

# The New Criterion

Features September 2000

## The difficulty with Hegel

by Roger Kimball

*Reflections on the philosopher, occasioned by the recent biography by Terry Pinkard.*

*Philosophy need not trouble itself about ordinary ideas.*

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*

*He described what he knew best or had heard most, and felt he had described the universe.*

—George Santayana, on Hegel

*Philosophers are hardly ever cynical manipulators of their readers' minds. They do not produce delusions in others, without first being subject to them themselves.*

—David Stove, "Idealism: a Victorian Horror-story (Part One)"

Hegel, Bertrand Russell observed, is "the hardest to understand of the great philosophers." Hegel would not have liked very much that Russell had to say about his philosophy in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945). Russell's exposition is a classic in the library of philosophical demolition, much despised by Hegel's admirers for its vulgar insistence on common sense. (Best line: that Hegel's philosophy "illustrates an important truth, namely, that the worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise.") But I am not at all sure that Hegel would have disagreed with Russell's comment about the difficulty of understanding him. He knew he was difficult. He was always going on about the "labor of the negative," the superficiality of mere common sense, and the long, "strenuous effort" that genuinely "scientific" (i.e., Hegelian) philosophy required. It is even said that on his deathbed Hegel declared that there was only one man who had understood him—and he had misunderstood him.

I first came across that *mot* in Søren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), another anti-Hegelian salvo, quite different from Russell's. Neither Kierkegaard nor his editors supply a source for the observation, and Terry Pinkard, in his new biography of Hegel, [1] sniffily describes it as an "apocryphal story," "emblematic of the anti-Hegelian reaction that quickly set in" after the philosopher's death in 1831.

I was sorry to learn that. Like many people who have soldiered through a fair number of Hegel's books, I was both awed and depressed by their glittering opacity. With the possible exception of Heidegger, Hegel is far and away the most difficult "great philosopher" I have ever studied. There was much that I did not understand. I secretly suspected that no one—not even my teachers—*really* understood him, and it was nice to have that prejudice supported from the master's own lips.

Is it worth the effort? I mean, you spend a hundred hours poring over *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)—widely considered to be Hegel's masterpiece—and what do you have to show for it? The book is supposed to take you from the naïve, "immediate" (*unmittelbar*, a favorite Hegelian term of contempt) position of "sense certainty" to Absolute Knowledge, "or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit." [2] That sounds pretty good, especially when you are, say, eighteen and are busy soaking up ideas guaranteed to mystify and alarm your parents. But what do you suppose it means? Mr. Pinkard notes that at Jena in the early 1800s, "Hegel seemed to inspire two kinds of reaction: he was either highly admired and even idolized, or he was disparaged." In fact, Hegel's work has always inspired these opposite reactions, throughout his lifetime and afterwards. Mr. Pinkard, who teaches philosophy at Georgetown University and who has written several other books about Hegel, is firmly in the admirers' camp. I am not.

What Mr. Pinkard has given us with his new book on Hegel is partly an intellectual biography, partly an outline of Hegel's work. Recognizing that some of his readers will be more interested in Hegel's life than in detailed discussions of his ideas (and vice versa), he has done his best to segregate the story of Hegel's life and intellectual formation from the book reports. He corrects some misconceptions. For example, I had always thought that Hegel died of cholera when an epidemic of that disease swept through Berlin in 1831. Not so, says Mr. Pinkard. What Hegel really died of was "most likely . . . some kind of upper gastrointestinal disease." Good to know that. And like almost every sympathetic commentator on Hegel I have read, Mr. Pinkard sternly points out that the one thing everyone remembers about Hegel's philosophy—that it says reality develops according to a process of "thesis/antithesis/synthesis"—is actually nowhere to be found in Hegel's writings. It was in fact a shorthand devised by a "deservedly obscure" professor called Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus. The popularity—could it be the clarity?—of that formula seems to incense Hegelians. Mr. Pinkard argues that it "misrepresents the structure of Hegel's thought," though I have to say that readers who encounter Hegel's description of "the movement" in which thought "becomes estranged and then returns to itself from estrangement, and is only then presented in its actuality and truth" might be forgiven for making the same mistake.

Mr. Pinkard does an adequate job—not more than that, I'd say. He is clearly in command of the material, biographical as well as philosophical and historical; he has all the right quotations from Kant and Fichte, Hegel's primary philosophical inspirations; he provides generally astute summaries of contemporary events and controversies; nevertheless his presentation is plodding and curiously repetitious. How many times, for example, do we need to be reminded that Hegel was excessively fond of wine—he had good taste in claret, which is something—and of playing

cards? How often do we need to be told that he had the nickname “old man” when he was at school? Mr. Pinkard also has an unfortunate fondness for the word “alienation,” an Hegelian-Marxoid tic. When the young Hegel spends Wednesdays and Saturdays at the library instead of at home, it is a sign of the “alienation he felt as a teenager” — that sort of thing.

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## Hegel lived in tumultuous times.

One problem for Mr. Pinkard is that Hegel’s life was really not eventful enough to support a graceful biography of nearly eight-hundred pages. Born in Stuttgart in 1770 (the same year as Beethoven, Wordsworth, and his friend Hölderlin), Hegel came of age in the period of high Romanticism. His philosophy, which everywhere betrays a hankering after the infinite, is very much an expression of Romanticism, a fact that Mr. Pinkard both registers and manages to discount. In his early years, Hegel was a model student. But by the time he got to the theological institute at Tübingen in 1788 (where he roomed with Hölderlin and, beginning in 1790, with Schelling), Hegel had begun to chafe under the yoke of established authority and hidebound pedagogy. Bertrand Russell remarked that Hegel was attracted to mysticism when young and that his mature philosophy was “an intellectualizing of what had first appeared to him as mystic insight.” If you look at Hegel’s philosophy, that seems plausible, though Mr. Pinkard gives no evidence for “mystic insight” in the young Hegel. What is true, I think, is that in Hegel we see a theological student who became disenchanted with theology but could not see his way clear to dispensing with the aura of profundity that theology offered. The result was the attenuated theology of Hegelian idealism, in which the Absolute stands in for God.

Hegel lived in tumultuous times. The French Revolution was one contemporary “world-historical” event that fired his imagination. The other was the career of Napoleon. Hegel was at Jena, teaching and finishing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when Napoleon came through in 1806. (Though Mr. Pinkard points out that it is not true, as Hegel suggested in a letter, that the book was completed on the eve of the Battle of Jena.) Like many Romantics, Hegel worshipped power, and in Napoleon (“this extraordinary man, whom it is impossible not to admire”) he saw power incarnate. When the emperor rode through town, Hegel wrote excitedly to a friend that he had seen “the world-soul . . . astride a horse.”

But what did Hegel *do*? He was a private tutor, headmaster at a high school, briefly the editor of a provincial newspaper, and for most of his career a university professor: at Heidelberg from 1816 to 1818, and then at Berlin until his death. Although he became a great celebrity at Berlin, Hegel’s lecturing style was not universally admired: students not susceptible to his spell, Mr. Pinkard tells us, complained that he began every third sentence with “therefore.” One note of drama came in 1807 when Hegel fathered an illegitimate child, named Ludwig, with his landlady. Mr. Pinkard notes that after Hegel was married (in 1811) and had two other sons, he arranged for Ludwig to live with his family. It ended badly. Ludwig wished to study medicine, but Hegel refused to pay for his education. (In general, it seems that he treated Ludwig as a second-class citizen.) Ludwig

broke with the family around 1826, commenting that “I always lived in fear but never in love of my parents.” Mr. Pinkard deals fairly with the story of Ludwig in his text but, curiously, there is no sign of the child in the index, either in his own right or as an episode in Hegel’s life. Under “Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich,” we find entries for everything from “beer” to “napping on sofa,” but nothing under “illegitimate child” or “Ludwig.” A very Hegelian sense of priorities.

**T**he tone and embonpoint of Mr. Pinkard’s book suggest that with Hegel we are dealing with a figure of the first importance. It is a common feeling. Another Hegel commentator, J. N. Findlay, spoke for many when he said that Hegel was, “without doubt, the Aristotle of our post-Renaissance world.” (Findlay also said that Hegel’s personality was “characterized by an almost English sobriety and good sense,” a remark that surely casts suspicion on his good sense.) For my own part, I believe that when you finish working your way through Hegel what you have are two things: a handful of scattered insights about philosophy, art, and society; and acquaintance with—often contamination by—one of the most powerfully obfuscating philosophical methodologies ever devised. I am perfectly happy to acknowledge that Hegel was a genius. But so what? As the English writer Walter Bagehot observed in another context, “In the faculty of writing nonsense, stupidity is no match for genius.”

Hegel wrote a great deal of nonsense. Yet he did not do it on purpose. Arthur Schopenhauer, one of Hegel’s bitterest enemies, was right to complain about “the stupefying influence of Hegel’s sham wisdom.” (No one under the age of forty, he thought, should read Hegel: the danger of intellectual corruption was too great.) But I believe that Schopenhauer was wrong to attribute mystifying motives to Hegel. He may have been, as Schopenhauer also said, a “charlatan,” but Hegel was a sincere charlatan. He said a lot of loopy things. He believed them all.

Kierkegaard saw something essential about Hegel when he noted that he and his philosophy “constitute an essay in the comical.” Hegel, Kierkegaard said, was like a man who had built a palace but lived in the guard house. His elaborate “System” of philosophy promised to chart the necessary development not only of consciousness but also of world history and even of nature—indeed, for Hegel, there were no hard and fast distinctions to be drawn among these realms. On the first page of his preface, Mr. Pinkard plaintively asks how it is that Hegel “came to be so badly misunderstood.” That is one question I think I can help him answer. Item: “A rational consideration of Nature,” Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of Nature*,

must consider how Nature is in its own self this process of becoming Spirit, of sublating its otherness—and how the Idea is present in each grade or level of Nature itself: estranged from the Idea, Nature is only the corpse of the Understanding. Nature is, however, only implicitly the Idea, and Schelling therefore called her a petrified intelligence . . . ; but God does not remain petrified and dead; the very stones cry out and raise themselves to Spirit.

Which leaves us—where? Between a rock and a hard place, anyway. All but Hegel's most abject admirers are (at least secretly) embarrassed by his philosophy of nature. It takes a strong man to read, for example, that "the celestial bodies only *appear* to be independent of each other" without blanching. A peek into that part of Hegel's oeuvre is the quickest way to highlight Kierkegaard's point: the discrepancy between pretension and achievement is like Falstaff's dishonesty: "gross as a mountain, open, palpable." The formidable difficulty of Hegel's writings might make it seem that one must be extensively trained in philosophy to answer him effectively. But this, Kierkegaard wrote, "is by no means the case. All that is needed is sound common sense, a fund of humor, and a little Greek ataraxy [tranquillity]." Of course, it is not without irony that those homely things—common sense, humor, and tranquillity—may be in even shorter supply these days than the sort of dialectical prowess that playing with Hegel's philosophy requires.

**T**he real issue for Kierkegaard was the place of the individual in this grand chronicle purporting to recapitulate—nay, to be—Spirit's self-unfolding. (There is a worrisome ambiguity running through all of Hegel's work: does he believe that his philosophy is reporting on its subject matter—logic, world history, self-consciousness, whatever—or does he think his philosophy somehow is its subject matter?) The problem is that the individual seems to get lost in the process. Kierkegaard saw the unintended comedy of a system picturing the development of self-consciousness in which the self in any recognizable form is shuffled off rather early. Yes, Hegel constantly assures us that each "stage" or "moment" of development is simultaneously cancelled and yet preserved as Spirit progresses. This after all is the famous dialectical process whereby each level of development is said to contain its opposite and is *aufgehoben*. There is, I am happy to say, no English equivalent for that participle. It is usually translated as "sublated." [3] What this Hegelian philosopher's stone means is that you can eat your contradiction and have it too. "The essence of each thing," Hegel wrote in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, "lies in determination, in what is the opposite of itself." Nice work, if you can get it. Hegel's dialectic is a universal cognitive solvent; it licenses epistemological anarchy. If the essence of X is not-X, what then? The philosopher Leszek Kolakowski underscored the sober truth of the matter: "We must finally conclude that in the Hegelian system humanity becomes what it is, or achieves unity with itself, only by ceasing to be humanity." So why read Hegel? For one thing, he has startling flashes of insight—about the nature of modernity, the relationship between the state and civil society, the self-enchancements of freedom. Hegel is deep. He is also muddy. His work, the philosopher Roger Scruton observed, is "like a beautiful oasis around a treacherous pool of nonsense, and nowhere beneath the foliage is the ground really firm." It may be worth visiting, but both the going and the getting back are treacherous. Many never return.

A second reason to read Hegel has to do with that treacherousness. Just as doctors learn a lot about health by studying diseases, so we can learn a lot about philosophical health by studying Hegel. As Russell noted, Hegel "epitomized better than anyone a certain kind of philosophy." It wasn't, Russell thought, a good kind of philosophy—he believed that "almost all of Hegel's doctrines are false"—but it vividly illustrated the mental consequences of looking at the world in the peculiar

way that Hegel's philosophy teaches us to.

A third reason to read Hegel is his influence, which everybody—friend as well as foe—admits was enormous. “No philosopher since 1800,” Walter Kaufmann wrote in his 1965 appreciation of Hegel, “has had more influence.” That influence took several different directions, of which I will mention three. In the first place, Hegel's writings, especially the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* (1820), were a definitive influence on the philosophy of Karl Marx and, through him, on Lenin and Stalin and on Marxism in general. It is true that Marx devoted many pages to criticizing Hegel's philosophy. But he firmly embraced Hegel's view of history as a realm of ineluctable dialectical progress—progress, that is to say, which is *necessary*, i.e., inevitable, and which proceeds by continuous negation. As the philosopher Louis Dupré put it, Marx accepted the method of Hegel's philosophy while discarding its content. One often hears that Marx attempted to “stand Hegel on his head.” What Marx actually said (in *Capital*) was that Hegel's idealism left his dialectic “standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”

Just how “rational” Marx's appropriation of Hegel turned out to be, we now know. The murderous legacy of Marxism cannot be laid at Hegel's door—except, perhaps, insofar as Hegel's philosophy unfits the mind for exercising serious criticism. Marx never tired of excoriating Hegel for his “mystification.” Quite right, too. But Marx took on board a particularly noxious piece of mystification when he swallowed Hegel's dialectic. As George Santayana noted in *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916; rev. ed. 1939), implicit in Hegel's dialectic is a monstrous piece of “egotism” that presupposes the preposterous effort of “making things conform to words, not words to things.”

Hegel's admirers hate that sort of criticism. It seems downright philistine to point out that the idea of one thing “containing” (or “positing,” as Hegel liked to say) its opposite is really just a piece of verbal legerdemain. That is exactly the sort of thing your man in the street, someone who hadn't had the benefit of reading Hegel, would say. But then Hegel has always been especially popular among people whose entire livelihood is bound up with verbal legerdemain—I mean academic professors of philosophy. Whatever else can be said about Hegel, he is the ideal professor's philosopher. He has been extremely helpful in keeping the mills of academic industry grinding away. Not only does the inherent difficulty of his books guarantee a virtually endless stream of work—Hegel's books cry out for academic commentary, the more the better—but also his view of the universe was calculated to be deeply gratifying to academic philosophers. After all, his philosophy puts them and their profession at the very apex of creation. Artists have an intuitive grasp of the Absolute, Hegel thought; in religion, one is “*implicitly* reconciled with the divine

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Being"; but it is only with philosophy that Spirit achieves "the supreme freedom and assurance of its self-knowledge." Convenient, that, if you happen to be a professor of philosophy.

Finally, Hegel has been immensely influential on the development of post-Kantian idealism. What is idealism? It is the contention that thought makes or (better, because more portentous) "constitutes" reality. (Mr. Pinkard speaks of Hegel's "supposedly 'idealist' " philosophy, but that is much too modest: Hegel's was the real thing.) Idealism exercises a variety of attractions. For one thing, it is deeply flattering to its proponents, for it suggests that reality is in some obscure way dependent on them. (Hence Santayana's charge of "egotism," which he defined as "subjectivity in thought and willfulness in morals.") Idealism also, as the philosopher David Stove pointed out, offers a steady diet of religious consolation while simultaneously pretending to take it away. The basic procedure is quite simple. As Stove observed in his essay "Idealism: a Victorian Horror-story (Part One),"

In every idealist manual after Kant, the first lesson is the same: *kick Berkeley*. This is sure to start things off on the best possible footing, by engaging your readers' common sense on your side. This way, you cut off their retreat, and you can then torment them at your leisure, about how, although the universe is *of course* thought, it is not, indeed, *your* thought, or my thought, or even everybody's thought. It is objective, or public, or Absolute, Thought.

Hegel was a supreme master at this sort of thing. In the long preface to the *Phenomenology*, for example, he early on tells his readers that "philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying": "What I have set myself to do is to help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowing' and be *actual* knowing."

Fair enough, you say. "Science," "actual knowing": it all sounds eminently worthwhile. Thank God he is not some crazy Berkeleyan who thinks that "to be is to be perceived" or whatever. But exactly what does Hegel mean by "science," by "actual knowing"? Perhaps the following passages will clear things up. The first is from the preface to the *Phenomenology*, the second from its last chapter:

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. Though it may seem contradictory that the Absolute should be conceived essentially as a result, it needs little pondering to set this show of contradiction in its true light. The beginning, the principle, or the Absolute, as at first immediately enunciated, is only the universal.

Spirit . . . has shown itself to us to be neither merely the withdrawing of self-consciousness into its pure inwardness, nor the mere submergence of self-consciousness into substance, and the non-being of its difference; but Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as Subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content. . .

. Spirit, therefore, having won the Notion, displays its existence and movement in this ether of its life and is *Science*.

Everywhere in Hegel there is an aroma of religiosity—religion so to speak “sublated” into the frightful patois of philosophical idealism. In the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel assures readers in one breath that of course “the universal spirit or world spirit is not the same thing as God. It is the rationality of spirit in its world existence. Its movement is that it makes itself what it is, i.e., what its concept is.” Thanks for that clarification. But in the same work he tells us that philosophy has demonstrated that “Reason . . . is both substance and infinite power, in itself the infinite material of all natural and spiritual life as well as the infinite form, the actualization of itself as content. . . . the True, the Eternal, the Absolute Power and that it and nothing but it, its glory and majesty, manifests itself in the world.” Amen.

Hegel is also an acknowledged expert at another maneuver, the art of the philosophical thunderclap, what Stove describes (in the second part of his essay on idealism) as “reasoning from a sudden and violent solecism.”

Say or imply, for example, that in English “value” means the same as “individuality.” You can be miles down the track of your argument before they get their breath back.

This method is not only physiologically but ethologically sound. Of course it should never be used *first*. You need first to earn the respect of your readers, by some good reasoning, penetrating observations, or the like: *then* apply the violent solecism. Tell them, for example, that when we say of something that it is a prime number, we mean that it was born out of wedlock. You *cannot* go wrong this way. Decent philosophers will be so disconcerted by this, that they will never do the one thing they should do: simply say, “That is not what ‘prime number’ means!” Instead, they will *always* begin . . . [by] casting about for an *excuse* for someone’s saying what you said, or a half-excuse, or a one-eighth excuse; nor is there any danger that they will search in vain.

Hegel is full of philosophical thunderclaps. It is difficult for most of us not to be discommoded when we read, in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1812–16), that “logic must certainly be said to be the supernatural element which permeates every relationship of man to nature.” But when we get to his discussion of the syllogism and read that “not only is the syllogism rational, but *everything rational is a syllogism*,” the only healthy response is panic.

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## Hegel is full of philosophical thunderclaps.

It is probably unfair to pick on Hegel’s *Logic*. The book really has very little to do with the discipline of the same name. Let us turn instead to one of the most profound and widely admired passages in Hegel, the celebrated “master/slave dialectic” in the *Phenomenology*. This section has made a deep impression



on thinkers from Marx to Francis Fukuyama. It describes the way that we come to recognize and deal with the fact of other people, other self-consciousnesses. According to Hegel, self-consciousness exists “only in being acknowledged.” Like Rodney Dangerfield, it is not complete in itself but demands the respect, the recognition of the other. This, Hegel says, leads to a struggle for recognition, a contest that quickly escalates to a life-or-death struggle:

They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not the submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*. . . . Similarly, just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other’s death, for it values the other no more than itself.

Gee. Does this sound like anyone you know or have ever heard of—excluding, that is, current or potential guests of your local penal establishment? I know, I know: that is a terribly vulgar question. After all, Hegel is not talking about you or me; he is talking about the necessary unfolding of self-consciousness as it struggles into a recognition of its own freedom. If you find *that* convincing, then you have the makings of a true Hegelian.

Of course, the master/slave dialectic is Hegel at his most dialectically nimble. It might be easier to start, as he does, with simple sense certainty. At the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to get us to unsettle some of our simplest, most taken-for-granted ideas about what counts as knowledge.

To the question: “What is Now?,” let us answer, e.g., “Now is Night.” In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth. . . . If *now, this noon*, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.

The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e., it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. . . . This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, *viz.*, Day and Night, is *not*.

**W**hat should we think of this argument? Badly, anyway. It threatens to destabilize the meaning of some perfectly good words by, so to speak, falsely existentializing them. If at noontime someone said to Hegel, “George, bring me that book now,” and he waited until night to do it because, after all, that was when he had inscribed the word “now” on a piece of paper, we wouldn’t think him clever. Part of learning language is learning the limits of language: grasping what it cannot tell us as well as what it can. On my desk at the moment is Big and Little: A Book of Opposites by Richard Scarry, a very different sort of philosopher from Hegel. It recounts in vivid detail the doings of Hilda the hippo, Squeaky the mouse, and many others. Our son, aetat. two, has

absorbed the difference between big and little, up and down, now and then, this and that without once positing the negative or mediating the immediate. I asked him about what Hegel said and he just laughed. Whom would you trust?

Almost everyone who reads very far into Hegel is struck by his famous observation in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that “The rational is the actual and the actual is the rational.” Hegel’s sympathetic commentators keep telling us not to worry, that although it might seem more or less equivalent to a cynical defense of the status quo (“Whatever is, is right”), really, in its *true determination*, it doesn’t mean that. But how can you tell? Hegel presents his system as the very incarnation of freedom. But, as Russell noted, what Hegel describes is “a very superfine brand of freedom. It does not mean that you will be able to keep out of a concentration camp. It does not imply democracy, or a free press.” Why should it? If the “essence of each thing lies . . . in what is the opposite of itself,” then anything goes. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel remarks in passing on the advantages of German as a language for philosophy. “Some of its words,” he observes, “even possess the further peculiarity of having not only different but opposite meanings so that one cannot fail to recognize a speculative spirit of the language in them.” That “speculative spirit” is at the very center of Hegel’s philosophy. It implies a kind of verbal intoxication in which reality is subordinated to unanchored cogitation. At one point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel defines “the True” as “the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk.” He wasn’t kidding.

## Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Hegel: A Biography*, by Terry Pinkard; Cambridge University Press, 780 pages, \$39.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. I suspect that at least part of the success of Hegel’s book was due to its title, which combines the edifying (*Geist*, spirit) with the *recherché* (phenomenology). What exactly is a *phenomenology* of spirit? The term “Phänomenologie” was coined by the eighteenth-century German philosopher J. H. Lambert, who used it to mean the study of the illusory aspects of experience. As Mr. Pinkard points out, Hegel took the term from Kant, who with his distinction between “phenomena” (stuff we experience) and “noumena” (stuff we cannot experience), gave it a new twist. Just as biology is the “logos” or study of life (“bios”), so “phenomenology” is the logos or study of “appearances” (from the Greek *phenomena*, “things that appear”). Hegel’s “phenomenology of spirit,” then, attempts to describe the unfolding appearances of self-consciousness from its dawn to its full maturity. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. The word is the gift of a clever translator who remembered that *sublatum* was the perfect passive participle of the Latin verb *tollo*, which means both “to raise up” or “preserve” and “to take away,” “remove,” “destroy.” A very Hegelian sort of word, *tollo*. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 19 Number 1 , on page 4

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