

The Reversal of the Absolute in Hegel

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In the *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel raises the question of how it is possible that philosophy claims to be “an objective science of truth” and yet, throughout history, philosophical theories have presented us with a variety of different truths. Hegel formulates the problem as follows: “It is of course a sufficiently grounded fact that there are and have been different philosophies. Yet the truth is one” (*LHP*, 17). A few years earlier he started these lectures with the same dilemma: “If we start from the fact that truth is eternal, then it cannot fall into the sphere of the transient and it has no history. But if it has history, and history is only a display of a series of past forms of knowledge, then truth is not to be found in it, since truth is not something past” (*LHP*, 11).

How are we to reconcile these two sides—a variety of philosophical theories representing different truths on the one hand, and imperishable and universal truth on the other? One way to answer this dilemma would be to claim that philosophy is really not able to attain truth. That would be the position of skepticism. A second option would be to say that there is one theory which is true, and all other theories, which contradict it, are false. Hegel is often thought to give this answer, but in fact he does not. A third option would be “postmodern”: one can say that there are many truths, each in its own domain, and that we should not search for a general truth which covers or unites them all. The postmodern position is closer to Hegel’s than the second option, but it does not fully represent his position either, for he maintains as a “fundamental proposition, . . . that the truth is *one* and one only” (*LHP*, 18).

How can the truth be one if Hegel does not endorse the second option to solve the dilemma? He thinks that if the solution to the dilemma is to be found at all we should first examine the very idea of truth itself. This leads him to reject “the abstract opposition of truth and falsehood” as presented by those caught in this dilemma who choose the second option as a solution (*LHP*, 18). Hegel, in contrast, called on his audience to think of the nature of truth in a manner that is not abstract. What did he mean by that? How can we rethink the nature of truth? How does his new position about the nature of truth differ from the traditional one? Why would rethinking the nature of truth be necessary? These are the questions to which this essay is devoted. I do not, however, intend to exposit Hegel’s theory of truth. Rather, I wish to explain what role the rethinking of the nature of truth plays in the whole of the philosophical project of Hegel, and what are the reasons why the traditional understanding of truth should be reexamined.

All four of the books Hegel published himself (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Science of Logic*, *Encyclopaedia*, and *Philosophy of Right*) were meant to respond in one way or another to the new social world that emerged in the course of the Napoleonic reconstruction of Europe, following the French Revolution. They were meant to be a philosophical response to the historical situation in which he was living.¹ Thus in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he claims his book is a response to the “birth-time and a period of transition to a new era (*Periode*)” (*Ph.*, 11). In fact he thinks that this is one of the first responses to the new spirit or new cultural formation which is only beginning to appear (*Ph.*, 11–13). This situation requires changing philosophical thinking in such a way that the truth would not get lost in the new spiritual formation, since the truth of the new spirit cannot be comprehended in the old way. A new *Wissenschaft* is needed which is able to rethink the nature of truth and falsity. This new science is *die eigentliche Wissenschaft des Geistes*, “the authentic science of spirit,” which is introduced in the *Phenomenology* and which, if I am right, is continued in all other major works of Hegel.

In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel’s last work, he is concerned that the methods of traditional *Verstandeserkenntnis* (cognition peculiar to understanding as distinct from reason)—definition, classification, and inference—have become inadequate for comprehending the truth concerning social issues—such as right, ethics, and

the state. And if there is no adequate philosophical knowledge of these matters, then “the concepts of truth and the laws of ethics are reduced to mere opinions and subjective convictions” (*PR*, p. 19). This situation is dangerous because it leads “to the destruction of inner ethics and the upright conscience, of love and right among private persons, as well as the destruction of public order and the laws of the state” (*PR*, 18). Hence the aim of the book is to improve the situation and to recover the truth about social reality, law, and freedom by using the new philosophical method presented in the *Science of Logic*.

In the original Preface to the *Science of Logic*, written in 1812, Hegel talks about a “new concept of scientific procedure,” which is a response to the situation when “[traditional] logic shows no traces so far of the new spirit which has arisen in the sciences no less than in the world of actuality” (*L*, 26–27). In the Introduction it is explained that the belief of ancient metaphysics in the “full agreement” between thinking and things faded some time ago. This, as we have seen, was a metaphysics done with the assumption of the immediacy of thought. By the time Hegel is writing, this belief was replaced by the “reflective understanding” of Kant. Here the difference between thought and the object of thought becomes realized. It means that it becomes evident for a thinker that his representation of an object by any kind of articulation in any language possesses different characteristics than the object itself. This might lead us to skepticism, in which case “thoughts are *only* thoughts,” and as a result, “the Notion of truth is lost; it is limited to knowing only subjective truth, only phenomena, appearances, only something to which the nature of the object itself does not correspond: knowing has lapsed into opinion” (*L*, 45–46). Thus we see that the question of truth and the need of rethinking its nature are in Hegel closely and consciously connected to the contemporary cultural situation in which he is writing.

To clarify that, let us turn to Hegel’s philosophical vision of the cultural situation of his own age. According to him the new era can be characterized as an age when societies obtain a form of *Staat*, the state. By “state” Hegel does not mean what we normally mean. Our usual meaning—the concrete governmental and official structures of a politically organized body of people—corresponds more closely to Hegel’s notion of “political constitution.” The state as such, however, according to Hegel is a specific form of objective spirit, i.e., a specific form of culture (*PR*, 258).

Hegel says that “the state is . . . the customary culture [*sittlicher Geist*], . . . which thinks and knows itself” (*PR*, 257). Here lies the difference between traditional culture and culture having a form of the state: the latter is a culture which is aware of the fact that it is a culture. A traditional culture does not think of itself as a culture but as a “natural” or “human” way of life. In other words, in a traditional culture the cultural norms are thought of as laws of nature. Therefore, in traditional cultures the differences between natural and cultural determinations of life are not articulated: “cultured” or “civilized” modes of behavior and thinking are understood to be “natural.”

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the mind of the people of traditional cultures as *sittliches Bewußtsein*, “customary consciousness” (*Ph.*, 465). This consciousness thinks of its relationship to its culture in an immediate way: “the essence of traditional life is for this consciousness immediate, unwavering, without contradiction” (*Ph.*, 465). It “sees right only on one side and wrong on the other” (*Ph.*, 466), because it takes the customs and habits of its culture to be the universal and natural laws of the life of the human species as such. In traditional culture, Hegel says, “virtue represents nothing more than the simple adequacy of the individual to the duties of circumstantial relationships [*Verhältnisse*]. . . . He must simply do what is prescribed, expressly stated, and known to him within this situation” (*PR*, 150). Consequently rectitude is the universal virtue of the traditional society.

The modern age was introduced by positing the *difference* between the body of customs and the individual. As Hegel says, the achievement of modernity was to allow “the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfillment in the *self-sufficient extreme* of personal particularity” (*PR*, 260). This principle constitutes the way modern cultural institutions function and how modern individuals live their lives. Hegel claims this principle of the fulfillment of subjectivity makes possible civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*)—a realm in which autonomous human individuals associate with each other through the institutions of free-market economy in order to satisfy their private needs. All communal ends are consciously posited and calculated with the goal of maximizing the satisfaction of the private interests of individuals. All this is described in the early modern social-contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Hume. There is no doubt that, according to Hegel, the principle of civil society was a necessary step in creating a culture of freedom.

The immediacy of thought and “customary consciousness” disappears when culture reaches the form of the state. When a society perceives itself as a state it understands itself as one culture among others. This new social self-awareness is not entirely a modern phenomenon. At first this kind of self-consciousness was achieved in the medium of “subjective history,” i.e., in the historical narratives of this or that culture. The ancient Greeks had this kind of narrative. But the medium of “subjective history”—the tales of the heroes—was not yet mature enough to overcome the “naturalness” of the culture. “Subjective history” contributes to the awareness a culture has of itself, to the extent that the historical account of the past is not only about the past, but about the present. The story of the past of a society is also a story of what the society has become, of what it is. Consequently the true subject matter of this kind of “history” of a society is not the historical data from its past, but its present. In other words, only because there is a culture which wishes to understand itself does it make sense to write its history: “It is the state which first supplies a content which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it.”² History is actually constructed as a means to understand what a culture is in the present, not vice versa.

A national history, in whatever form it is narrated, remains limited because the object of description is limited. The object of a national history is a principle of this or that *Volksgeist*, which is always a *particular* principle (*PR*, 340). However, if the history is such that it includes many national spirits in their mutual relationships, then through this dialectic of relationships a culture achieves a new level of self-awareness, which was not available in the form of the traditional national history. The dialectic of several national spirits helps to produce a new type of knowledge, which Hegel calls both “the universal spirit” and “the spirit of the world [*Weltgeist*]” (*PR*, 340). He says that the exposition [*Auslegung*] and *actualization* [*Verwirklichung*] of the universal spirit” becomes manifested in the medium of the world history of different cultures (*PR*, 342).

In what sense is the thought or knowing, which is presented by the world-spirit, universal? As Hegel explains, the national spirits are always particular and determinate. But the spirit which comes into being in the “element” of world history constitutes a plurality of these particular and determinate elements (*R*, 346). The plurality of its content is what makes the world spirit absolute, in opposition to

the particular national spirits, which are always singular. In other words, knowledge in the form of the world spirit is knowledge in the plural.

What is more, because absolute spirit is an event of thought, not of empirical reality, its “actualization” does not signify the emergence of a universal culture—a new, global way of life. Put in Hegel’s terms, the *Dasein* of absolute spirit does not lie in the new mode of *Sittlichkeit*, the social way of life. Rather, it denotes a new way of understanding itself that a national culture can achieve. All national cultures, as they look upon themselves from within, seem to be totalities, i.e., they are singular in mode of thought, but as soon as we place them in the context of relationships between different cultures, this totality disappears. We then have a new horizon for understanding them—the horizon of emergence, mutual relationships, and the passing away of a variety of cultures. A national culture of a philosopher becomes one possible way of life among many. Because each of these ways of life is a particular and determined spirit, they all differ from each other. The “universal spirit” of world history is universal only in a sense that transcends the singularity of the mode of thinking of “customary consciousness.” But it is not universal in the sense that it announces a new, absolute culture which has an absolute priority over the ways of life of past cultures.

The next question becomes, whether the world spirit is something prior to national spirits. Does the world spirit serve as a neutral, a priori ground, as a foundation for national spirits? In other words, can we have the world spirit first, and then a priori deduce the features of the actual national spirits as they emerged throughout history? Or, put another way, can we know the universal spirit prior to the particular actual history of national spirits, or is it constituted by the national spirits?

Hegel has often been interpreted as giving an affirmative answer to these questions, even though in the third part of the *Encyclopaedia* he denounces a priori history writing: “when the assumed conceptions or thoughts are arbitrarily adopted, and when a determined attempt is made to force events and actions into conformity with such conceptions” (*Ency.*, 549). Presumably the “logic of the development of the absolute idea” does not consist of arbitrarily adopted conceptions. Yet Hegel does not denounce all reasoning prior to doing history. He claims we can talk about the purpose of history prior to investigation of concrete empirical history. And he says that

whether there is reason in history, or a plan of providence, “must be decided on strictly philosophical ground” (*Ency.*, 549).

Although Hegel is aware of the danger of arbitrarily defining the content of history according to a priori concepts, he does not believe that a historian can narrate the events “exactly in the casual mode he finds them, in their incoherent and unintelligent particularity” (*Ency.*, 549). There exists no history of facts as “they really were.” All history is written with a definite aim, with some concepts presupposed, and from a certain point of view. Hegel’s own world-history is written from the point of view of the development of the freedom of an individual. It is not an ultimate history pretending to determine things “as they really were” from the objective viewpoint of God.

In what sense, then, is the spirit which appears in world history universal? It is not universal in the sense that history was written from neutral ground, nor in the sense that it would contain all empirical historical material, nor that it would have been applicable to all historical material. The universality of world history does not consist in being logically or historically prior to actual history. As is true of all knowledge, universal spirit is a result of the development of culture. As a mode of thought universal spirit has become possible only in the new era of which Hegel and his contemporaries speak. But what is most intriguing about the universality of spirit is that “universal” knowledge, in the form of world history, is constituted by the plurality of principles (of national spirits), each of which was formerly thought of as universal.

The “universal spirit” of world history cannot be deduced purely from reason alone. It is the result of the historical development of culture. Furthermore, it is not absolute in the sense of one principle that can claim unrestricted validity. Once a reader of the *Philosophy of Right* reaches the level of world history, its universality vanishes. Consciousness on the level of world history experiences a reversal in regard to the promise made at the start of the book. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel promised to find the universal truth concerning contemporary social and ethical matters. In the final paragraphs, when universal spirit comes into play, universality seems to be lost rather than discovered. It now belongs to world history, which is a subject of a different study.

A similar reversal occurs in the final stages of Hegel’s other works. The *Phenomenology* ends with the notion of “absolute knowing” and

points toward the absolute form of absolute knowing of the *Science of Logic*. The *Science of Logic* ends with the notion of “absolute idea” which becomes nature, the topic of the second part of the *Encyclopaedia*. Thus the stages in the end of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* do not seem final. In what follows I wish to investigate whether they are absolute.

Let us start from the *absolutes Wissen* in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*. It is the formation (*Gestalt*) of thought where the spirit has gained its own pure form, the Notion (*Begriff*), in contrast to religion, the form of which is pictorial thinking. Spirit, which has reached the form of the notion, takes the form of *Wissenschaft*, the form of thinking needed in the contemporary world to address and solve its problems, as Hegel promised in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*. What does it mean that knowledge has reached the form of the notion? Absolute knowing, Hegel explains, is a movement of “moments,” the *bestimmte Gestalten des Bewußtseins*, the specific formations of consciousness, the description of which comprises the content of the book (*Ph.*, 528). All these moments, the particular formations of consciousness, have tried to achieve truth and obtain certainty of knowledge in one way or another, but all have failed. Thus Hegel calls his phenomenology a “pathway of despair.”

On the level of absolute knowing these moments are considered as *bestimmte Begriffe*, concepts determined in such a way that “to each abstract moment of Science corresponds a shape [*Gestalt*] of manifest Spirit as such” (*Ph.*, 805). Recollection of previous configurations presents us with the movement that constitutes absolute knowing: “Absolute knowing . . . has for its path [of formation] the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm. Their preservation . . . from the side of their conceptual organization . . . [is] the science of phenomenal knowledge” (*Ph.*, 808).

“The science of phenomenal knowledge,” of course, is nothing but the phenomenology of spirit. Phenomenology recollects and by the same act preserves the succession of the spiritual formations. Therefore the content of absolute knowledge is nothing in addition to the content of previous spiritual formations. In regard to the content of absolute knowledge we have nothing absolute, as opposed to the relative content of earlier formations of consciousness. We know very well that the sum of mistaken views does not constitute truth.

What is different, on the level of absolute knowing, is the form of knowledge: it is a “knowledge through notions,” or conceptual (*begreifende*) knowledge. Thus the question: how does the *begreifende* form of knowledge make it absolute?

The reader will learn that, as in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Science of Logic* consists of formations (*Gestalten*) that follow one another. Hegel says at the conclusion of the work the science of logic “has demonstrated their transition and untruth.” The absoluteness of the notion is in fact similar to the absoluteness of knowledge at the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*. It is absolute in the sense that “in running itself as a subject matter through the totality of its determinations, [it] develops itself into the whole of its reality, into the system of the science” (L, 843). The highest stage of the notion is the absolute idea. “The content of the absolute idea is the whole display that has passed before us up to this point,” Hegel explains in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*.³ Thus the science of logic is the system of erroneous ways of expressing truth, in the same way that the phenomenology in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was a system of failures of consciousness to achieve truth. In what sense, then, is the absolute idea as the highest form of the notion, absolute? Again it is clear that the sum of mistakes does not constitute the truth.

Hegel does not state that the final position of the *Science of Logic* has some kind of self-evident ground that would make it different from the configurations of which it consists. The absoluteness of the final stage consists in circularity, in the fact that the end coincides with the beginning: “By virtue of the nature of the method just indicated, the science exhibits itself as a *circle* returning upon itself, the end being wound back into the beginning, the simple ground, by the mediation; this circle is moreover a *circle of circles* . . .” (L, 842). The same idea of circularity is mentioned in the *Phenomenology*: “The movement [of the absolute spirit] is the circle that returns into itself” (*Ph.*, 802). If the absoluteness of the absolute idea has any positive meaning, then it consists in circularity, in the fact that the end coincides with the beginning.

At the end of the *Phenomenology* absolute knowing using “the absolute method of knowing” does not mean that we have reached beyond the limited forms of knowledge and created a universal ground in a transcendental or ontological sense. Hegel is not a foundationalist. Unlike Kant and the early modern philosophers, he does not attempt

to secure an absolute, i.e., universally valid starting point, then build up a theory developing it from the certainty of this point. There is only one way in which the notion as the absolute idea makes the content of absolute knowing absolute, namely, it makes it absolutely certain that absolute knowledge will always be relative. In other words, the absoluteness consists in absolute relativity of all the ways of achieving and articulating the truth. In both absolute knowledge and the absolute idea the truth is removed from us rather than secured in some way. The absoluteness of the relativity of the articulation of truth is the absolute method of knowing, and absolute knowing is absolute in the acknowledgment of that fact.

Relativism in Hegel does not mean that there is no truth at all; it means that there is no “abstract” universal truth, that we cannot have a judgement which fixes truth with absolutely universal validity. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel calls this way of doing philosophy dogmatism: “*Dogmatism* as a way of thinking . . . is nothing else but the opinion that the True consists in a proposition which is a fixed result, or which is immediately known” (*Ph.*, 40). We can find examples of these kinds of truths in other areas of knowledge, Hegel says, but the nature of philosophical truths is different. Thus questions like, “When was Caesar born?” or “How many feet are in a stadium?” can and ought to have “clear-cut” answers. But the True in philosophy is “the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk,” because “the single shapes [*Gestalten*] of spirit do not persist any more than determinate thoughts do, but they are as much positive and necessary moments, as they are negative and evanescent” (*Ph.*, 47).

How are we to understand the difference between what Hegel promises the reader and what the reader gets when he reaches the level of the absolute? It is not simply that the expectations of the reader will not be met. The reversal is not humbug. It is not that the reader has obtained nothing. But his finding is negative rather than positive; he realizes the impossibility of what he was hoping for—absolute knowing. The reader realizes that his expectations have been wrong. He will understand that there is no absolutely universal method of philosophical knowledge, and that there is no absolute knowledge, the claims of which would have universal validity and absolute certainty of this validity. Donald Phillip Verene calls it “Hegel’s final irony” when, in the *Phenomenology*, a reader comes to understand

that the “absolute” standpoint of the “we” from which the earlier forms of knowledge were demonstrated as failures turns out to be a failure as well.⁴ The end coincides with the beginning: the modes of knowledge that were expected to be the most certain and the most firmly grounded turn out to be the opposite, analogous to the reversal found in the first form (*Gestalt*) of knowledge—“sense-certainty.” This principle of reversal is why one circle, in which the end leads back to the beginning, leads to the next circle, and so on, until the reader realizes that philosophy is “the circle of circles.” At any point, there is nothing to do but start another circle.

This reversal of expectations of knowing occurs in every stage of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. In each stage Hegel shows at first the advancement of thought in comparison to the earlier formation of knowing. Then the achievements of this new formation are deconstructed by showing that the new formation of spirit or thought really does not solve the problem which it set out to solve.

We have discussed how the “customary consciousness” of traditional culture becomes deconstructed in the course of the development of the modern world, which arises as a result of positing the difference between culture and the individual. According to Hegel, in modern society there is more freedom for the individual than in traditional society. Hegel gives a phenomenological description of this new consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. The modern individual is dedicated to his purposeful activity (*Ph.*, 402), the product of which is “work” (*Ph.*, 405). The work becomes the “thing itself” (*die Sache selbst*) which is, on the one hand, a contingent result of an action of an individual but, on the other hand, it obtains an existence of its own and endures independent of the individual (*Ph.*, 409). The “thing itself” is regarded as sublime because it is thought to be the most important thing in the world (truth, in the case of philosophy), for it stands outside the subjective realm of the individual. It requires tremendous effort and dedication of an individual to create a work which would be the expression and embodiment of the “thing itself.”

Thus the “thing itself” becomes the object and purpose of an individual’s actions. The truth of the consciousness of the modern individual, in contrast to the consciousness of the traditional individual, consist “in the unity of the consciousness with the action, and his true work is that unity of *doing* and being, of *willing* and achieving” (*Ph.*, 409).

Hegel's phenomenological analysis of the meaning-structures of "an individual at work" leads to the deconstruction of the very same meaning-structures. A human being whose conscious activity can be described by these structures ends up by projecting the meaning of his life onto the work which is conceived as the most important thing, the "thing itself." This consciousness of an individual performing this activity thinks of himself as honest (*Ph.*, 412) and as having integrity (*Ph.*, 414) because he is able to reach out from his contingent, subjective sphere. The "thing itself," to which the work is dedicated and which the work actualizes, is understood by the "artist" not as his particular subjective caprice but as the opposite—as an objective and universal matter which *ought* to be meaningful for everybody—because it is the "thing itself."

"The truth about this integrity, however, is that it is not as honest as it seems," Hegel notices (*Ph.*, 415). "While, then, it seems to him that his concern is only with the thing itself as an *abstract* reality, it is also a fact that he is concerned with it as his own doing. But just because he is concerned merely with being active and busy, he is not really earnest about it" (*Ph.*, 415). In other words, the individual is not aware that the purpose of his work is not a thing outside of himself which, he thinks, would make his creative enterprise self-sacrificial and praiseworthy. An individual thinks that he is connected to the external reality of the "thing itself," but as it turns out, the outside reality of the "thing itself" is nothing but the activity of the individual himself. Thus an individual, instead of relating to the objective and universal "thing itself," has only related himself to himself. This is a mediated relation, but the individual has not reached beyond his own subjective sphere. What is more, one can discover that there are as many "things-in-themselves" as there are creative individuals. There is not just one universal "thing-in-itself," but a variety of them.

At first, however, the creative consciousness of a modern individual fancies that there is only one "thing-in-itself" and "it [the consciousness of a modern individual] interferes, therefore in the action and work of others, and, if it can no longer take the work out of their hands, it at least shows an interest in it by passing judgement on it, if it gives it the stamp of its approval and praise, this is meant to imply that, in the work, it praises not only the work itself, but also *its own* generosity and moderation in not having damaged the work . . ." (*Ph.*, 417). The community of these "generous" creative people, each

showing interest in each other's work but actually being interested only in their own, i.e., their own activity, is *das geistige Tierreich*, "the spiritual animal kingdom." This kingdom is Hegel's reversed picture of the creative consciousness of *homo economicus* in civil society. Such creative activity, that at first appeared as a sublime, heroic gesture of an individual—namely, finding the aim of his life in his work, in the creation dedicated to the "thing itself"—turned out to be a parody of the whole idea of this kind of life.

This stage of Hegel's phenomenology is an example of how one formation (*Gestalt*) of consciousness or a mode of thought becomes deconstructed from inside. The difference between this example and the final stages of Hegel's major works is that, in the latter, the reader himself has to deconstruct the final formation of thought. The reader who already knows what "absolute" knowing or "absolute" method mean will be able to do so. If not, the reader will enter the other circle. Hegel holds that consciousness or thought is always able to move on; it is always possible to replace one formation (*Gestalt*) of thought with another. Consciousness is always able to transcend any horizons of its thought. Thus consciousness is able to transcend the sensible world and create the supersensible world. But that is not the end, because then consciousness is able to transcend the supersensible world and create another one. Unlike Husserl or Heidegger, Hegel does not think that thinking is determined by horizons; on the contrary, thinking is essentially free, and as a result is always able to transcend any horizons.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel talks about the process of transcending one formation of thought by another by using the term *Verkehrung*, "reversal." Reversal means more than just transcending because, according to Hegel, when consciousness enters a new configuration of thought it is not just the next formation, standing after the previous one, but its truth turns the previous formation upside down. In other words, *Verkehrung* signifies the process in which the former world of consciousness becomes *verkehrte*—reversed, or topsy-turvy. In the above example, the modern individual ends up by doing the opposite of what he thought he was doing: he became interested in himself instead of in the "thing itself." The idea of the "thing itself" became reversed.

Hegel introduces the notion of the *verkehrte Welt*, the "topsy-turvy world," in the third chapter of the *Phenomenology*.⁵ Here Hegel

describes the “moment” in which consciousness transcends the sensible world and opens up “a *supersensible* world which henceforth is the *true* world, . . . a permanent *beyond*” (*Ph.*, 144). This process is similar to what happens in Plato’s allegory of the cave and in his philosophy in general: a philosopher is able to obtain a vision of the world beyond the flux of appearances of his everyday world. In other words, a philosopher is able to reverse the flux of appearances into *das ruhige Reich der Gesetze*, the tranquil kingdom of laws (*Ph.*, 157). The ultimate end of philosophy and science seems to be to detect laws behind the flux of appearances and to articulate them as propositions that are universally valid concerning appearances. But for Hegel this is not the final form (*Gestalt*) of thought. According to him this was only “*die unmittelbare Erhebung der wahrgenommenen Welt in das allgemeine Element,*” the *immediate* raising of the perceived world into the universal element” (*Ph.*, 157).

As consciousness was able to transcend the sensible world, it transcends the supersensible world as well. “This *second supersensible world* is in this way the *inverted world*” (*Ph.*, 157). It is reversed in the sense that there was no change and motion in the first supersensible world; the laws of which it consisted were “tranquil.” The second supersensible world obtains “*the principle of change [Wechsel] and alteration [Veränderung]*” (*Ph.*, 157). The topsy-turvy, supersensible world has been freed from the idea (*Vorstellung*) of the consciousness which is inclined toward “*Befestigung der Unterschiede in einem verschiedenen Elemente des Bestehens*” (“fixing differences in one particular sustaining form of being”). The first supersensible world is immediate in relation to itself; in the second supersensible world this relation becomes mediated. In the technical vocabulary of Hegel, it means that thought has obtained a form of “for itself,” or a form of “self-consciousness.” The “self-consciousness” as a principle of thought, in Hegel, means that thought has become able to reflect *itself*, while thought in the form of “consciousness” is able to reflect only on the object. Together with being able to reflect itself, the thought becomes alive and frees itself from “fixed determinations.”

Hegel holds that *Verstand* is able to create the world of immutable laws and that *Vernunft* is able to reverse this world and to introduce change into the realm of these laws. Philosophy is always the function of *Vernunft*. According to Hegel, Kant was right that we cannot have universal claims in the domain of *Vernunft* without contradiction. But

Hegel takes contradiction as a higher principle of knowledge than the lack of it, because contradiction expressed more precisely the nature of the real world and life. If Kant thought that philosophical knowledge has to avoid the realm of contradiction, Hegel thought it the other way around. He holds that absolute truth can be found only in the realm of contradiction and difference. Thus, if the Kantian project is in some sense continued by Hegel, it is not completed but reversed. It is reversed by rethinking the nature of truth in Kant.

In Kantian thinking, there exists only one true philosophical system which, if true, contains the coherent body of universally valid statements. According to his own words, Kant remains true to the “dogmatic procedure of reason,” which could turn into dogmatism only if its principles are not first secured by criticism, to which the *Critique of Pure Reason* is devoted. However, Kant holds that philosophy “must necessarily be developed dogmatically,” “through orderly establishment of principles, clear determination of concepts, insistence upon strictness of proof, and avoidance of venturesome, non-consecutive steps in our inferences.” From Hegel’s point of view, Kant attempted, but failed, to make philosophy self-conscious because he remained true to the “dogmatic procedure of reason.” In contrast to this, Hegel thinks that the nature of the truth has to be thought in accordance with the nature of the idea, i.e., as “the absolute unity of differences.”

If we are reading this formula from the standpoint of absolute knowing we should read it reversed: “non-unity of differences.” The non-unity should be understood as a reversal of the unity in the form in which we expected it, because absolute knowledge is not the last nor the ultimate form of thought. It is absolute in comparison to the formations of consciousness which preceded it, but it will reverse itself, just like any other formation of thought. We cannot think of it as it seems to us from the earlier formation of consciousness, as a final truth and ultimately firm ground for all scientific knowledge. It is only natural that Hegel had in mind a reader having philosophical aspirations of the old era, that is, someone who thinks truth “abstractly.” Abstractly means that he searches for truth in universally valid statements, because that is contained in his commonsensical aspirations about what truth is in the culture he belongs to.

Hegel’s goal is to reverse these aspirations of the old philosophical culture. This is how he himself explains what kind of impact his

philosophy should have on the reader: “Truly speculative philosophy cannot take on the garb and style of Locke or the usual French philosophy. To the uninitiated, speculative philosophy must in any case present itself as the upside-down world [*verkehrte Welt*], contradicting all their accustomed concepts and whatever else appeared valid to them according to so-called sound common sense [*gesundes Menschenverstand*].”⁶ This is not unlike Socrates’ understanding of philosophical praxis. Socrates said to his interlocutors, “I don’t know what truth is. “Tell me!” And if one of the interlocutors allowed himself to be drawn into the conversation and attempted to explain the truth he knows, then Socrates demonstrated to him that he really does not know it. The interlocutor gained an understanding that what he thought to be true in fact is not.

Hegel says to the reader: “You want to have absolute knowledge. Come along with me, and I will bring you to it.” And if the reader goes through the “gallery” of different modes of thought—all of which attempt to reach universal truth—then, as he reaches the end of a circle, he realizes that his wish was foolish. There is no absolute truth in the sense that he used to think about it. If Hegel succeeds, the reader’s understanding of the nature of truth becomes reversed.

NOTES

The following abbreviations to Hegel’s works appear in the text:

LHP = *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Ph. = *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), cited by paragraph number.

L = *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1993), cited by page number.

Ency. = *Philosophy of Mind: Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), cited by paragraph number.

PR = *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), cited by paragraph number, with citation to the Preface by page number.

Quotations from these works are occasionally modified in relation to the original German.

1. See the discussion of the social and cultural break in Germany in Hegel's lifetime in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
2. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 136.
3. *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part One of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Garaets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), pars. 237 and 303-4.
4. Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 114.
5. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die verkehrte Welt," *Hegel-Studien* 3 (1966): 135-44; Joseph Flay, "Hegel's Inverted World," *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (1970): 662-78; W. H. Bossart, "Hegel on the Inverted World," *Philosophical Forum* 13 (1982): 326-41; Robert Zimmerman, "Hegel's Inverted World Revisited," *Philosophical Forum* 13 (1982): 342-70; Verene, *Hegel's Recollection*, chap. 4.
6. "Hegel to van Ghert (Dec. 18, 1812)," in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 591; *Briefe* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 425-26.

