
THE IMPLICIT MEANING OF HEGEL'S 'PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT'

Viktor Ivanovich Polishchuk^{*}, Zoya Yanovna Selitskaya and
Grigory Viktorovich Silchenko

Tyumen State University, Lenin St. 1, Ishim, 627750, Tyumen Region, Russia

(Received 1 March 2016, revised 16 March 2016)

Abstract

The article complements the traditional interpretation of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'. It argues that his work is a 'depiction' of an increasingly comprehensive self-cognition of the world spirit, affecting its history: it becomes less spontaneous. Self-actualization of the spirit is the process of transforming history into real, i.e. rational history, which consists in creating scenarios and implementing them. In other words, history becomes a rational activity. It is literally being created, thus becoming a product of Man's activity, i.e. culture. The article makes use of the rules of deductive and inductive logics, of required analytical procedures, as well as the diachronic, comparative, historical, hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of analysis.

Keywords: philosophy, consciousness, world, creation, culture

1. Introduction

Before too long, it will be two hundred years since the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was first published. The philosopher finished his work by the end of his so-called 'Jena period'. Later he was proud of the fact that it happened on the night before the battle of Jena. French troops occupied the city. Hegel's house was broken into. He had to leave it and to stay at friends' place for some time. Despite all his deprivations, he hailed Napoleon's troops. The philosopher saw a reformer in him, a successor of the French Revolution, destroying the old order and opening new ways for Germany. He wrote to Niethammer, his countryman and close friend: "I saw the Emperor himself – this universal soul – when he took horse to command reconnaissance. One feels amazing, when one sees such a personality, who, staying here, at this place, on horseback, encompasses the whole world and rules it." [1].

The 'Phenomenology of Spirit' has a subtitle: 'Science of the Experience of Consciousness'. The piece of work was intended to be the first part of 'the science system' and as a whole, as seen by many researchers, presents a vivid description of progressive growth of consciousness from its embryo state –

^{*}E-mail: v.i.p.1945@mail.ru

sensuous certainty – to the absolute knowledge. Marx named it “a source and mystery of Hegelian philosophy” [2]. Later in life, Hegel himself named this first large original work of his “a journey for discoveries” [3]. The ‘Phenomenology’, being an attempt at conceptualizing the controversial development of culture, is full of discoveries indeed. The key one is the active essence of consciousness, its ability to objectify, to turn into cultural forms of existence and human relations. Whatever exists in culture, including the objects of natural world, encompassed by human activity, is born in human consciousness in the form of ideas or images. The objective existence of consciousness, or culture, affects consciousness itself, i.e. shapes it. Tracing the main stages of its formation, consciousness finally perceives them as the manifesting (emerging) spirit. It perceives not only itself, but also created culture, as the source, the subject. Nevertheless, the culture, in its turn, shapes and thus gives rise to consciousness. It becomes a deity, captures consciousness, depresses the human spirit and makes it unhappy. The relations between culture and the spirit resemble those of master and slave, whereby it is frequently impossible to determine, who dominates and who is held subject. However, the spirit’s perception of its dependence, and therefore the necessity to be liberated, is unconditional and absolute knowledge. This idea justifies the three-part structure of Hegel’s work: one part is devoted to the subjective consciousness, another deals with its objective state, i.e. self-consciousness, and the third part covers oneness of the subjective and the objective, expressed in absolute knowledge and corresponding spirit.

In this context, the Soviet philosopher M.K. Mamardashvili wrote, “No matter what speculative, theological and metaphysical expression Hegel chose to present it, the fact remains that he was the first to put the spotlight on social formations of cumulative human culture, existing in human activity” [4]. In fact, the ‘Phenomenology’ claims that the objective spirit knows the identity of the true creator of culture or the ‘second human nature’. However, the individual does not possess such knowledge. Coming to the world, he sees it in its transformed shape, presented in the form of culture. That is why culture is no less objective to him than a mountainous landscape or a starry sky. This constitutes the individual’s subjectivity, i.e. limitation. To become objective and to get the full knowledge about himself, the individual must go through all the stages of the development of the objective spirit. As J.W. von Goethe put it, the individual must “pass through all the epochs of the world culture” [5]. Hegel dwelt upon these ideas in the preface to his work. They are straightforward enough, though limited to ordinary everyday observations. Indeed, each generation and, therefore, each of its representatives repeats the life of previous generations in something essential, reliving their joy and grief, their mistakes and miscounts. If the ‘Phenomenology’ was limited solely to the depiction of this fact, it would certainly not be praised as one of the most fundamental works of philosophical literature.

2. Methodology

Scholars, as well as anyone even superficially familiar with this work, have noted its complexity not only for understanding, but even for simple reading. It is hard to grasp the 'Phenomenology' as a whole, to make one coherent image of it. The work discusses too many things, contains too many digressions, fragments and separate remarks. Hegel admitted it himself. In his letter to Shelling, he wrote about his creation, "Inclusion of particularities, as I feel, made it difficult to see the integral whole. However, this integral whole is by nature such a plexus of transitions, that, if everything were to be outlined with more clarity, a more detailed and coherent presentation would have taken more time. Needless to say, certain parts require a lot of editing; you can find a lot of such places." [1, p. 271] The philosopher Gustav Shpet, who translated the 'Phenomenology' into Russian, commented on this peculiarity of Hegel's work, "There is a reason for the complexity and intricacy of the 'Phenomenology of Spirit'. As any higher formation of consciousness repeats previous developmental stages and goes through the corresponding dialectic steps, Hegel tries to retain some uniformity of verbal expression as well. This formalism results in the fact that, for instance, the terminology, perfectly appropriate when applied at one stage, turns into an allegory at another stage." [6]. Apart from terminological difficulty, there was another: "Hegel's language, even in oral speech, appalled Shiller and Goethe" [6, p. 440]. Hegel, bearing in mind his difficult language, frequently said that God punished him and made him a philosopher.

The peculiarities mentioned above not only render the understanding of the 'Phenomenology' difficult, they sometimes discourage its reading altogether. The German writer and philosopher F.H. Jacobi, who was in his sixties when Hegel's work was published, regretted to admit that he could not struggle through it, opening this 'thick book' only once, and then putting it aside forever [7].

2.1. Hegel and Jesus Christ

If he wished, however, Hegel could write simply and clearly. The preface to the 'Phenomenology' was written in this way, clearly wording the idea of the necessity to revive philosophical speculation as well as the necessity to regard it as a serious occupation. Hegel considered light-minded attitude to Philosophy a prejudice of his time, a false claim that everyone could philosophize, because everyone had the required and sufficient measure "in the form of his natural mind" [8]. Not without irony, Hegel observed that everyone had eyes, hands and feet, but nobody considered it sufficient to make shoes. Philosophy is frequently used to make up for deficiency of knowledge and learning, that is why it is treated as something formal and devoid of content. Meanwhile, the situation is just the opposite: any cognitive or scientific matter can be accepted as true only

on condition that it has its foundation and ultimate source in Philosophy. Sciences cannot “have life, spirit and truth” without it [8].

This fragment is very illustrative not only of the ‘Phenomenology’, but of the whole of Hegelian teaching. Contrary to then (and now) common assumption that only the use of Mathematics in a science makes the latter a science, Hegel assigned to Philosophy the role of the criterion of scientific validity. A belief concerning Mathematics is based on its spurious accuracy and logical nature, whereby *b*, for instance, follows from *a*. Accuracy as a strict conformity with the pattern, and result as a logical conclusion can be synonyms of scientific character and veracity. However, the emergence and life of the individuality surpass accuracy and cannot be reduced to it. A mechanism needs precision, but a living organism needs life in all its variety and consistent and unlimited development. Mathematical accuracy is hardly relevant as far as such categories as consciousness, understanding and thinking are concerned. Yesterday’s truth may turn into an illusion today, or at least into something that is not quite the truth anymore. Here, the notions converge, complement each other, but become quite contradictory at a certain moment. There is no end to these intricacies of the mind, because there is no clear indication that understanding has been achieved; one is constantly reminded by one’s previous mistakes and errors of how elusive full understanding can be. Science – not Philosophy – refuses to acknowledge any ambiguity in such matters, and insists that the truth and understanding should be precise. Philosophy, however, claims the opposite: the true and vivid understanding is a process. Just like life itself, it is obscure and does not exist without its opposite.

In the above-mentioned preface to the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’, Hegel defines philosophy almost verbatim to Jesus Christ’s own definition of Himself: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Just as Jesus Christ is the highest measure of humanity in Christianity, Philosophy is the highest measure of scientific veracity in cognition. In his definition, however, Hegel used the word ‘spirit’ instead of the original ‘way’. The philosopher was, of course, well versed in the study of the Gospel of John. He had written ‘The Life of Christ’ ten years before the ‘Phenomenology’. The above-mentioned coincidence is not formal. By substituting ‘spirit’ for ‘way’, Hegel avoided being reproached for a direct identification of Philosophy and Jesus Christ, and expressed the active essence of the former at the same time. The motive that encourages one to philosophize emerges from inside; it is found in one’s attitude to oneself, in one’s consciousness. To philosophize means to rise to an understanding of the simple fact that Man is what he causes himself to develop into. Consequently, Man is the reason for and the source of himself. Jesus Christ, who determined his fate Himself, could say that He was ‘the way’. In Hegelian philosophy, such self-determination is a major quality and the essence of spirit. It is the essence of Man, culture and, ultimately, Philosophy, because Philosophy has nothing more to say about Man.

In a later aphorism, Hegel thus expressed the need to revive Philosophy, 'What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable'. He was convinced that immediate consciousness reaffirmed this assumption. The aphorism attracted much attention and became a target of heated criticism even from those, as Hegel wrote, who "considered their knowledge of Philosophy undoubted" [9]. The aphorism, indeed, arouses immediate protests based on abundant evidence of what is normally deemed rational turning out to be irrational. Hegel felt the controversy of the idea. However, he was no less convinced that it was true, than his critics were convinced that it was false. They held that the real world was far from reasonable, that it only was to become reasonable. That is why the philosopher did not provide much clarification, just commented tongue-in-cheek, "...if the world were what it is to be, what would become of the old-fashioned speculation about the rational obligation?" [9, p. 90].

Hegel claimed his principle of equality of the reasonable and the real to be 'simple'. It is, indeed, simple, especially considering that the German term 'Wirklichkeit' – 'reality', 'actuality', 'truth' – originated as M. Eckhart's translation of the Latin word 'actualitas' and has an implied the meaning of 'activity'. That is why 'reality' is considered to be both the object and the result of human activity. It can be evaluated differently, but it cannot be denied rationality. Coming into this world, the individual perceives everything in it to be objective, almost natural phenomena. Up to a point, he does not even suspect that all of them are products of someone's activity. Even observing the so-called 'nature' he sees it through the eyes of those who taught him to see, to recognize and to understand.

In 'Hegel's Life, Work and Doctrine' Kuno Fisher referred to an episode described by the poet H. Heine. During one of his frequent evening visits to the philosopher, Heine came up to the window and admired the starry sky. He started to fantasize – first to himself, then aloud – about the stars, and love, and God's omnipotence, etc. Suddenly, Hegel put his hand on Heine's shoulder and remarked, "The starry sky has nothing to do with it. It has no more meaning than what Man attaches to it." [10]

It is by attaching new meanings to phenomena through human activity that the new world, i.e. culture, is formed. This process is formative for Man himself. Human activity makes it possible for the ideal to manifest itself in the material. The ideal penetrates into the mundane world, which eliminates the contradiction between the two. It is crucial to understand that activity is the ultimate measure and evaluation criterion of human mind, not vice versa. Obviously, what activity one can perform reflects the quality of one's mind and the quantity of one's intelligence.

Outside activity, the mind, as well as Man and his consciousness, remain empty abstractions. Attempts to understand the mind outside activity can be explained by its superficial similarity to a machine, which can either work or stand still. The mind, however, cannot stand still, otherwise it does not exist at

all. It is only by being active that Man and his mind become real, definite entities and constitute world culture.

2.2. *Hegel as a philosopher and a person*

Speaking about the complexity of the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’, it is necessary to distinguish between two aspects of its author’s personality – Hegel the philosopher and Hegel as a human being – as does V.I. Korotkikh, an ardent researcher of Hegel’s legacy [11]. That is why it is important to bear in mind not only the intensity of the philosopher’s work on the ‘Phenomenology’, but also his state of mind during that period. On top of writing, Hegel had to deliver an academic course ‘Jenaer Realphilosophie’ (it contained lectures ‘on the philosophy of nature and of the spirit’). Naturally, his work on the ‘Phenomenology’ was uneven, often interrupted by other matters. There were also the everyday circumstances of his Jena life, such as fathering an illegitimate child. Hence, it is safe to say without much exaggeration that a great part of the ‘Phenomenology’ was written intuitively. An indirect corroboration of this premise is found in one of Hegel’s letters, where he confessed that should the manuscript have been lost it would have been very difficult to reconstruct it [7, p. 54]. The authoritative researcher Rudolf Gaym gave a similar evaluation of Hegel’s work; he accompanied his analysis of the ‘Phenomenology’ by such epithets as ‘embryonic’ and ‘undigested’ [12].

If the work in question was, indeed, written intuitively, it becomes clear why it is considered to be ‘the source and the mystery’ of the whole of Hegelian philosophy. Whatever is created by intuition has a spontaneous, organic, integral, though undeveloped quality to it. It contains the purpose and a sketchy outline of its further development. The ‘Phenomenology’ can be seen as an embryo of the entire Hegelian doctrine. Its value is not diminished by spontaneity with which it was written, by unexpected directions of thinking and paradoxical combinations of incompatible, as it would seem, formations of consciousness, where absolute freedom is found side by side with terror, and the animal with the master. While working on the ‘Phenomenology’, Hegel wrote, ‘Activity dies in the product’ [13], which is true: reality consists of frozen forms of the activity of the spirit. However, the result of a philosopher’s activity is philosophical knowledge that, in its turn, presents the ‘reconstructed immediacy’ [13, p. 384]. It is the immediacy of the way Man and culture are created, as well as the immediacy of the fact that Man is the original source of everything. This last fact is conditioned by language, Science, culture and therefore remains a mystery.

2.3. *The end of philosophy and history*

This fact was not a mystery for Hegel himself, even before the ‘Phenomenology’ was written. Neither was it a mystery for ancient thinkers. This fact is not very significant as such, because it is of little consequence to the

average man, who hardly believes in the rational essence of reality. However, for a philosopher like Hegel, the fact that Man conditions himself in history had great significance. History is the play and the stage. People are separate acts in the play, even if they do not realize it. However, as world history unfolds, the authentic authorship of these acts must be revealed – that is what the development of consciousness consists in. Finally, separate acts merge into one action and create world culture, the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' being a rough outline of this process. Concluding the preface to the 'Phenomenology', Hegel wrote, "On the way to its true existence, the consciousness will reach a point at which it will abandon its illusion, as if it were burdened by something foreign, which exists as something else, i.e. the point at which a phenomenon becomes identical to its essence. At this point the description of consciousness will coincide with the true knowledge about the spirit. By gaining insight into its essence, the consciousness will be able to express the nature of absolute knowledge itself." [8, p. 50]

Hegel is known to condition the development of culture by demands. Culture is what demands are. A well-developed man has a variety of demands; that is why his culture is spiritual and diverse. It would seem to follow that such a man enjoys a higher level of freedom. However, culture can also impose demands, being the ultimate one itself. Therefore, culture is both captivity and liberation. Its development, according to Hegel, is a progress of how freedom is perceived. Full liberation, as well as self-cognition, is achieved in culture at the stage of absolute spirit, i.e. in art, religion and philosophy. At this point, human mind, passing through every stage of its development, reveals its identity with the spiritual basis of existence. It realizes that it is, in fact, the best implementation and expression of the spirit.

Philosophy exhausts its meaning at this stage, because its mission is fulfilled, and all sciences about the world and Man are brought into a system. The history of Philosophy itself represents the way, traversed by the idea from pure existence to absolute spirit. This way is of utmost significance to Hegel, as in his system of philosophical sciences; this way turned out to be a stage by stage construction of everything cognized by the spirit. These stages of cognition are the stages of creation of the spirit. It is clear now that the whole world is, in fact, a product, created by the spirit. Any cultural value, created by Man according to an idea, is that same product. That is why the world turns out to be culture.

Man also proves to be culture inasmuch as the spirit prevails in him and he creates himself. Self-creation is the essence, the intended purpose and the freedom of Man. Eventually, world history turns out to be culture as well. Hegel was the first to understand the significance of this fact. Perceiving himself as the essence and subject of history, Man becomes its creator. It means that history as a spontaneous development of the society turns into culture, i.e. into planned creation and implementation of Man's goals.

3. Conclusions

Major world events after Hegel's passing away demonstrate how deeply insightful his work was. World history is becoming more uniform and rational, and easier controlled (Some authors link this state of society not to culture, but to civilization, thus contrasting the two. In our view, civilization is a developmental stage of culture, its new level, conditioned by social and technological progress.). What is going on in the world is not a random interplay of spontaneous forces. It is an outcome of somebody's deliberate intentions and calculations. Today, it is promoted by information technologies. They significantly simplify the connections between different phenomena and processes in the world. They also simplify the control over these phenomena and processes. Information technologies provide an opportunity to influence events and, consequently, to determine their development. Not only do they determine, but also create, or initiate new events. Figuratively speaking, the drama of history is written before it happens in reality. In other words, history in its traditional interpretation is coming to an end. History as human creation is being born, which is, in essence, culture.

"The end of history will be a very sad time" [14] – this well-known adage is true only if one interprets it as the end of ideological evolution of humanity and the universalization of Western liberal democracy, as Fukuyama does. However, Hegel himself (and it is Hegel's idea that Fukuyama refers to, just as A. Kozhevoy [14, p. 296] did before) being the precursor of the end of history, does not find it very sad. The end of history is a logical end of the world spirit's rushed quest, the end of its rebellious confrontation with nature (human nature included).

In their search for the essence, Science and the art alike strive to cut off whatever seems redundant and insignificant from 'the lump of the world'. Only Philosophy accepts the world as it is. Being a science concerned with 'the study of emerging knowledge', it testifies that there is no innermost inexpressible meaning in the world, apart from what Man puts into it. However, such is Man's nature; such is Man in his spontaneity. Such is absolute knowledge. Hegel finishes the 'Phenomenology' with the following words: "*from the chalice of this realm of spirits does it foam to him, his infinity*".

Such an end is not going to be sad. If Man has courage enough to follow his nature, to live without losing his spontaneity, he will find life, the spirit and the truth in himself. It is apparent, though, that Man does not want to know himself in his spontaneity. He is more attracted by culture, wherein he finds a guarantee for his live and, probably, eternity. He is inclined to remain a mediocrity, and that is sad indeed. The end is, of course, inevitable, but it can also be a beginning, as in 'to die in order to live'. Hegel used this famous saying to express the meaning of his teaching. He also attributed this meaning to Philosophy as a whole, as well as to history. The final words of the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' meant for Hegel the beginning of work on the system. They can also mean for us the beginning of new research into the

visionary core of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'. Such evidence can be found not only in the history of mankind on the Earth. Recent decades have seen a number of discoveries proving that Man's existence matters not just for the Earth, but also for the Universe. In 1973, the English astrophysicist B. Carter put forward the anthropic cosmological principle, according to which, in one of its interpretations, the Universe was intended ('conceived') to be compatible with sapient life, i.e. Man. The Gaia hypothesis, formulated in 1979 by the English chemist and earth scientist J. Lovelock, regards all living organisms and the environment as components of one organism of cosmic proportions, which, possibly, even today tries to interact with mankind. One of the founders of synergy I. Prigozhin wrote at the end of the last century, "Today, however, as physicists are trying to incorporate instability into the picture of the Universe in a constructive way, a convergence of the inner and outer worlds is observed, which is arguably one of the most important cultural events of our time" [15]. Thus, natural scientists implicitly acknowledge Hegel's conviction, that not only history, but the whole world is ultimately culture [16]. Thus, a philosophical response to the problem stresses the need for Man to know himself [17].

References

- [1] G.W.F. Hegel, *A Collection of Works of Different Years*, Vol. 1, Mysl', Moscow, 1971, 255.
- [2] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. A Collection of Works*, Vol. 42, Politizdat, Moscow, 1974, 155.
- [3] A. Gulyga, *Hegel*, Molodaya Gvardiya, Moscow, 1970, 71.
- [4] M.K. Mamardashvili, *Forms and Content of Thinking*, Vysshaya Shkola, Moscow, 1968, 55.
- [5] I.P. Eckerman, *Talks with Goethe*, Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, Moscow, 1981, 203.
- [6] G. Shpet, *On the part of translator*, in G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Nauka, St. Petersburg, 1992, 439.
- [7] K. Fisher, *Hegel, his Life, Work and Doctrine*, in *The History of New Philosophy*, Vol. 8, Sotsekgiz, Moscow, 1933, 573.
- [8] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Nauka, St. Petersburg, 1992, 37.
- [9] G.W.F. Hegel, *Logics, Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Vol. 1, Mysl', Moscow, 1974, 89.
- [10] K. Fisher, *Hegel, his Life, Work and Doctrine*, in *The History of New Philosophy*, Vol. 8, Sotsekgiz, Moscow, 1933, 111.
- [11] V.I. Korotkikh, *The Problems of Philosophy*, **4** (2005) 159.
- [12] R. Gaym, *Hegel and His Time*, Nauka, St. Petersburg, 2006, 213, 254.
- [13] G.W.F. Hegel, *A Collection of Works*, Vol. 1, Vol. 1, Mysl', Moscow, 1970, 298.
- [14] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History: The Philosophy of History Anthology*, Aspect Press, Moscow, 1995, 310.
- [15] I.R. Prigozhin, *Problems of Philosophy*, **6** (1991) 48.
- [16] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hrsg. von Otto Weiß, Leipzig, 1909, 334.
- [17] V. Polishchuk, *Russ. Stud. Philos.*, **52(2)** (2013) 35-45.