

# Hegel's natural assumption

## The first sentence of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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The 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has enjoyed a long and rich critical reception in the history of Hegel scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Distinguished from the famous 'Preface' in that it introduces the particular ambitions of the *Phenomenology* as opposed to Hegel's philosophical enterprise as a whole, the opening section of the 1807 work has been understood as the exposition of a paradoxical structure of philosophical science (*Wissenschaft*): the path of philosophical science emerges from out of the analysis of the immanent dialectical unfolding of an introduction to this same philosophical science. Hegel acknowledges this paradoxical relation between the path *to* and the path *of* philosophical science at the end of the introductory section to the *Phenomenology*: 'the way to philosophical science is itself already philosophical science.'<sup>2</sup>

A crucial element of this internally paradoxical conception of philosophical science within the *Phenomenology* – that it is simultaneously the introduction to philosophical science and always already a part of that science – is a preliminary dialectical critique of the limits of modern theories of cognition. As the memorable opening passage of the Introduction makes clear, the problem with modern epistemology is that it tries to know the mode of knowing most appropriate for comprehending the truth of the absolute – the truth of what is – before any step is taken into the philosophical knowledge of truth as such:

It is a *natural assumption* that in philosophy, before we start to deal with its proper subject-matter, viz. the actual cognition of what in truth is, one must first of all come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded either as the instrument to possess the Absolute, or as the medium through which one discovers it.<sup>3</sup>

[*Es ist eine natürliche Vorstellung, daß, ehe in der Philosophie an die Sache selbst, nämlich an das wirkliche Erkennen dessen, was in Wahrheit ist, gegangen wird, es notwendig sei, vorher über das Erkennen sich zu verständigen, das als das Werkzeug, wodurch man des Absoluten sich bemächtigt, oder als das Mittel, durch welches hindurch man es erblicke, betrachtet wird.*]

Before one gets into the work of philosophy, one must first learn to philosophise.<sup>4</sup> Much ink has been spilt in explicating *why* it is that Hegel starts his Introduction to his 1807 book with this 'natural assumption'. Above all else, Hegel is said to be positioning his phenomenological study in relation to the distinctive problems of modern epistemology, principal among which is the presumed separation of the subject of knowing and the object known via the instrumentalisation of cognition. But *how* did the 'natural assumption' appear? How did it become a predominant form of philosophical proceduralism? What are the processes that allowed it to manifest in such a manner that Hegel was able to deploy it as the starting point of his *Phenomenology*? Are those processes intra-epistemological or broader socio-historical ones? Without answering these questions, any exposition of the 'natural assumption' is in danger of being itself naturally assumed as a simple manifestation of the limits of theories of cognition when, in fact, something significantly more complicated is taking place.

This essay aims to protect against such an ironic fate by offering an alternative account of the first sentence of the Introduction. It will provide an exposition of the presupposed processes that render the 'natural assumption' possible as a hypostatised cultural form that could be immediately mobilised by Hegel as the starting point of the *Phenomenology*. I will show that, more than simply

a critique of modern theories of cognition, the ‘natural assumption’ expresses a complex historical abstraction that constellates both the concealed impositions of institutionalised academic philosophical production, and the mediation of the private property relations that dominate modern civil society. By abstraction I mean the process of the interconnection of elements that constitute a phenomenon but which are not empirically observable on its surface. The abstraction of the ‘natural assumption’ is that it contains and expresses social and historical processes – the mechanisms and apparatuses of the social space of philosophical production within the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century university system and the general structural presuppositions of private property relations in modern Prussian life – but does not display those processes at the level of its formal characteristics. Specifically, I will seek to show that Hegel’s critique discloses the social imbalance that posits philosophical cognition as a product of the specific form of ethical substance that dominates early nineteenth-century life: the system of private property relations constitutive of civil society.

In order to develop this claim, I provide a detailed commentary on a number of terms that appear in the opening sentence of the Introduction but have yet to be explored in greater detail: ‘before’ (*vorher*), ‘necessity’ (*notwendig*), ‘philosophy’ (*Philosophie*), ‘one’ (*man*) and ‘possession’ (*bemächtigen*). These terms are the clues to disinterring the processes that, I argue, render the natural assumption possible as a cultural form.

## The imposition of propaedeutics

As was noted above, the dominant understanding of the starting point of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* is that it presents an immanent critique of the basic presupposition of modern theories of cognition.<sup>5</sup> Modern epistemology separates the subject of knowing from the object known, thus inaugurating a whole series of assumed divisions: subjective certainty is cut off from objective truth; the method of philosophising is disconnected from philosophical knowledge; the infinitude of truth is irreducible to the finitude of subjective reflection; and so on. As important as this focus is, however, one consequence has been a misconstrual of the opening passage in terms of the staged, explicit relation to ex-

isting modes of philosophising crystallised in particular systems of thought. In other words, the Introduction is not simply an interrogation of modern epistemology, but a personification of modern epistemology in a particular system. The most dominant point of reference indicated in the Introduction is, according to Hegel scholarship, Immanuel Kant’s conception of transcendental critique.

The ‘natural assumption’ is said to personify the standpoint of Kantian philosophical critique understood as an investigation into the conditions of possibility of *a priori* knowledge of the concepts, principles and criteria of metaphysics. What this investigation produces is a discourse on the nature and limits, and thus legitimacy, of knowledge free of experience (reason). As a result of the delimitation of reason, the *limits* of knowing are known, whereas the *boundaries* of reason can only be thought (since they are ‘beyond’ experience).<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of this distinction between the known limit and the thought boundary, Kantian philosophy produces a separation between the knowing subject (the limits of subjective reflection) and the unknowable object of thought (reason as that which *burdens* humans with necessary questions that cannot be answered).<sup>7</sup>

The Kantian problematic of the presupposition of a subjective dogmatism that is hidden within the transcendental critique of objective legitimacy, has been well explicated by Hegel himself as well as by secondary literature. Yet, nowhere is Kant explicitly referenced in the Introduction. This, of course, does not mean that Kant’s critical method is not *implied* – it clearly is since the whole problematic of the opening passage concerns the elaboration of the nature and limits of the correct cognition of the truth of the absolute. The purpose here is not to contest this. Rather, I take the absence of direct reference to Kant as an invitation to reconsider the function and the presuppositions of the first sentence. In fact, the character of the opening sentence – which is said to establish the whole issue of the critique of modern epistemology – is far too general a proposition for it to provide, as Ludwig Siep reminds us, ‘an exacting critical engagement ... with Kant.’<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Hegel’s generalisation is so general that it is remarkably difficult to identify a particular philosophical system as the *specific* target of the Introduction’s opening passages. Although certain references to Descartes, Locke, Kant, Jacobi and Reinhold can no doubt be discerned if one follows an ‘iconological’

impulse (a search for sources), this preoccupation with past philosophical systems as providing some determinate content to the standpoint of the natural assumption is, I would argue, misleading in that it particularises the general.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is, I think, precisely the status of generalisation embodied by the natural assumption that should be analysed if we are to have an alternative understanding of its status.

In fact, as I will suggest below, the generalisation of the natural assumption could be construed as a determined effect of a historical process that, in specific institutional fields of knowledge production, converts particular modes of philosophical orientation into a fixed, generalised code or convention of philosophical practice. In the case of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, this specific institutional field is that of the discipline of philosophy within the modern German university system, usually periodised as beginning in the early 1700s with the emergence of the University of Göttingen. The institutional determination of a generalised philosophical convention can be discerned in at least two interrelated ways in the opening sentence: first, by the imposition of propaedeutics as what comes ‘before’ (*vorher*) philosophy; and second, by an abstract power of the ‘necessity’ (*notwendig*) of propaedeutics.<sup>10</sup>

What allows the natural assumption to be perceivable and deployable as a generalised starting point of philosophical practice is, therefore, the sense in which what it signals is the convention of propaedeutics – that is to say, the preparatory studies required for individuals to enter into specific disciplines. The Introduction consciously stages a confrontation with the mechanisms and demands of general *introductory* knowledge (*pro*-paedeutics). Propaedeutics are, then, a general introduction to a particular knowledge that aims to provide students with some basic theoretical content (concepts, ideas, systems, methods, bibliographies, etc.). In Hegel’s time, the status of propaedeutics were, generally speaking, governed by institutionalised education, and Hegel knew the character of this pedagogical form well. Not only was he part of the university system throughout his life – albeit in a highly uneven way – but he also produced a philosophical propaedeutic whilst teaching at a *Gymnasium* in Nuremberg.<sup>11</sup>

Propaedeutics, according to one of Hegel’s letters, are the *enforced* educational condition that assures ‘that

empty minds are filled with thoughts’ so that the ‘natural peculiarity of thought – i.e., accident, caprice, oddness in matters of opinion – is driven out.’<sup>12</sup> In this context, Hegel is referring to the education of school children, which is obviously different to the situation staged in the opening of the *Phenomenology*. Nevertheless, the latter is marked by a certain demand that philosophical work begin first by subjugating thinking to the order of a learned practice; or, put another way, of a practice that demands that the individual would-be philosopher fill in his or her philosophical mind by an established convention of orientation. It insists that before one does philosophy, one needs to *learn* how to philosophise. Propaedeutics is, from this perspective, in-built into the very substance of philosophical knowledge of which it is thus an integral part.



The necessity of the conjunctural relation of propaedeutics and philosophy within philosophical work was, for Hegel in Jena, an absurdity. The absurdity is formalised in a nice gnomonic attack on Kant’s notion of philosophising in the so-called ‘Aphorisms of the Wastebook’ (1803/4-1806). Kantian philosophising aims to teach philosophy prior to doing philosophy. It is, as Hegel puts it somewhat brutally, ‘as if someone could teach

carpentry but not how to build a table, a chair, a door, a cabinet, etc.’<sup>13</sup> ‘Carpentry’ in this notebook entry is understood as the generalised logic of the practice and teaching of making things made out of wood without actually making things made out of wood. It is an infinitely repeatable order of practice that can be mapped onto all who wish to enter the practice, but done so without actually entering into the practice of philosophy. Or, to recode the metaphor into the language of epistemology, it means to know the faculty of knowing without knowing anything. Hegel takes this point up again in his lectures on the history of philosophy. This time he draws attention to the ‘old story’ of the σχολαστικός (*scholasticus*) – that is to say, the institutionalised subject of competent scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

This reference, together with Hegel’s earlier attack on the internal contradiction of Kant’s philosophy in the ‘Wastebook’ notes, can be said to work analogically to the hidden presupposition of the natural assumption: the latter is produced within an order of institutionalised philosophical practice that elaborates externally-imposed instruments of philosophical practice that organise philosophical work prior to any philosophical knowledge. Philosophy within the university system, as the institution that dominates (although not *absolutely*) the practice of philosophy in Prussia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, produces in this way a meta-philosophical injunction – a kind of academic categorial imperative – that precedes philosophical knowledge and that, crucially, polices the passage into philosophy. It is not insignificant that Hegel notes the *necessity* (*notwendig*) that animates the natural assumption: to do philosophy, one *must* first follow the proceduralism of propaedeutics in so far as it is the latter that structurally presuppose philosophy.<sup>15</sup> The matter is an imperative; and the imperative precedes philosophy but has no determinate philosophical content since it is not premised on the knowledge that one is always already within the element of philosophising the absolute by virtue of the unity of the latter with *ourselves*.<sup>16</sup>

Hegel’s concerns in the opening of the *Phenomenology*, then, are not simply limited to the problem of modern epistemology. They take issue with other latent processes that condition the *possibility* of doing philosophy in a given moment. But this is only one aspect of the natural assumption. The meta-philosophical im-

perative emerges as a duty that is *taught* in such a way that it gets fully *internalised* by the subject of the natural assumption – namely, the one who carries it out as if it were totally natural. The agent of the natural assumption is a subject of the acquisition of competency – a kind of ‘student-subject’, as I would define it, who is shepherded into a process of philosophical practice that rests on a certain academic-institutional consensus that philosophical work begins first by a propaedeutics on cognising cognition. Interestingly, Hegel’s opening sentence ascribes an abstract status to this student-subject that is subjectivised by the necessity of a particular order of philosophical production. The sentence makes note of this subject as ‘one’.

### The ‘one’ as abstract subject

For the natural assumption to have appeared as immediately perceivable form of thought, there must have been a process of imposition that gets internalised by a subject in such a way that it becomes a habit or reflexive second-nature that is manifested in institutionalised conventions of philosophical practice. The opening of the Introduction suggests this sense of the reflexive character by posing an unjustified mode of philosophical orientation as if it were fully justified. In other words, the standpoint of the necessity of propaedeutics arrogates to itself the position of philosophical beginnings. We can develop a deeper and more precise understanding of this hidden process of the institutional formation of philosophising by considering the strange abstract subject that punctuates the opening sentence – the ‘one’ [*man*].

It should be noted at this point that the subject of the ‘natural assumption’ is not *solely* a student-subject. Functioning beyond the strict limits of schematised education, the ‘natural assumption’ is a constitutive feature of philosophical production *per se* in Hegel’s present. In other words, it points to a broader social issue, one animated by the question of how philosophy in any given historical moment is produced at a general level. Thus, the generalisation of philosophical practice is semantically registered by a generalised subject, an abstract ‘one’. This subject is an agent that is represented, at first blush, as if it is stripped of any determinate socio-historical content. Regardless of context, the ‘one’ simply carries

out the task of how to philosophise. But as I already suggested, this generalisation is an abstraction of what is nonetheless also a determinate institutional field and set of practices (the university). The abstract character of the 'one' is, accordingly, abstract in an internally contradictory sense: it can be described as formally abstract only in so far as its concrete content is concealed from it. That the 'one' is required to blindly follow the regulations of a prescribed schema of transition into philosophical knowledge, reveals the determinacy of the subject's structure as being threaded through by the mechanisms that organise, produce and reproduce the schema. The indeterminacy of the 'one' is, paradoxically, the determination of institutionalised philosophical production raised to the level of generalised architectonic logic.

Unfortunately, not only has the historical and philosophical status of the 'one' in Hegel's opening passage received little analysis in Hegel scholarship, but it has often been (albeit unconsciously) covered over. Take, for example, Adris Collins' preliminary presentation of the basic structure and posited goal of the opening sentence of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*: 'It seems "natural", to assume, Hegel says, that we must understand the nature and limits of the instrument or medium through which we discover the truth before we become involved in actual knowing.'<sup>17</sup> Collins here immediately collapses the 'one' into a 'we'. That is to say, she substitutes an abstract, individuated subject for an abstractly collectivised social subject.<sup>18</sup> Within the context of the *Phenomenology*, this substitution is highly charged: the 'we' constitutes, as is well-known, the very centre of Hegel's notoriously complex concept of spirit as defined, for the first time in the 1807 work ('I that is We and We that is I').<sup>19</sup> Although it enters into Collins' exposition somewhat precipitously, the reference to the 'we' is, according to the salience of the 'we' in Hegel's thought, not without some justification.

Spirit only finds its initial point of philosophical description in the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology* within the context of the formal definition of self-consciousness as mutual recognition, but it already appears in the Introduction by way of the philosophical dissolution of the separation between cognition and the absolute. As Hegel will try to show, the absolute is not an object to be epistemologically won by cognition, but is, rather, the process of a subject's reconstruction of

itself from out of its dynamic externalisation and re-integration of its objective otherness – that is, of spirit that comes to know the result of its negation, differentiation and alienation of otherness, and as the very subject that knows itself as the process of negation, differentiation and alienation of otherness as its own act and substance. That is to say, as a subject that knows that it is *in itself* the negation of the object, and as the subject that knows that it is the negation of that knowing in a higher order experience of ontological unity with the object – or, a subject that knows that it has the in itself as something *for itself*.

Within the context of the Introduction, this dialectical process of the in-self as becoming fully appropriated by the for-itself of spirit results in the identification of the absolute with nothing less than *ourselves* since the knower is not extrinsic to the object known, but is a dynamic processual unity (a spiritual unity) of the two. In other words, in so far as *we* are the subjects of knowing, *we* are the absolute. The *Phenomenology* is, understood thus, the introduction and first part of a systematic presentation of speculative philosophy raised to the order of social ontology.<sup>20</sup>

However, Hegel refrains from identifying the subject of the opening sentence of the Introduction with the subject of the 'we', in order to begin to disclose the sense in which theoretical propaedeutics are *obstacles* in the passage toward grasping the truth of the absolute as the truth of who and what we are. To immediately posit that *we* are the subject of natural assumption is to socialise a phenomenon (regardless of how formal or abstract it is) that is, for Hegel, *de-socialised* within the order of the demands made by philosophical propaedeutics (since it posits abstract, anonymous individuals, the mere 'one'). The process of de-socialisation consists of the misrecognition of the social character of the 'we' as the absolute – a subject that articulates the recognition of its collective status as dialectically particular and general. (The chiasmic form of the 'I' and 'we' in the famous formulation cited above registers this.) This process of spirit's actualisation as the collective social 'we' is, crucially, determined by spirit itself. Spirit is the name of a 'subject' that produces its own subjectivity, thus *both* its status as subject and substance. It is ontologically identical to processuality – it *is* process (and thus cannot be reducible to either subject or substance). As Hegel notes in a

remarkable proposition in the 1803/04 'First Philosophy of Spirit', the ontological processuality of spirit consists of 'bringing itself to birth'.<sup>21</sup>

It is the task of philosophical science to expose spirit's self-parturition at the level of its most adequate form of expression. This means that philosophical science is the form in which spirit unfolds itself as the *free* subject of its own formation, which of course means, by extension, that philosophical science is the most developed manifestation of freedom. It is for this reason that Hegel's philosophical enterprise aims to achieve the status of being presuppositionless; spirit must express itself from out of its own determinate content. It is spiritual freedom expressed as spiritual freedom. Or, put another way, the collective 'we' must form its freedom from out of its own activity.



In the opening of the *Phenomenology*, philosophical thinking is imposed upon by an extrinsic schema of theoretical progress, one that misshapes progress for inert regression since it bars us from a passage into philosophy by locking thinking into an interminable struggle of working out how to enter. The 'one' is the kind of subject that emerges in this relation of externality, of an abstract, indeterminate particular that is ignorant of its

own particularity. More importantly, the 'one' is a hypothesised agency that is, ironically, barred access to the substance of philosophical knowledge by being forced to remain within an illusory expanse of superficial logical and epistemological concerns.

The Reinholdian distinction between the passage into philosophy and the passage of philosophy – allegorised by Hegel in the figures of the 'spacious vestibule' of pseudo-scientific philosophising and the 'temple' of philosophy – is an element of the processes that give sense to how the natural assumption became a natural assumption. The architectural allegory that represents the division, however, does not simply draw attention to two modes of intellectual orientation – of a passage into philosophy that, because of the 'bad infinity' of its practice, never gets into philosophy, and the passage of philosophy.<sup>22</sup> It also underlines the mediation of the *social* division operative within the spaces that determine philosophical production: the spaces that either permit or forbid entry into the temple of philosophy. In *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* Hegel mockingly refers to the Reinholdian orientation, which reduces reflection – thus anticipating the more memorable element of instrumentalisation in the opening sentence of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* – to an appropriable skill, 'a kind of handicraft, something that can be improved by newly invented turns of skill.'<sup>23</sup> It is the task of philosophy to provide access to this handicraft. Thus, '[Reinhold] seems to think of this task as the finding of a universally valid and ultimate turn of skill such that the work [of philosophical cognition] completes itself automatically for anyone who can get acquainted with it.'<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, philosophy is, within the Reinholdian disposition, presented as a 'representation of philosophy' instead of philosophical work as the development of its own immanent unfolding.<sup>25</sup> What I think is more significant in Hegel's devastating critique of Reinhold is the hidden *social* division and asymmetry that structures the abstractly open passage into the acquaintance with philosophical cognition – anyone can do it, so long as they are appropriately initiated – and the fact that the reduction of philosophical cognition into a learnt skill is itself socially reproduced as a set of 'mental exercises' of 'big brains'. A disciplined subject of philosophy as produced and reproduced under the auspices of the uni-

iversity system knows how to enter into philosophy since they know how to obediently perform its exercises. It is a subject that already knows how to be in a given order of philosophy by way of the recurrence of such exercise. For it to have appeared as a natural assumption, the form must thus have been slowly internalised by way of the *repetition* of exercises in a given social field. And for the repetition to be repeated, the convention must have been abbreviated into a relatively accessible and assimilable – repeatable – schema. Something that can be learnt by rote and never be forgotten.<sup>26</sup> This learning by rote – what Hegel will refer to as ‘mechanical memory’ in his *Philosophy of Spirit* – is internalised by way of social inclusion and exclusion within the production of philosophy. The university system is a social context in which the would-be philosopher learns how to cultivate the illusory image of intellectual self-organisation. Or, more precisely, the student comes to know that he is the subject of philosophical knowledge production when he learns how to order his own thoughts according to the internalised rules of academic work.<sup>27</sup> Philosophical disciplinarity is self-incurred obedience.

This notion of a disciplined university subject offers us one way, then, of understanding the peculiar reference to philosophy – *Philosophie* – in the opening sentence of the Introduction. The reference is strange for the simple fact that it is noted in the very first sentence only to be used again in the sparest of ways. The ‘Preface’ of the *Phenomenology* already provides us with one reason as to why it is that Hegel dissolves the notion of *Philosophie*, preferring instead *Wissenschaft*. What the 1807 work tries to develop is the passage into actual knowledge of the truth of the absolute and not, as Hegel has it, the mere ‘love of knowing’ – that is to say, a classically-orientated mode of philosophical production that is marked by an unbridgeable internal distance from the knowledge of the truth of the absolute since it rests on the fundamental presupposition of modern theories of knowing – namely, that truth is an object to be known by a knowing subject.<sup>28</sup>

What is perhaps more interesting about the first sentence is, however, the sense in which the philosophical proceduralism of the natural assumption operates *within* philosophy (*in der Philosophie*). That is to say, philosophy is not conceived as a limit to be overcome by actual scientific knowledge, but it is posited as the space – the ‘spacious vestibule’ – in which disciplinarity is produced and

reproduced. This suggests that *Philosophie instrumentalises* the natural assumption and recodes it, ideologically, as if it were something pertaining to philosophy as such – that is to say, philosophy as a historical task and not simply a university discipline.

Hegel does not try to rescue philosophy from this ideological imbroglio. He will, rather, disclose the way in which the abuses of philosophy as institutionalised mode of intellectual production are immanent, determinate aspects of the historical unfolding of philosophical science (*Wissenschaft*). This brings us to another significant point that Hegel explores in his critique of Reinhold in 1801 – one which I would tentatively suggest may imply that another presupposition of the natural assumption is the tacit representation of philosophical reflection as an instrument whose historical specificity can be construed as an effect of *private property* relations in particular.

### Private property relations

Hegel’s critique of the ‘mental exercises’ that ‘[keep philosophy] busy with analysis, with methodology and with storytelling, so that it saves itself from taking the step [into philosophy] altogether’, is that this not only restricts philosophy to the level of an infinitely repeatable schema of cognising cognition, but it also extracts philosophy from the broader realities of social life.<sup>29</sup> It makes it ‘deaf to all demands’ of existence at a given historical-social moment.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, as a result of the mediation of the relations of civil society, philosophy is not simply a way of knowing cognition but it is reduced to being the ‘private possession of a few individuals.’<sup>31</sup> In the critique of Reinhold in 1801, then, what appears as something formally accessible to all is, in reality, a socially ordered and institutionally reproduced possession of a particular group of institutionalised educators. In this sense, the distinction between the ‘one’ and the ‘we’ – of an abstractly produced and reproduced subject of philosophical production that is ignorant of the imposition of the given ethical substance and the concrete complex processual spirit that produces its own life from out of itself – is overdetermined by the historical moment. By pointing to instrumentality, of a *thing acquired*, Hegel is, I argue, underlining the structural features that determine that moment.

The critique of the instrumentalisation of cognition

as pure means of acquisition of the knowledge of the truth of the absolute is, as I have already noted, a well-documented episode in *Phenomenology* scholarship. That the 1807 work begins within the socio-ethical order of acquisition – that the absolute is an object to be *possessed* (*bemächtigt*) and that cognition is a thing to be acquired – has however, like the previous two points I have explored, received little attention.<sup>32</sup> This is surprising. From his earliest writings in Bern to his mature works, Hegel was extremely attentive to the private property relations that defined modern civil bourgeois society.<sup>33</sup> For example, his fragmentary writings on ‘love’, composed while in Frankfurt, offer an allegorical image of social union in which private property is superseded into a higher order unity of true relationality (thus anticipating, to some extent, the logic of mutual recognition that constitutes the general character of spirit within the *Phenomenology*).<sup>34</sup> Significantly, this ‘true union’ of love is articulated by Hegel according to a preliminary passage through its negative formation. Prior to such union, love appears as the process of the direct consumption of the object of desire. The loved object is *owned* by the lover. Hegel uses the figure of the prostitute to render this point more pronounced; and money appears as the mechanism that insures exclusive right of access to the object. Love, under the conditions of civil society, leaves lovers in an insurmountable impasse: they experience each other only as objects to be acquired. As Hegel puts it, such love is, in truth, ‘loveless’ ‘hostility’ that yields only a relation conditioned by the defense of its ‘right, its property’.<sup>35</sup>

Despite their energetic commitment to thinking the unified social totality, what these Frankfurt writings cannot account for, however, is the manner in which the very instrument of the construction of new images of social unity – namely, the instrument of philosophy – is itself an object alienated from historical-social life, itself an object of the civil society it criticises and aims to negate. It is only when Hegel moves to Jena that he begins to understand the way in which *philosophy* comprises a privately possessed object that structures the legal and ethical modalities of exclusive access and alienation. When Hegel notes that the source of the need of speculative philosophy is the diremption of social life in its given, modern conjuncture – the divisions of society as *atomistic* bourgeois individuals who lose their connection to the collective life of their ethical substance – he

not only, then, reflects on why it is that civil society needs philosophy, but he also underscores what philosophy itself needs for it to be understood as the ideal reflexive form of knowing the totality of ethical substance as the truth of spirit.<sup>36</sup>

The atomistic individual of civil society concretises as such the ostensibly abstract ‘one’ who appears as the first named subjectivity of the *Phenomenology*. I would argue this ‘one’ is not a free-floating entity but rather the subject of civil society in the early nineteenth century. As a consequence of this atomisation of philosophical practice, the subject of that practice can only connect himself to the order of institutionalised philosophy or the practical demands of the civil service since it is in that social space that one acquires (or becomes ‘acquainted’ with) the instruments of philosophical knowledge.<sup>37</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, universities were no longer spaces of scholastic and religiously orthodox tutelage of things disconnected from everyday life. Rather, they had become spaces of knowledge that augmented practical studies for a student body made up of nobles and the middle classes that passed through universities so as to be professionalised according to the demands of the state, which is to say, to work as civil servants.<sup>38</sup> To philosophise in the first years of the nineteenth century according to the conventions of the university system was thus to be mediated by a complex set of social processes that structured that system. Hegel felt the effects of this system directly – for many years he lived a highly precarious economic life, finding it difficult to make ends meet because of the shift in labour relations in universities. When Hegel moved to Jena he quickly became part of a radically expanding class of teachers known as *Extraordinarien* (inexpensive instructors that held the rank of ‘associate professor’).<sup>39</sup> His thought developed within a changing labour market which was itself a part of an uneven history of university reforms that was controlled by the conjunctural relation upheld by German institutions with the state. This relation tried to manage particular crises involving the financial situation of universities, the rising rate of qualified individuals in the professional realm of a civil service that had only a finite number of positions, the problem of the socio-ethical responsibility of universities as formally open to all but in reality servicing only those who could afford it, and so on.



Importantly, philosophy in the university system of the eighteenth century was not simply a discipline that taught the history of systems of thought traditionally transmitted as ‘philosophical’, but it was a site of different processes, crises and social practices overdetermined by the relations of private property in civil society. The natural assumption contains elements of this overdetermination in so far as it operates on two orders of *givenness*: first, that of the pre-given status of meta-philosophical proceduralism, a schema of production that dictates how it is that one is to start philosophising from the standpoint of institutionalised philosophy; and second, that cognition as a means is given as an object to be *acquired*, a possession that can be used to instrumentally manipulate the absolute according to its own form. Taken together, these two orders of the given allow us to perceive that a distinctive presupposition of the natural assumption – of what allows the natural assumption to appear – is that it constellates processes of *appropriation* that disappear from within the generalisation of proceduralism into a self-evident, naturally assumable, order of philosophical knowledge.

Philosophical production according to the natural assumption, then, starts with an appropriation of a meta-philosophical practice of propaedeutics that has been internalised to the level of reflexive second nature – meta-philosophical in so far as it assumes certain methods, criteria and borrowed theoretical approaches instead of tarrying with the philosophical problem of what it means to be a philosophical science that, if rigorously philosophical, cannot start with a blind confidence of those methods, criteria or borrowed models of theoretical construction.<sup>40</sup> The infamous ‘way of despair’ that Hegel notes later in the Introduction is precisely that path in which one not only does not know the way in which it will develop, but that also has to be constructed, somewhat paradoxically, by being pursued.<sup>41</sup> What is proper to philosophy – its subject-matter – is, then, nothing that can either be appropriated by an extrinsic non-scientific thought or be appropriated as such (since it is produced by spirit as spirit’s own production). The starting point of the *Phenomenology*, the natural assumption, is the start that unfolds both the critique of the limits of the use of extrinsic mechanisms, and the fact that one must start with what presents itself as the most culturally dominant way of starting to philosophise – which, for Hegel,

is the codified form of philosophical production in the university system that is internalised, as if it were truth and not representation, by the subject of philosophy.

This sense of the natural assumption as an appropriated mode of thinking overdetermined by private property relations suggests, once again, that we cannot therefore simply explicate the opening of the *Phenomenology* as a theoretical critique of the presuppositions of modern epistemology but, rather, that it should also be understood as a constellated, overdetermined phenomena that contains within itself, although in abstracted form, the mediation of the critique of epistemology by the private property relations that structure modern civil society.

## Conclusion

A structural presupposition of the reflections set out in this essay has been to take seriously – to the point of exaggeration – an important caveat and proviso of the reading of the *Phenomenology* that Hegel makes in his prefatory remarks to the book: ‘Impatience demands the impossible, to wit, the attainment of the end without the means. But the length of this path has to be endured, because, for one thing, each moment is necessary; and further, each moment has to be *lingered* (*verweilen*) over.’<sup>42</sup> I have tried to linger over the natural assumption by inquiring into what mediates its mode of appearance – what allows it to ‘come on the scene’ (*Auftreten*), as Hegel likes to put it in the *Phenomenology* – as construed from the standpoint of a concept of history as an ensemble of relational social processes (institutions, practices, etc.).<sup>43</sup> I have tried to do this so as to offer an alternative perspective from which to reflect on the opening of Hegel’s celebrated 1807 work.

Crucial to this, as I have argued, is the way in which the relations of private property that structure civil society overdetermine the sense in which cognition, as a result of the natural assumption, emerges as a means (instrument/medium) through which one possesses the absolute. In so far as the absolute is the higher order dialectical unity of ourselves as subject and object (of spirit in a moment of its self-formation) the absolute is something that can be neither privately owned (as it is an expression of the totality of spirit) nor publicly distributed (as this still presupposes a social asymmetry of access, acquisition and alienation since it assumes

a subject that carries out the distribution and one who receives it).

This allows us to consider the ways in which the natural assumption in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* is an expression of a socio-historical phenomenon that is considerably more complicated than the narrower epistemological concerns with which it is usually associated. Philosophical cognition, and the problem of how to start to philosophise, is not a uniquely theoretical problem concerned with the possibility of knowing the mode of knowing most adequate to knowing the absolute. It is also, for Hegel, a constellated problematic of other social processes and practices that render its appearance possible – processes that allow it to emerge as a phenomenon that has crystallised in such a way that it can be immediately deployed as a starting point. In other words, Hegel's *Phenomenology* does not start solely from the premise of an idealised interrogation of modern theories of cognition – idealised by assuming a historical body of knowledge that one could totalise as 'modern epistemology' – but also from a socially and historically and specific object, one that contains within itself the processes that allow it to appear as an ideal, isolatable, generalised form.

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## Notes

1. I would like to thank Stephen Howard for his valuable suggestions, critical insights and unwavering encouragement. Special thanks also to Peter Osborne, who guided much of the work presented here when it was in germinal form.
2. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 56; G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 80. The English pagination of the *Phenomenology* will henceforth be followed by the German when direct reference to the German is noted.
3. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 46, 68. Emphasis added and translation of *bemächtigt* as 'to get hold of' amended, see note 32.
4. Hegel famously presented this problematic in later works by way of an allegory of 'learning to swim' without getting into the water. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 428; and G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Sucht-

ing and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 34 and 82.

5. For example, see Robert C. Solomon *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Kenneth Westphal, *Hegel's Epistemological Realism: A Study of the Aim and Method of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Tom Rockmore *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Karin de Boer, 'Hegel's Conception of Immanent Critique: Its Sources, Extent and Limit', in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 83–100.
6. The distinction between the limits of cognition and the boundaries of reason are perhaps rendered most clear in the difference between the *immanent* ('within the limits of possible experience') and *transcendent* ('those that would fly beyond these boundaries') use of principles of reason. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 385.
7. This sense of the 'burden' of human reason is a reference to the first sentence of the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 99.
8. Ludiwg Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. D. Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63.
9. Siep claims that Hegel perhaps had Jacobi in mind since the latter 'thought it essential to insulate the faithful intuition of God from all concepts of the understanding.' Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 64. Ardis Collins offers us an alternative reference point. She notes that perhaps Hegel had Reinhold in mind in the Introduction since the latter, according to Hegel's devastating critique of his work in the 1801 *Differenzschrift*, posits the absolute as if it were an immediately known and objective philosophical result that simply needs philosophically reconstructing. See Ardis Collins, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Dialectical Justification of Philosophy's First Principles* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 176. Evangelia Sembou gives us a broader reference point: Hegel's Introduction is concerned with the 'tradition' of modern epistemology that runs from Descartes to Kant. See Sembou, *Hegel's Phenomenology and Foucault's Genealogy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 14. In an older text, Werner Marx notes, in his excellent study of the 'Preface' and 'Introduction' to the *Phenomenology*, that the 'Cartesian principle of self-consciousness was among the "self-evident truths" of the "culture" of Hegel's day.' Werner Marx, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Commentary Based on the Preface and Introduction*, trans. P. Heath (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 2. I borrow the notion of 'iconology' from Erwin Panofsky's exposition of the idea in his major work *Studies in Iconology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).
10. Kant described his *Critique of Pure Reason* as a propaedeutic. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 123, 133 and 149.
11. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
12. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. C. Butler and C. Seiler

(Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 280.

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. J. Stewart (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 252. Hegel allegorises the separation of learning to philosophise from philosophical knowledge by another mode of artisanal work (that of the leather shoemaker) in the *Phenomenology*. See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 41, 63.

14. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3*, 428. On a critical sociological account of the social field of academic work within the European university complex, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. P. Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

15. This notion of institutionalisation as enforced condition of philosophical practice that gets internalised by a subject as if it constituted the true mode of philosophical production could be systematically reconstructed in light of Hegel's earlier notion of 'positivity'. The latter is, according to Hegel's first major Bern writing, the reconfiguration of Jesus' 'virtue religion' into an authoritarian doctrine of moral obligation by way of the power of the Church-State. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 75–86.

16. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 47.

17. Collins, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 173.

18. Perhaps one reason for Collins' immediate turn to the 'we' is that it appears in Miller's translation of the opening sentence. Michael Inwood's peculiar recent translation completely covers over the reference to the 'one'. Instead, he renders the sentence as follows: 'It is a natural idea that in philosophy, before we come to deal with the Thing itself, namely with the actual cognition of what in truth is, it is necessary first to come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded as the instrument by which we take possession of the absolute, or as the medium through which we catch sight of it.' G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. M. Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 35. Both J.B. Baillie's somewhat forgotten translation as well as Terry Pinkard's new edition offer us a more precise rendition of the German: 'It is a natural supposition that in philosophy, before one gets down to dealing with what is at issue, namely, the actual cognition of what, in truth, is, it is first necessary to come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded as the instrument by which one seizes hold of the absolute or as the means by which one catches sight of it.' G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. T. Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 49. 'It is natural to suppose that, before philosophy enters upon its subject proper – namely, the actual knowledge of what truly is – it is necessary to come first to an understanding concerning knowledge, which is looked upon as the instrument by which to take possession of the Absolute, or as the means through which to get a sight of it.' G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 131.

19. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 110.

20. This is a central concern of two recent collections of essays: Italo Testa, ed., *I that is We, We that is I: Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); and Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen, eds., *Recognition and Social Ontology* (Leiden:

Brill, 2011). For a conception of Hegel's social ontology that that does not situate his thought in relation to pragmatism, see Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Hegel*, trans. D. Fernbach (London: Merlin, 1978).

21. G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H.S. Harris (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 228.

22. Hegel's critique of Reinhold's reduction of philosophy to philosophical logic that, when viewed historically, accounts to nothing more than the image of philosophical systems as idiosyncratic views bolted onto a preexisting image of the history of philosophy as the endless aggregation of those views anticipates the concept of the 'spurious infinite'. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 139.

23. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris (Albany NY: State University of New York, 1977), 86.

24. Hegel, *Difference*, 86. Interestingly, Reinhold's commitment to universalising philosophical logic so as to be universally valid is a politico-ethical injunction that Hegel retains in his own work. The promise of raising philosophy to the standpoint of universalised cultural language is made note of in Hegel's famous unsent letter to the German classicist J.H. Voss in 1805. Hegel, *Letters*, 107.

25. Hegel, *Difference*, 86. (Translation slightly modified.)

26. The practice of repetition finds its most ironic formalisation in Hegel's analysis of the emptiness of consciousness as emptiness of being in the repetitive practice of the Vedic *Om*. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 97.

27. It should be noted that university students were almost exclusively male in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Germanophone context. For an excellent study of this history, see Patricia Mazón, *Gender and the Modern Research University: The Admission of Women to German Higher Education, 1865-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

28. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 3.

29. Hegel, *Difference*, 88. On 'diremption', see *Difference*, 89-90.

30. *Ibid.*, 88.

31. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 7.

32. Miller's translation of the verb *bemächtigen* as 'to get hold of' somewhat downplays the more aggressive socio-political connotations of the expression. Baillie and Pinkard come closer to it when they translate it as 'to take possession' and 'seizes hold of', respectively.

33. This attentiveness to private property relations is no doubt due to his interest in Rousseau's thought (in particular, of the *Second Discourse*, in this context). The Genevan was, as a school friend of Hegel's once noted, the latter's 'hero ... whose works he continually read.' Cited in H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder, Volume 1: The Pilgrimage of Reason* (Indianapolis and London: Hackett, 1997), 2.

34. On the relation of Hegel's writings on love to the concept of recognition in his mature writings, see Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 74–80.

35. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 302–308.

36. On the 'atomism' of civil society, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences: Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 256–257. On 'the need of philosophy', see Hegel, *Difference*, 89–93.

37. The following historical and sociological remarks draw heavily from Charles E. McClelland's excellent social history of the modern German university system. See his *State, Society, and University in Germany: 1700-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On the context of the development of universities in Prussia after 1806, see R. S. Turner, 'The Prussian university and the university imperative, 1806 to 1848', unpublished PhD Thesis (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972). (I am grateful to Ryan Dahn for this reference.) For more expansive analyses of the European university system in the early modern period, see also Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, *A History of the University in Europe, Volume II: Universities in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

38. But this transformation of the university into finishing schools for bureaucrats was radically uneven throughout the eighteenth century for a number of interconnected reasons: wars, the tensions among principalities and the state, the consistent decline in student numbers, financial mismanagement, a slow but relatively steady attack on the institution by public opinion, and so on.

39. To be more precise, the rate of pay of the 'extraordinaries' was seldom enough to make a living. Thus, most had to augment their income by other means (private tutoring, writing journalistic articles, etc.). See McClelland, *State, Society, and University*, 81.

40. This is why the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* quickly turns into an posited examination of the philosophical lexicon one immediately deploys when one philosophises – 'absolute', 'cognition', etc. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 48.

41. *Ibid.*, 49.

42. *Ibid.*, 17, 13. Martin Heidegger offers us a model of the imperative of patience. His essay 'Hegel's Concept of Experience' is one of the most protracted philosophical interpretations of a single moment in Hegel's thought. See Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. J. Young and K. Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86–156. In a recent work, Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda exacerbate Hegel's injunction by focusing on Hegel's use of the non-linguistic semantic notation of the dash, a mark that appears at the end of the *Phenomenology* and in the opening sentence of Hegel's exposition of being in the *Science of Logic*. See Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2018).

43. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 48, 71.

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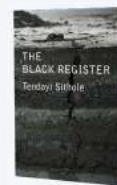
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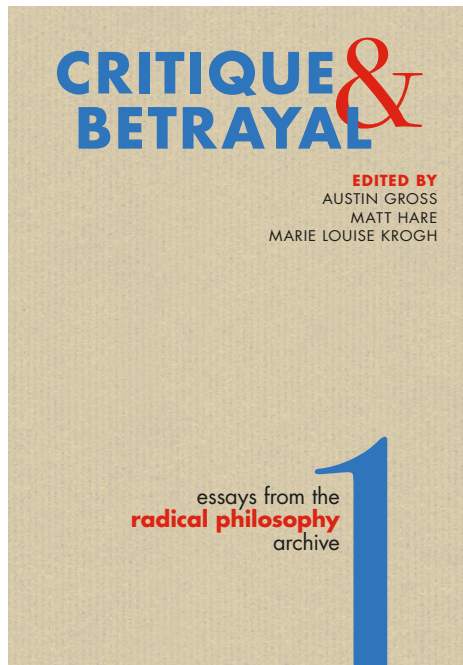
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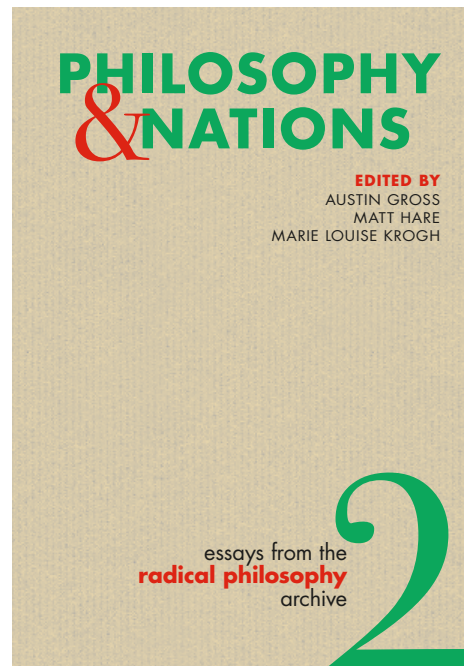
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