

December 13, 1961

Dear Richard Portes:

One of the reasons for the delay in commenting on your paper on Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND was, I must admit at once, my shock at the approach to that most encyclopedic mind of all of Europe—G.W.F. Hegel—taught at Yale. Perhaps that proves that I am not a "full" Hegelian because I lack his patience as well as full cognizance of the pettiness of the academic world or self-styled "representatives" of the minds of men. I have now reread Hegel's attitude and will scrupulously follow it. We may rest assured that it is the nature of truth to force its way to recognition when the time comes....it is very often necessary to distinguish the public from those who take upon themselves to be its representatives and spokesmen. The public takes up an attitude in many respects quite different from the latter, indeed, even opposed to them. Whereas the public good-naturedly and generously will rather take the blame upon itself when a philosophical work is not quite acceptable or intelligible to it, these "representatives", on the contrary, convinced of their own competence, put all the blame on the authors. The influence of the work on the public is more silent than the action of those 'representatives', who are like the dead burying their dead." (pp.129-130)

Fine. Instead of being concerned with style, I will go directly to the aim, content, the historic sweep of the PHENOMENOLOGY which Hegel called his "voyage of discovery." Unless you are ready to embark on such a voyage, it is, of course, impossible to see what he discovered. Abstractions will not do. For example, you write that "Hegel intends to lead us to his own formulation of an all-encompassing absolute idealism." What, precisely, to the words, "absolute idealism" mean? In the ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCES Hegel means the fact that he must call the "end" of his system the "Absolute Idea" because "It is certainly possible to indulge in a vast amount of senseless declamation about the idea absolute." (par.237) Kant, Jacobi, Schelling, Fichte were all "absolute idealists"—and yet Hegel broke from them all, breaking more decisively from some than from others, but breaking with all because of the introversion of German idealism, escaping the realities of the objective world. He appreciated "the great merit of Kant", his rediscovery of the dialectic, his appreciation of the dignity of thought as against the English empiricists who saw only the sensuous, the tangible, "experience"—but the dichotomy between thought and thing remained; the challenge of the times were not met: "there are no traces in Logic of the new spirit which has arisen both in Learning and in Life." (p.35, SCIENCE OF LOGIC, Vol.I) As for the other philosophers I mentioned, Schelling and Fichte came to the absolute, says Hegel, like a "shot out of a pistol" (PHENOMENOLOGY, p.89) with none of the "strenuous toil" and "some feeling for "the immanent rhythm" needed to enable philosophy to meet the challenge of the objective world while Jacobi was an outright "reactionary."

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If you limit yourself to the Preface, just the Preface, of the PHENOMENOLOGY you cannot escape his concern for the objective world, "the thing", and his disgust with the subjectivism of the philosophers: "our epoch is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things hitherto prevailing, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation. It is indeed never at rest..." (p.75) It is impossible not to see the concrete, the historic and the present underlying Hegel's simplest abstractions. He is talking of the period in which he lived, (and as he put the finishing chapter to the PHENOMENOLOGY Napoleon was approaching Prussia)—the break-up of feudalism, the Great French Revolution, the birth of new gods, "Freedom", "Reason" to which all the intellectuals drank great toasts, only never to acquire "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative" (p.31) that was necessary, to be as creative in thought as the masses proved to be creative in action.

The ivory balls are too bent on abstractions, eager to skip the concrete, and proceed to "the next" generalizations to stop to listen to "the immanent rhythm"

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of the world about them, much less the music of Hegel's dialectic. You write that with Hegel "Substance is Subject, and Geist the Absolute", and no doubt a quick reading would make it appear correct, but when you consider that Hegel's knowledge of humanity's development -- its history as well as the history of thought or philosophy -- was as profound as it was encyclopaedic, one must resist the temptation to see the goal ahead of the road of getting there. "For the subject-matter is not exhausted in its purpose, but in working the matter out ..." (p.69) And again, "Impatience asks for the impossible, wants to reach the goal without the means of getting there. The length of the journey has to be borne with, for every moment is necessary..." (p.90)

And "the length of the journey", and the knowledge that to Hegel "The truth is the whole" must make us pause at least to see how he relates substance to subjects. "In my view -- a view which the developed exposition of the system itself can alone justify -- everything depends on grasping and expressing the ultimate truth, not as Substance but as Subject as well." (p.80) In a word, he doesn't throw out substance or object or the thing for the "subject", although it is the subject, the dynamism of the development, the living dialectic which is lacking in all other, and which must occupy the center of the philosophical stage as it does the historic stage. The essence of counterposing subject to substances is not to blot the latter out -- though it will get "absorbed" in man's gaining a new dimension rather than in "thing-in-itself" existing outside of us -- but to point to method -- method of analysis, method of development, method of seeing, listening, hearing, smelling, thinking, each of which senses cannot be separated from the whole. Don't forget Hegel's subtitle for his PHENOMENOLOGY; it was "Science of the Experience of Consciousness."

As for "Geist" being the "Absolute". Yes, but... Just take a look at the contents page and see where Spirit begins. It is page 455, hardly more than a half of the book has yet been covered. Before we get to Absolute Knowledge on p.808, where theory and practice are finally united, and history and science and subject and object become one, we have quite a pathway to go through. The goal, which is Absolute Knowledge or Spirit knowing itself as Spirit, finds its pathway in the recollection of spiritual forms as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their spiritual kingdom. Their conservation, looked at from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; looked at from the side of their intellectually comprehended organization, it is the Science of the ways in which knowledge appears. Both together, or History (intellectually) comprehended (begriffen), ~~the~~ form at once the recollection and the Golgotha of Absolute Spirit, the reality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it were lifeless, solitary, and alone."

How then if we went our way back from p.808 to p.455 or the beginning of spirit, we find the most profound criticisms of civil society, of Culture, of life and literature, of enlightenment and the French Revolution, of Morality and of Religion, which prompted Marx to say that, "to the extent that it (PHENOMENOLOGY) holds fast the alienation of Man -- even if Man appears only in the form of Spirit -- to that extent all elements of criticism lie hidden in it and are often already prepared and worked out in a manner extending far beyond the Hegelian standpoint." (Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic, Appendix to MARXISM AND FREEDOM, p.309 -- and follow through also p.311 where Marx deals with this "absorption" of the "object" by the "subject", that is to say the "all-sided transcendence of the object of consciousness."

It may sound as if I am saying: you cannot have an opinion about Perception, which is the subject of your paper, unless you have gone through the whole of the PHENOMENOLOGY plus the SCIENCE OF LOGIC plus the ENCYCLOPAEDIA, not to mention the PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY as well as all critiques of same. But in truth I am asking you to

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limit yourself to your subject-matter without wishing to judge the end at that early stage, and for that early stage too it was necessary to read the Preface and Introduction. No school will teach you the historic, much less the Marxian approach, and thereby they make gibberish out of the greatest of Western philosophers. If I may I would like to suggest your reading Chapter I, "The Age of Revolutions: Industrial, Social-Political and Intertual" of my MARXISM AND FREEDOM to get a whiff of the actual age in which Hegel lived as well as the age in which we live and which makes Russian Communism to exorcise the ghost of Hegel, because I do believe it will help you understand what Hegel was after when he wrote "man's mind and interest are so deeply rooted in the earthly that we require a like power to have them raised above that level." (p.73)

Far from a rock battle, "a farce drawn out to unnecessary length for its result is clearly predetermined", or any "obscuring of particularly and emphasizing, creating universality", Hegel, in approaching the section on "Perception", is pointing out that all timid approaches at universality were erased because there was not even any stability in this type of consciousness, much less universality. With "Perception" we may finally get the faint outlines of a form which the universal assumes, but knowledge is a great deal more than mere perception, and so we remain barely at the threshold, which remains "substance" of the poorest variety, that is say, incapable of undergoing change through the negative or any form of development, self-development, self-activity, self-knowledge, or any sort of process which is not static. You seem to think that the dissolution of an object is possible only through trickery, and abstracting and universalizing it where it is nothing but "pure thought", something that Hegel as a philosopher of the absolute began with in the first place and "therefore" didn't really take a look at "the thing-in-itself." Quite the contrary is the truth. Hegel looked not only at the thing objectively (true objectivity however does not mean that the thing remains outside of us, having a "life" of its own we can never penetrate) but he looked at thought itself the same way. What he had against "purest thought" of contemporary philosophy, its "absolutes" was that it didn't sufficiently penetrate into its own objectivity, its history, the refelation of reality as past and as present as well as anticipation of future; in a word it just didn't measure up either to the objective world or the philosophy which would comprehend --and move on! "Science is not that kind of Idealism which stepped into the place of the Dogmatism of mere assertion and took shape of a Dogmatism of mere assurance, the Dogmatism of mere self-certainty. Rather since, knowledge sees the content go back into its own proper inner nature, the activity of knowledge is absorbed in that content..."(p.113) "Because the substance of individual mind, nay, more, because the universal mind at work in the world (Weltgeist), has had the patience to go through these forms in the long stretch of time's extent, and to take upon itself the prodigious labor of the world's history, where it bedied forth in each form the entire content of itself..." (pp90-1 --finish the paragraph and see how much more you can get out of it when you do have history, as substance and as subject, in the back of your mind, instead of just a bunch of abstractions)

Dear Richard, I do hope you will use your wonderful talents in the philosophic field to grasp at what Hegel called the "life-movement of truth", and Marx called "the self-development of the proletariat" who has nothing to lose in grasping at the truths of this exploitative society which has ~~not~~ reified him into a thing, and made the thing, the machine, the master, so that the proletariat's "search for universality" signified the end of the "pre-history of man" and the beginning of his true history. No doubt by then even a child will know how to stand Hegel right side up, and see that Man, not "Spirit" is "the Absolute", that is to say, the new society. I would love to work with you on some of those chapters of Hegel. Won't you ask Joenathan to give you one brief outline I made of the PHENOMENOLOGY? And I hope you don't mind if I send him a copy of this. Let's all swim together toward new horizons.

Yours,

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