

## ***Hegel's Absolute: An Introduction to Reading the Phenomenology of Spirit***

Verene, D.P.

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Donald Phillip Verene's latest work on Hegel is a precise and brief contribution to the "Introduction to Hegel" scholarship. As an exercise in brevity, its summation of the *Phenomenology* is a laudable triumph. As a skeletal presentation of the Notion on its road of despair, however, it is useful only for two groups of readers: (1) those who accept the results of the Hegelian project and who want a simplified and short-hand version of it; and (2) those who are familiar with Kant but have misgivings about the foundation of his critical and reflective philosophy. It is of little use to Hegel scholars or to those who wish to understand the journey of the Notion on its road of despair. Those who wish a fuller treatment of this path would do better to consult Verene's 1985 work, titled *Hegel's Recollection*. Instructors who seek to provide their advanced undergraduates with an introduction to Hegel would benefit from this work, though they ought to understand that such a "digest" approach to the *Phenomenology* does great harm to the cogency of Hegel's work. As Verene points out of the *Phenomenology* and Hegel's *Science of Logic*: These "are not books that can be taught; they must be self-taught" (p. 37).

Having said this, the work is still to be recommended to the aforementioned groups of readers. Its central thesis is presented with great clarity and coherence. Verene's sentences are crisp and discrete, his explanations of difficult concepts are coherently concise, and his exegeses demonstrate a deep knowledge of the primary and secondary literatures. There is very little in the book by way of argument, however. The bulk of the pages are given over to cursory explanations, albeit ones that are correct so far as the length limitations permit.

The title and subtitle are precise: the book focuses on Hegel's concept of *the absolute* and indeed is an introduction to *reading* the *Phenomenology* and not an introduction to the *Phenomenology* itself.

The preface thus begins with general advice on reading Hegel as well as an introduction to the tasks of Verene's book. The work is composed of a preface, ten chapters, and an appendix of 60 terms used in the Hegel corpus (with translation notes for each term). A bibliography of six pages is included. Including all of the above, the book totals less than 130 pages, and the reader interested in Hegel is often left wanting more.

The first chapter introduces Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology* and understands it largely as a response to Kant's critical philosophy. The treatment of the preface is about as thorough a treatment as any in the entire book. Verene skillfully summarizes Hegel's intensive writing into a few pages. He takes approximately ten pages to contrast Kantian reflection with Hegelian speculation, and he correctly focuses the discussion on Hegel's understanding of speculation as rooted in the speculative sentence's destruction of the subject-predicate distinction. He also identifies key paragraphs so that the reader can compare Verene's analysis to the original work.

The second chapter is on Hegel's so-called introduction, and Verene summarizes it as an explication of the double *Ansich* (in-itself) of consciousness. Verene is right to place heavy emphasis on this concept in the rest of the book, as the dialectical and speculative motion of consciousness from in-itself to for-itself (and back again into the in-itself) constitutes the heart of Hegel's methodology—without it, there would be no apodicticity to the movement of the Notion from sense-certainty towards absolute knowing. Verene repeatedly points out that consciousness is in a constant state of trying to re-unify its two moments, an appropriate reminder where the *Phenomenology* is concerned. This becomes the central running theme of the entire book.

The third chapter introduces Hegel's concept of *reason* as speculative and as distinct from the Kantian Notion of *understanding*. This, along with the fourth chapter—titled *Hegel's System*—summarizes Hegel's comprehensive philosophy. There are digressions in these two chapters that seem somewhat outside the project of an introduction to reading the *Phenomenology*, and this reviewer would have preferred for these pages to have been spent on further elucidation of the dialectic of speculative reason. Nonetheless, the chapters are

well-written. The fourth chapter indeed does a decent job of summarizing a corpus that somewhat ironically is easier to summarize than is the *Phenomenology* alone. Verene focuses on the “dialectic of *Andness*” (the *An-und für sich sein*, the conjunction of the in-itself and for-itself).

The fifth chapter is titled *The Beginning of Phenomenology*, and this is the proper beginning of the path of despair traveled by consciousness. Verene discusses the extent to which Hegel was justified in beginning the path of despair at the level of sense-certainty and the thing rather than at the level of mythical forces and energies (as in Cassirer, for example). This discussion is a key moment in the exegesis, as it demonstrates that Verene sees Hegel as supplying an interpretation of *philosophical consciousness* and not *human consciousness*, for this is how Verene saves Hegel from Cassirer’s attack (p. 44). This is one of the few places in the brief text where the secondary literature on Hegel is extensively considered.

This important fifth chapter is also where Verene introduces and defines *determinate negation*. An earlier and fuller treatment of this central Hegelian concept should have been offered, but much of what is true about determinate negation is considered in the earlier discussion on speculation.

The sixth chapter is titled *Force, Understanding, and the Inverted World* and covers the movement of consciousness from understanding to dialectical reason. In a puzzling move, no attempt is made to define *force* in its relationship to the Understanding, something that Hegel explicitly does in paragraph 136. The chapter instead focuses on the “syllogism which has for its extremes the inner being of Things and the Understanding, and for its middle term, appearance” (par. 145, quoted on Verene’s p. 49). The syllogism is an AAA-2 and thus invalid:

1. Premise One: The inner being of things is distinct from the appearance of things.
2. Premise Two: The understanding of things is distinct from the appearance of things.
3. Conclusion: The understanding of things is distinct from the inner being of things.

Verene argues that this is precisely the form of “reason” taken up by the Understanding with regard to the thing-in-itself. Because there is no way to get from the inner being of things to the understanding of things, the Kantian philosophy must conclude that the thing-in-itself is unknowable according to critical principles. For Hegel, as Verene correctly points out, the realization of the logical gap in the above syllogism leads consciousness to seek “a single way of knowing that can encompass the object and the self” (p. 52). But in seeking this, it draws a distinction between itself and the object, thus forming itself into self-consciousness.

Chapter seven is titled *Self-Consciousness of Masterhood and Servitude* and introduces the stoical acquisition of intellectual independence via servitude. Verene cautions us against calling the servant (*der Knecht*) a *slave*. Hegel clearly does not use the German for slave (*der Sklave*), and we ought therefore to avoid that common move in Hegelian translation and exegesis. As a movement into stoicism, this step on the road toward absolute knowing is an independence from *the state*—the stoic philosopher is of the state and lives in servitude to the state, but he has a higher calling in his love of wisdom and thus achieves separation from the will of the state.

At the same time, this independence leads him into skepticism, which Verene defines as an attempt to “reject the world while at the same time holding on to it” (p. 64). Hegel says this is “like the squabbling of self-willed children” (par. 205, quoted by Verene). This squabbling constitutes the *unhappy consciousness* (Verene correctly indicates that it should more properly be translated “the unfortunate consciousness”). This is defined as the skeptical self-consciousness of existence as dual-natured and contradictory, and the only answer to it is the whole of the speculative philosophy—not merely in its results, but in its entire inner movement from sense-certainty to absolute knowing.

The third section of the *Phenomenology* is addressed in two chapters: chapter nine is a very cursory treatment of the first two chapters of the third section (*Reason* and *Spirit*). Verene explains the architectonic of the work and the confused labeling scheme of the table of contents before turning to the chapter on reason. His first move is to explain that reason has become transformed from speculative reason

to *beobachtende Vernunft*—observing reason. The function of this type of reason is to observe or examine the object, and insofar as the Notion has ascended to self-consciousness at this stage, reason will attempt to see itself as an organism having a distinct behavior pattern or psychology. Thus are born physiognomy and phrenology, each of which attempts to discern the inner by examination of the outer. Verene highlights the vehemence of Hegel's response to these approaches (p. 77)—they are, after all, direct competitors to phenomenology.

From these efforts at internalizing the outer, self-consciousness proceeds to re-unify itself in other ways: pleasure, the law of the heart, virtue, and scholarship all become grounding principles for self-consciousness as reason—and all of them fail to accomplish the desired unification. Having made the attempt, however, reason develops the self-confidence to see itself as a lawgiver, as a being that can change the world through directed and purposive activity.

However, this lawmaking power is ineffective outside of the social sphere, and this leads reason to change into spirit (*Geist*). This is not the same spirit as in the title of the *Phenomenology*, but is modified here into “self-consciousness as a fully social or ethical form of being” (p. 82). The summaries of the various stages of spirit are cursory and the transitions rather strained. This is no doubt due to attempting to summarize dozens of pages of text into one or two paragraphs. The section on spirit is by far the weakest in the book. If it is true—as Verene argues—that mastery of the consciousness and self-consciousness sections of the *Phenomenology* supply a reader with sufficient tools for a proper understanding of Section C, then perhaps it would have been best to leave out the digest of this section altogether.

The final chapter is reserved for a fairly full treatment of the *Phenomenology's* final two chapters (*Religion* and *Absolute Knowing*), wherein Verene summarizes the overall purpose of the *Phenomenology* as showing the path of consciousness toward self-recollection and wisdom. The concept of self-recollection (*Erinnerung*, also sometimes rendered by Hegel as “*Er-innerung*”) is central to Verene's interpretation. He focuses heavily on the fact that Hegel comes back to this concept several times in the last page of the *Phenomenology*, and that Hegel appears to make it central to the task of the self returning

to itself via the “grasping” function of the *Begriff* (Notion, or concept). Verene summarizes this final moment in the life of spirit as a “comprehensive knowing” (*begreifende wissen*)—or a knowledge by the spirit of its own shape. This return into the self is accomplished by re-collection of the spirit’s path toward absolute knowing—the hyphen inside “recollection” emphasizes the internal dialectic and inwardizing function of the process. Finally, Verene has the hyphenated word speaking to Hegel’s “Andness.” It might be a strained analysis to employ about a single grammatical decision, but the hyphenation does occur in a crucial place and Verene’s analysis does in fact explain a great deal.

Verene’s central thesis in this book has been that the *Phenomenology* is an effort to show the path of consciousness coming to know itself after experiencing its own self-estrangement throughout the various courses of its experience (this is *der Verzweiflung*—the *path of despair*). The re-collection of consciousness that culminates in absolute knowing is accomplished by reason, which is recollection (*Erinnerung*) as well as speculation. Together, these concepts make up Hegel’s conception of *reason* (*Vernunft*). This *speculative* reason is contrasted to the critical (Kantian) reason of the understanding, which has no memory and as a result cannot become dialectical or speculative. This thesis has played out consistently throughout the entire interpretation, with each piece being skillfully woven into a short but dense narrative. Keeping in mind the special limitations involved in summarizing the *Phenomenology*, the book nonetheless presents a valid and sound argument culminating in a well-learned, accurate interpretation of one of philosophy’s great works.