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The Location and Purpose of Language on the Way of Despair: 
A Preliminary Understanding of Hegel's Philosophy of Language

By Worth Hawes

Hegel's dialectic is a continual source of irritation.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer

I. Introduction

Hegel is immense. The power and range of his endeavor is still not fully known. In Hegel's philosophy we can see the genesis of a significant number of theoretical avenues subsequently pursued. If the history of philosophy is but a series of footnotes on Plato, as Whitehead attests, then the history of philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is, for the most part, a similar set of interpretations of, reactions to, and elaborations on themes in the Hegelian corpus.

...all the great philosophical ideas of the past century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis—had their beginnings in Hegel; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason, which remains the task of our century.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Taylor 2)

Hegel is the culmination of everything that precedes him and the genesis for whatever follows. Bertrand Russell and others may want to contend that "almost all Hegel's doctrines are false" (Russell 730), yet, if we give any legitimacy at all to Hegel's dialectic, we realize that it is just this sort of refutation that fuels the proliferation of Hegel's truth. In fact, Hegel is nothing without his philosophic opponents; their explicit disagreements with him only further and make clear the extent of his pervasiveness.

1 This paper was originally written for Prof. Abba Lessing's Philosophy 302—The History of Western Philosophy: The 19th Century.
We will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point. In effect, I believe that Hegel's text is necessarily fissured; that it is something more and other than the circular closure of its representation.

—Jacques Derrida (Taylor 1)

The Hegelian project is at once the most intriguing and captivating philosophy, and conversely, the most enigmatic and off-putting. While his influence is unquestionable and the studies of his ideas indispensable, attempting to explicate his wealth of insight is hindered by the apparent opaqueness of his style and logic. But beyond the initial (and probably continual) frustration, there is something to be gained from an analysis of Hegel: the expansion of our consciousness of consciousness.

The densely packed encyclopedic form of Hegel makes it difficult to isolate elements for discussion. Any piece of his thought is enmeshed in a web of totality, which encompasses and necessitates the clarifying of many other terms in order to distinguish the one that we wish to identify. This condition, though, is a testimony to his goal and method. Hegel is a philosopher of the Absolute; everything eventually merges into the same being. And so likewise, it seems that any depiction of this totality would have intrinsic to it a characteristic merging of concepts.

As a means to better understand Hegel, this essay will attempt to locate and establish the purpose of language in his philosophy. The aim of this study is not to study Hegel’s usage of language or to follow language in Spirit’s particular movements, but rather to find Hegel’s description of language and to show what significance and direction it has acquired in his thought. First off, however, a general tour of the Hegelian arena is in order. This aim will be achieved by following a path defined by four key elements in Hegel: the Dialectic, Spirit, the Absolute, and finally, Hegel’s method. As alluded to previously, eventually all these concepts bleed into one—so, clear distinction is a chimerical commodity at best.

II.A. The Dialectic, Spirit, and the Absolute

From the outset of any explication of Hegel, it is of paramount importance to recognize that truth is not exempt from movement and change. Truth is, in effect, a Heraclitean flux. In every grasp of truth, it is necessarily something different from what it has been and what it will be. This insight is of the utmost importance in our concern to solidify our notion of reality. Reality cannot be affixed to a definite immutable shape:
[The conventional opinion] does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive unfolding of truth, but rather sees in it simple disagreements....[philosophic systems'] fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole” (Phenomenology of Spirit; henceforth “PS” 2.).

All the conclusions drawn by philosophy over the centuries are a part of the larger unfolding process of truth. Unaware of truth’s actual nature, history has seen the perpetual debate between truth and falsity. The real truth, however, lies in the process in which one philosophic discovery is the bud that opens in the next formation of ‘truth,’ which itself turns out to be a bud for the next, and so forth.

If everything, including truth, is in constant motion what is the instigator of this change? Hegel’s answer to this question is what he calls, in necessary acknowledgement of previous philosophic thinkers, the ‘dialectic.’ For example: in Plato’s Republic, we see a primitive form, or bud, of what comes to be Hegel’s full-fledged dialectic:

I was just...saying that some things are apt to summon thought, while others are not, defining as apt to summon it those that strike the sense at the same time as their opposites, while all those that do not, are not apt to arouse intellection (203).

The dialectic, as alluded to in the passage, is built on the opposition between a pair of concepts. In consciousness, everything includes with it its negation, its ‘opposite.’ Hegel’s expansion of the dialectic is that it is, in actuality, intrinsic to everything; no object has positive, or expressive, being without some recognition of what it is not. Consequently, all substance is composed of a positive being and its negations. Movement is effected in the overcoming of this polarity. In Hegel’s words:

...the living Substance is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself...Only this selfrestoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness

2 To clear up any potential confusion: citations of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit refer to paragraph number, not page number, and are therefore denoted by a number followed by a period.
within itself—not an original or immediate unity as such—is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual (PS 18.).

Substance is involved in the process of “circular self-pursuit” (Hyppolite 391). In this process, a ‘being-in-itself’ recognizes that its own being is a being identified because of what it is not, its other, the negation of itself. This being-in-itself, without its intrinsic other, or ‘being-for-another,’ is an impossibility: “it is impossible to pose abstract identity without posing otherness” (Hyppolite 392). The being-in-itself has no existence in isolation; it is only an abstraction. In its otherness, it sees itself by virtue of the condition that it, too, is other for this other. “Each has both perspectives in itself” (PS 42.): being-in-itself and being-for-another. Yet in seeing itself in its other, it returns to itself from what it is not and is now ‘being-for-itself.’

This explication is obviously rather ‘abstract’; I will attempt to clarify the subject. Let us use an example on a level more readily available to us, the level of consciousness. I assert myself: i.e., “I am who I am.” Here, I am being-in-itself. This claim means nothing as a lone positive assertion posited by a solitary being. Only when I proclaim this in the presence of an other does it have any validity: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (PS 178.). I have no certain positive existence until the confirmation or recognition of my ‘claim’ by an other; but until then, I am nothing, ‘pure negativity,’ negative existence. And this says nothing of the (linguistic) dialectics involved in the statement, “I am who I am.” The meaning of each word is born out of its negation and subsequent overcoming of it.

The other is indeed instrumental to my becoming sure of myself. At this stage of being recognized by the other, I am being-for-another. And in this stage of being-for-another, my supposed ‘self-determined’ and ‘self-motivated’ essentiality is uncomfortably put in question; as I am ‘for another’, this other can do with me whatever he or she pleases. Here begins what Hegel calls the “life and death struggle” (PS 187.). In this battle, I attempt to destroy or possess the other and thereby establish my self-certainty. I seek to dis-allow their ability to manipulate and distort who I am to myself. But I eventually realize that the other’s certainty is likewise questioned in its relation to me. In this threatening loss of self in the face of the other, however, one actually acquires self. “They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another” (PS 184.). I see myself, my condition, in the face of the other—the other that I recognize as ‘not being’ me. I return
to myself, but now being confirmed in my self-certainty, I am being-for-myself. “This circular movement—this self-pursuit which is the life of the self—is the foundation of Hegel’s dialectical schema” (Hyppolite 385).

This depiction of the dialectic is still too simple. In actuality, this self-pursuit happens over and over again. Also, the circular movement is inherent to any concept in consciousness, not just consciousness. And even more confusing is how smaller dialectical circles simultaneously operate within larger circles—more about this situation later.

What Hegel wants to further show is that this circle of self-pursuit is not only going on at the level of our ‘individual’ existence, but also, and chiefly, at the level of universality. The universal working out/mediation/return of itself is the becoming of ‘Spirit.’ Spirit is the universal life Substance—that which is, in history, coming to know and be certain of itself. Spirit is the subject that is realizing itself in the progressive and organic unfolding of truth. Concretely, Spirit resides in the world and is seen in all its productivity, its assertions: art, philosophy, religion, etc. The movement of Spirit, however, is always necessarily directed and moving into the future. The subjectivity of Spirit “imagines” and “inhabits” an age but then always seeks to move on in its formation maturing “slowly and quietly its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world” (PS 11.).

Spirit, to be sure, is only as strong as its external creations, or assertions. The manifestations of Spirit are the claims of which it wants to be certain: “The power of Spirit is only as great as its expression, its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition” (PS 10.).

Spirit, as with all Substance, is only what it is in its dialectical relation to negativity. In the confrontation with its other, Spirit becomes certain of itself. It risks itself to gain itself. In the face of its negation-nothingness—Spirit grows certain of its Being. Spirit continues to expand itself in time and finally reaches a point of the greatest expanse. It is here that it finds itself and is thus in-and-for-itself (e.g., an other is no longer required to establish self-certainty).

[Spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative...on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being (PS 32.).
And in its culmination, Spirit realizes itself as what Hegel deems the 'Absolute.' The Absolute is the merging of all totality into a single being.

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself (PS 20.).

Spirit is thus the self-supporting, absolute, real being. All previous shapes of consciousness are abstract forms of it. They result from Spirit analyzing itself, distinguishing its moments, and dwelling for a while with each (PS 440.).

Spirit is the universal subject. It is not some mystical entity at all. It is the real life force that guides history in the effort to find and become certain of itself. When, finally, at the end of its dialectical movement, the Spirit has made itself known, everything has been preserved and is present in the Absolute (PS 13.).

It is the whole which, having traversed its content in time and space, has returned into itself, and is the simple resultant simple Notion of the whole. But the actuality of this simple whole consists in those various shapes and forms which have been its moments, and which will now develop and take shape afresh, this time in their new element, in their newly acquired meaning (PS 12.).

Hegel uses (at least) two memorable metaphors in depicting the Absolute: the Bacchanalian revel and the foaming chalice. At the Bacchanalian revel, everyone is drunk and remains in the dance for only a moment. Nevertheless, the motion of the dance continues (PS 47.). The dance is Spirit and each of the individuals makes up a moment of the whole. Any single particular does not constitute the whole, but each is a necessary moment in the organic unfolding of the dance, which is nothing without the individuals. Hegel concludes his opus with the metaphor of the foaming chalice. The Absolute is a chalice overflowing with being, from which foams infinitude (PS 808.). Everything has become one and the same being in the Absolute. All dialectical opposition ceases: time and eternity become identical, and so do being and nothingness; the in-
itself is merged with the for-itself, resulting in the in-and-for-itself. “When the negation itself is negated, opposition is overcome and opposites are reconciled” (Taylor 2). The Absolute is the recognition and joyful swirling of everything in Spirit’s exposition of itself.

II.B. Hegel’s Method

...the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about. The aim by itself is a lifeless universal, just as the guiding tendency is a mere drive that as yet lacks an actual existence; and the bare result is the corpse which has left the guiding tendency behind (PS 3.).

Hegel, in his method, is like the consummate improvisational musician. His technique is impeccable and he is always attentive to the present development of his artful creation. Recognizing that the ‘truth shape’ necessarily changes in time, he proposes a method that aims to get inside truth and to move organically with it—like an improvisor amidst the changing texture of sound. Consequently, Hegel’s ‘truth’ is always something new. By pushing the limits of our understanding of any philosophic position, he finds that we move entirely into a new perspective, but still an intrinsic outgrowth of the one before. There is a “necessary progression and interconnection” between “the unreal forms of consciousness” (PS 79.). The Phenomenology of Spirit is the process of internally following these “patterns of consciousness” (PS 89.) on their way to the one real consciousness—Absolute consciousness.

Each stage of consciousness’ growth is “burdened with something alien” (PS 89.). But as these forms of consciousness are in a fluid relationship with one another, they all lead to the same end: “the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself” (PS 80.). The necessary course of consciousness will “by itself bring to pass the completion of the series” (PS 79.) The end to this movement of truth is ‘Absolute Knowledge.’

The experience of itself which consciousness goes through can, in accord-
dance with the Notion, comprehend nothing less than the entire system of consciousness, or the entire realm of truth of Spirit...And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this, its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself (PS 89.).
For Hegel, Science becomes the project that will expand one’s consciousness to such an extent. In truth, it is only through Science that Spirit comes to know itself at all (PS 27.). There is nothing sedate about this method; Hegel has no delusions. (Well...that’s probably debatable.) Hegel calls the journey of consciousness “the way of despair” (PS 78.)—which is most definitely a fitting tribute to his endeavor. If one is to follow the method of Hegel, one is forced to “surrender to,” to “lose oneself” (PS 3.) in the dialectical movement of consciousness. One cannot remain on the outside and remain faithful to the project at the same time. It is imperative that one immerses oneself in the organic unfolding. There is nothing to hold onto in the way of despair except anticipation of the goal, the Absolute: “short of it no satisfaction is to be found at any of the stations along the way” (PS 80.). This process is, as Hegel claims, a “violence” (PS 80.). It is never a peaceful road until the joyful, and ironically, tranquil chaos of the Absolute is reached. And until then, it is a road paved only with opposition and change.

...existence is really the perversion of every determinateness into its opposite, and it is only this alienation that is the essential nature and support of the whole (PS 491.).

III. Hegel on Language

Hegel’s philosophy of language is no less provocative than the rest of his system. Characteristically, language is tied up with multiple other factors and, therefore, discriminating a ‘pure’ philosophy of language takes some doing. Again, what this essay attempts to do is locate the place of language in Hegel’s system and discern its function in the dialectical unfolding of Spirit. Hegel’s use of language and the specific movements of language would also provide for interesting studies and would as well be required for a comprehensive explication of Hegel’s linguistic philosophy, but, for the sake of a succinct and directed focus, these other issues will not be taken up here.

In the Philosophy of History, Hegel states: “In speech man is productive; it is the first externality that he gives himself, the simplest form of existence he reaches in consciousness” (Burbidge 86-7). In essence, what this passage is stating is that the first self-conscious recognition of one’s own existence is by the means of language. What appears (and I will explain why I say ‘appears’ very shortly) as the most immediate recognition of one’s individual self is linguistic expression. Language is required for thinking in general. “Thoughts...are formal determinations of the mind which cannot exist for the subject
without words. Language...is absolutely necessary for our thoughts: ‘we think in names’" (Houlgate 142).

Language also allows us to be for others.

...it is the real existence of the pure self as self; in speech, self-consciousness, *qua independent separate individuality*, comes into existence as such, so that it exists for others. Otherwise the ‘I,’ this *pure ‘I,’* is non-existent, is not there...(PS 508.).

We make ourselves known to others in the articulation of our thoughts. If I utter nothing, there is no outward expression of my selfsame selfconsciousness. I, as consciousness, fail to outwardly exist. And considering that I need an outward projection of myself to be recognized by an other and therefore establish self-certainty, without language I would really have no existence at all. One critic points out that in a more developed moment of Spirit, linguistic assertion actually replaces physical combat in the ‘life and death struggle’ (Burbidge 88).

Language, at this stage of expression, reflects my certainty. I attach my individual being to the articulations, internal or external, that I make about myself. But any careful analysis of this condition causes me to dialectically move and thereby puts my certainty in jeopardy. Language is, in truth, “clever and witty” (PS 521.). Language does not allow me to stabilize my particular being at all; rather it points me in a totally different direction.

The ‘I’ of which I initially want to be sure is the immediate ‘I,’ the sensuous ‘I,’ the ‘I’ that I see, feel, hear, and smell.

But language, as we see is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true content alone, it is just not possible for us to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean (PS 97.).

Language is inherently universal (PS 110.). I might think that I mean a particular being, but in my thought or articulation, I express nothing that is not universal in nature. Hegel, in his discussion of ‘Sense Certainty,’ even makes it clear that attempts to capture any ‘external’ particular employing conventional signs such as “this,” ”now,” “here,” or physically pointing to an object fail to reach what they mean (PS 110.). As signs, these gestures are not the object itself and can legitimately refer to a huge variety of things (e.g., ‘this’
pencil, ‘this’ computer, ‘now’...‘now,’ etc.). Even the terms “particular” or “being-in-itself” are universal signifiers which have no direct reference to the individual being that we could mean.

In the actual attempt to say it, it would crumble away; those who started to describe [a particular] would not be able to complete the description, but would be compelled to leave it to others, who would themselves finally have to admit to speaking about something which is not (PS 110.).

Language’s repudiation of our intention is its divine, or absolute, essence (Heidegger 64). Language refuses to submit to our individual caprices and innate to it is a channeling of each self-consciousness toward the Absolute goal.

Language—which has the divine nature of directly reversing the meaning of what is said, of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant get into words at all (PS 110.).

Language not only points us in the opposite direction, but is also the true foundation of ‘Sense Certainty’ (Lamb 290). When Hegel says, “Language...is the more truthful,” implicit is this position. I may say that I immediately intuit a tree, for example. But in reality, this tree is not even available to my consciousness until I have a name for that sense impression. Another example: I want to call any five words in a row a ‘glib.’ Well, until I had a word for it, I could never sense a ‘glib,’ but now I am faced with an abundance of them. In the action of putting the word ‘glib’ in to the referential totality of language, it acquired a meaning prior to any sensory experience. And as with all language it refers to a universal not any particular.

Consequently, what is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant [but is not actually expressed] (PS 110.).

Language is the cornerstone of the reasoning consciousness (perhaps redundant), and that which is not named is unavailable to consciousness and therefore has no reality. Language is the possibility of Truth. “Truth itself has the capacity to realize itself (make itself known) via speech” (Harvey 287). In every utterance or statement—conscious engagement and/or employment of language—what we are referring to is a complex
structure of reference which is prior to any thinking, to a totality that is bigger and more 'truthful' than any particular.

Our next question is: why do we begin to speak at all? To answer this riddle, we now need to take a step back and look at the bearer of language: Culture.

Spirit, in the unfolding of itself, by necessity, splits into two opposing but dialectically enmeshed worlds: "the Aether of pure consciousness" and its alienation, "the world of reality" (PS 487.). This is the process of dialectical 'self-othering' which was noted in the first section of the paper. The actuality of the world of consciousness "rests on the process in which [it] divests itself of its personality" (PS 488.). This productive divesting of itself is what Hegel calls 'Culture.' Living Substance cannot help but posit its other, or alienate itself. Never would it realize itself otherwise. At this point, harkening back to the circular movement of the dialectic, this factor becomes apparent: the world, as other, is something that opposes consciousness (Spirit) and, consequently, consciousness seeks to possess world. Culture is the product of consciousness in the effort to overcome the chasm. The individual is the real actuality of this turmoil: "This externalization is...both the purpose and existence of the individual" (PS 489.). The individual exists as a moment of Spirit but also as the means to further the othering of Spirit in culture, to hasten Spirit's identification of itself. "...culture is the simple soul of the substance by means of which, what is implicit in the substance, acquires an acknowledged, real existence" (PS 490.).

Dialectically understood, the individual is at once looking at culture as "a solid and fixed reality over against it" (PS 490.) but also as the means by which it attains "standing and actuality" (PS 489.). This condition is daunting to the individual—his essentiality is in question—and, like Spirit, it sets out to possess its other, culture. (To draw a schematic: this phenomena is one in which a smaller dialectical circle othering and overcoming [individual-culture] is produced by and within a larger circle [Spirit-World].) This task, however, is an impossibility.

The particularity of a nature which becomes purpose and content is something powerless and unreal; it is a 'kind' of being which vainly and ridiculously strains every nerve to get going; it is the contradiction of giving to what is particular an actuality which is immediately a universal (PS 489.).

The individual is not real existence; it is an unreachable particular. As Hegel pronounces it, the individual is an "imagined existence" that tries to exist in someone's mind (PS 489.). The particular individual has no expression and therefore no actuality. A mediation/overcoming of the two, the individual and culture, is set in motion.
...the process in which the individuality moulds itself by culture is, therefore, at the same time the development of it as the universal, objective essence, i.e., the development of the actual world (PS 490.).

The overcoming of man's alienation in culture is brought about through language.

According to Hegel, language is that exteriority—which will allow us to understand the world of culture, the world of Spirit alien to itself (Hyppolite 402).

A simple way, and perhaps the most appropriate way, to watch this overcoming of the individual's alienation is to do a Hegelian analysis of Descartes' first 'indubitable' principle. *Cogito ergo sum* no longer means what we have always taken it to mean (Lamb 295): I, the particular individual, become certain of myself in the process of becoming aware of my own thinking. Obviously, for Hegel, the 'I' cannot be a particular 'I': anyone can say the *Cogito*. The divine power of language again points us to the universal. In saying the supposed particular 'I' we invoke the universal 'I'.

*Language*...contains [the 'I'] in its purity, it alone expresses the 'I,' the 'I' itself. This *real* existence of the 'I' is, *qua* real existence, an objectivity which has in it the true nature of the 'I'. The 'I' is this particular 'I'—but equally the universal 'I' (PS 508.).

The particular 'I' may utter itself, but it 'vanishes' as soon as it does. In speaking it becomes alienated to itself as it loses its particular self in language, the universal (PS 508.). While this episode looks like the ultimate annihilation of individual power to the self-consciousness of the late twentieth century, for Hegel it is a monumentous and much-welcomed occasion. Jean Hyppolite characterizes the justification for such jubilation:

The two opposing terms, the self of consciousness and the universal, become identified with each other in language—spirit's logos which makes the I a universal and by that very fact makes the universal an I. The function of language is precisely to say the I, to make the I itself a universal. Thus language is a moment of the spirit; it is the logos, the middle term of intelligences...I simultaneously express myself and alienate myself;
I become objective...that universal self-consciousness which results from
the alienation of the specific self is precisely what is to be realized. And
language alone can realize it (403).

It is not that the individual is swallowed by culture. No, as a dialectical relation, the two
are overcome and a new being is born; both are now recognized as functions of the Universal.

What appears here as the power and authority of the individual exercised
over the substance, which is thereby superseded, is the same thing as the
actualization of substance (PS 490.).

The individual in every production and utterance is always engaged in actualizing the
universal Spirit. It is intrinsic to the nature of language that Spirit is to be realized
(Hyppolite 402; see also Harvey 287).

To put it most emphatically: the self can only truly discover itself as a universal
being (Hyppolite 403). In language, the 'individual' is taken into Spirit and begins to
move with it toward the Absolute.

If we choose now to look at the history of philosophy as a series of linguistic
utterances, which we should, we then see the history of philosophy as the history of Spirit
externalizing and coming to recognize itself again through language. Philosophy is the
"systematic continuity of utterances which gradually brings that structure [of thought] to
full self-manifestation and self-articulation" (Houlgate 150). As the dialectical circle of
circles, philosophy is the explicit explication of Spirit and the self-recollection of the
whole (PS 47.). "...the Spirit makes intelligible to Spirit in language what is already
implicit in the Spirit itself" (Hegel's Aesthetics, hereafter "HA"; 796).

For Hegel: "What is reasonable is actual; and what is actual is reasonable" ("What
is Philosophy?" 23). Anything that can be known can or will be expressible in words.
That which is not sayable is not real.

Spirit in the last resort is only satisfied when it has permeated all the
products of its activity with thought too, and so only then has made them
its own (HA 13).

The last statement could also say that Spirit is not completely satisfied until it has uttered
everything that it encompasses. Only in language does Spirit become sure of its expanse. Language is the existence of Spirit (PS 652.).

IV. Evaluation and Criticism

Hegel’s Absolute is a major proposition—to say the least. I, at this stage of my ‘Hegelian development,’ find it impossible to comprehend or believe in this rational totality. But at times, the optimism of Hegel does appear compelling enough to convince me merely to get on the ‘way of despair’ and hold on tight (except, there’s only ‘nothing’ to hold on to, of course). The dialectic is a brilliant process that does seem to crystallize consciousness. Consciousness necessarily does change in time in the process of self-recognition, but I must contend that Consciousness, the Individual Consciousness, never rises above its own estranged position. Consequently, while I would give support to many of Hegel’s initial treatments of language, I also fail to find any validity in his attempt to establish language as a primary Spiritual conduit to Absolute consciousness.

In a moment of sensation, as Hegel correctly points out, I cannot grasp the particular in language. Instead, I am employing a tool from an elaborate system of reference which is not solely my own. Furthermore, it is only the sign that allows me to rationally take hold of the sensation. Language definitely precedes me and my awareness of anything, internal or external, that is or will be fixed in reason. Language is the building block of reason and self-awareness.

Where does language take us though?—that is the real question. It does make logical sense to conclude that if I say ‘I,’ I am not in a linguistic sense referring to the particular ‘I.’ The sign ‘I,’ which any self-consciousness can say or write, only refers to other symbols which are also general in nature. So, when Hegel says there is more truth in language, he says this to show that the only legitimate way to recognize oneself is as a universal self: language is universal and therefore, the one who uses it to understand himself is obviously universal as well. Again, logically this reasoning makes sense. Intuitively (in the common colloquial sense), however, there is something wrong with this picture.

From here to my grave, every time I utter ‘I’ (as I just did), I will be referring to the particular individual ‘I’ that I know myself as, not some logically construed universal. I realize that when ‘I’ is abstractly taken as a sign, it does say the opposite of what I ‘mean.’ But in truth, I do ‘mean’ something concretely particular. This meaning points beyond the possibilities of language. We do not remain trapped in language as Hegel’s schema finally leaves us. There is a ‘pre-linguistic’ or ‘a-linguistic’ realm that does have permanent
actuality. This condition, if it is to be attributed anything, is due more to a lapse in the structure of reason and language than it is to a overactive imagination.

As a side note: the previous paragraph does not even begin to mention the problems Hegel faces concerning the particularity of languages. There really is no universal language. So even if Hegel is right, it seems that the greatest universality achievable would be a universality related to a specific language. For Hegel, this end would be unacceptable; his philosophy of the whole can know no boundaries along the lines of particular languages. Not being a linguist, I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt here, but I leave to others more qualified to make a definitive statement.

Hegel, in his over-zealous effort to draw the ultimate synthesis, forgot to recognize imperfection—the imperfection that refuses to be merged with the perfect. Language, and therefore reason as well, is an imperfection of this sort. These two elements will never be able to grasp it all. From the first instance of sense certainty, language is unable to encompass all of reality—rational meaning, yes, but all meaning, no. Hegel's philosophy, for all its attempts to remain immanent and concrete, ends up quite empty: a conclusion that is foreseeable from the first discussion of language in Hegel.

This flaw in language is so abundantly clear. We are faced with examples of it all the time—in saying 'someone's' name, in sitting in 'this' chair, in typing on 'this' computer. I mean something real that language cannot reach. Contrary to Hegel, truth does reside with the ineffable. Let me use another example that strikes close to home for all of us. Unless there is a flaw in language, sex is impossible—a predicament which is obviously not the case. In a sexual union, two particular individuals are engaged. To be sure, as soon as a description of the passion is to be initiated, one realizes that all the words that one is using refer to other words or, at best, actions in which any two people can engage. There is no denying the activity that has transpired; there is the problem, however, of authentically encapsulating the episode in words. It cannot be done. Language fails to grasp the particularity and actuality of the individuals and their passionate act. In passing, let me say that sex becomes a real dilemma in Hegel if in the end all is one. Let us hope that his answer to the problem is be found elsewhere than in a Freudian interpretation of the terminal image of the Phenomenology, the lone foaming chalice. How provocative, ironic, and telling it is if the organic unfolding of the Absolute is actually Spirit, or Hegel himself, in the throes of a masturbatory climax.

The individual remains in a dialectical relation to language throughout life. This condition is not overcome. At times, language 'masters' me, but at other times, I 'master' language. Recognizing this situation, I can give Hegel credit for one aspect of his project. In the Phenomenology, Hegel, employing his mastery of language, is coming to recognize
himself. Hegel is othering himself by writing his philosophy. He is painting a self-portrait in order to better recognize himself. The Spirit and Unity moving throughout Hegel’s work is Hegel himself, nothing more or nothing less. He is the continuity of history; he is unfolding. In language, we are allowed to paint such beautiful pictures of ourselves. He has made language work for him.

As Nietzsche would thematize later in the century, Hegel was involved in the conversion of his life into literature. His life is the text that he interpreted in the Phenomenology. And as such, his product is a work of art. May we all live to create, in even just the smallest resemblance, an image of ourselves so magnificent.

The only thing that comes back to itself is the particular self that can be with particular others. Hegel, as a human being existentially like any of the rest of us, cannot help but to find (or not find) only himself at the end of his way of despair. We each have our own way, and on it our particular spirit pervades everything. The effort of making sense of the whole is a journey unique to every individual, not so unique as to prevent others from finding the truth in Hegel’s own journey, but unique enough to challenge the necessity of Universal Spirit in Hegel.

Hegel deserves respect. But only as an other in alienation can I come to know and praise him. ‘Here’ (in this particular paper), we see the movement of my knowledge towards a mediation of our philosophical positions. I still remain convinced, however, that we will never totally merge. We remain estranged from one another—a predicament that crystallizes my existence forever and always. (Finitude and eternity never merge.) To conclude: knowledge exists only in estrangement. The Spirit of Hegel really has nothing to return to if estrangement is ever overcome.

If all knowledge were knowledge of the universe as a whole, there would be no knowledge

—Bertrand Russell (745)

Works Cited


