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Hegelian Preliminaries 01

This essay, a simple and easy to read introduction, is posted in the web with mp3 audio.
http://juanvillage2012.scienceontheweb.net/?p=77
The following is a portion of it. It works for me to understand Hegel's system.

Hegelian preliminaries

What, then, is the Phenomenology of Spirit about? Hegel says quite clearly in his “Introduction” to the Phenomenology that the work is concerned with the theory of knowledge . In particular, he says that it is concerned with how the kinds of knowledge-claims that we make can be said to match up with the objects that they purport to be about. Thus, one might expect such a work to
be concerned with problems of the evidence of the senses, induction, whether the justifying evidence for epistemic claims is “internal” or “external” to consciousness, and similar issues. However, the topics covered in the Phenomenology instead seem to range over items as varied as issues concerning the formation of character in early modern Europe, Kantian ethics, and the history and philosophy of religion, with there being only a short introductory chapter on what might at least look like epistemology to a modern philosophical reader. Understanding the general goal of the Phenomenology therefore requires us to see how Hegel takes the theory of knowledge to be connected with all these other issues. The task of the theory of knowledge seems to be to offer an account that explains how our knowledge-claims (our ideas, our propositions, our sentences, whatever) could possibly match up with their purported objects. Hegel notes that putting the issue in this way seems to place the problem of skepticism at center stage in two ways. First, the basic issue of such a theory of knowledge would be with whether our knowledge-claims do or can match up with real things, in which case generalized skepticism – the doubt that our claims might in general fail to match up to “real” objects- becomes the main concern of such a theory of knowledge. Answering that kind of skeptic comes to be the problem of the theory of knowledge. Second, generalized skepticism is also the result of adopting such a view, in that once one understands the problem of knowledge to be that of matching up some “idea” with objects, these “ideas” become the intermediaries between the thinking subject and the world, and the problem thereby naturally arises as to how we could know that the intermediary is not giving us an illusory representation of its object. Stated in those terms, it might seem impossible to answer the skeptic unless one therefore finds some kind of self-certifying idea (an idea that carries its own justification on its face, such as the property of being “certain” or being “infallibly known” or being “necessary”) and a self-certifying procedure to move from that self-certifying idea to other non-self-certifying ideas. Now, there are many candidates for what would count as self-certification (certainty, infallibility, indefeasibility, and so on) , and the issue therefore seems to come down to which of these really would be the self-certifying “ground” of all other knowledge. The theory of such a “ground” would be a “science” in the German sense of Wissenschaft – that is, a kind of structured theoretical knowledge of some circumscribed domain. Is such a “science” possible ? It seems not , for whatever shape this “science” may take, it is but itself only one more claim to knowledge, and it must therefore “ground” itself. There are, moreover, very conflicting claims to knowledge among different types of communities. Some religious types claim to know God with certainty and infallibility in their hearts ; other more secular types claim to know the individual items of sense-experience with certainty or infallibility. The latter may claim to reject the former because they do not fit their canons of “scientific procedure” or the “commonly accepted standards” of rationality. The former may reject the latter because they substitute procedures of scientific rationality in places where only the “heart” can rule. Neither side, so it
seems, produces any real argument to convince the other, since both stances amount to simply taking certain standards or certain projects to be self evident while rejecting the other side’s claims simply because they fail to live up to the standards of their own point of view. Indeed, what each side takes as self-certifying is dependent, so it seems, on other assumptions that are certainly not so self-evident (such as issues concerning secular accounts versus religious accounts). At least from the standpoint of a theory of knowledge that would be a genuine Wissenschaft, we need more than the vague assurance that “our side” has really got it right simply because the “other side” has failed to live up to our standards. The other side is, after all, capable of making the same claims . Since each side in these disputes already makes a variety of assumptions in forming its accounts of knowledge-claims, each of these kinds of theories is, as Hegel puts it, itself only an appearance, a historical phenomenon, alongside other claims to knowledge, and, as an “appearance,” it can make no intrinsic claim to being true or even better than the others. Indeed, if we are to take the problem of skepticism seriously, we must see all accounts, including the account we are giving of the other accounts, as “appearances, ” as merely one more

set of claims as to what is real and true that stands alongside a host of other competing claims. An authentic skepticism must therefore be skeptical about itself; it must also take skepticism itself as only an “appearance.” But such a type of skepticism will, of course, seem corrosive, since it appears to offer no way to resolve such issues. How could, for example, the secularist come up with an account that is justifiable to the religious in terms that the religious can accept on their own terms or that give them reasons to change what they count as the “grounds” of belief ? Yet , if Hegel is right, only a theory that does exactly that could claim to be an authentic Wissenschaft, a well-grounded, structured theoretical account of knowledge and not just a restatement or a refinement of principles that a given community (modern, ancient, religious, secular, whatever) already takes for granted. The task of a theory of knowledge must be to produce some way of evaluating what kinds of reasons for belief (or for action) can count as authoritative reasons, and it must be able to show that the reasons it gives for counting those reasons as authoritative reasons are themselves authoritative reasons, and it must do this while at the same time regarding all claims, including the ones it itself makes, as being only “appearances. ” The theory of knowledge can therefore only adequately define its task if it is able to effectively delineate what it means to take everything as an “appearance” and to understand what it means to be genuinely skeptical. To look at all such accounts as appearances, Hegel argues, is to look at them (in his words) as “formations of consciousness, ” as forms of life that have come to take certain types of reasons as authoritative for themselves. Reasons appear as authoritative when they appear as mandatoy, that is, as necessary for the agents for whom they are authoritative. In this way, Hegel continues the Kantian shift away from Cartesian issues about
certainty (from the kind of hold that we have on certain norms) to necessity (the hold that certain norms have on us) . A “formation of consciousness” in Hegel’s sense is composed both of the ways in which a form of life takes certain types of reasons (or, to put it more generally, norms) as authoritative for itself and the ways in which it articulates to itself why it is legitimate for those reasons to count for it as authoritative, non-optional reasons. (A terminological point : In the Phenomenology, Hegel quite consistently refers to that set of “grounds” that people take as authoritative as the “essence,” or the “absolute essence” of a formation of consciousness; he says of these “essences” that they are the “objects” of a consciousness that assumes that such and such is authoritative for it.) The Phenomenology, by and large, examines various “formations of consciousness” in terms of how they take these authoritative standards more or less as “given, ” as “objects” of consciousness that the participants in that form of life simply “find” in their social worlds ready at hand for them. To look at accounts as appearances is therefore to take them at their own word, to see how in their terms they take certain kinds of reasons to be authoritative, and how they attempt to legitimate that authoritativeness for themselves ; it is not to presuppose that any one account or “appearance” is superior to another. Since there can be a variety of different “formations of consciousness, ” it might seem that in taking each one as an appearance, the theory of knowledge is thereby destined from the outset to result in a kind of self-undermining relativism or some kind of pointless self-contradictory avowal that no statement of knowledge can be taken to be true. Taken this way, the attempt to produce an adequate theory of knowledge can, as Hegel puts it, only be seen “as the path of doubt, or, more authentically, as the path of despair. ” If an adequate theory of knowledge must also therefore give a non-question begging account of why it takes its own reasons to be the authoritative reasons for accepting the account of knowledge that it gives, then it seems not merely to have complicated its task but perhaps to have made it impossible. Those reasons themselves, so it would seem, would also have to be underwritten by other reasons, ad infinitum. Moreover, in order even to start, the theory of knowledge surely has to presuppose some kind of standard for counting some kinds of things as evidence, but this kind of methodological restriction seems to say that it can presuppose no such standard at all. Thus, it seems that such strictures make it impossible to produce any kind of legitimate “science” Wissenschaft of knowledge at all. Since we must start somewhere, it seems that we must simply take whatever standards of evaluation we happen to have and subject them to some kind of internal test. Indeed, Hegel recommends this solution as appropriate, given the general question with which modern considerations of the theory of knowledge already begin. That issue has to do with how we match up our “ideas” with the way things are “in themselves.” Now it is trivially clear that whenever we attempt to go about doing this, we are always using some standard or another in terms of which we judge that something counts as the way in which things “really are” as opposed to the way they only seem to be.

Those standards, as Hegel says, are internal to consciousness in the sense that we are always taking things to be such and such in terms of the kinds of reasons that we have come to take as authoritative for ourselves. The major issue for the theory of knowledge must be to examine whether those reasons (or, more neutrally put, those “grounds”) that we take as authoritative really are authoritative. It must show that what underwrites the “ground-rules” of our reason-giving activities is genuine and legitimate. If nothing else, we can look to see whether these authoritative reasons themselves are within their own terms satisfactory, not whether, for example, we find

them satisfactory by the standards of another set of terms. That is, we can examine the reasons that we or anyone else has come to take as authoritative, and we can reflect on whether those reasons can be shown to be adequate at least in terms of the goals that they set for themselves. In this way, perhaps, this kind of corrosive skepticism can become a “self-consummating skepticism . ” There are at least two types of doubts we may have about such reasons. We may have doubts about whether those reasons that we take as authoritative really are authoritative reasons and we may have doubts about whether the account that we have given of why they should (or should not) count as authoritative reasons is itself in order. Skepticism arises when either of these kinds of doubts occur ; it arises, as Hegel likes to put it, out of the negativity of self-consciousness. The “negativity” of an account is its capacity to generate a self-undermining skepticism about itself when it is reflected upon within the terms that it sets for itself. The negation of an account, in Hegel’s language, is always that set of self-undermining considerations that arise from within an account’s own terms, and, for that reason, negation is always determinate negation, the specific set of self-undermining objections that come out of such accounts. This kind of “negativity” – the capacity to generate a kind of skepticism about itself from its own terms – is a characteristic of those accounts that are the object of reflection, or, as Hegel puts it, of self-consciousness. The “science” (Wissenschaft) of knowledge must therefore also develop within itself some conception of the relation between authoritative reasons and self-conscious reflection. Self-consciousness on the Hegelian model is not the awareness of a set of internal objects (sensations, mental occurrences, representations, whatever) . To use a metaphor, self-consciousness is at least minimally the assumption of a position in “social space.” We locate ourselves in “social space” when, for example, we reason in various ways ; or when we assume various roles; or when we demand a certain type of treatment because of who we think we are ; or when we see some forms of behavior as appropriate to the type of person we think ourselves to be ; or when we recognize others as having the right to make certain kinds of moves within their speech-community ; or when we give a reason to another person to explain or to justify what we are doing; or when we give an account of what we are doing to others that we think affirms what we take to be a good reason for doing what we are doing. Within a “social space” individuals assert various things to each other and give what they take to be reasons for these assertions, and people impute certain reasons to them on the basis of the shared social norms that structure their “social space” – that is, on the basis of what they take the person to be committed to in light of what he does and their shared norms. All the various activities of reason-giving – for example, of telling someone why you take some belief to be justified, of giving a good reason to yourself for going ahead and doing something, or of narrating some story about yourself that you take to explain and justify the way you lead your life – are themselves forms of social practice in which we in turn mutually evaluate each other’s actions, in which we each assume certain types of epistemic and ethical responsibilities, and in which we impute certain moral and epistemic responsibilities to others in light of their behavior. In the various social practices involving reason-giving, we also have principles of criticism for evaluating the reasons we give. Reason-giving, that is, is itself a social practice that goes on within a determinate form of “social space” that “licenses” some kinds of inferences and fails to “license” others. A distinguishing feature of a particular “social space” is the set of what counts within that “social space” as the basic “ground-rules” for agents to justify their beliefs and to guide their actions. The structure of authoritative reasons within each “social space” thereby naturally appears to each agent to constitute not just the way that he and others contingently happen to reason but the way in which people in general should reason. That is, those sets of authoritative reasons appear as both certain and as structuring what is to count as truth, and as necessary, as something that is not optional for the kinds of agents they are. When a set of such reasons and the accounts given of them undermine themselves, they of course lose that appearance of necessity and they lose their link to truth for those agents. Part of the theory of knowledge, therefore, must be to see if there are any set of authoritative reasons that can generate their own necessity in a way that does not undermine itself. This requires the construction of a self-conscious reflective account of those authoritative standards and norms themselves that can affirm for us which of them are genuine and legitimate. Any form of life will have certain reasons that it takes as authoritative ; to the extent that it becomes self conscious about these standards and norms, it will develop accounts of why what it takes as authoritative for itself really is authoritative. Becoming self conscious about such norms is to become aware of the apparent paradoxes, incoherences, and conflicts within them. All these forms of self-consciousness have a mediated (that is, inferential) structure . Whenever there is mutual recognition among self-conscious subjects that is mediated by such a shared self-conscious understanding of what for them counts in general as an authoritative reason for belief and action that is, mediated by whom they take themselves to be in light of what they count as being generally authoritative for themselves and why they take themselves to count those things as authoritative – we have a relation of what Hegel calls spirit . Spirit – Geist – is a self-conscious form of life – that is, it is a form of life that has developed various social practices for reflecting on what

it takes to be authoritative for itself in terms of whether these practices live up to their own claims and achieve the aims that they set for themselves. Put more metaphorically, spirit is a form of “social space” reflecting on itself as to whether it is satisfactory within its own terms (with what it takes to be the “essence” of things, in Hegel’s terms). “Spirit” therefore denotes for Hegel not a metaphysical entity but a fundamental relation among persons that mediates their self-consciousness, a way in which people reflect on what they have come to take as authoritative for themselves. Dilemmas arise within a given form of spirit when there are internal problems within that “social space” such that some of these taken-for-granted reasons seem to clash with each other, or when some ways of reasoning within that “social space” quite unexpectedly lead to skepticism about the whole system of reasons itself or about significant parts of it (for example, when a form of life sets certain basic aims for itself that it necessarily fails to satisfy, that is, when that form of life is unsuccessful in its own terms) . In these cases, in order to stabilize their sense of who they are, agents seek to affirm for themselves that what they have come to take as authoritative reasons really are authoritative reasons. Moreover, this activity of affirming that things are in order and that our reason-giving practices are not flawed is aimed at satisfying the desire to affirm for ourselves that we are who we think we are, or that our self-identity is not terribly flawed and irrational , and that the world is therefore fundamentally as we take it to be. These social practices of affirmation and reassurance can take many different shapes – tragic drama, religious practice, philosophical reflection, acting within certain social roles but they all function as practices through which individuals and communities reflect on their self-generated skeptical reproaches on their form of life and try to reassure themselves that their practices are in order (or with some revision can be put back in order) and that their “social space” is therefore internally lucid. Since we cannot assume that any one of these “forms of spirit” is correct we must treat them all as “appearances” – and we cannot assume that we can take a vantage point outside any of these “social spaces,” we must conduct the theory of knowledge “inside” each of these “formations of consciousness, ” which of course are also “formations of spirit. ” Since any putative theory of these reasons (any putative Wissenschaft) must itself be treated as only an “appearance , ” it must be treated as a historical phenomenon alongside other historical phenomena. Moreover, no such purely historical phenomenon can claim to be the correct theory (or to be the true Wissenschaft) simply by stating that it “works” within its own terms or “fits” better the contemporary scene or matches up to its participants’ “intuitions, ” for that scene and those intuitions are themselves only “appearances” and are the result of many contingent factors. But even this way of putting matters is itself not sufficiently skeptical, since it begs the question as to why it is required that philosophy should be such a Wissenschaft at all. (In effect, it makes being a Wissenschaft into a hypothetical rather than a categorical imperative.) The usual claims about philosophy’s need to “ground” things cannot be satisfactory, nor can it be enough to simply want philosophy to be a Wissenschaft – to have a taste for large, architectural edifices rather than, say, desert landscapes. After all, why is it mandatory for there to be a “grounding” of thought and action at all ? And why that type of grounding? Why should we not settle for something else, perhaps a kind of humanistic reflection in an essay oriented form, such as Montaigne offered ? Or just aphoristic reflections, such as Pascal practiced ? On Hegel’s terms, to be genuinely skeptical, we should demand of philosophy that it give a non question-begging account of why it must be a Wissenschaft at all, and in general how it can claim whatever authority it claims for itself. Thus, in the terms that Hegel sets for his thought, he must be able to show why the kind of project that he is attempting – a theory of knowledge that treats everything, including itself, as an “appearance,” a “formation of consciousness” – is itself a necessary project, something that “we” (the modern community, his readers) supposedly require because of some feature of our selves. Moreover, not only must “we” be said to require it, this requirement itself must be intelligible to “us” as being more than something “we” just contingently happen to want or desire at this point in our history. Even if we do happen to want it or need it, that wanting and needing must be due to features of ourselves that are not optional for us. It is therefore important for Hegel to show that alternative accounts of what is to count for us as authoritative are not merely deficient in respect of some particular aim or another ; their deficiencies must somehow themselves lead to the kind of account that he thinks is the proper one . That is, it would not be enough to gather up alternative explanations of what is to count as authoritative reasons for belief or action and then compare them on some scale of how well they all managed to satisfy some presupposed fundamental aim (for example, matching up with our intuitions in reflective equilibrium, or showing the rationality of science to be continuous with common-sense rationality) . If nothing else, that would always leave it open as to the status of the presupposed aim itself, and whether that aim was optional for us. Instead, the other accounts must be shown to be self-undermining in such a way that they themselves require the Hegelian account to make sense of themselves. This may mean showing that there is indeed some aim that is operative in the practices of those alternative accounts that the Hegelian theory itself better fulfills. But that aim must be shown to emerge as a requirement itself, as something that those accounts themselves generate out of their own failures to make good on the terms that they have set for

themselves. Hegel's term for this way of looking at reason-giving activities is dialectic. Dialectic looks at accounts that forms of life give of what they take to be authoritative for themselves, and how those accounts are transformed in terms of considerations internal to the accounts themselves. Forms of life as "spirit" are constituted by the kinds of self-conscious reflections on what is necessary in that form of life to explain and justify what for that form of life counts as an authoritative reason for belief and action. There is obviously much more in a form of life that does not fall under the category of reason-giving or
justification, but the reasons for counting a form of life as a distinct form of "spirit" have to do with the accounts that the people within that form of life give of themselves, what they take to affirm for them that their self-conceptions are adequate, and what it is that they take to reassure themselves about what they as individuals and as a collective form of life do and accomplish. Thus, a crucial part of the story of these kinds of reflective forms of life concerns how and why it is that they come to take certain kinds of things as justifying what they do, how and why they take certain kinds of skeptical doubts about this to be more serious than others, and how and why we, the readers observing those reflective forms of life, can take our accounts as necessary to answer their skeptical doubts. When confronted with self-generated skepticism, a reflective form of life seeks reassurance in the accounts that it gives itself of what is authoritative for it. One of two things happens : either the reassurance is successful , and there is a renewal of that form of life ; or it fails, and a new conception of what is authoritative – and thereby a new form of life – is required. Although treating the theory of knowledge dialectically brings history into the theory of knowledge, doing so is not without its pitfalls. This would have been especially clear to Hegel, since he lived in a time of both growing historicism and of political movements that appealed for their legitimacy to alleged facts about traditions and to the way that, for example, the "Germans" or the "French" did things. As Hegel clearly saw, however, if one explains our being the agents that we are solely in terms of historical forces or movements, then one will not be able to answer any questions about whether being these types of agents – whether having adopted these types of reasons – is itself justified. The most one could say is that this is what we have become. In that way, a purely historical argument taken as legitimating anything would only be an example of what Hegel called "positivity, " and what Kant called "dogmatism. " It would tell us that we are the agents for whom certain types of things and not others count as authoritative reasons, but it could not give us any reassurance that taking these reasons to be authoritative is not, for example, some massive act of self-deception or self-degradation, nor could it assist that form of life in dealing with its own internally generated skepticism about any of these things. If it appeals to something like "tradition" or just asserts that we have come to take such and such as authoritative reasons, it cannot even attempt to give an account of itself that can show why in any non question-begging way its own accounts are "better" than other competing accounts. It would only be able to say that we have become these agents because of such and such contingent events in the past. Therefore, if history is to be brought into philosophy (and, in particular, the theory of knowledge) without its making philosophy into a new form of dogmatism or simply an apology for the status quo, then the purely historical account of the contingencies that have made us who we are must be supplemented by a philosophical – that is, a dialectical history of self consciousness. A dialectical history tells a different story from that of the history of historians in that it does not concern itself primarily with how
things came about – what social forces were at work, what contingencies were brought into play – but with showing how succeeding "social spaces" contained resources within themselves that were able to explain and justify themselves over and against earlier alternative accounts and to demonstrate and affirm for themselves that their own accounts of themselves were satisfactory. This dialectical history of self-consciousness is thus also a history of rationality itself. All forms of reason-giving must also be treated as "appearances, " and the historical nature of rationality consists in the way in which forms of life develop not only practices for evaluating and criticizing other practices but also develop practices for reflecting on the practices of evaluation themselves. Such a dialectical history does not claim that the later "formations of consciousness" were "fated" to succeed the earlier forms, or that the earlier forms were "aiming" at the later forms ; it claims that only they (or something very much like them) can be seen in retrospect to have completed the earlier ones, to have provided a structure that in retrospect may be understood as having worked out the insufficiencies of the earlier ones in such a manner that this later form of life has the resources within it to justify its way of taking things as making up for the insufficiencies of the earlier reflective forms of life. The very general form of a dialectical progression in the Phenomenology of Spirit therefore looks something like this. A reflective form of life takes such and such to be authoritative reasons for belief and action; those types of reasoning then generate within their own terms skeptical objections against themselves (as Hegel puts it, they generate their own "negation") ; that form of reflective life, however, turns out to be unable to reassure itself about what it had taken as authoritative for itself ; the new form of reflective life that replaces it and claims to complete it, however, takes its accounts of what for it have come to be authoritative reasons to be that

which was necessary to successfully resolve the issues that were self-undermining for the older form of life ; but this new reflective form of life in turn generates self-undermining skepticism about its own accounts, and the progression continues. The necessity to be found in the dialectical history of self-consciousness therefore is not a causal necessity but something more like the necessity to be found in a line of argument. Just as only some kinds of things can complete a certain line of argument, only some types of things can complete a dialectical historical progression . The failures of certain accounts require that other very specific types of accounts be given, if those failures are to be avoided, and if the later account is to be said to be a resolution of the earlier account. Of course, for contingent reasons, the progression may not be completed. Just as I may fail to complete a certain line of thought for contingent reasons – I may die before I finish it, I may be rendered incapable of completing it, or I may come to find that completing that line of thought is not important to me anymore – a historical progression may for contingent reasons fail to be completed. Contingent failure to complete a line of thought does not, however, show that such and such was not therefore required to complete that line of thought.
The Phenomenology offers a dialectical-historical narrative of how the European community has come to take what it does as authoritative and definitive for itself. These other accounts are not confined to purely philosophical accounts but constitute all the ways in which “spirit” can appear : as art, as politics, as “high culture , ” as social critique, as religion, as science, and so on. In tracing out this dialectical history, Hegel also wishes to show how the tension between the ways individuals take things from their own personal point of view and how they take things to be justified from a more impersonal point of view lead them to revise their own self-conceptions and how they try to fit their personal accounts of their lives into the larger narrative that they take to be going on in their community.
Now it is clear that for Hegel, even something like this dialectical schema itself cannot simply be assumed without further question, for it rests on the idea that we need to give accounts of what we are doing, that we are motivated to alter those accounts when they generate self-undermining considerations and so on. But, again, for Hegel’s program to remain true to the aims it sets for itself, it must pose the same kind of question : Why is dialectic not something optional for us ? What is insufficient with our simply “carrying on in the same way,” as it sometimes seems that Wittgenstein recommends, or with our not bothering as to whether all our reasons are in order, or with simply ignoring all the difficulties? For Hegel it would just beg the question to say that our “nature” demands answers to such questions, or that it is the “essence” of humanity to have such needs. It is incumbent on Hegel therefore to provide an account that shows how such “carrying on in the same way,” “giving reasons to others,” and similar practices themselves necessarily lead to the kind of account-giving that dialectic seems to presuppose. This is indeed the main task of the first three sections of the Phenomenology. The work opens by showing how certain post Enlightenment attempts at a description of our awareness of things in terms of some kind of direct awareness of the objects of consciousness undermine themselves, and within their own terms turn into quite different types of descriptions. It also tries to show how the attempt to salvage that idea by an appeal to the reflective “understanding’s” description of supersensible entities itself becomes contradictory and antinomial, with the reflective “understanding’s” claim that it consistently describes the world thereby also undermining itself. Since what “Consciousness” took to be a straightforward description of the world turned out to be antinomial, it finds that it must reflect on the accounts it gives itself. “Consciousness” thereby becomes self-consciousness in trying to give an account of how it could possibly grasp the world as it took it to be. In each case, so Hegel tries to show in the Phenomenology, there is an element of teleology at work in that the schema of “skepticism, attempts at reassurance, and the ultimate insufficiency of the accounts” motivates a move to a different account that itself is justified only in terms of its overcoming the insufficiencies of the preceding ones. But at the beginning of the Phenomenology (in the chapters on “Consciousness”) it is necessarily stated as an epistemological and not a historical point. Hegel’s argument for the necessity of a historical account arises only out of the self-undermining failures of these supposedly non-historical accounts. Those offered in terms of some kind of direct awareness of objects or self-sufficient practical activity turn out to be insufficient and require an appeal to “impersonal reason” – the “view from nowhere, ” to use Thomas Nagel’s term – but all the different kinds of appeals to an “impersonal reason” that supposedly transcends all particular social practices turn out to fail on the terms that they set for themselves and to imply that they themselves must be understood as historically embedded forms of reflective social practice – for example, the failure of the otherwise successful methods of modern science to provide foundational answers to social and personal conflicts ; or the failure of those claims about individual belief and action that do not appeal self-consciously to norms but to some fixed “inner quality” of ourselves, such as Faustian self-determination, emotionalist religion, or the activities involving the character ideal of the detached yet sincere “gentleman, ” the honnete homme of early modern French culture. Each turns out not to be the consequence of the application of “impersonal reason . ” Instead each turns out to be a specific historical “formation of consciousness, ” something intelligible only when seen in its historical context and in terms of the

ways it tried to redress the historical insufficiencies of its predecessors, to realize their aims without falling prey to the ways they undermined themselves. In the opening chapters of the Phenomenology, therefore, Hegel takes himself to have given an account of how spirit comes to see itself as necessarily being historical without at the outset presupposing that it must be historical . Or to put it a different way, we, the modern readers whom Hegel takes as his audience, come to see that the mandatory nature of some norms involves an account of their role in a complex set of reflective and non-reflective social practices – Geist, "spirit" – and that the attempt to explain the normative character of these social practices by appeal to some kind of direct awareness of objects, self-sufficient practice, impersonal reason or inner quality fails and must be supplanted by a historical account of those reflective social practices. In this way, history, as a story of a sequence of events that are linked together in terms of their being parts of an overall account of how such and such came to be authoritative for a community, is possible only in terms of the development of Geist – that is, of the development of such reflective social practices. To understand the development of a social practice is to understand the development of its norms, and while there can certainly be causal accounts of how norms develop (in terms of historical causation, the diffusion of knowledge, the effects of new modes of production, and so on) , an account of norms as norms is not causal but is itself normative. It is an account of how one set of norms fails at achieving its aims, how it undermines itself or is undermined by the acceptance of other norms – in other words, how it fails or succeeds on normative grounds itself. Indeed, we, the readers, thereby come to see that Geist, self-reflective social practice, makes history – as distinct from mere succession in time – possible through Geist's (spirit's) reflections on what in its past was insufficient and how those insufficiencies point in the direction of what could be authoritative about later sets of activities and practices. Hegel's characterization of the problem of knowledge as that of taking all claims, even its own , as "appearances" thus comes full circle. The theory of knowledge must be historical, and the history of our claim-making activities must have developed within itself a series of practices for reflecting on the practices themselves, on what it means in general to be a legitimate ground of knowledge, and what it means to be a rational agent. This historicized theory of knowledge , which takes itself as simply an "appearance, " is thus self referential, and it must therefore be able to work out how it is that it can come to take itself as underwriting its own claims not by appeal to any transcendent entities or "essences" but only by appeal to its own free-standing practices and the way in which reason – as the principles for evaluating those practices in terms of their own internal normative structure – has itself historically developed. It is part of Hegel's thesis that reassurance about the intelligibility of those definitive norms is an especially difficult task for the late modern period. Whereas what was authoritative for earlier periods could be presented and justified through relatively succinct and compact accounts related, for example, to early religious practices, what is authoritative for moderns cannot be so neatly presented. Modern life's demands are also of sufficient complexity and its practices are sufficiently reflective so that its "spirit" cannot be fully presented in works of art or in religious rituals and symbols. Moreover, the complexity of modern practice makes it difficult to see how the terms of one practice do not simply conflict with and therefore undermine the terms of other practices (to see why, for example, the "demands" of career do not simply conflict with the "demands" of family life, and to see why one is not therefore simply forced to intuitively balance the claims of one over the other or simply to blindly choose one or the other). The intelligibility and justifiability of modern norms therefore always seem to be in question. This is the "negativity" of modern life. In Hegel's own day, this "negativity" of modern life had itself been exacerbated by the image that had arisen among Hegel's immediate predecessors of an earlier form of life, the Athenian Greeks, as offering a clear, if unattainable, alternative to modern life. Competing alongside that idealized image of the Athenian Greeks was an idealized image of the Middle Ages as a time of tranquility, reconciliatory religious faith, and a common purpose to life. For those who believed that neither a return to Athens nor to medieval Europe was in order, there was also a cacophony of other alternatives, many claiming to be distinctively "modern": post-Enlightenment social and religious thought, pietist religious revival , doctrines of revolutionary freedom, and romantic enthusiasms about the personal exploration of the "self." Coming to terms with modern life therefore requires a dialectical history of European reflective social practice, of European Geist itself. This tracking of the history of the development of reflective social practice leads us, the readers, from the way that the form of life of the ancient Athenian Greeks undermined itself to the denouement of the classical world in Roman life. That denouement set the stage for the way in which medieval conceptions of faith and chivalry led to the self-undermining nature of the early modern aristocratic ethos and the ensuing experience of "groundlessness" in early modern European life. The movements of religious renewal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the eighteenth century intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment attempted to respond to the problems brought on by that early modern experience of "groundlessness, " but the insufficiencies of both religious renewal and Enlightenment practice to re solve those problems necessitated the transformation of the early modern

experience of “groundlessness” into the fully modern project of self-grounding, which itself then assumed several different forms : the French Revolution, modern subjectivistic accounts of autonomy and morality, and modern romantic inquiries into first-person experiences of the self. In constructing the path that those various reflective forms of life have retrospectively been seen to have taken, we find not only that each such “formation of consciousness” is intelligible only in terms of the historical insufficiencies of the preceding “formations of consciousness, ” but that these “formations of consciousness” have left remnants of themselves in all the succeeding “formations of consciousness” such that the intelligibility of each – and of our own – is possible only in terms of the intelligibility of all of its predecessors . Strikingly, Hegel argues that the modern European “spirit” can come to terms with the path it has taken and the place it has ended up only by understanding the sense of religiosity it has also developed along the way, and by finally understanding this sense of religiosity itself in terms of what he calls “absolute knowing” : that culmination of the Phenomenology of Spirit in which a full reconciliation of modern humanity with itself is seen to be possible. Having come down the “path of despair, ” the modern community thus turns out to be the “self-consummating skepticism” that has within it the reflective resources to be able to continually renew itself against its own self generated forms of skepticism. The Phenomenology thus serves the task of forming and educating the modern European community into comprehending that its form of life is “spirit , ” that the European “spirit” has the shape it does only by virtue of the accounts that it has historically given to itself of what it has taken to be authoritative for itself, and that the kind of historicized account it must now give of itself is possible only because the historical insufficiencies of its previous accounts have themselves exhibited a kind of retrospectively understood teleology within its entire history. Accordingly, the Phenomenology is supposed. to take its readers, the participants in the modern European community’s form of life, through the past “formations of consciousness” of the European “spirit” – the ways in which that “spirit” has both taken the “essence” of things to be and the ways in which it has taken agents to be cognitively related to that “essence” – and demonstrate to them that they
require the kind of account which the Phenomenology as a whole provides, that the Phenomenology’s project is therefore not optional for them but intrinsic to their sense of who they are. Thus, the Phenomenology serves as the Bildung (the education, formation, and cultivation) of its intended readership into coming to terms with what is entailed in their form of life and what kinds of alternatives are available to them. The conclusion of the Phenomenology thus originates for Hegel the project of showing how this is concretely to be carried out, and the “Berlin system” of Hegel’s later days shows us how he attempted to fulfill this task. The reconstruction of this ambitious Hegelian project is the goal of this book.
