greece as the “natural cave”?

The Spirit chapter of the *Phenomenology* opens up with a discussion of Greece, and then proceeds to a discussion of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, where two all important, and related, questions are raised: 1. Where does the human being's most fundamental allegiance, and identity, lie—family or political community? and 2. Where does law come from: the gods or man? These divides are divides in the Greek world itself, and will—once their consequences are played out--bring the humans out of the Greek polis and into a very different order of Spirit, namely Roman Law. Hegel calls Greek spirit “true” Spirit, and the dialectical ascent in the *Phenomenology* from here on in follows the

chronological order of human history. But, it has taken a lot of work—five long chapters, more than half the book, to get to this initial or ‘immediate’ form of Spirit. In particular, we had to claw our way out of the various modern positions of Chapter V just to get to Greece!

But: why start here? Why is Greece Hegel’s example of “true spirit”? Aren’t there, even in Hegel’s own work, many other, and—assuming time matters—earlier versions of Spirit? China, India, Persia, Israel, Egypt, just to name a few from his lectures on the *Philosophy of World History*. And—to make matters more complicated—even chapter 7 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Religion, which is in Hegel’s presentation the “subjective” side of World Spirit, starts not with Greece but with Egypt. What is so important about Greece, then?

I think an important clue is found in something Hegel says about Egypt, and in particular about the sphinx, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Here, and in the religion chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel presents Egypt as the immediate predecessor, in a way the source, of the Greek Spirit. In the sphinx—in that riddling being slain by Oedipus—the Egyptians came up with an image of the central riddle of human existence—even if—as Hegel claims—they did not themselves understand the question, or even that it was a question. The sphinx, Hegel argues, must be understood not statically, in an Egyptian way, but dynamically. It is the human bursting out of the animal, freedom emerging from its submergence in nature. This capacity to burst forth is the ground of the historicity, the development, of human thought and society. The sphinx, in short, is an image of Spirit, of the incarnation of spirit in the world. But this

be a riddle. Man both is and is not the maker of himself. That, Oedipus discovers, is a *problem*.

The Greeks are important—and I think will always be important--because they bring this problem into the open with a force, with a clarity, with a radicality that, as far as I am aware, has no equal. Bringing the riddle of who man is to the surface, Hegel claims, is not just the work of Sophocles, or Plato, or any other small group of thinkers. This motion is implicit in the history of the Greek polis itself—democracy, however imperfect or limited, has within it an implicit claim of human agency, self-determination, a claim that is always coming up against limits. But this motion—and the questions and questioners which this motion bring to the surface—rend the Greek world asunder. The antimony between Creon and Antigone becomes the opposition between Socrates and Aristophanes. Hegel, one might say, takes the Olympian view, i.e. he does not take sides. He makes us see that Western Civilization has been in crisis from the beginning or even that crisis, a cutting, is the very soul of the West. For this reason, the Greeks are the right place to begin to philosophize about the human things. Their world is, one might say, the natural cave. We need return to them, both with and without Hegel, if we would open up philosophical questions that perhaps have been prematurely closed, as well as, paradoxically, to better understand where we are today.

Conclusion...Finally! Why is Hegel important?

Hegel's thought is an attempt to think through, and deepen, the Enlightenment, to raise it from Voltairean fad to a fully reflective self-awareness. Despite the passage of time, and the monstrous difficulty of his writings, I can think of few better guides to our

own self-examination than Hegel. He makes us aware, as few thinkers do, of all the forest of claims and counter claims. Moreover, and this is perhaps more important today than ever, Hegel reminds us of the mystery—and I think this mystery is at the center of the liberal arts as such—of how we are all a combination of spirit and animal, historical and natural, freedom and necessity, word made flesh.

Thank you.