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**Dialectical Logic and Self-consciousness: Some
Preliminary Remarks on Hegel's Phenomenology of
Spirit and Science of Logic**

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Abstract

The purpose of this note is to explore briefly the role that a dialectical development of logical understanding and consciousness plays in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* with some references to his *Science of Logic*. The role played by the logic of ontological development is emphasized. Furthermore, the role of human laboring activity in particular in Hegel is singled out as an area where thinking can redirect itself to return from the heights of speculative thought to a this-worldly development of freedom through a series of internal and dialectical contradictions. In line with this approach, Hegel's non-atomistic characterization of the individual in society can also be seen in a new light.

Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (PS) and Science of Logic (SL) are two seminal works by the great philosopher. Of the two the Phenomenology of Spirit(1807) is a youthful book compared with the Science of Logic(1816). However, there is a continuity of Hegel's philosophical project of arriving at a dialectical grasp of the dynamics of "Being" with significant thematic and conceptual overlap between the two works. The purpose of this note is to explore briefly the role that a dialectical development of logical understanding and consciousness plays in these works.¹ The emphasis will be on PS, with only some remarks on SL when relevant.²

It is important to see both these works in a post-Kantian philosophical context as well. In this particular context, among other things, Hegel was wrestling with Kant's particular solution to Humean skepticism which challenged the ideas of causality, necessity and universality, ultimately negating the possibilities of deriving certain knowledge of the world through rational reflection. Hegel found Kant's solution through a critique of pure reason to be a partial one only. In his view, Kant conceded too much to Hume by restricting the possibility of knowledge only to the realm of phenomena and thus making it seemingly impossible to gain knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality through rational speculation.

PS can be seen as Hegel's early and preliminary investigation of the development of a reflective consciousness through using a kind of dialectical logic. More specifically, Hegel attempts to establish clearly the stages that an ordinary consciousness needs to go through in order to reach the necessary epistemological and ontological conditions for embarking on further speculative thought that rejects Kant's epistemological and ontological claims regarding the inability of pure reason to know the thing-in-itself. In this sense, his later SL pursues the logical and ontological

¹ There are, of course, many interpretations and exegetical pieces on PS. Jean Wahl's discussion of the unhappy consciousness and its subsequent influence on French thinking is a prominent case in point. There are also works by Hyppolite, Westphal, Kojève, Pippin and others each with its distinctive viewpoint. Mine is, in a sense, closest to that of Westphal but without his theism. In terms of dialectical logic, I have been influenced by Ilyenkov's book by the same title.

² Hegel's earlier work *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* is also of some importance. But a historical exegesis of the evolution of Hegel's thought in this manner would take us too far afield.

structure of speculative thought in depth by starting where PS leaves off. SL starts with the idea of pure, indeterminate, immediate "being" whereas PS ends--- after consciousness has become fully critical and aware of itself--- with the dissolution of subject/object dichotomy in thought (speculative or absolute knowledge as such).

In SL, Hegel wants to begin without any presuppositions by suspending all assumptions about thought and being. His philosophical strategy here is to let the indeterminate thought of being unfold through a dialectical movement of self-generated contradictions that are sublated through the use of a more developed form of dialectical logic. PS is a preliminary necessity only for those who are not convinced that this is possible or desirable.

The ordinary, non-philosophical consciousness is not moved by the spirit of self-criticism. It is this possibility---and indeed the necessity as well--- of self-criticism of thought by itself that Hegel wishes to bring out. But the ordinary consciousness is fixated upon everyday experiences of objects, processes and practices. It does not see the point of challenging these already settled habits of the ordinary mind.

Hegel wants to help the ordinary consciousness by offering a ladder to the inquiring mind in order to finally arrive at the standpoint of speculative logic. Hegel believes that the "individual" has the right to demand such a ladder since the ordinary mode of consciousness is certain only of its ordinary modes of grasping sense data, perception, understanding etc.

Hegel shows that starting with immediate *sense – certainty*, a dialectical movement of thought can be traced through the work of many mediations which lead ultimately to a *perceptual* stage of cognition. A similar dialectical exercise with perceptions leads to the category of *understanding*. A further process of mediation and sublation takes the consciousness to the next stage of self-consciousness illustrated through the famous master-slave figure³. In what follows, I will emphasize the complexities of this figure. In particular, the role of the laboring process in

³ There is a large literature on this already. From a literary perspective, the rhetorical figure can be seen as an elaborate conceit that draws out and emphasizes certain aspects of this figure in order to elucidate how self-consciousness develops. The complexities of this process will be highlighted here.

creating self-consciousness will be a central aspect. It may be helpful to elaborate a bit upon these preliminary stages of passing from the ordinary consciousness to self-consciousness.

Sence-certainty experiences itself (i.e. in its *Erfahrung*) as being aware of the pure empirical particularity of things. At this point, the consciousness is naïve and experiences seemingly no mediation through concepts or language. It looks at what it has before itself simply as “this”, “here”, “now”. However, through its own experience (*Erfahrung*), it realizes that the object (*Gegenstand*) is much more complex than the initial appearances. For example, "this" turns out to be not just a pure and simple “this”. A complex unity and continuity of many moments are found to be involved when we try to think through the idea of a simple 'this'. In particular, the idea of 'this' also involves the idea of its dialectical negation 'not-this'. Likewise Hegel speaks of “now” as a now which is an absolute plurality of nows and a 'here' that turns out to be a complex of many 'heres' involving also "... a Before and Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and Left" as Hegel reminds us using remarkably simple everyday German locutions. Ultimately, this dialectical movement of what is now a reflective consciousness at its early stages takes it to the category of perception which overlays sense-certainty.

Similar dialectical critical reflection⁴ on the part of the perceiving consciousness

⁴ Here the idea of sublation(*aufhebung*) is important. Contrary to the popular bowdlerized version of dialectics as the *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* triad, Hegelian dialectics is the self-movement of thought where both negation and preservation take place continually. In SL(paragraphs 184-187), Hegel gives a very clear exposition of this:

To sublata, and the *sublated* (that which exists ideally as a moment), constitute one of the most important notions in philosophy. It is a fundamental determination which repeatedly occurs throughout the whole of philosophy, the meaning of which is to be clearly grasped and especially distinguished from *nothing*. What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing. Nothing is *immediate*; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of *mediation*; it is a non-being but as a *result* which had its origin in a being. It still has, therefore, *in itself* the *determinate from which it originates*.

Furthermore, Hegel adds:

'*To sublata*' has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even 'to preserve' includes a

results in a further discovery. Perception finds that its object is not just a thing with particular proportions and apparent color etc. Rather, it is a concrete expression of a force within the object. This is clearly a post-Newtonian and a post-Kantian development. Here Hegel is trying to push the Newtonian idea of a mechanistic force further and to find its limits. To grasp the nature of this force with the mind requires (Kantian) understanding (*Verstand*). The lawful nature of the realm of inner force is described further by the Kantian categories of universality, necessity, causality etc.

negative element, namely, that something is removed from its influences, in order to preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.

The two definitions of 'to sublimate' which we have given can be quoted as two dictionary *meanings* of this word. But it is certainly remarkable to find that a language has come to use one and the same word for two opposite meanings. It is a delight to speculative thought to find in the language words which have in themselves a speculative meaning; the German language has a number of such. The double meaning of the Latin *tollere* (which has become famous through the Ciceronian pun: *tollendum est Octavium*) does not go so far; its affirmative determination signifies only a lifting-up. Something is sublated only in so far as it has entered into unity with its opposite; in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a *moment*. In the case of the lever, weight and distance from a point are called its mechanical moments on account of the sameness of their effect, in spite of the contrast otherwise between something real, such as a weight, and something ideal, such as a mere spatial determination, a line.' We shall often have occasion to notice that the technical language of philosophy employs Latin terms for reflected determinations, either because the mother tongue has no words for them or if it has, as here, because its expression calls to mind more what is immediate, whereas the foreign language suggests more what is reflected.

The more precise meaning and expression which being and nothing receive, now that they are *moments*, is to be ascertained from the consideration of determinate being as the unity in which they are preserved. Being is being, and nothing is nothing, only in their contradistinction from each other; but in their truth, in their unity, they have vanished as these determinations and are now something else. Being and nothing are the same; *but just because they are the same they are no longer being and nothing*, but now have a different significance. In becoming they were coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be; in determinate being, a differently determined unity, they are again differently determined moments. This unity now remains their base from which they do not again emerge in the abstract significance of being and nothing.

Thus it is through this dialectical motion of understanding the inner force that consciousness finally finds a dimension of itself in the things outside. It has now begun to turn into self-consciousness; but it is still at an early stage of development.

A crucial further step in the development of self-consciousness occurs when consciousness discovers other living, self-conscious beings. These beings validate our own awareness of ourselves by recognizing us. We, in our turn, must recognize them as well and thus validate their awareness of themselves .

Most importantly, at this stage through this mutual recognition, self-consciousness realizes that individual identity is not really that of an atomistic, isolated person. Individuals are formed by their interactions with others. These social interactions give self-consciousness a social character. Therefore self-consciousness can think of itself as one aspect of a “unit of...different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their oppositions, enjoy perfect freedom and independence.” This is the point where a reflective self can say:

“I that is We and We that is I.”

There is some danger of misconstruing Hegel as a collectivist. It needs to be emphasized, therefore, that Hegel is endorsing a genuine individual self-consciousness, but it is a self-consciousness that is rooted in a reciprocal sociality at the same time. In paragraph 177 of PS, Hegel clarifies further:

Only so and only then *is* it self-consciousness in actual fact; for here first of all it comes to have the unity of itself in its otherness. Ego which is the object of its notion, is in point of fact not "*object*". The object of desire, however, is only independent, for it is the universal, ineradicable substance, the fluent self-identical essential reality. When a self-consciousness is the object, the object is just as much ego as object.

With this we already have before us the notion of *Mind* or *Spirit*. What consciousness has further to become aware of, is the experience of what mind is — this absolute substance, which is the unity of the different self-related and self-existent self-consciousnesses in the perfect freedom and independence of their opposition as component elements of that substance: Ego that is “we”, a plurality of Egos, and “we” that is a single Ego. Consciousness first finds in self-consciousness — the notion of mind — its turning-point, where it leaves the parti-coloured show of the sensuous immediate, passes from the dark void of the transcendent and remote super-sensuous, and steps into the spiritual daylight of the present.

The socio-historical unity of 'We and I' is what Hegel calls *Geist* or spirit, Ontologically, Hegel understands *Geist* to be the 'absolute substance' of individuals who belong to Geist".

This brings us to a concrete elucidation of the mutual recognition problem through a consideration of the relation between the "master" and "slave" (lordship and bondage in J. B. Baillie's translation from which the quotes below are taken).The whole problem is set in the context of mutual recognition because without such reciprocal recognition consciousness can not ground itself ontologically. As Hegel puts it:

Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that, it exists for another self-consciousness that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized ...self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness ... it must cancel this its other. To do so is the sublation... it must set itself to sublimate the other independent being... secondly, it therefore proceeds to sublimate its own self. (B-229)

One who becomes the master "...is the consciousness that exists for itself; but no longer merely the general notion of existence for self." (B-239) In this social-spiritual metaphor, the master "... is the power dominating existence." (B-235) However, it is the bondsman who labors and is thus related to the world of things in nature. Therefore, Hegel concludes:

"The truth of the independent consciousness is ... the consciousness of the bondsman ...bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness within itself. It will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence." (B-237)

Hegel is quite explicit with regards to the role that labor plays in this transformation.

"Though work and labour ... the consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself...Labor is desire restrained and checked...labor shapes and fashions the thing...The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct apprehension of that independent being as its self." (B-238)

One important aspect of Hegel's illustration here is that the fundamental asymmetry of power prevents the above relations from being a fully spiritual one.

Only the emergence of a shared recognition, albeit through a life and death struggle, can lead to a common ideality. This is objectified in the laws and institutions that are the products of historic struggles. Indeed this can be called the dialectics of the spirit working through history. Hegel refers to the Greek world described in Sophocles' *Antigone* to illustrate the limits of the ancient world and the possibilities of further movements of consciousness and self-consciousness. In the SL and in his lectures on philosophy of history Hegel develops these themes further.

We have finally arrived at the point in the PS where the unhappy consciousness begins to glimpse spiritual consciousness. This more developed form of consciousness understands itself not only as historical and social but also as ontologically grounded as well because of this historicity and sociality. Thus the self-consciousness of 'Being' itself – “substance” or the “absolute” – now is revealed abstractly as socio-historical . From this perspective, Hegel's later work from SL onwards through his lectures on the philosophy of right and philosophy of history are attempts attempt to make this characterization of consciousness more concrete.

However, at this point in PS religion – spiritual consciousness posits the divine being – infinite reason, logos, etc. – can still remain the object of consciousness. There is still alienation. God is conceived as “the deed of an alien satisfaction.” The divine power is separated from human power and the human self “does not find it in its own action as such.” (PS 477)

At the ultimate stage, according to Hegel, *contra* Kant, this type of religious consciousness develops into absolute knowing. This step comes with the realization that the power attributed to an outside God is actually the power of dialectical reason. This is summed up in *Begriff* or Concept. *Begriff* is always and everywhere at work in both ontological being and human consciousness. Only at this point of development into absolute knowing through dialectical reason, does consciousness dissolve qua consciousness. It is finally able to transform itself into speculative thought. It is no longer just 'consciousness – of' with its object 'out there.' It is now universal dialectical reason and presages Hegel's later thought in SL. In this sense, as claimed at the beginning of this essay, SL does indeed begin where PS leaves off. Together, the

two works develop systematically the ontological unfolding of consciousness by using dialectical logic in its full rigor and encompassing scope.

Note:

In the next essay I will discuss how close Hegel's Logic takes us to human social practice, only to return to speculative thought. It was up to Marx to use human laboring activity as social practice as the key to a real dialectical development through history. [i.e. practical activity altering both nature and human nature.] I will naturally discuss the category division of labor (DOL). DOL is the key explanatory factor for (alienated) thought.

(Key: critique of Hegel for his elevation of thought as the only active and creative force.)

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