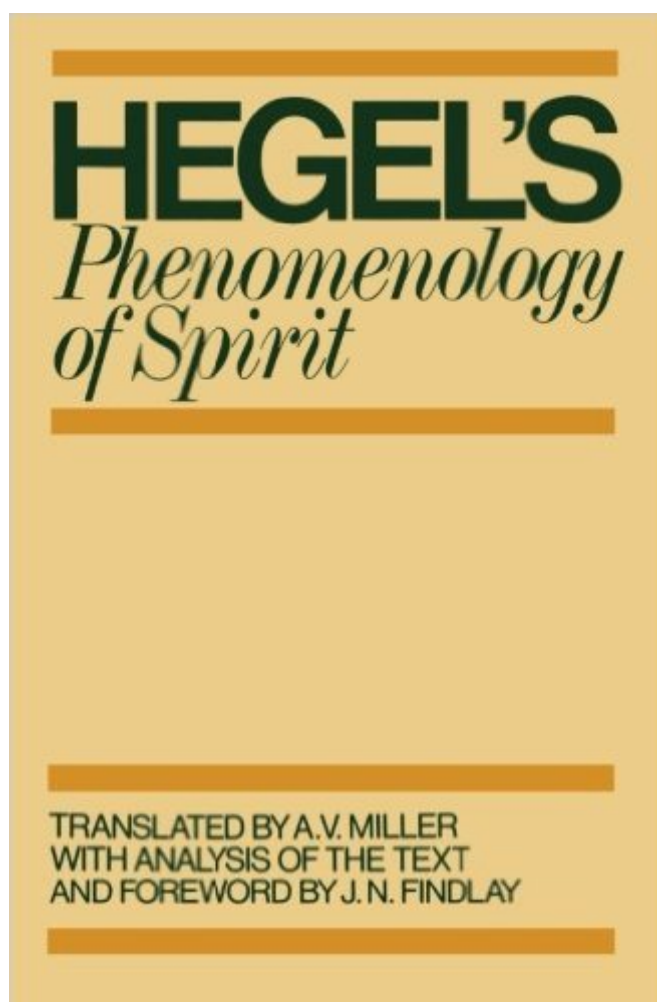


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# Phenomenology Of Spirit



## Synopsis

This brilliant study of the stages in the mind's necessary progress from immediate sense-consciousness to the position of a scientific philosophy includes an introductory essay and a paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the text to help the reader understand this most difficult and most influential of Hegel's works.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The following comments pertain to the Miller translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* published by Oxford University Press. Arguably the *Phenomenology* is one of the most significant works in modern philosophy, certainly in German idealism. While clearly an important work, even by the arcane standards of German idealism it is a difficult read for the non-Hegelian. And, can be nearly impenetrable if approached without the assistance of a skilled guide (or two). The following comments are limited to the respective quality of the Oxford University Press edition, and, to offer some potential resources that may be helpful for readers new to Hegel.

First. In addition to the text of the *Phenomenology* a foreword and para by para commentary by Findlay is also included. Though he is a capable thinker, Findlay's commentary is rather terse and may be of limited help to first time readers. From a physical stand point, while the font is of an adequate size, the margins are relatively small and not conducive to copious note making.

Second. With regard to additional resources, Robert Stern's commentary in the Routledge *Philosophy Guidebook* series is quite good as a starting. It is readable, short, and clear - not overly laden with technical jargon and its citations

are referenced to the Miller translation. A modest drawback to Stern is the lack of a glossary. Hegelian terminology can be difficult and some assistance in this regard would be useful. More advanced students may wish to augment Stern with a more detailed commentary from the likes of Harris, Hyppolite or Lauer. Third, J. Bernstein has a wonderful yearlong graduate-level course discussing the Phenomenology available on-line for no cost at [BernsteinTapes.com](http://BernsteinTapes.com). Kudos to the folks who have made this available it is an outstanding resource. Overall, this is a solid version of the Phenomenology that offers good value to the purchaser.

It doesn't make any sense to rate this work at anything less than 5 stars, since it's one of the most influential works of the last 200 years. It was written in 1806, and it is Hegel's attempt to demonstrate the systematic way in which human experience develops, from its simplest roots in sensory life to its highest fulfilment in scientific, political and religious experience. This was a work that took Kant's revolutionary insights and produced a new philosophy of the human person that prefigured the developments of Marx, Freud, existentialism, deconstruction and so on. Human experience is here understood in a rigorously anti-reductive way: Hegel will not allow meaningful dimensions of human experience to be ignored in the way that they typically are in too-facile theories of experience (like sense-data empiricism, physicalist reductionism, possessive individualism, etc.). Experience is also understood dynamically: because of its own internal reason, experience develops into progressively more complex forms. It is a masterful work, and it takes years of serious study to master this book. It is a very difficult book to work with, because it is written in a very daunting manner, which means it is not realistic to imagine reading it outside of a university course in which someone can lead you into the reading of Hegel's phenomenology. This translation by Miller is also imperfect. This translation was meant as an improvement to the older Baillie translation but, while this one is marginally more "literal," it does not do as good a job as Baillie at communicating the sense of what's being said. If you can only have one translation, this is probably the better choice, but if you are studying the book seriously, I highly recommend hunting down a copy of Baillie's translation as well.

Everyone agrees that the Phenomenology of Spirit is a frustratingly difficult book. It is also, in my humble opinion, one of the most important and brilliant works of philosophy ever written. I want to emphasize "important" because there are plenty of people who are willing to grant that the work is a work of genius, but who would still deny it any enduring relevance or importance. I think that many of Hegel's insights have become so common place that Hegel is not always given the credit he

deserves for them. The critics of Hegel are often unaware of the debt they owe to Hegel in regard to certain ideas that they simply take for granted, but before I get to that, I want to say a few words about why this book is so difficult. This review turned out to be much longer than I anticipated so I have broken it up into three sections. In the first section I try to give some sense for why I believe the difficulty of this book is necessary and could not have been avoided. I will be defending Hegel from the charge of willful obscurantism. In the second section I attempt to provide a brief (and woefully inadequate) summary of some of the ideas in this book, especially ideas that I think are of enduring relevance. And in the third section I provide a very brief list of some helpful secondaries on Hegel.

### WHY HEGEL IS SO DIFFICULT

All philosophy is difficult. I think what frustrates people about Hegel is their belief that he is being willfully obscure. It often appears as if Hegel is trying his best to make sure that no one is able to understand him, or that he is simply dressing up simple insights in extremely convoluted language. I think this is a mistake. I do not believe that Hegel is being obscure for no reason, nor do I believe that it would have been possible for Hegel to present his ideas more clearly than he did. The difficulty was inescapable. There are two primary reasons for that. The first reason this book is so difficult is because Hegel is operating at a very high conceptual level. He is operating with pure concepts, and Hegel is aware that most people do not feel at home in pure concepts. In his *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences With the Zusatze* (With the Zusatze; Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences With the Zusatze) Hegel writes "In our ordinary consciousness thoughts are affected by and united with the sensible and the spiritual material with which we are familiar" (27). Hegel gives the example of a simple judgment "This leaf is green". This judgment contains a number of pure categories. It contains the category singularity ("this"), being ("is"), and quality ("green"). These categories are given as united with sensible content, but in philosophy, Hegel argues, we attempt to think these pure categories without the sensible material they are usually united with and, in this situation, Hegel writes "consciousness feels as if...the very ground, where it stands solidly and is at home, has been pulled from under it" (27). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel attempts to trace the path that consciousness travels from Sense-Certainty up to Absolute Knowledge. This process proceeds through dialectical movements. The simplest form of this movement is from "being-in-itself" to "being-for-itself" to "being-in-and-for-itself". This movement gets replayed over and over throughout the *Phenomenology*. So why does Hegel present it in such abstract terms? Is he just trying to make things difficult? There is no doubt, when you are reading the *Phenomenology*, that Hegel is often alluding to real historical events (Greece, Rome, the Enlightenment, the Terror, etc.). So why doesn't he just present these in all their empirical detail? Why does he attempt to present them in

terms of their pure conceptual development? I do not think that Hegel is simply being difficult for the sake of being difficult. Hegel wants to avoid the temptation to simply identify these conceptual movements with actual historical movements. It would be a mistake, for example, to treat the dialectical movements in the chapter on the Enlightenment as nothing but a description of the historical Enlightenment. There were Enlightenment thinkers before and after the historical Enlightenment, and their thought will necessarily enact the same dialectic. Hegel wants to avoid the mistake of treating the Enlightenment dialectic as something that happened at a particular time and is now done with. This is, I believe, why Hegel ascends to the purely conceptual. It can be quite helpful, when reading Hegel, to try to "fill in" the empirical/historical detail he is leaving out. You need to know "Hegel is talking about Rome now" or "Hegel is talking about feudalism now". This will help overcome, to some degree, the dizziness of operating with pure concepts by giving the reader some ground to stand on. Though one should always try to rise above that empirical ground to grasp the pure conceptual movement that is illustrated within it. Good secondaries can be quite helpful in that regard. The second reason this book is so difficult is because Hegel is attempting to say something new. Hegel is trying to work out a notion of substance as subject, and this is something that had never been done before. Hegel has to find a way to express in language a notion of reality as Spirit coming to know itself through a process of alienation and re-appropriation. This is why his language becomes so convoluted with terms like "reflecting itself back into itself", "pure negativity", etc.. This problem arises whenever someone tries to say something original or new and is not specific to Hegel. This is how language works, which is why I do not think it is entirely fair to criticize Hegel for his obscure language. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Prose of the World* makes the point that if language were what many people take it to be, words with exact significations (Ideas in the Platonic sense), then we could never learn anything new from anyone else. If language communicated merely by awakening within the listener pure significations which the listener already possessed in their purity, then no one could ever tell us anything we did not already know (which is probably why Plato conceived knowledge as recollection). This is how language often functions in our daily life. When we say things like "I am going to the store" for example. But when language is functioning authentically, or creatively, "it is not a simple invitation to the listener or reader to discover in himself significations that were already there. It is rather the trick whereby the writer or orator, touching on these significations already present in us, makes them yield strange sounds" (13). Hegel certainly carries this to an extreme. He uses words that we are all familiar with "negation", "reflection", "self-certainty", "essence", etc. but he makes them yield strange sounds. That is probably the main reason Hegel is so difficult. There is no easy way around that.

One cannot, as so many people seem to demand, simply "translate" Hegel into our everyday speech, while leaving the sense unchanged. It is necessary to learn the language, and the only way to really learn the language is to simply live with it for awhile. You cannot learn a foreign language by simply "translating" that language into your mother tongue. You only really understand a language when it is no longer necessary to "translate". The same is true of Hegel. It can be helpful to read "translations" at first, but at some point you need to learn to read Hegel's own language, and eventually you will find it is no longer necessary to translate, and the whole notion that Hegel is expressing himself poorly will disappear.

HEGEL'S ENDURING INSIGHTS

I am not really qualified to offer a detailed summary of this book. It would also be impossible to offer such a summary in such a short space. What makes Hegel worth reading are all the rich insights that one gets reading this text, but that cannot be easily summarized. Reading this book will change the way you think about many things. There are, of course, certainly aspects of Hegel's philosophy that are dead. I think his teleological understanding of history is probably no longer a viable position. Even when one disagrees with Hegel's conclusions, however, he still raises some very important, and enduring questions (Is absolute knowledge possible? What is the relation between religion and philosophy? Is it possible to have a society of free individuals without alienation? and many more). It would, however, be a mistake to simply equate "Hegel's philosophy" with "Hegel's conclusions". It is simply impossible to present Hegel's philosophy as a simple list of his "positions". Hegel seems to believe that any truly comprehensive philosophy must be capable of accounting for every possible philosophical position within itself and Hegel tries to do that in this work (this is one of the most exciting aspects of this book in my opinion). You will find nearly every possible philosophical position represented somewhere in this book, including positions that actually post-date Hegel (Stoicism, Skepticism, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Rousseau, Nietzsche, utilitarianism, positivism, etc.). From the standpoint of Hegel's system all of these "positions" are comprehensible and "true" in their own, one-sided, way. For Hegel, if your own "philosophical position" is incapable of accounting for the fact that someone else might adopt a "contrary position" then your position is not yet comprehensive enough. It is still too one-sided. It would be a mistake, therefore, to reduce Hegel's philosophy to a particular position. One of Hegel's most enduring insights was his insight into the fact that one-sided positions tend to be inseparable from their opposites, and so any one-sided resolution is impossible. A number of Hegel's insights have now become commonplace, and tend to be accepted even by Hegel's fiercest critics, though they often fail to give Hegel the credit he deserves. For example, Hegel was the first to really introduce history into philosophy. Philosophy has a history, general world-views have histories, concepts have histories, and philosophies cannot

be viewed in isolation from their social/historical context. This is often simply taken for granted now, but was not at all taken for granted before Hegel. This is a notion that is still very much with us and a part of contemporary debate (in the debates about Thomas Kuhn's paradigms, for example, and in debates about historicism and cultural relativism). Hegel was also one of the first to realize that consciousness itself developed, both historically and individually. Before Hegel consciousness, or the soul, was generally treated as a substance that possessed certain distinct "faculties". The soul did not develop historically, however, since human beings possessed the same set of faculties in Aristotle's time as they did in the time of Kant (there was, of course, debate about what those faculties were, but there were few people claiming that the "faculties" changed through time). Hegel realized that consciousness was something that changed through history. Hegel was a kind of precursor of developmental psychology. Hegel also realized the importance of alienation in the process of development. Moral development requires, for example, a stage where the customs of one's own society come to be seen as "alien", and only if we pass through that stage of alienation from our own culture, can we become individuals in the true sense of the term. This, to me, is one of Hegel's most interesting and enduring insights. Hegel also developed an insight from Fichte, that the distinctions between self and not-self are distinctions which are themselves made by the self. Hegel realized that in different forms of consciousness this distinction was made differently. At one stage the in-itself might be viewed as force, while in another stage it might be viewed as God or moral law. The in-itself, therefore, is always an in-itself for us. I think this insight is being rediscovered in systems theory, in the work of Niklas Luhmann, for example, in his book *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. So do not let anyone tell you Hegel is dead. People who make that claim are usually associating Hegel's name with positions that he never held in the first place (subjective idealism, for example).

HELPFUL

SECONDARY There have been a ton of books written about Hegel and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and I have not even read the tiniest fraction of the available English language scholarship on Hegel, but these are a few books I found helpful in my reading of the *Phenomenology*. In the *Spirit of Hegel* by Robert Solomon. Solomon's book is very accessible, and it has a good, long introduction which provides the historical/philosophical context for Hegel's philosophy (Kant, Fichte, Schiller, etc.). For both of those reasons this is a very good introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology* for those reading it for the first time. One should, however, take the title of Solomon's book seriously. It is written in the SPIRIT of Hegel. Solomon himself claims that his reading is not bound by the letter of Hegel. Solomon himself is most famous for his Nietzsche interpretations, and when he says in the SPIRIT of Hegel, he seems to also mean in the SPIRIT of Nietzsche. Solomon reads Hegel as a

Nietzschean critic of all other-worldliness. It is certainly possible to read Hegel in that way, and there is textual support for it, but it is not the only way to read Hegel. So the first time reader should use Solomon to get some sense of what Hegel is up to, but should take what Solomon says with a grain of salt.

Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit" by Jean Hyppolite. This book is probably the most famous book on the Phenomenology of Spirit, and for good reason. It is a classic.

Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit by Alexandre Kojève. This is another very famous book on the Phenomenology. It provides a superb analysis of the Master-Slave dialectic, but one should take this book with a grain of salt as well. Kojève was a Marxist, and he tends to read Hegel through his Marxist lens, and he tends to view the entire Phenomenology through the lens of the Master-Slave dialectic.

Hegel's Ladder (Two Vol. Set: The Pilgrimage of Reason; The Odyssey of Spirit) (Vol 1) by H.S. Harris. I wish that every major philosophy book had a commentary of this caliber. Harris goes through the Phenomenology paragraph by paragraph. Harris first attempts to "translate" each paragraph into more understandable language, and then he provides a lengthy commentary on each paragraph. It is a monster of a book, much longer than the Phenomenology itself, and is probably not a book to sit down and read cover to cover, but it can be EXTREMELY helpful when you are working with particular sections of the Phenomenology. I would also recommend that the reader take advantage of Findlay's commentary which is contained in the back of Miller's translation of the Phenomenology. The first time I tried to read the Phenomenology I was not even aware that Findlay's commentary existed, but it is often quite helpful. Good luck!

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