

## HEGEL : AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA ARTICLE

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[Published in *Edinburgh Review* No. 76 (February 1987).]

### **Hegel, G. W. F.**

German philosopher (1770-1831), whose major works include *Phenomenology of Spirit* (completed on the eve of the Battle of Jena, 1806, and published the following year), *Science of Logic* (1812-16), *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1<sup>st</sup> edn. 1817) and *Philosophy of Right* (1821). Professor of philosophy at Berlin from 1818 until his death.

Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* shows him as an idealist, his *Philosophy of Right* as an upholder of the state. The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, by contrast, tells a much more radical philosophical and political story and makes it intelligible that not only Marxism, but also the whole of mid-nineteenth-century anarchism, should have emerged within the framework of Hegelian thought. The Hegel of the *Phenomenology* is an apocalyptic anarchist whose touchstone is the 'absolute freedom' of the French Revolution and who advocates the thesis of the unity of theory and practice almost forty years earlier than does Marx. Commentators on Hegel, with rare (and glorious) exceptions, read the *Phenomenology* through the *Encyclopaedia's* conservatively-distorting lens; to read the *Phenomenology* on its own terms is to bring Hegel's challenge and his originality to light.

The theme of apocalypse supplies the key to the *Phenomenology*. The term 'apocalypse' signals an event which ends history and which, at the same time, reveals history's sense. For Hegel the French Revolution, by means of which 'heaven is transplanted to earth below' and which inaugurates a 'new world', is an event of just this kind. In its apocalyptic light, and there alone, truth can appear and philosophy – literally, the 'love of wisdom' – can become wisdom itself. Only at the end of history, and within the post-Revolutionary and post-historical 'new world', can truth come into its own. In Hegel's words: 'until spirit has completed itself...as world-spirit [i.e. until it has completed itself historically], it cannot reach its completion as self-conscious [i.e. as truthfully self-aware] spirit'. Thus true theory has, for Hegel, practical preconditions of an historical and Revolutionary kind. The author of the

*Phenomenology* situates himself on the practical terrain of the new world which obtains once history has been brought to its insurrectionary close. As in all apocalyptic theory, the revelation of truth – in Hegelian terms: the writing of the *Phenomenology* – figures, reflexively, as an event within (or, rather, at the end of) the historical narrative which that revelation itself unfolds.

The historical scenario unfolded by Hegel is one according to which freedom undergoes successive alienations until, at the end of history, it makes its appearance on its own, non-alienated terms. Thus, history is revealed as a story of freedom, and the post-Revolutionary 'new world' in which Hegel sees himself as situated is one where, for the first time, non-alienated freedom obtains. For Hegel, in sum, *true theory* and *free practice* form a unity: each presupposes, and implies, the other.

Why this should be so becomes clear when we ask what, according to Hegel, non-alienated freedom involves. The *Phenomenology* tells us that it involves *mutual recognition*, i.e. a reciprocal acknowledgement of each individual's freedom by each other individual: where mutual recognition obtains, and there alone, each individual can be free not (as in liberal theory) *in spite of*, but rather *through*, each other. A mutually recognitive polity is wholly unstructured – in order for recognition of an individual's freedom to be possible, everything about that individual must be at issue, without remainder, before each of the others – and so it can be appreciated in what sense an anarchist stratum is present in Hegelian thought. It can be appreciated, too, why true theory goes together with free practice. We can act freely, and freely recognize others, only where we ourselves are truthfully self-aware; conversely, only a mutually recognitive conversation – one where everything is at issue and where, because freedom obtains, no recognitive or epistemological holds are barred – supplies a sufficiently strong testing fire for its outcome to qualify as wisdom or as 'absolute truth'. And it is to an audience amongst whom mutual recognition obtains (a post-historical audience) that the author of the *Phenomenology* addresses his dialogical appeal. Thus, in Hegel's view, mutually recognitive freedom is the unique (the necessary and sufficient) title to epistemological competence; and such freedom obtains only once history has reached its apocalyptic and anarchic term.

In the history of Western thought, it may be observed, no stronger bonding between wisdom and revolution has ever been proposed. Hegel's precursors are the millenarian anarchists of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries; his heirs, from Stirner and Marx through to Sartre, are those who are prepared to throw all forms of statism to the winds. In our own social and political world, where mutual recognition exists (if at all) only on the margins and in the interstices of alienations that are more massive than ever before, Hegel challenges us to wager everything that we are upon a freedom through which, in their unity, our theoretical and practical aspirations may be simultaneously redeemed.

## **Further reading**

G. W. F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V.Miller (Oxford University Press)

A. Kojeve *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Basic Books)

J. Hyppolite *Studies on Marx and Hegel* (Heinemann)

W. Kaufmann *Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts and Commentary* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson)

E. Caird *Hegel* (Blackwood)