

Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit

STEPHEN HOULGATE

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With *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, the renowned Hegel scholar, Stephen Houlgate, offers a clear and helpful guide to one of philosophy's most complex and difficult *opuses*. As a guide, Houlgate's book cannot pretend to replace the actual reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but acts rather as a microscope helping the new reader to grasp the underlying arguments seldom visible at first glance. It sharpens the reader's eye to the dialectical movement at play in Hegel's arguments and, in this respect, Houlgate's emphasis on the 'micro-transitions,' which occur "within a given shape of consciousness and the 'macro-transitions' that take us from one shape to another" (24) is quite enlightening.

While the macro-transition from one shape of consciousness to another is perhaps better known or easier to catch, the micro-transitions occurring within the dialectical movement of, say, sense-certainty are on the contrary easier to pass by. In this regard, not only is Houlgate's account of these transitions meticulous even though, he tends, like many commentators, to focus on the first four chapters of the *Phenomenology*, hoping that the reader "will then be able to engage with the missing details from Chapters Five to Eight by themselves" (ix, 123). To help, each section within Houlgate's third chapter, 'Reading the Text,' (which constitutes the main element of the book) is completed by a small set of study questions which makes it possible to test one's understanding of both Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Houlgate's commentary of it.

However, more than a mere commentary on the *Phenomenology*, Houlgate's reader's guide aims to provide insight into Hegel's own philosophical project and the place which should be given to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* within this project. If "the *Phenomenology* sets out a single, continuous, logical argument," (ix) it does not, according to Houlgate, presents "[Hegel's] own philosophical account of humanity" (192). The aim of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is not to act as a prototype of his philosophical system but to convince what Hegel calls the 'natural consciousness,' i.e., the typical ordinary consciousness of the everyday, of the legitimacy of the philosophical standpoint: "Philosophy *can* begin with the free act of suspending all presuppositions, and proceed directly to think being. This is what happens in Hegel's *Logic*. Yet the conviction that pure thought can know from within itself what there is, is itself rejected by natural consciousness; and, in Hegel's view, consciousness is within its rights to reject philosophy in this way. If philosophy is to persuade consciousness of its merits, therefore, it has no choice but to suspend its own ontological pretensions and undertake a phenomenological examination of consciousness itself" (12).

In this regard, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not so much a prolegomena to Hegel's system as to an *introduction* to philosophy as such, an attempt to show how philosophy *qua* practice can emerge from the problem encountered by natural consciousness, when it "loses its own certainties and is led to the standpoint of philosophy" (12).

Thus, Houlgate distinguishes Hegel's *ontological* system from his *phenomenological* enterprise; while the first starts from a philosophical standpoint and asserts on the nature of being, the latter focuses merely on consciousness itself and its apprehension of being, not on being itself. The implications of such an interpretation are numerous

and rich, but they reveal another aspect of Houlgate's book. As a reader's guide, the book intends to set the record straight on a multi-faceted work, which led to multiple interpretations.¹ Obviously, Houlgate cannot account for all of the interpretations of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, nor go into all the details on the exegetical debate surrounding Hegel's *opus* in a book designed as a popularizing work. However, Houlgate tends to solve rather quickly, if not one-sidedly, some of the most controversial issues of Hegel's work, when he is not simply setting them aside. One can think, for example, of the epistemological status of *contradiction* in Hegel's philosophy (57), the nature and object of *desire* for self-consciousness (84) or the (in)ability for consciousness to seize the specific thing within language, i.e., outside of the state of sense-certainty (34). These troublesome elements (among others) of the *Phenomenology* are treated rather lightly by Houlgate. We may, of course, condone this by considering the magnitude and difficulty, which would result from any attempt to give credit to the complexity and richness of the vast number of diverging positions within Hegelian studies. Nevertheless, as a reader's guide, Houlgate's book occupies a certain place in the spectrum of the debates surrounding Hegel's work, which should be read in dialogue with other interpretations of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

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¹ Unfortunately, Houlgate gives nothing, but a too brief outlook of such diverse readings in the last pages of his book (Chapter Four, 191-194).