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History and Memory in the

Phenomenology of Spirit

The first chapter of this study is dedicated to the connection between memory and history in the Phenomenology of Spirit, that is, in the early work at the time of which the later structure of the philosophical system is not yet in place. In developing this topic, I propose a reading of Hegel’s 1807 work as itself a “work of (philosophical) memory.” I shall proceed by analyzing the turning points of the Phenomenology in which the problem of history is channeled into the phenomenological development in a way that forces Hegel to re-think the entire structure of the process. I discuss, in turn, the preface to the entire work, the chapter (BB) Der Geist, the chapter (CC) Die Religion, and the conclusion of (DD) Das absolute Wissen. In all these turning points Hegel re-organizes the phenomenological process according to radically new criteria so that the entire course and plan of the book take on a different shape. I argue that these radical changes are produced by the intervention of (phenomenological) Erinnerung and by the interaction between memory and the issues posed by the concept of history The crucial question here regards the transformation of the phenomenological movement – the logical, diachronic succession of consciousness’s experiences – into a historical sequence. What is required, on the philosophical, conceptual, and systematic level, in order to stage a movement as specifically historical? What is history and who/what is its subject?

I propose to recognize the issue of memory as present in the Phenomenology at two distinct, yet interacting levels. On the one hand, Hegel tackles the problem of memory as a specific content or figure in the phenomenological development. But on the other hand, and this is my original and central point, I claim that the Phenomenology works on the basis of its textual “internal memory,” namely, on the basis of a web of internal recollections and cross references that are responsible for the
advancement of the process. The *Phenomenology* is, in this perspective, itself the work of memory. According to a long-standing historical tradition memory is the itinerary of self-transformation that is connected with the creation of “memorable” texts. Here, I attempt a reading of Hegel’s 1807 book as a paradigmatic example of this tradition. It will become clear in the successive chapters how memory, dialectically understood, is the force at work successively in the Logic and in the philosophy of spirit; it is the immanent method that structures from within the very activity of philosophizing.

1 Figures of memory: substance becoming subject – preface

Placing the book in Hegel’s historical present, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* opens with an appeal to *Erinnerung* and closes, in the chapter on Absolute Knowing, by instituting the connection between memory and history in its different declinations (phenomenical, or factual history, and “conceptual history”). The circularity of the work – and the simple fact that the preface was written immediately after the conclusion of its last chapter – only reinforces the importance of this finding. In between the two (acts of) *Erinnerung(en)* lies the unfolding of the phenomenological development through which consciousness is led to the highest level of absolute knowing. “Spirit” (*Geist*), in the proper sense that introduces this structure in the homonymous chapter, appears as a fundamental station in this movement. With spirit, history emerges thematically before the conclusion of the process, midway through it, and radically changes the nature of the development. The appearance of history is a problematic break both in the phenomenological narrative and in consciousness’s experience. The issue of whether, and up to what point, Hegel’s 1807 work follows a unitary plan has often been raised, much debated, but not definitely solved.1 Although it is not my direct concern here, that issue is related to the two questions that I want raise. First, how is history thematically channeled into the phenomenological process? Hegel’s claim that spirit is a fundamentally historical reality is not the assumption on which the *Phenomenology* is based, but rather its demonstrative outcome. In other words, Hegel can claim that spirit is constitutively historical only to the extent that the phenomenological process succeeds in integrating history in the movement of self-consciousness (or, alternatively, only to the extent that the phenomenology succeeds in becoming a true philosophy of history). The second question is related to the first. Assuming Hegel’s famous