

C L A S S I C T H I N K E R S

Hegel

J.M. Fritzman

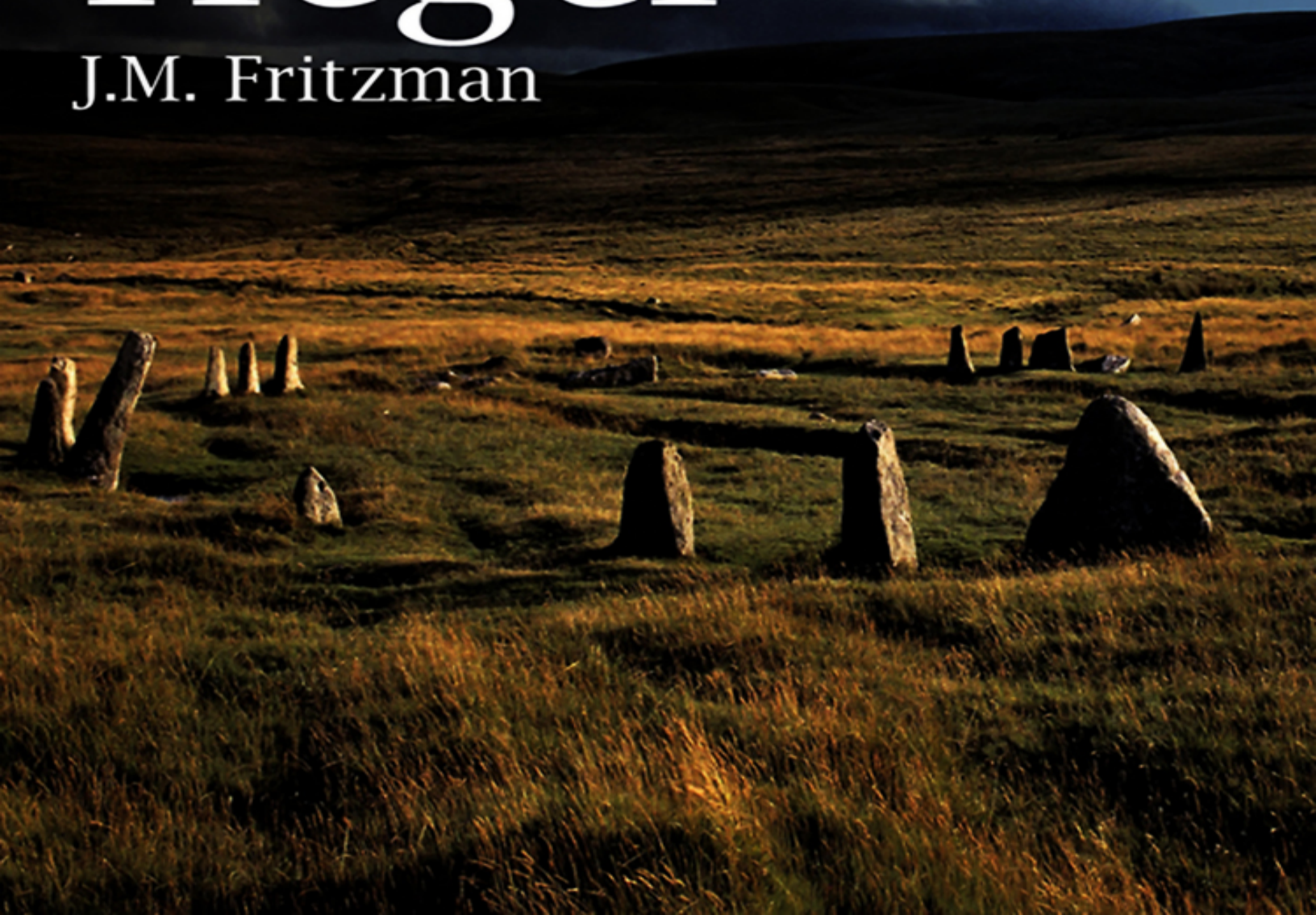


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For Gwendolyn Kelly Garrison, the avatar of India, “the one sole country under the sun that is endowed with an imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land that *all* men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined.”

Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World*, Vol. 2

(New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), p. 26.

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“I used to think gratitude a heavy burden for one to carry. Now I know that it is something that makes the heart lighter. The ungrateful man seems to me to be one who walks with feet and heart of lead. But when one has learnt, however inadequately, what a lovely thing gratitude is, one's feet go lightly over sand or sea, and one finds a strange joy revealed to one, the joy of counting up, not what one possesses, but what one owes. I hoard my debts now in the treasury of my heart, and, piece of gold by piece of gold, I range them in order at dawn and at evening.”

Oscar Wilde, *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 276.

1

Introduction

Why study Hegel? So far, philosophy has had only two heroic moments - times where it cast aside everything that is external and became fully itself. The first is Neoplatonism, which begins with Plotinus in 3 BCE and lasts several hundred years. The second moment is German idealism. Hegel is the greatest of the German idealists. Not the most brilliant or creative: that would be Schelling. But it is Hegel who thinks things through to their conclusions and links them together. The world today would be almost unimaginably different without him. Hegel's philosophy decisively influenced both Marx and Lenin. Without them, communism would never have existed, there would have been no Soviet Union or communist China, and the First World War would have concluded quite differently than it did.

Martin Luther King Jr. was influenced directly through reading Hegel, especially the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, and indirectly through studying philosophical personalism while a doctoral student at Boston University. Personalism, by the way, is the view that ultimate reality - God, if you prefer - is a person. Whereas Aristotle claims that God is the Unmoved Mover, wholly unaffected and indifferent to the universe, a personalist such as King believes that God is in a loving relation with the universe and - like a person - God has thoughts and feelings. The history of the civil rights movement would have been substantially different without Hegel.

Hegel is also important for philosophy. The beginnings of Anglo-American philosophy - one thinks, in this context,

especially of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell – are marked by a rejection of Hegel's philosophy. Twentieth-century French philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as German philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas, develop much of their philosophies in conversation with Hegel. By contrast, more recent French philosophy is defined by a concerted rejection of his philosophy. Indeed, David Carroll writes that, for Jean-François Lyotard, “the central problem is still, as it has been since at least Nietzsche, how to escape from or exceed the recuperating powers of the dialectic.”¹ Carroll further observes that

there is really no critical philosopher in France in the last twenty years – this is especially true of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, as well as Lyotard – who has not made this one of, if not the most pressing of all critical tasks. The political implications of all of their work could even be argued to be directly rooted in their critiques of the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics.²

Carroll's point is reinforced when we recognize that Marx's own notion of dialectic is a further articulation of Hegel's. More recently, an Analytic Hegelianism has emerged as philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition, such as Robert Brandom and John McDowell, have written extensively on Hegel, urging that his arguments are still pertinent.

Hegel is doing a lot of things, as we will see, but his central project is one of reconciliation – with a twist. Hegel wants to demonstrate that, in the modern era, nature and society are not finally alien to us. We can be at home. And, if we feel estranged, we must discover in the very conditions that seemed to cause our estrangement the basis for reconciliation. That is always his main theme. Now, this makes Hegel sound like a profoundly conservative thinker. If we do not feel at home in our society because of its many

injustices and inequities, it might seem that he tells us to get over it, deal with it, stop whining, accept that things are for the best, and smile. That is not Hegel! It is not Hegel because he is not trying to reconcile us to actually existing circumstances – although this is what he sometimes seems to suggest – but rather to reconcile us to circumstances that he presents as rational. So, there is in Hegel a call that we be actively engaged in transforming our world and making it into a home.

Hegel frequently discusses spirit or mind (*Geist*). By this book's conclusion, readers will have a good grasp of this concept. As a first approximation, though, they will not go wrong to think of spirit as synonymous with human culture. Hegel claims that spirit emerges from nature but cannot be reduced to nature, and so spirit cannot be comprehended with the methods that are appropriate for the natural sciences.

If there is a single concept that is associated with Hegel, it is dialectics. People with only a limited exposure to Hegel's dialectics frequently believe that it consists in three steps. First, there is the thesis, a partial statement of the truth that is mistaken for the entire truth. Second, there is the antithesis, a corrective to the mistakes of the thesis which nevertheless misses the aspects of the thesis that are correct. Finally, there is the synthesis, which incorporates the correct aspects of the thesis with the correctives supplied by the antithesis. The synthesis then itself becomes another thesis, again giving rise to another antithesis, and then to another reconciling synthesis that becomes yet another thesis. This process continues until we reach the final synthesis that actually is the full truth and so does not require a correcting antithesis.

This account of Hegel's dialectics is itself only a partial comprehension that requires correction. Before criticizing, however, let us first note three features that it perceives

correctly. First, it recognizes that truth emerges from error. Moreover, as we will see many times throughout this book, truth necessarily emerges from error. So, the history of philosophy is not, for Hegel, a catalog of howlers and blunders that might have been avoided. Rather, it is only by attempting to correct the perceived inadequacies of previous views that philosophy develops. Second, this account recognizes the importance of history. Truth cannot be seized in an instant but rather must develop through philosophers continually responding to and correcting each other. Earlier philosophers literally could not think what later philosophers can. Finally, this account implicitly suggests a holism in which partial truths are progressively corrected so that their one-sidedness is overcome.

However, this account must be supplemented. Although the thesis comes first in the order of narration, it actually emerges as a reaction to the antithesis. That is, what we are calling the thesis is recognized as a thesis only after it has been contested by the antithesis. Prior to that, the thesis is not explicitly articulated. Instead, it may be believed to be so obvious that individuals may not even recognize that they believe it. (This is an experience that many people have when they first visit another country.) Only after the antithesis appears is the thesis seen as a thesis and as a view that is, in principle, contestable. In this sense, the antithesis creates the thesis against which it protests.

This is why the antithesis is not, ultimately, alien from the thesis. The thesis is the product of the antithesis. Shifting perspective slightly, it is equally correct that the antithesis actually emerges from within (what will subsequently come to be recognized as) the thesis.

The thesis does not take kindly to the corrections offered by the antithesis. Even if the antithesis were content to correct only the perceived failings of the thesis, the thesis would resist. The thesis does not perceive its own failings.

However, the antithesis challenges the very existence of the thesis. Just as the thesis believes that it expresses the whole truth, failing to perceive that its articulation is partial, so the antithesis also claims to possess the whole truth. Neither the thesis nor the antithesis recognizes any merit or legitimacy in the other. And so they struggle. As they fight, the thesis responds to the attacks of the antithesis by employing the very tropes and categories of the antithesis. By responding in this way, the thesis thereby becomes the antithesis. To be sure, the thesis may continue to disagree vehemently with the antithesis. However, in adopting the preferred descriptions and forms of argument of the antithesis, the thesis has already lost. It has irretrievably altered into the very form of the antithesis. This is the synthesis! The synthesis is best described not as the resolution of the thesis and antithesis, but rather as the thesis becoming a position within the antithesis.

An especially clear example is found in Hegel's first major publication, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when he chronicles Enlightenment's struggle with Religion. Enlightenment here plays the role of the antithesis, denouncing Religion as baseless superstition that is contrary to reason and experience. What Enlightenment fails to see is how Religion emerges through Enlightenment's very opposition to it. Before Enlightenment, Religion does not exist as an explicit set of beliefs. Instead, what will retrospectively be recognized as Religion initially exists as a thoroughly integrated aspect of the life of a people, as people's implicit worldview, expressed in their rituals and practices. It is only after Enlightenment appears, denouncing Religion as superstition, that Religion can then be experienced as a specific and contingent, and so as a contestable and optional, aspect. Enlightenment does not recognize this. What Religion, now explicitly articulated as Religion, does not perceive is how its own response to

Enlightenment accepts Enlightenment's own categories. Religion *argues*. It maintains that it is not superstition but instead rational. Indeed, Religion claims that it is more rational than Enlightenment. In responding in this way, Religion thereby takes on Enlightenment's own categories. Religion may still reject many of Enlightenment's specific assertions, but Religion articulates its rejection in the language of Enlightenment. At this point, Religion becomes not an alternative to Enlightenment, but merely another position within Enlightenment itself.

This example also allows us to comprehend the positing of the presuppositions. For Hegel, the presuppositions are posited retrospectively. It is not only that we can see, after the fact, that one thing was the beginning of something else. Crucially, it is also that what later emerges changes the very meaning of the thing from which it began. Religion exists *as* Religion - as a set of articulated beliefs that can be rationally defended, rather than as rituals that are inseparably integrated into the life of a people - only after, and as a result of, Enlightenment's depicting Religion as superstition. After Religion emerges as Religion, though, it can then be seen retrospectively as something quite ancient. As the life of a people, it is ancient. As a set of articulated beliefs, it is recent.

A final way in which the fashionable account of Hegel's dialectics is inadequate is that it supposes that there is a final synthesis - Hegel's own system - that does not itself become yet another thesis then to be opposed by an antithesis. This is one interpretation in the scholarly literature. In this book, however, I will argue that a better reading is that Hegel's system is not the culmination of dialectics but rather its comprehension.

Hegel lived almost two hundred years ago. His world is markedly different from our own. Nevertheless, many of the challenges that he faced are still with us. Comprehending

how he articulated those problems and understanding his proposed solutions can provide guidance for us. I have already suggested that Hegel's project is best seen as one of reconciliation. I would like to discuss this further, urging that Hegel seeks to overcome various forms of dualism and skepticism. Skepticism would have us believe that there could be substantial constraints on our ability to know what the world is like, to know that other people also have minds, and to know about God. Now, there is a sense in which skepticism can be empowering, as Nietzsche later recognizes. If we doubt that some claim is true or that a theory is correct, we can be motivated to investigate further, do research, and see if we can learn more and comprehend matters more thoroughly. This type of skepticism is beneficial.

There is another type of skepticism, however, that is stultifying. This second type of skepticism asserts that, in principle, we can never know the world, whether other persons have minds, and about God. This skepticism further tells us that there is no point in investigating or doing research because we can never know what we would seek to know. It can take various forms, some more obvious, others less so. For example, this skepticism asserts that one gender can never comprehend others, that a culture can never understand others, that the universe is stranger than we can ever imagine, that we can never know what other persons are really like or what they believe, that - try as we might - the world is ultimately mysterious.

Hegel's response is that we should be skeptical of this very skepticism. Rather than heeding its counsels of despair, we should instead investigate, do research, observe and talk with others, and thereby discover what we actually can know. When it turns out that we do not know what we thought we did, then we should investigate further and try to correct the errors in our beliefs. We should not conclude,

as insidious skepticism would advocate, that we cannot really know much or anything and then quit trying. Through overcoming previous mistakes and correcting errors, we learn more than we knew before. This is why, moreover, Hegel rejects a priori methods and conceptual analyses. We can discover what can be known only by attempting to know, partially succeeding, and then trying again.

All of this is to suggest that Hegel is not claiming to have achieved a final certainty – although there is a fashionable interpretation of him that asserts otherwise – but rather that he holds that we should strive for knowledge and correct errors when they are detected. In this way, moreover, mistakes and errors are not entirely negative. False theories can still have been useful – Ptolemaic astronomy could predict eclipses, despite believing that the earth is the center of the universe – and the discovery of a theory's limitations can motivate us to overcome them. When we learn that we have not adequately comprehended another person, culture, the universe, or even God, we do not despair in the face of an ultimate mystery. We renew our efforts.

Is it not the case that Hegel places an unconditional faith in reason, in our ability to know? True, he does. Paradoxically, however, so does the insidious skepticism that he opposes. This skepticism asserts that we cannot know – and how, we may sensibly ask, does it know this? Actually, the choice between Hegel and skepticism is quite simple: Should we try to know, making corrections as needed; or should we prefer an ignorance that does not even try?

Let me briefly discuss several other important themes in Hegel.

When Hegel criticizes worldviews and philosophies, he uses internal critique. He does not argue against those other positions because they contradict his own views. He

recognizes that, were he to proceed in that way, the others could acknowledge that his system contradicts them - and then urge that this is why his system should be rejected. In order to avoid such gainsaying, Hegel instead shows that perceived alternatives to his system fail by their own standards of success. Such a position does not fail because it contradicts his system, it fails because it contradicts itself. Hegel then argues that a successor position emerges that addresses this contradiction. In this way, he seeks to show that what initially appear as alternatives to his own system are instead aspects, moments, within it.

This suggests that, for Hegel, philosophy must be a system that emerges historically. It is insufficient merely to chronicle the different articulations of philosophy, compiling a list of them, and noting their similarities and differences. Rather, philosophy must be a system that shows how previous articulations contributed to its own realization. Since later articulations become possible only as responses to earlier articulations, philosophy is necessarily historical.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, Hegel is also concerned to overcome a number of dualisms, and he opposes immediacy. The latter is the term he uses to refer to positions that advocate either that there are experiences that are unconceptualizable or that there is something - such as God or the universe itself - that is beyond human comprehension. In response, Hegel maintains that all experience is conceptual, mediated, and that there is nothing that cannot be comprehended. He argues, moreover, that the very attempt to assert that there is something that is ultimately mysterious involves conceptualizing it.

As noted above, Hegel also opposes dualisms, and, in this sense, his philosophy is a holism. Many of these dualisms find expression in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, but they are deeply embedded in Western culture. In ethics,

there are tensions between following our inclinations and doing what is moral, as well as tensions between achieving the best consequences and acting from the proper motives. In politics, there are tensions between the individual and the larger community, including the state. There are tensions between explaining the natural world, on the one hand, and comprehending humans and culture, on the other. There are tensions between faith and reason, as well as between humanity and God. With every dualism, Hegel attempts to demonstrate that both sides are one-sided, that each side is a partial truth that mistakes itself for the whole truth, that both sides are mutually co-determining, so that one side can be fully comprehended only by including what initially appears to be its adversary, that the estrangement experienced in one side is redoubled in the other, that one side emerges only when its opposite appears, that, even though both poles are mutually co-determining, we must nevertheless begin from one pole to see both aright.

Hegel published the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. Although the majority of its interpreters believe either that this book should be read as telling a single linear narrative or that it is actually two distinct stories slapped together, it is most usefully read as telling the story of Western civilization from three successive standpoints. Hegel first tells this story from the perspective of what he calls "shapes of consciousness," an era's worldview. He next tells it from the perspective of the social conditions that made possible those shapes of consciousness. Finally, he tells this story from the perspective of religion and philosophy. This book is notoriously difficult to comprehend. One of the reasons is that Hegel discusses things at a highly abstract level - and he often discusses several things at once, things that have some important features in common.

Another reason that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is so hard is that Hegel's transitions can seem abrupt and

arbitrary. Why did he go in that direction, readers wonder, rather than some other? It is helpful here to see Hegel approaching the story of Western civilization from a retrospective standpoint. But he tells it prospectively! What I mean is this. Writing in 1807, Hegel knows how history has turned out so far. So, when he tells the history of Western civilization, he knows which events were important and which can be ignored. He narrates that history from the beginning, however, and so it is not always obvious why things had to happen the way he says. Well, they did not have to happen that way. At the time, they were contingent and something else might have occurred. Given that they did happen, however, they become necessary. It is one of Hegel's deepest lessons that what was contingent can become necessary.

Here is a simple example. Suppose that the only way I can reach New Delhi by tomorrow is to catch a flight early this morning. It is possible, of course, that I might miss my flight. People do that every day. And if that happens, I will not reach New Delhi by tomorrow. Given that I do reach New Delhi tomorrow, however, then it was necessary that I caught my flight. So, although Hegel maintains that his transitions are necessary, this necessity is the result of their already having happened.

Many interpreters of Hegel believe that his concept of necessity is stronger than this and that each shape of consciousness must transition to a specific successor. I will later discuss the limitations of this.

Let me say a few more words about the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Initially, it seems that Hegel is going to write a traditional book on epistemology, the theory of knowledge, explaining how an individual can know something. In a sense, that is not wrong. In another sense, it is.

To generalize to the extreme, modern philosophers from Descartes through Kant believe that, before we try to know

anything else, we must first determine what sorts of things we can know. Hegel rejects this tradition. He claims that we only discover what we can know by actually trying to know things, failing, and then trying again. We can provisionally know what sorts of things we can know by retrospectively seeing what sorts of things we have actually been able to know. But we can do no more than that. So, rather than first attempting to determine, a priori, what can be known, Hegel instead investigates actual attempts to know.

Another way that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not a traditional book on epistemology is that Hegel believes that knowledge can be explicated only at the social level. To put this in a slogan, it is society that knows in the first instance, and individuals know only because society knows. What does that mean?

First, it means that individuals cannot determine what counts as knowledge or what the criteria for knowledge are. Whether some individuals can be correctly said to know something is a matter of whether others in their society regard them as knowing it. In science, for example, a scientist knows that a theory is true only when it has been recognized as true by other scientists. Before passing this process of peer review, an individual scientist does not know that a theory is true. This explains why Hegel begins with individuals trying to obtain knowledge but then switches to discussions about society. His approach to knowledge is quite distinct from the individualist perspective to which we are accustomed, and that also makes it difficult to comprehend the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

There is something else that is even more radical. Hegel believes that humanity ultimately constitutes an extended mind, a shared consciousness. We believe, unreflectively, that each individual has a mind. Two heads are better than one, we say, but they are still two heads. Hegel thinks, however, that, if the two heads are thinking together, or

even thinking against each other, they then should be regarded as a single mind. I will discuss this in greater detail in the chapter on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but it is helpful to anticipate Hegel's views.

Following the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wrote the *Science of Logic* as well as the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (which is divided into three books: *Logic, Nature, Spirit*). The *Logic* of the *Encyclopedia* is an abridgement of the *Science of Logic*. For the purposes of this book, we do not need to discuss them separately. The *Logic* is divided into three components: Being, Essence, and Concept. It is incredibly easy to get lost among the *Logic*'s trees and so to miss the forest.

There is a continuing debate about whether the *Phenomenology of Spirit* merely introduces readers to Hegel's system while remaining outside of it, as Moses remained outside of the Promised Land, or whether it is itself a component of the system. I suggest that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* both introduces the system and is a part of it. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* tells the history of Western civilization, as I have suggested above, from three successive perspectives: the shapes of consciousness, their social contexts, and religion and philosophy. The *Logic* narrates that same history from the perspective of concepts. Being is the moment where things are described as they appear. However, Being can explain neither why similar things are similar nor why things appear as they do. These failures lead to Essence, which tries to explain appearances by postulating hidden forces. However, Essence cannot explain why things would be caused to appear as they do, and it does not recognize that, in addition to being changed by other things, things can change themselves. Finally, the Concept explains things by pointing to their purposes. It is crucial to recognize that these three levels of explanation are not mutually exclusive

but rather are nested together. Essence contains Being and the Concept contains both. Again, Hegel's perspective in the *Logic* is retrospective, although his narrative is presented prospectively. Further, the *Logic* is not only a history of the ways in which people have thought (a category theory) but also a discussion of what there actually is (a metaphysics).

In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel argues that the results of contemporary science can be arranged in a hierarchical order, from those aspects that are most distant from human culture to those which are nearest. He is concerned to show that we need not feel estranged or alienated from nature. Rather, nature is the condition of the possibility of human culture. In the *Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel chronicles the development of spirit, beginning with the individual (subjective spirit), moving to society (objective spirit), and concluding with art, religion, and society (absolute spirit).

The chapters on Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and on the *Philosophy of History* discuss objective spirit in greater detail, and the chapter on his lectures on Aesthetics and on Religion further discusses absolute spirit.

I have tried to write this book so that it does not presuppose any previous knowledge of philosophy and still provides a useful orientation to Hegel - an impossible task, perhaps, but many things are impossible until someone does them. If you need help, try Wikipedia, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/>, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at www.iep.utm.edu/, or *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/>.

Finally, Bertolt Brecht "never met a person without a sense of humor who understood Hegel's dialectic."³ Neither have I.

Notes

1 David Carroll, "Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgments," *Diacritics* 14/3 (1984), p. 79.

2 Ibid.

3 Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 111.

2

Hegel's Life and Influences

What I will do in this chapter is to discuss Hegel's life so that readers will have an understanding of the context in which his philosophy is situated. I also want to indicate some of the influences on him. Before proceeding further, however, a brief discussion of context.

A thing is the thing that it is, Hegel believes, as a consequence of the set of relations in which that thing is positioned. Change those relations, change the context, and the thing itself changes and becomes something other than it was. Since the relations are continually changing and, moreover, a relation doesn't form a self-consistent set, things are always on the move. Hegel's context isn't ours. Perhaps, later, readers may decide that it wasn't his either. Nevertheless, that context isn't wholly alien from ours. I intend to insert Hegel in our context, as much as is feasible, so that we comprehend him from our perspective. This will involve situating him in contemporary debates as well as interpretive controversies about the meaning of his texts. Reading Hegel this way risks distorting him, to be sure, but it has two considerable advantages. First, the Hegel we encounter will be more accessible, less strange, than he might otherwise seem. As we progress, we will discover that he becomes less familiar and more interesting. The second advantage is that Hegel will be found to have something to say about contemporary debates. He won't be talking about historical curiosities. Not that he ever did, but explaining why apparent curiosities are actually of decisive importance would require digressions and detours that, while scenic,