

## Article

---

"Hegel's *Phenomenology* and the Critique of the Enlightenment. An Essay in Interpretation"

George di Giovanni

*Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 51, n° 2, 1995, p. 251-270.

Pour citer cet article, utiliser l'information suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400913ar>

DOI: 10.7202/400913ar

Note : les règles d'écriture des références bibliographiques peuvent varier selon les différents domaines du savoir.

---

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter à l'URI <https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

---

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. Érudit offre des services d'édition numérique de documents scientifiques depuis 1998.

Pour communiquer avec les responsables d'Érudit : [info@erudit.org](mailto:info@erudit.org)

# HEGEL'S PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION

George DI GIOVANNI

*RÉSUMÉ : La Phénoménologie a souvent été critiquée comme un mélange malheureux de logique et d'histoire. Cet article soutient que l'ouvrage doit être lu comme un « roman philosophique », et que, lu ainsi, il a une unité conceptuelle et artistique. Cette nouvelle forme de production philosophique fut possible parce que Hegel avait dépassé les limitations de la rationalité telle qu'elle était conçue par les Lumières. Dans leur désormais fameuse critique des Lumières, Adorno et Horkheimer se sont servi du mythe de l'Odyssée pour illustrer les pratiques manipulatrices et trompeuses auxquelles la raison des Lumières est nécessairement condamnée. Cet article soutient que la mythologisation est elle-même une de ces pratiques, que les idéalizations kantienne de la raison sont en quelque sorte des mythes, et que ni Kant, ni Adorno/Horkheimer n'ont échappé au besoin de mythologiser, ou, effectivement, aux limitations de la rationalité des Lumières. Par contraste avec la dialectique critique de Kant et la dialectique négative d'Adorno/Horkheimer, la Phénoménologie se présente comme une leçon objective sur la manière dont il est possible d'esquisser des significations et des valeurs universelles hors de l'histoire sans s'évader dans l'espace/temps irréel du mythe.*

*SUMMARY : The Phenomenology has often been criticized for being an unfortunate mixture of logic and history. This paper argues that the work ought to be read as a "philosophical roman," and that, as so read, it has conceptual and artistic integrity. This new form of philosophical production was possible because Hegel had overcome some of the limitations of rationality as conceived by the Enlightenment. In their now famous critique of the Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer used the myth of Odysseus to illustrate the manipulative and self-deceptive practices to which Enlightenment reason is necessarily given. This paper argues that myth-making is itself one of these practices ; that Kant's idealizations of reason are a kind of myths ; and that neither Kant nor Adorno/Horkheimer escaped the need for myth-making, in effect the limitations of Enlightenment rationality. By contrast to Kant's critical dialectic and the negative dialectic of Adorno/Horkheimer, the Phenomenology stands as an object lesson of how it is possible to derive universal meanings and values out of history without thereby escaping into the unreal time/space of myth.*

## I

It is now half a century since Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their critical essays on the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Political and economic circumstances have drastically changed since then. Yet the theme of those essays — namely, that “domination” is the meaning of Enlightenment rationality, and that to overcome the irrationality of the contemporary world one must therefore overcome the Enlightenment heritage — is one that still echoes in current critique of modernity and in current analyses of the power structures of contemporary society. This is not the place to review such literature. Hegel and the Enlightenment are our subject (even though Hegel’s appearance will have to be somewhat delayed), and the Adorno/Horkheimer critique is relevant only because its themes would not have sounded strange to the Enlightenment itself. In its final phase at least, the Enlightenment had a clear idea of the irrationality that its ideal of self-knowledge generated. Kant, for one, had quite deliberately tried to find a language for it in his late writings, in order to contain it within transcendental bounds and thereby save the ideal. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* can be read as an extended criticism of precisely this attempt of Kant. Far from being the Enlightenment’s superannuated final product, the work can be read instead as a rebuttal of the Enlightenment’s very project, a first attempt at overcoming it. This is perhaps what makes for Hegel’s enduring relevance — why, despite the endless polemics against him, he never ceases to fascinate. At the end, as we shall see, his reply to Kant might sound to the contemporary mind peculiarly vacuous — a sign this, either that Hegel’s attempt ultimately failed or that, on the contrary, we are the ones who are still bound to Enlightenment prejudices and therefore unable to understand him.

In their essays Adorno and Horkheimer used Homer’s Odysseus as a figure of Enlightenment man. This was a brilliant move on their part. The wandering hero returning home after many adventures is an especially apt metaphor of the Enlightenment’s conception of history as the laborious but certain journey of humankind toward a reason that rightfully belongs to it but chance events have kept afar. Moreover, in thus exploiting the Homeric myth, Adorno and Horkheimer could make the further point (essential to their overall thesis) that, far from being opposed to mythological thinking, the Enlightenment’s pursuit of self-knowledge had already begun with myth-making. The myth of Odysseus is in itself — not just *for* the enlightened reader — a story about the quest for self-knowledge. It is also a record in figurative language of the first lesson that had to be learned in this quest — namely, that the quest itself forces the one in pursuit of it into impossible quandaries. Odysseus was indeed capable of extricating himself from them through subterfuge, because of his legendary cunning. But in themselves the quandaries are never

---

1. MAX HORKHEIMER and Theodor W. ADORNO, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Association, 1944; German reissue, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969). English translation by John Cumming, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). I have made very free use of “Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment.” Some of the points I make in Part II of this paper regarding Kant have been loosely inspired by “Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality,” even though Kant and his moral theory are treated there in a completely different spirit.

resolved. They are symptomatic of the same irrationality which affected the Enlightenment and still affects us. There is no escaping it, therefore, by turning away from reason back to some mytho-poetic form of thought, as romantics of all ages have repeatedly advocated. The fall from innocence — the beginning of subjectivity and the outburst of irrationality that accompanies it — occurs precisely with myth-making. Accordingly, Adorno and Horkheimer have easy play turning the richly textured figure of Odysseus into an allegory of modern man. Odysseus's impossible entanglements with his world are still ours, and they all derive from the same attempt to abide by the injunction, "Know thyself!"

But in what does this irrationality consist? And why should its onset coincide with that of self-knowledge? One episode of the Homeric story relates how Odysseus has to navigate in the vicinity of the Sirens, whose sweet songs might lure him into taking up abode with them — his return home thus forever compromised. Odysseus cannot *not* listen to the songs. Blocking his own ears to the music would destroy his very character. For Odysseus is the seeker of knowledge on a voyage of discovery, and the deliberate ignoring of anything that is presented to him along the way would no less compromise the journey than the mistake of confusing for destination what should in fact be only one stage in the voyage. Hence Odysseus's stratagem, which we all remember from high-school days. He blocks the ears of his companions with wax and has himself tied to the mast of the ship, so that, as the ship navigates past the Sirens, his companions can work hard at their oars undisturbed by either their songs or his cries, while he, restrained by the bonds that hold him secure to the ship, can experience in full the lure of the music, and the pain of the restraints tugging at his flesh, without however swerving from his appointed goal.

In the Adorno/Horkheimer reading of the story, the Sirens are innocence — that pre-historical state when human beings presumably still saw themselves as part of nature and still operated as part of it. It was a happy state, because nature's dominion over them was so complete as to render any conflict with it impossible. But human beings rebelled. They abstracted themselves from nature in order to assert themselves in contradistinction to it. And thus Odysseus's painful journey of self-discovery began — painful, because it required that Odysseus should deny all that constituted his positive being for the sake of a "self" which, apart from that being, had to remain an empty abstraction. This is the inner contradiction of Odysseus's vocation. He must strive to leave nature behind in order to assert his self-identity yet cannot give this identity concrete content without drawing it from nature, thereby negating his original intention. Odysseus's journey is therefore fated never to come to an end. His return to Ithaca, according to the Adorno/Horkheimer's reconstruction, is in fact only a sham homecoming.

The Sirens' allure is that of the nostalgia for a past when pleasures and pains could still be unashamedly natural. Threatened by it, Odysseus has only two possible courses of action open to him. He can numb his senses using suitable techniques, and thereby concentrate his energies on the work to be done for the return home — neither with any clear idea, however, of where this "home" (the "self") ever lies

or of how all the heaving and towing of the oars will ever get him there, nor with any awareness of the price in sheer loss of natural happiness which the work exacts. This, the lot of *homo technicus*, is the course that Odysseus chooses for his companions. Or he can, on the contrary, sharpen his senses to the allure of nature while deliberately holding fast to his ideal of the self. In the pain of unsatisfied desire caused by his commitment, he will then also experience the full efficacy of that ideal — at the price, however, of also recognizing his own individual impotence. For the self he seeks thwarts the desires of nature without substituting, let alone satisfying, desires of its own. Its only force is that of the logic of an abstraction — an ideal for which Odysseus must sacrifice his bodily wants without however ever expecting to find in it a real home. The restraints that can save Odysseus's freedom from the dominion of nature bind him just as much, therefore, in servitude to the ideal.

Open disclosure of the limits of his situation is the course of action that Odysseus, true to his character, chooses for himself. However, the choice between numb activity or impotent sensitivity that has confronted him is itself only the consequence of another more fundamental choice that was imposed on him the moment he sought to take leave from nature to come back to his own. That is the choice between domination by the nature which Odysseus wants to escape, and domination by the abstract self to which he must take refuge for the sake of escaping the other domination. The choice is an unhappy one, since it forces our hero to the equally unacceptable alternatives of either forgoing his journey or undertaking it in full knowledge that there will not be an end to it. Hence the stratagems to which Odysseus must resort along the way, all of them manipulative devices for creating at least the illusion that the original quest has been satisfied. Here is where the irrationality of his situation is most clearly revealed. For, poised as he stands between the domination of nature and the domination of an abstract self, Odysseus is forced to a strategy of repeated artifice and deception in order to mask his impotence. The result is that Odysseus, the seeker of freedom, in effect falls victim to yet a third kind of domination — the self-imposed one of manipulation. And this result, according to the Adorno/Horkheimer reading of the Homeric myth, is what also defines the situation of Enlightenment humanity.

## II

The late Enlightenment was however aware, as I have already suggested, of the irrationality that affected the quest for freedom it had undertaken in the name of the self. I am not referring here to Hamann or Jacobi, even though their names would have to figure prominently in any close study of the period. Jacobi especially had explicitly argued that Spinoza's pantheism (which went hand in hand with a Hobbesian identification of knowledge with power) precluded the possibility of genuine individuality, hence of "selfhood" in any significant sense. And he had directed his polemic just as much against the rationalism of the Berlin *Aufklärer* (who drew inspiration from the same historical sources which Adorno and Hork-

heimer identify as the founders of the Enlightenment)<sup>2</sup> as against those (such Herder and the adepts of the *Sturm und Drang*) who were on the contrary reacting against it. In either case, whether to empty abstractions or to the *Sturm und Drang's* image of an evolving divinity, it was the individuality of the human being, hence true human personality, which, according to Jacobi, was being sacrificed.<sup>3</sup> It had been Jacobi's personalism, moreover, that had inspired Reinhold to raise the issue of "individuality" and "individual responsibility" in 1791-1792, and to amend Kant's moral theory in order to make room within it for precisely a "faculty of personality."<sup>4</sup> Kant was to raise the issue himself in 1793, and he made Reinhold's language of personality his own — albeit, as we shall have to see, with a totally different intention in mind.<sup>5</sup> Jacobi, in other words, is inextricably bound to the Enlightenment's reflective apprehension of its idea of the self. Not by chance, therefore, will Hegel turn to him (specifically, to his *Woldemar*) for the final statement of his official treatment of the Enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>6</sup>

Yet neither Jacobi nor, for that matter, his friend and mentor Hamann belong to the present context, for, though both were aware of the irrationality the Enlightenment generated (its "nihilism," as Jacobi called it), neither faced up to it on its own terms. Hamann's sacramentalism presupposed a picture of nature and of society which no longer made sense since Descartes. As for Jacobi, apart from his consistent negative polemic, he only knew how to alternate between preaching a peculiar kind of secular religiosity, which appealed to traditional virtues, or advocating an economic and political individualism in fact perfectly consistent with Enlightenment's rationalism. From an Adorno/Horkheimer perspective, these are stratagems which, no less than Odysseus's, put him in collusion with the Enlightenment's project. The

2. Notably Francis Bacon and Martin Luther. Cf. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4-5. Kant prefaced the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with a motto drawn from Bacon's *Instauratio Magna. Pæfatio*.

3. For Jacobi's famous criticism of Spinoza and philosophy in general, see F.H. JACOBI, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau: Löwe, 1785), p. 29-30, for one representative passage. For Jacobi's criticism of Herder, see Supplement IV to the second (1789) edition of the same work. An English translation of both texts, with original paginations, can be found in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill"*, translation with introductory study, notes and bibliography by G. di Giovanni (Montréal/Kingston: McGill/Queen, 1994). A detailed treatment of Jacobi's relation to the Enlightenment (and, indirectly, of Hamann's as well) can be found in *The Unfinished Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, p. 3-167 of the just cited volume of translations.

4. The relevant documents are as follows: K.L. REINHOLD, "Concerning the Fundamental Truth of Morality and Its Relation to the Fundamental Truth of Religion," *Der neue Teutsche Merkur*, II, 3 (March, 1791), p. 225-280; K.L. REINHOLD, *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, 2 vols (Leipzig: Göschen, 1790-1792): "On the Hitherto Unrecognized Distinction Between Disinterested and Interested Drive [Triebe], and Between These Two Drives and the Will," Vol. II, Letter VII, p. 220-261; "Discussion of the Concept of the Freedom of the Will," Vol. II, Letter VIII, p. 262-307. The translation of titles is mine.

5. In an essay entitled "Concerning Radical Evil in Human Nature," first published in the April 1792 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* and then reproduced as Book I of *Religion Within The Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). Cf. note 17 below.

6. Cf. note 41 below. For Hegel's treatment of the Enlightenment in Chapter VI the *Phenomenology*, with special reference to the Jacobi connection, cf. my "Hegel, Jacobi, and 'Crypto-Catholicism', or Hegel in Dialogue with the Enlightenment," in *Hegel on the Modern World*, A.B. Collins, ed. (Albany: SUNY, 1995), p. 53-72.

only difference is that, unlike the Homeric hero, Jacobi was not at all clear about what he was doing.

It is Kant who, on the contrary, had the clarity of an Odysseus. At issue is of course the heterogeneity between the immediacy of the supposed sense-content of experience and the purely formal character of the categories which are supposed to inform that content.<sup>7</sup> This heterogeneity, which also results in an incommensurability of theoretical and practical determinations of experience, pertains to the essence of Kantian critical idealism and also constitutes its main difficulty.

Kant, as is well known, uses two different strategies in an attempt at overcoming the difficulty. The first is to interpose a system of figurative representations (the so called “schemata of the imagination”) between formal categories and sense-content. A variation of this same strategy, applied in moral contexts, is to use sensible figures, not as means of instantiating the moral law in actual experience (as one does for theoretical laws, since the moral law cannot by its very nature ever be *given* realized in experience) but as typifying it, i.e. as a token of it. The moral order is then taken *as if* instantiated in experience, on the analogy of the mediation between reflection and sensibility supposedly effected in theoretical knowledge by virtue of the imagination.<sup>8</sup>

The second strategy is to use for the required mediation ideal constructs of reason which represent nature as if it were an internally organized whole, after the manner of reason itself.<sup>9</sup> Kant deploys many such ideal constructs, and in a variety of contexts. In all cases, however, the aim of the strategy is to represent nature as so structured that all the various formal requirements of rationality (whether theo-

7. Cf. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 83 : “The difficulties in the concept of reason caused by the fact that its subjects, the possessors of that very reason, contradict one another, are concealed by the apparent clarity of the judgements of the Western Enlightenment. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, they are expressed in the unclear relation of the transcendental to the empirical ego, and in the other unresolved contradictions. Kant’s concepts are ambiguous.” Translated by Cumming. Horkheimer and Adorno would deny to Kant the clarity of Odysseus.

8. It is especially in his later writings that Kant quite deliberately develops the idea of a “moral nature” constructed on the analogy of phenomenal nature yet determined according to the requirements of the abstract ideas of law and freedom. Cf. for instance, the following two passages, both from *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) : “But lest anyone be immediately scandalized by the expression *nature*, which would stand in direct contradiction to the predicates *morally* good or *morally* evil if taken to mean (as it usually does) the opposite of the ground of actions [arising] from *freedom*, let it be noted that by ‘the nature of a human being’ we only understand here the subjective ground – wherever it may lie – of the exercise of the human being’s freedom in general (under objective moral laws) antecedent to every deed that falls within the scope of the senses.” “Whatever good the human being can do on his own, according to the laws of freedom [...], can be called *nature* [...]. Not that by [it] we understand a physical property distinct from freedom ; rather, we use it only because we at least have cognition of the *laws* of this faculty (the laws of *virtue*) and, on the *analogy of nature*, reason thus possesses a visible and comprehensible clue to it.” (Academy Edition, VI, p. 21-22, 190, respectively ; my translation, forthcoming in Vol. VI of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant). Cf. also *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) : “Yet to this dynamical concept [of physical action and reaction] there lies at its basis a merely formal concept of pure mathematics (e.g. geometry) [...]. So too, on this analogy, the doctrine of Right wants to determine for each exactly *his own* (with mathematical precision) [...].” (Academy Edition, VI, p. 233 ; my translation).

9. The *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is where Kant develops this strategy in detail.

retical or moral) can in principle be satisfied with respect to it, even though this satisfaction cannot ever be experienced as such.

Now the important point to note about Kant's two strategies is that they are not interchangeable, since each is governed by a different systematic interest.<sup>10</sup> At issue in the first is the possibility of connecting with actual experience, through sufficient mediating links, Kant's two ideas of nature, i.e. "nature" understood either as object of observation or as product of moral determination. Quite different, however, is the issue in the second. For the same two ideas would be mutually exclusive were it not for the strict critical limits that Kant imposes on them. These limits allow one to shift systematically from the one to the other as contexts of experience require without thereby incurring contradiction. Even assuming, however, that their connection with experience has been established by Kant's first strategy, and that any danger of contradiction has been critically averted, it does not follow that someone engaged with nature at a highly individualized level of experience can therefore operate on their basis without running up against, not indeed logical but pragmatic difficulties. Such a real "someone" would need reassurance that he or she can function in a universe thus defined according to Kant's moral and theoretical stipulations precisely *as a human individual*, without thereby losing intellectual integrity or emotional sanity. The ideal constructs on which Kant's second strategy is based respond to precisely this need.

Here is where the Kantian *Mensch* and the Odysseus of Adorno and Horkheimer begin to reveal their common Enlightenment heritage. For both are required to fall back upon subjective resources in order to save a rationality which in fact undermines their subjectivity. This is already clear with respect to theoretical praxis, because, as we learn from Kant, although a scientist knows that there are laws governing the nature he observes, and these laws are *a priori* determined by the categories, yet how they apply to any single event of nature is still a contingent matter. Accordingly, in keeping with Kant's second strategy, the scientist also conceives nature ideally as if it were organically ordered after the model of reason's own operations, and he can therefore direct his research into a given cluster of phenomena on the assumption that these are all manifestations of an organism's striving after a certain end. In this way, i.e. in view of the particular end thus imputed to nature in that instance, the scientist can narrow to a manageable range the otherwise infinite possible ways that the all too formal laws of nature can be applied to any actual field of experience.<sup>11</sup> Now the paradox in all this is that the order of nature which the scientist thus seeks to discover with the assistance of his organic models is in fact purely mechanistic — one based, in other words, on external relations alone, hence incompatible with the interiority which the scientist possesses

10. Hence the problem whether Kant shifted from one to the other at different times and in different works is a spurious one, because it presupposes that the two strategies have a common aim. For Kant's supposed shift of perspective from the *Critique of Judgement* to the *opus postumum*, cf. Vittorio Mathieu, *Kants Opus postumum* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1989), especially p. 42-44.

11. Cf. *Critique of Judgement*, Introduction, Academy Edition V, p. 179-181.

as a subject and his organic models reflect. It is for this reason that such models cannot have strict objective status in science.<sup>12</sup> Yet without them the mechanism of nature could not be uncovered. No less than Odysseus, therefore, the Kantian scientist finds himself in the peculiar situation of having to ply his subjectivity in the task of promoting an order within which, however, the latter has no place.

Even starker, however, is the paradox in a moral context. The difficulty here is not only the already intractable one of reconciling natural desire for physical happiness with moral perfection.<sup>13</sup> Even more revealing is how Kant construes his model of a civil society.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, Kant must assume infinite freedom on the part of a society's members. On the other hand, since this freedom means perfect interiority and cannot therefore ever be realized as such, he conceives the structure of his ideal society on the analogy of a mechanism of nature — as a system of relations that hold society's constituents members together externally, without in any way implicating the internal freedom which the system none the less presupposes on their part.<sup>15</sup> Perfect interiority is thus pitted against perfect exteriority. And each is posited for the sake of the other, because, were the exteriority less than just perfect, it would interfere with the internal autonomy (the moral virtue) which the society's members must individually strive to attain on their own. Apart from this interiority, however, which makes obedience to civil laws itself a moral duty, the externality of civil relations would itself revert to a mere mechanism of nature.<sup>16</sup> Caught in between the two is the real individual who must perform the analogical extension of the otherwise merely physical image of himself that provides the moral matter (so to speak) of the civil state. On him also falls the task of reconciling in actual practice — i.e. not just dialectically, according to the logic of the critical system, but psychologically — the otherwise discordant images of himself as “physical object,” “legal person,” and “moral self.”

It is the idea of this “morally responsible individual” that Kant developed in 1793, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Exactly in the manner of the Adorno/Horkheimer Odysseus, such an individual must laboriously strive after the perfection of humanity, either in the lonely and painful (because guilty) recognition that he cannot but fall short of the ideal of pure autonomy that motivates him (hence that the new nature he seeks is only the dream of a lost past), or in

12. *Ibid.*, §77, p. 409, lines 23ff.

13. Cf. below, note 20.

14. In Part I of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “Metaphysical Principles of a Theory of Right.”

15. “Mutual coercion” is the required purely external yet moral social bond. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 232, §E: “Strict right can also be represented as the possibility of a thoroughgoing reciprocal coercion consistent with everyone's freedom according to universal laws”; “Right and authorization to coerce therefore mean one and the same thing”; p. 230, §B: “In this reciprocal relation of the power of choice no account at all is taken of also the matter of choice, i.e. the end that someone has in mind in willing an object [...]”

16. Part II of *Metaphysics of Morals*, “Metaphysical Principles of a Theory of Virtue.” The Introduction, Sections IX and X are especially important. Note p. 394, lines 28-32. Virtuous action must spring from the disposition to constrain oneself internally, even though virtue also makes respect for “right” (i.e. external coercion) a duty. “For it is the *theory of virtue* that commands to hold the Right of human beings as holy.”

subjection to the external discipline of social labour. And, again in the manner of Odysseus, he is bound to both the law of his guilt and the law of his labour because of the fear that, apart from them, he would revert to mere nature, even though neither the idea of moral interiority nor that of external legitimacy with which he operates in fact do any more justice to his real individuality (his incarnate subjectivity) than does the mechanism of nature from which he wants to save it.

What finally clinches, however, the community of heritage between the Kantian *Mensch* and Odysseus is the clarity of vision that both have about their situation. I suggested earlier that in 1793 Kant borrowed his language of "personality" and "moral responsibility" from Reinhold. This is undoubtedly the case.<sup>17</sup> Yet the uniqueness of Kant's intention in reintroducing within his critical system such dogmatic common places as "free choice," "responsibility," "guilt," and "original sin," can best be noticed by contrasting it with precisely Reinhold's intention. Mindful of Jacobi's personalism, Reinhold's aim had been to rehabilitate traditional moral assumptions by showing that, although we cannot demonstrate their validity objectively, they are none the less rational postulates within the critical system. On Reinhold's view, an intellect endowed with special insight should be able to comprehend their possibility theoretically. For Kant, on the contrary, the same assumptions are inherently irrational. Such questions as why certain individuals act in one way and others do not, or why or how evil ever entered the world, are totally outside the pale, not just of objective cognition but of rationality itself.<sup>18</sup> On such matters, Kant says, we should not expect any special revelation to enlighten us, since it is not clear whether even an intellect higher than ours could actually see through them, or, if it could, whether we could understand whatever it would relate

---

17. Compare Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, VI, p. 27-28: "The predisposition to *personality* is the susceptibility to respect for the moral law *as of itself a sufficient incentive to the power of choice*. This susceptibility to simple respect for the moral law within us would thus be the moral feeling, which by itself does not yet constitute an end of the natural predisposition but only in so far as it is an incentive of the power of choice. But now this is possible only because the free power of choice incorporates moral feeling into its maxim: so a power of choice so constituted is a good character, and this character, as in general every character of the free power of choice, is something that can only be acquired; yet, for its possibility there must be present in our nature a predisposition onto which nothing evil can be grafted. The [28] idea of the moral law alone, together with the respect that is inseparable from it, cannot be properly called a *predisposition to personality*; it is personality itself (the idea of humanity considered wholly intellectually). The subjective ground, however, of our incorporating this incentive into our maxims seems to be an addition to personality, and hence seems to deserve the name of a predisposition on behalf of it"; with Reinhold: "Only through this independent power of a self-determining will alone – a power which indeed cannot suppress the impulse of needs but can steer them according to its law and through its capacity – can we and must we, as rational beings which should not be looked at or used as *things*, think of ourselves as *persons*," in "Concerning the Fundamental Truth of Morality etc." cited above, note 4. (My translations).

18. See Kant's treatment of the determination of free choice and the origin of evil in *Religion*, especially Book I, p. 21 (and note), 43-45, 62. The key consideration is that all the representations dealing with the history of human morality cannot be treated as "dogma." (Cf. Book II, "General Remark," p. 84 ff). At issue is not just the fact that such representations cannot be understood by us (since in traditional theology too dogmas were considered articles of faith that transcend human rational insight) but that they are *per se* incomprehensible, i.e. lacking in the speculative content that dogma (even when the object of faith) requires. They are admittedly only fictions, albeit fictions sanctioned for pragmatic purposes.

to us.<sup>19</sup> Yet these assumptions are required for practical purposes, whenever human action is at issue and the individual human subject is in need of defining how he or she stands related to the universe precisely as an *individual*. But if, on Kant's own admission, rationality is defined in this universe either by formal moral law or equally formal civil right, yet individual human subjects must resort to conceptual constructs that avowedly escape rational comprehension in order to express their place within it, the further conclusion cannot be escaped that, from the point of view of the rationality of that universe, the presence within it of such human individuals (their incarnate subjectivity) is what constitutes its irrational limit. Though the ones who must work out their salvation individually in view of the "self" as defined by the moral law and by civil right, the same individuals can find no objective validation for their individuality on those very definitions. That was Odysseus's quandary; it is also that of the Kantian *Mensch*.

Kant's ideal moral constructs, unlike Reinhold's, are not means of expressing a rationality that transcends our ability of objectifying it, but means of containing an irrationality which the critical system itself generates because of the abstractness of its ideal of "self." In the 1793 work on religion, Kant seems at times to concede the fact with almost cynical lucidity. But that containment rather than true clarification had to be his strategy at the level of moral pragmatics should have been clear already in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For, as Kant's contemporaries were quick to point out, the idea of *summum bonum* that Kant felt obliged to introduce there, precisely where an individual's quest for morally sanctioned happiness is at issue, is inherently incoherent. The two elements which it seeks to synthesize, viz. desire for physical happiness and desire for moral perfection, are in principle irreconcilable, since the one by definition entails heteronomy while the other strict autonomy. Yet this idea, only deceptively rational as it is, is what Kant offers the individual human being as subjective support along life's way.<sup>20</sup>

19. *Religion*, p. 142-143: "So through our rational insight we cannot reconcile the divine and holy legislation, which only applies to free beings, with the concept of the creation of these beings, but must simply presuppose the latter as already existing free beings who are determined to citizenship in the divine state, not in virtue of their creation, but because of a purely moral necessitation, only possible according to the laws of freedom, i.e. through a call. So the call to this end is morally quite clear; for speculation, however, the possibility of beings who are thus called is an impenetrable mystery"; p. 143-144: "Now regarding these mysteries, so far as they touch the moral life-history of every human being – namely how does it happen that there is a moral good or evil in the world at all, and (if evil is in every human being and at all times) how is it that good will still originates from it and is restored in a human being; or why, when *this* happens in some, are others however excluded from it – regarding this God has revealed nothing to us, nor can he reveal anything, for we would not *understand* it."

20. See August Wilhelm REHBERG, *Über das Verhältniß der Metaphysik zur Religion* (Berlin: Mylius, 1787) p. 157ff., and Rehberg's review of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Allgemeine LiteraturZeitung*, Nr 188, a.b., (6 August 1788) 345-360, especially column 359. Rehberg rejected Kant's two postulates of the immortality of the soul and of the existence of God as principles justifying our belief that the just man will be happy, on the ground that the two postulates contradict the other postulate of freedom on which they are founded. His argument, in brief, is that neither could happiness be part of the determination of a free being who is by nature autonomous (inasmuch as it entails sensibility and hence heteronomy) nor could God (inasmuch as his creation can only result in intelligible being) be the author of a world of which "the good" would include sense-satisfaction (hence an element of non-intelligibility). Kant seems to accept, however, that "God" is a fiction intended to mask admittedly impossible conceptual problems. For instance, he says

It is significant, moreover, that Kant offers this support while also defining the nature and function of religion, since it is in his treatment of the latter that his relation to the Enlightenment comes most clearly to light.<sup>21</sup> In continuity with long standing Enlightenment's aspirations, Kant's intention was to save religion by justifying it on rational grounds. But the Enlightenment's typical way of accomplishing the task was to interpret traditional religious faith and religious practices as historically conditioned expressions of universal reason. Kant, by contrast, recognizes that rationality has unavoidably irrational consequences for the individual labouring under its ideal. It is in this recognition that he establishes his critical distance from the Enlightenment. In his system, therefore, rather than a historically conditioned expression of reason, religion is understood on the contrary as a historically conditioned means of containing reason's irrationality. Again we are brought back to the myth of Odysseus. For Kant's ideal constructs turn out to be, in effect, rational myths. The only advantage that the Kantian *Mensch* ultimately has over Odysseus is the added reflective awareness that, in striving for rationality in general, human beings must act out as individuals myths about themselves.

No less than Adorno and Horkheimer, Kant had perfect critical clarity about the limits of the Enlightenment and its project. He of course was openly in collusion with the original choice between domination by nature or by reason which is the hallmark of that project, whereas Adorno's and Horkheimer's aim was to reject it. By contrast, therefore, Kant might now appear to us, if not cynical, certainly naively optimistic about the efficacy of his containment action. But are Adorno and Horkheimer truly in a less unenviable position? For since they admit that they have no positive alternative to the Enlightenment's choice, and since they have denied themselves the romantic escape back to mythical consciousness, their only possible critical strategy is the denial of anything and everything that the contemporary world has attempted in answer to the Enlightenment's problems. But how does this frenzy of negativity in any way help except, perhaps, by taking pervert consolation in despair? And how is this consolation any less illusory than the one produced by Kant's instruments of containment, except perhaps in that it takes pride in its own self-confessed impotence?

Be that as it may, what we now have at hand is a clear statement of the problem facing us. Is it possible to define rationality in such a way that an individual

---

in *Religion*: "The distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start is, however, infinite, and, so far as the deed is concerned – i.e. the conformity of the conduct of one's life to the holiness of the law – it is not exhaustible in any time [...]. But because of the [right] *disposition* [presupposed in us] from which the deed derives and which transcends the senses, we can think the infinite progression of the good towards conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart (through his pure intellectual intuition) to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)" p. 66-67. But in fact the transition from temporal deed to supra-sensuous holiness is *in principle* impossible (hence, the supposed original derivation of the deed from the assumed right disposition equally impossible). Yet God will consider the one as equivalent to the other – an absurdity which the rhetoric of divine mystery masks without in any way removing.

21. Cf. *Religion*, Book IV, p. 153-154, where Kant defines the difference between "rationalists," "naturalists," "pure rationalists," and "supernaturalists," on the basis of the kind of religion one admits.

operating under it need not escape into mythological time or (it amounts to the same thing) find his own historical individuality beyond the bounds of sense? Here is where Hegel's *Geist* comes on the scene.

### III

Hegel's official treatment of the Enlightenment and of Kantian morality is in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>22</sup> That is not our concern here, however, except indirectly. More to the point is the idea of rationality that governs the whole work. Part logic and part history, Hegel's *Phenomenology* has from the beginning been open to the charge of being an illegitimate mixture of the two. For Croce, who was likely following up on an earlier criticism of Rudolph Haym, it was reminiscent of a "philosophical *roman*."<sup>23</sup> Yet a myth is also historical figure and explanatory device at once, and, as we have seen, Kant's ideal construct is a type of critical myth. Nobody would however want to deny that either lacks proper form or does not play a legitimate intellectual function. The significant question, therefore, is in what sense, if any, Hegel's *Phenomenology* differs from either myth or critical ideal construct, and what idea of rationality does its peculiar form presuppose.

One clue for a possible answer lies in the method of the *Phenomenology*. The work proceeds in the reverse order of Kant's critical system. Kant first identifies his parameters of rationality — in effect, by defining the limits of objectivity either theoretically, on the basis of the categories, or practically, as a function of the idea of law. Only then does he move to the dialectical work of reconciling the two ideas of objectivity thus established, from the standpoint now of a subject actually engaged in the process of experience. It is at this stage that, as we have seen, the idea of an "individual self" emerges. Hegel's original problem in the *Phenomenology* is, on the contrary, that of a historical consciousness which is faced by a variety of conflicting claims to objectivity such as Kant's system would for instance present, and must therefore decide which, if any, it can accept. The philosopher's special task is precisely to reflect upon historical consciousness in order to discover how the latter ever got to its present idea of itself and its world, i.e. its idea of objectivity.<sup>24</sup>

Now on Hegel's assumption such a reflection is possible only because there is continuity between the two forms of consciousness at issue — the philosophical

22. In Section II. I shall be citing the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* according to the pagination and, when needed, line number of Vol. IX of G.F.W. HEGEL, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg : Meiner, 1980).

23. According to Croce, both the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* "move on a course here and there that brings to mind memories of some philosophical *roman* : of *Émile*, or of the journey of that Irishman in search of the best of religions." *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel* (1906), in *Saggio sullo Hegel e altri scritti* (Bari : Laterza, 1948), p. 75. Cf. Rudolph HAYM, *Hegel und seine Zeit* (Berlin : Gaertner, 1857) : "The *Phenomenology* has ingeniously been compared to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and the comparison is not without truth" p. 237. "In sum : the *Phenomenology* is a psychology brought to confusion and disarray through history and a history brought to ruins through psychology" p. 243.

24. P. 55.8-39.

and the historical.<sup>25</sup> All consciousness, be it the one or the other, has the property that it constantly reflects upon its "object" in order to distinguish in it between what presumably belongs to it as object and what is due instead to the requirements of subjective representation. All consciousness, in other words, is in principle critical. But, if such is the case, it follows that the difference between the two forms of consciousness with which the *Phenomenology* begins is merely one of degree of self-awareness. The many conceptual difficulties that in the *Phenomenology* come under scrutiny by the philosopher and are eventually resolved are all due to decisions about the nature of objectivity that historical consciousness itself has more or less deliberately made in the past. It has made them because in all its forms it is at least incipiently philosophical. By the same token, however, the explicitly philosophical consciousness that presides over the *Phenomenology* must recognize itself as engaged in a work already carried on by historical consciousness, and therefore as itself part of history.

The affinity between Hegel's idealized reconstructions in the *Phenomenology* of forms of historical consciousness and Kant's critical ideas, and the further affinity of both to myth, is here apparent. Since they all have to do with actual consciousness and its difficulties in actual praxis, none can avoid having a historical content. But, since in all cases the point at issue is the conditions that make for a recognizably human (i.e. historical) situation, reference to actual history is not for the sake of chronicling events (as in history proper) but to construct ideal *types* of such events. Hegel's fictions, Kant's critical ideas, and classical myth, are all instruments of self-awareness. In this, they are all at one. Yet the uniqueness of Hegel's *Phenomenology* also becomes apparent. The work stands opposed to Kant's critical system inasmuch as, by reversing the latter's order of procedure and thus moving dialectically from the beginning, it subjects its author (i.e. "the philosopher") to its own internal dialectic. The philosopher must himself place himself within history — something that Kant's critical philosopher, however critically aware of the limitations that his ideas of objectivity pose for historical individuals labouring under them, notably fails to do. The critical philosopher stipulates those ideas *a priori* without asking just how, and why, one ever got to them.<sup>26</sup> Hence the peculiarity of Kant's ideas about the origin or the destination of such integral components of a human individual's self-understanding as "happiness," "responsibility," and indeed "humanity" itself. Their "whence" and "whereto" are placed (quite deliberately) at a time which is beyond our reach, not just because we lack the technical resources to comprehend it but because it is *per se* beyond comprehension.<sup>27</sup> Exactly in the manner of myths,

25. Cf. p. 58.23-60.14.

26. I am not implying that Kant did not try to justify his *a priori* concepts and ideas, as indeed he did by means of his transcendental and metaphysical deductions. But these justifications all presuppose Kant's idea of rationality as the control of the content of experience, whether through scientific or moral praxis. This assumption can itself be subjected to critical scrutiny only if a historical dimension is added to it.

27. "But the full conformity of the will to the moral Law is *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable. But since it is none the less required as practically necessary, it can be found only in an *endless progress* towards that full conformity [...]." *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Academy Edition V: 122-123. Cf. also above, note 20.

Kant's ideal representations are projected into an unreal time. And, again in the manner of myths, the peculiar psychological burden that they impose on those who have to live by it is that these real individuals must interpret the meaning of their present situation precisely in terms of an avowedly unreal past and equally unreal future. Hegel's idealizations of historical events in the *Phenomenology* all fall, on the contrary, within the limits of real history. Croce's suggestion that the work is a "philosophical *roman*," despite its intended ridicule, in fact brings out what is best about it. For the *Phenomenology*, just as any good novel, although indisputably a fiction is none the less a fiction about real history. In this respect it breaks free from myth and traditional theology in a way that Kant and the Enlightenment thought indeed that they had done but in fact never did.

But how does the *Phenomenology* then avoid being mere fiction? How does it justify its own claim to being a work of science or, if we abide now by the characterization of it as *roman*, the claim that it is a specifically *philosophical* fiction? The fact that consciousness is essentially reflective (or, as Kant had recognized, that there is no consciousness which is not at the same time accompanied by self-consciousness) is of course the key consideration in this regard. Even granted this fact, however, the question still remains of how it is possible to avoid escaping into mythical time without however falling into the sheer negativity of an Adorno/Horkheimer dialectic. This question is all the more important because of the widely held belief that Hegel took his own historical time as the culmination of all time — a naive assumption that would indeed have marked a relapse to pre-Enlightenment, let alone pre-critical, modes of thought. Here is where we must direct attention to the actual content of the *Phenomenology*.

That the "self" — not as idea but as concrete reality — is the subject matter of the *Phenomenology* is clear from the very title which announces it as a study of the appearances of *Geist*. Whatever the exact meaning of this term, it unambiguously denotes "person" and "personality." Even clearer indications can be gathered, however, from the work as it unfolds. The moving principle, as we have already pointed out, is the recognition on the part of the philosopher/author of the difficulties that various forms of consciousness encounter because of the reflective abstractions through which they have codified their views of themselves and their world. Now the important point is that these difficulties all stem from the insufficiency of these abstractions to express the very process of objectification (the noetic praxis, so to speak) through which each of the forms of consciousness in question has made its decision as to what counts as "objective." The subjectivity itself of the consciousness, its individual "self," thus remains unspoken even though the at least implicit awareness of it cannot be lacking in the actual process of experience.<sup>28</sup> Significant new starts are made in the *Phenomenology* precisely according as new

28. That such is the case is revealed at different stages of the *Phenomenology* in different forms. For a typical, and especially illustrative text, cf. the opening section of Chapter V, p. 133.6-33. Cf. also: "[...] Self-consciousness has not yet received its due as a singular individuality [...]. This singular individual counts only as a shadowy unreality [...]." p. 251.9-12. Also, p. 254.24-37.

objectifications, which more explicitly implicate reference to the individual "self," are brought into the picture.

For instance, a turning point is achieved at the end of Chapter III, when it becomes clear that the scientist who has so far posed as a would-be detached observer of the facts of experience cannot give a detached observer's account of his own process of observation (hence a justification of the latter's objective validity) without explicit reference to his own subjectivity — for which, however, another set of assumptions is required than the one on which the "detached observer" operated.<sup>29</sup> In Chapter IV we further learn that the "self" cannot comprehend itself as such unless it takes another "self" as its object and considers nature as the ground (and limiting condition) of precisely this comprehension.<sup>30</sup> Chapter V avoids being simply a repetition of the first three chapters only because, even though the subject matter under examination is again physical science and the scientist's tendency is to look for objectivity in the external world, the scientist at issue is now perfectly aware of the close correlation that obtains between the rationality he finds in that world and his own reason — as science and scientists have indeed been aware at least since the time of Descartes.<sup>31</sup> In Chapter VI depth and objective stability is conferred on the otherwise purely subjective and hence ephemeral encounter of "self" with "self" in Chapter IV by translating the presupposed self's comprehension of itself into a series of social categories and social structures. It is in this chapter, as the moral theory of critical idealism comes up for discussion, that Hegel raises against it the kind of criticism that Adorno/Horkheimer levelled against the Enlightenment and mythical thought in general and we, mindful of Hegel, have just duly documented. The problem with moral consciousness according to Hegel is that, though it makes much of subjectivity in general, it is in fact intrinsically "dumb" (to use Hegel's own word), for it lacks a language that genuinely captures the concrete individual engaged in action.<sup>32</sup> It cannot therefore ever officially speak in first person but must instead escape into such abstractions as the formal "I." Because of the failure in this respect of moral consciousness Hegel proceeds to consider a form of society more intimately constructed on Jacobi's idea of personality and, with this step, he finally moves on to his official treatment of religion in Chapter VII.<sup>33</sup>

29. *Phenomenology*, p. 102.20-30.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 108.29-109.3, 112.3-20.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 137.20-32.

32. "Language is the existence [*Dasein*] of the Spirit." "The language of the ethical Spirit is the law and the simple command, and the plaintive cry, which is more [the shedding of] a tear about necessity. Moral consciousness is by contrast still *dumb* [*Stumm*], shut up with itself in its interiority, for in it the self does not have existence [*Dasein*] yet, for existence and the *self* at first stand to one another in external relation. Language [explicitly] comes forth, however, as the medium of independent and recognized self-consciousnesses [...]" *Phenomenology*, p. 351.11, 351.22-28.

33. This is the society of individuals who seek truth in their "conscience," which is by nature a totally individualized phenomenon. *Phenomenology*, VI.c. Cf. JACOBI's *Woldemar*: "[...] 'Absolutely not!' Woldemar replied. 'Only doing away with the exercise of conscience is pernicious [...].' The letter of reason, of religion, of civil and state law, are all alike; they are all equally capable of little. No man has ever obeyed

More about Hegel and religion in just a moment. Another more immediately important consideration is that, as is clear at least in Chapter VI, the failure on the part of consciousness to find adequate expression for its individual reality is due to its inability to bring together the idea it has of itself as rational *persona*, on the one hand, and as product of nature, on the other hand. And this inability is in turn the direct result of the abstraction with which a consciousness defines its “self” as rational. It is because of this abstraction, through which the consciousness objectifies itself and thereby cuts itself loose from its immediate state of nature, that the latter then appears to it precisely as what is left over after the abstraction and hence necessarily in opposition to it.<sup>34</sup>

Here we find Hegel developing, but in a historically much richer medium, the very point which, as we have seen, Adorno and Horkheimer made with respect to Odysseus and Enlightenment *Mensch* — namely that they are both caught in an impossible choice which is however the result of their quest for self-knowledge. As Hegel’s story goes, the problem is that, the less inclusive a real subject’s explicit objectification of its “self” is with respect to its otherwise many natural functions, the more do the unconscious forces of nature retain dominion over it in the form of gods or in the figures of deceased ancestors. Thus caught between the obligations of its rational *persona*, on the one side, and, on the other side, the anonymous demands of custom and family, the subject is left to work out on its own, as individual, the inevitable contradictions between the two. The more inclusive, however, that objectification of the “self” is, and the less do custom and family therefore retain divine authority, the more wildly do the forces of nature, now deprived of sacred bounds, rebound on the individual. It is this wild, desecrated nature — reduced to a waste by the very presence in its midst of the universal yet empty idea of the “self” — which, in Hegel’s story, European *Mensch* sets out to humanize at the beginning of the Middle Ages through the painful labour of culture and belief.<sup>35</sup> The upshot of this process is the Enlightenment, which in turn culminates with the moral theories of Kant and of Fichte. These last mark a turning point in Hegel’s story, because in them the objectified “self” has achieved complete inner determination through the preceding work of culture and hence can claim for itself (but ideally) all the functions earlier left to the domain of nature.<sup>36</sup> The objectified “self” now defines what nature “ought to be,” and it is through this definition that the individual subject of experience must henceforth filter all its feelings and desires. But nature “in itself” will simply not go away, no matter how much one idealizes

---

a law simply as law, but always only the authority that flows from it and accompanies it — always only the vitality that drive, inclination, and habit give to it. Only man’s heart says directly to him what is *good*; only his heart, his drive, tell him directly that to love the good is his life [...]” *Jacobi’s Werke*, F. Roth and F. Köppen, eds. (Leipzig, 1812-1825). Vol. V, p. 114-115 (my translation).

34. This opposition takes on different forms at different stages in the development of individual self-consciousness. In the “ethical order,” it has the appearance of an opposition (first revealed in action) between “human” and “divine law,” between “community” and “family,” between conscious action and unconscious motivation. Cf. *Phenomenology*, p. 242ff.

35. Cf. *Phenomenology*, p. 263.14-29, 264.16-265.4, 266.26-267.5.

36. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 325.16-24.

it. Driven outside the bounds of explicit rationality, it simply reasserts itself within the latter in sublimated and therefore all the more uncontrollable and violent form. "Terror" is the natural state of the civil society which the abstract idea of freedom of the French Revolution, once put to practice, finally produces.<sup>37</sup> It is however this Terror which, once interiorized and turned into a psychological force, gives rise according to Hegel's story to none other than the moral standpoint.

Neither the theoreticians of "communal ethos" nor the advocates of "individual liberties" can therefore take much comfort in Hegel. The price the former have to pay for glorifying the customs and symbols of "the people," their waving of flags, is to become thrall to shadowy figures from the past that detract from both individuality of feeling and universality of perception. As for the latter, by extending the logic of individual rights to the even most intimate details of life, they risk exposing human existence to the violence of abstraction precisely at the point where it is most fragile. For the theory of individual rights is based on the idea of abstract freedom, and this idea constitutes (as Kant so clearly saw) a system of external coercion.

But how does Hegel's *Phenomenology* then resolve itself? The answer is of course already implicit in Hegel's original decision to make the individual self the subject matter of his *roman*, and the encounter of its various historical forms (the philosophical one included) the action. Reason and rationality consist for Hegel, not in any of the ideas of either universal "self" or universal nature which are the *a priori* components of each of the configurations of experience displayed in the *Phenomenology* but in the process (the judgement) through which all these ideas are recognized as abstract aspects of the historical self. The theory of reason that emerges from the *Phenomenology* thus consists, not in a doctrine of elements but in a dialectic of ideas. This position — implicit from the beginning, as I have just said — comes to fruition in the chapter on "religion." There the procession of the historical forms of consciousness that up to that point have come under the philosopher's scrutiny one by one breaks down into its several components, and the latter are reassembled together in parallel formation, so to speak, all held together by the idea of the concrete self of which they are the various determinations.<sup>38</sup> Artistically speaking, the move finally unveils the true character of the main actor (i.e. the historical self), which so far has only been adumbrated indirectly. Philosophically, inasmuch as the *Phenomenology* is already a logic, it makes explicit the fundamental assumption that must govern any science of experience, namely that every experience is always the experience *by* a real individual *of* a real world. Kant of course knew this much. Hence his dialectical ideas of reason — particularly those that deal with religion, since they all have to do with the historical self. But, as we have been trying to argue, these ideas are introduced in Kant as a way of rationalizing a content which, on the assumptions of Kant's basic theoretical and moral categories, is *per se* unintelligible though pragmatically indispensable. For Hegel, on the con-

37. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 322.12 to the end of the section.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 366.35-37.26.

trary, religious representations are an objectification of the individual precisely as such, and religious practices a celebration of the life of this very individual.<sup>39</sup> In this sense religion provides (as Hamann and Jacobi had already claimed) the matrix of all rationality.<sup>40</sup>

Yet more must be said, for to claim that the individual self brings together in its historical reality its many abstract objectification is not sufficient by itself to establish that this synthesis is in fact possible — not at least if the *Phenomenology* is to be a true science of experience and not just fictional history.

Two considerations must be entered in this regard. The first is that the stage for the chapter on religion is set in the *Phenomenology* only when, by the end of Chapter VI, after the catastrophic consequences of operating exclusively on the assumptions of a moral view of the universe have been duly noted, Hegel goes on to portray a society made up of individuals for whom their very individuality is the principle of action. But Hegel discovers that “individuality as such” is just as destructive an abstraction as any other — it is indeed the ultimate abstraction — and the cause, therefore, of much grief between the members of a community. The redeeming feature of the new situation, however, is that real individuals *officially* aware of themselves as such are its protagonists, and for these individuals it is possible (as it would not be for abstract *personæ*) to recognize the harm they inflict upon one another, hence to acknowledge their respective evil and to bestow forgiveness on each other. It is with this dialectic of mutual confession and absolution (for which Hegel owes a debt to Jacobi’s *Woldemar*)<sup>41</sup> that “religion” is introduced.

The second consideration is that Hegel’s treatment of religion in Chapter VII leads in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* to what is — albeit clothed in images that have done nothing by way of illumining Hegel — a statement of the conditions that make syllogistic judgement possible with respect to its object, the subjective process leading up to it, and the union of the two.<sup>42</sup> It is the possibility

39. This is clear in artistic religion, at the stage where a people, in adorning the house of the gods and in giving honour to them, in fact adorn their own homes and their own bodies, and in thus celebrating their gods, take immediate enjoyment in their own richness and magnificence. (*Phenomenology*, p. 384.31-385.15). And it becomes even more evident when religious celebration assumes the form of stage drama. There comes the point (i.e. in comedy) when the individual actor becomes aware that the parts he/she has hitherto enacted (i.e. as gods or abstract characters) are in fact dimensions of his/her very existence. The enacted actions are in fact his/her actions. (Cf. p. 399.21-35).

40. Cf. JACOBI, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1785), p. 162-163; and HAMANN, “Doubts and Incidental Thoughts concerning an Assorted Report in the *Universal German Library*, XXIV (1776): 288-296,” in *Johann Georg Hamann, Sämmtliche Werke*, Josef Nadler, ed. (Vienna: Thomas-Morus-Presse im Verlag Herder, 1949), Vol. 3, p. 190; *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762), Vol. 2, p. 197.

41. *Phenomenology*, p. 351.11-18. “‘Dear Henriette,’ [Woldemar] said, ‘no word can say how I feel! Loudly could I — and would I — confess before the whole world that I am the guiltiest among all men [...]’.” “[...] ‘I will learn humility,’ he said. ‘You bring me back to myself! What in me now [lies] so dead against my own self [...]. That too is pride! Always the same hard, unbending, pride [...]. I was not good, Henriette! But I shall become it — I will learn humility; I will be yours [...]. Oh, do accept me!’” *Woldemar. Jacobi’s Werke*, Vol. V, p. 41, 476 (my translation). Cf. *Phenomenology*, p. 361.11-25.

42. *Phenomenology*, p. 422.28-423.19.

of such a judgement that has apparently been from the beginning the interest motivating the *Phenomenology*.<sup>43</sup>

Now together these two circumstances are the key to Hegel's idea of "religion" and, at the same time, the elucidation of his stand *vis-à-vis* the Enlightenment's understanding of itself as embodied in Kant. For inchoate in the dialectic of mutual confession and forgiveness is a social theory based on the recognition that, just because abstractions are necessary to reflection yet necessarily open up the possibility of harm being done to the individual, essential to a society is not indeed that this possibility should be removed but that it should be limited and thereby contained. A true human society is one that has institutions in place to resolve on an individual basis the evil that its own rationality necessarily generates. But it is only self-knowledge — or judgement aware of its own internal divisions, as displayed at the end of the *Phenomenology* — that can animate a society of this sort. Accordingly Hegel's religious community, as the fellowship of those who know that they have the ability both to bind and to forgive, is the historical presupposition on the one hand of a civil society that practically knows how to care for the individual, and on the other of a philosophical wisdom that speculatively knows why society should so care.

How strikingly parallel yet totally different Kant's and Hegel's treatment of religion are can be seen just in this. In both the religious community is poised between civil society and personal autonomy. But in Kant this community is a historical irrational surplus, so to speak, barely tolerated on purely pragmatic grounds.<sup>44</sup> In Hegel, on the contrary, it stands as the type of consciousness (which can be purely secular) where reflection has penetrated all aspects of human existence yet its products still retain natural form. Hence it stands with respect to the two (civil society and personal autonomy) as a reminder that the abstract externality of the one, and the abstract interiority of the other, are in fact the externality and the interiority of a flesh and blood body. Unless the limits posed by the contingencies of the latter are recognized and respected, both end up undermining their own possibility, and hence failing in their task of rationalizing experience.

---

43. *Ibid.*, p. 61.28-62.5.

44. Kant recognizes the need of a community of individuals bound together by the pure faith of reason. This community constitutes the ethical counterpart of the civil society which is formed when individuals abandon the unruly state of nature in order to realize their freedom in a civil state. Essentially, however, this community is an invisible one, and it is only because of contingent historical circumstances that a *visible* church is also present. Such a visible community is however acceptable only as a *fact*, and can be justified only inasmuch as it tends to disappear by dissolving itself into the invisible community of believers. Cf. *Religion*, Book III, sections 1, 2, 3. Kant offers a very strange justification for the need of statutory laws and of a visible founder for such a visible community. Namely, since as ethical subjects the members of this community are not really in need of it, without those historical means the community would lack stability. In other words, the visible church needs external support because, as historical phenomenon, it lacks strict conceptual justification. Cf. Book IV, p. 157(last line)-158. In another passage Kant decries as "opium" the hope of forgiveness which the priest offers to the dying, since agony of conscience is the proper ethical state that befits the sinner (as we are all presumed to be). *Religion*, p. 78 (note).

## IV

I gave fair warning at the beginning that Hegel's answer to the problems of the Enlightenment might not sound very satisfying to the contemporary mind. It really amounts to no more than a restatement of the injunction "Know thyself!" and of the implication the latter carries — well recognized by classical antiquity as well as by the Enlightenment — that knowledge of oneself means awareness of one's limits. It is precisely this adventure in reflection that gave rise, according to the Adorno/Horkheimer reading of history, to the paradoxical situation of both Odysseus and the Enlightenment. Stripped of its historical content, however, Hegel's resolution is simply to argue that rationality consists, not in the product of any single abstractive reflection but in the social and philosophical dialogue (of which the historical individual is the subject) containing such abstractions. This is indeed a purely formal, empty resolution. Yet it is precisely its emptiness that makes it effective and still relevant, because it precludes assuming any of those abstractions as definitions of humanity as such. It is definitions of this sort that lead to the frenzy of ideologies, to the escape into unreal time and the violence to the individual that the latter entails, and finally, when the effects of such heady excursions are felt, to the sad variations by the *savants* on the classical theme of *de consolatione philosophiæ*. For Hegel, on the contrary, there is in principle no reason for being either particularly optimistic or pessimistic about any human situation, for how history unfolds depends very much on decisions made by individuals within their particular temporal conditions. One thing is however certain, namely that the need to decide cannot be escaped, nor can the logic of the consequences entailed by the decisions made, for both were established the moment reflection set in and the adventure in self-knowledge began. In *that*, if anything, humanity essentially consists. Accordingly, although as historical novel Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the record of an age, as logic (i.e. as theory of reflection) it is still contemporary. Odysseus could after all have spared himself much trouble, avoided much deception and even honestly enjoyed his journeys, had he realized (as we learn from the *Phenomenology*) that his adventures were of his own making, and that he in fact had already reached home the moment he had left.