CHAPTER FIVE

THE PHENOMENOLOGY AND ‘FORMATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS’

It is this self-construing method alone which enables philosophy to be an objective, demonstrated science.

(Hegel 1812)

Immanuel Kant was born in 1724, and published “Religion within the limits of Reason” at the age of 70, at about the same time as the young Hegel was writing his speculations on building a folk religion at the seminary in Tübingen and Robespierre was engaged in his ultimately fatal practical experiment in a religion of Reason.

Kant was a huge figure. Hegel and all his young philosopher friends were Kantians. But Kant’s system posed as many problems as it solved; to be a Kantian at that time was to be a participant in the project which Kant had initiated, the development of a philosophical system to fulfill the aims of the Enlightenment; and that generally meant critique of Kant. We need to look at just a couple of aspects of Kant’s philosophy which will help us understand Hegel’s approach.

“I freely admit,” said Kant, “it was David Hume’s remark [that Reason could not prove necessity or causality in Nature] that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my enquiries in the field of speculative philosophy” (Kant 1997). Hume’s “Treatise on Human Nature” had been published while Kant was still very young, continuing a line of empiricists and their rationalist critics, whose concern was how knowledge and ideas originate from sensation. Hume was a skeptic; he demonstrated that causality could not be deduced from experience. One could witness the fact that one event has followed upon another time and time again, but this did not prove that the first was the cause of the second, and that the second necessarily followed from the first. This skepticism shocked Kant. If this were true, then there could be no science. In an effort to rescue the possibility of science, Kant set about constructing his critical philosophy, a kind of ‘third way’ between dogmatism and skepticism, whose aim was to determine the limits of knowledge and draw a line between what was knowable and what was not knowable.
An important step in Kant’s solution was his conception of the transcendental subject:

By this ‘I’, or ‘He’, or ‘It’, who or which thinks, nothing more is represented than a *transcendental subject of thought* = \( x \), which is cognized only by means of the thoughts that are its predicates.

(Kant 2007)

So the subject for Kant was a nothing, like a point which is defined as the intersection between two lines—it is determinate and you know just what and where it is, but it has no nature of its own. This device allowed Kant to avoid the contradictions which had plagued earlier philosophers, but it led to a new range of problems. What Kant had done was to escape the problems of the subject’s interaction with the material world by in effect placing the subject outside culture and history. He had created an eternal changeless subject which could be analyzed by the methods of philosophy, without any empirical content, at the cost of reducing the subject to a *nothing*.

Following Herder, Hegel’s proposal was to place the subject back into culture and history: the subject would be a product and part of culture and history, rather than standing outside of experience. One of the consequences of Kant’s transcendental subject was the resolution of the problem he inherited from the rationalist-empiricist debate: there were two kinds of knowledge, knowledge derived from two distinct sources which had to be combined somehow. On the one hand we had sensation, or ‘Intuition’, which was the immediate basis for experience, the beginning of all knowledge, and on the other hand, we had Reason, or Concept. Reason was needed to process the data of experience and acquire the categories through which sense could be made of experience. So we had two faculties: the faculty of reason and the faculty of intuition, and through reason we could acquire knowledge of the categories, of time and space, logic and so on.

One of the other implications, an essential part of how Kant resolved the contradiction he had inherited from the empiricists and rationalists, was that the world was divided in two: on our side was the world

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1 Space does not allow us to give due credit to Johann Gottfried Herder in this story. Herder was a close friend of Goethe, at the time he worked out the idea of Urphänomen; Herder may be deemed the first cultural-historical psychologist, founder of cultural anthropology, first to draw attention to radical difference in thought both between individuals and cultures, and first to suggest that language underlies consciousness. He was a philosopher of history, and invented the terms Volksgeist and Zeitgeist (Herder 2004).