

# HEGEL'S EPISTEMOLOGY

A Philosophical  
Introduction to the  
*Phenomenology of Spirit*

KENNETH R. WESTPHAL

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# Acknowledgments

I began studying Hegel's epistemology as an undergraduate when, scandalized by Kuhn's apparent attack on realism in the philosophy of science and appalled by the simple-minded relativism so widely espoused in popular culture, I became convinced by Richard Schacht, perhaps unwittingly, that if anyone had thought through relativism from the inside out and won, it was Hegel. My sense that Hegel's "idealism" is in fact a realist form of holism took longer to work out. I remain deeply grateful to Michael Theunissen, with whom I studied in Berlin, for confirming my interpretation of Hegel's ontology.

Graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison provided me with repeated and intensive training in philosophizing historically. I was inspired by the outstanding caliber of scholarship in ancient philosophy, such as Akrill, Owen, Owens, and Vlastos. Those scholars, along with the great Kant commentaries by Vaihinger, Paton, Kemp Smith, and de Vleeschauer, and Kemp Smith's monumental works on Descartes and especially Hume, formed my model of rigorous, historically based philosophy.

My training in analytic epistemology began as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign with Bill Alston, who drew my attention, inter alia, to Dretske's *Seeing and Knowing*. In graduate school my training in epistemology and philosophy of science continued with Fred Dretske. It has been both an honor and an incalculable benefit to have had the tuition of these two past masters of their craft. To them I dedicate this heretical little book. I hope they will not be too chagrined by what has become of one of their most avid students.

I mention these points about my background in order to suggest that, when these kinds of philosophical and interpretive resources are brought to bear on Hegel's philosophy, they reveal a surprisingly different content and character of Hegel's actual views. These resources reveal that Hegel was, among much else, an acute epistemologist with many abiding insights. That these are actually Hegel's views is best shown by the convergence of three crucial standards of interpretive adequacy: to provide a complete philosophical reconstruction of an historical text, to do this within its historical and philosophical context, and to provide good philosophical sense for both the structure and the details of that text, down to individual lines, phrases, and terms. Obviously, these standards can only be approximated by parts of the present synopsis of Hegel's epistemology. In other research that underwrites this synopsis, I have sought to fulfill these requirements conjointly and believe I have done so, certainly to a degree uncommon in Hegel studies. For enabling me to acquire, use,

and develop these abilities, I remain indebted, deeply and gratefully, to my teachers.

This book began with an article on the contemporary relevance of Hegel's epistemology delivered to the Hegel Society of Great Britain and published in their *Bulletin*, "Is Hegel's *Phenomenology* Relevant to Contemporary Epistemology?" (Westphal 2000c). I thank the Society for inviting me to compose my thoughts on these issues. I thank Bob Scharff for suggesting that I develop this article into the short book it has become, and I thank Jeff Edwards and Don Welton for seconding Bob's suggestion so resoundingly. This book was completed by composing Chapters 2 through 4. I am very grateful to Linda Napolitano Valditara for her invitation to crystallize my thoughts on these issues and for her incisive comments on my penultimate draft of this material.

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Material appearing in §13 and in Chapters 7 through 10 is based on my article, "Is Hegel's *Phenomenology* Relevant to Contemporary Epistemology?" *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 41/42 (2000): 43–85.

The chart in §14 is drawn from *Hegel's Epistemological Realism: A Study of the Aim and Method of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer, 1989), 156–7.

§15 is drawn from my article, “Can Pragmatic Realists Argue Transcendentally?” in John Shook, ed., *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2003), 151–75.

I gratefully thank the editors and presses in which these materials originally appeared for their kind permission to reuse them here. All of them have been variously revised for this book.



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# References and Abbreviations

I have used the author, date, and page method of citation almost exclusively. The full reference for materials cited in this way are found in the Bibliography under the author and date cited.

In a few cases it is more effective to use the following abbreviations. Multivolume works are cited by volume and page number thus: *CP* 6:52. Occasionally, “ch.” designates chapters.

*PhdG* Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hegel 1980; *GW* 9).

*GW* Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hegel 1968–).

*M* Miller, tr., *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977). Hegel's *Phenomenology* is cited by the initials of its German title, including (when necessary) page and line references to the critical edition of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*GW* 9). Page references to Miller's translation follow after a slash thus: (*PhdG* 9:58.13–4/*M*52).

*Enz.* Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (Hegel 1831). This three-volume work contains Hegel's shorter *Logic*, *Philosophy of Nature*, and *Philosophy of Spirit*. It is divided into consecutively numbered sections that are cited thus: *Enz.* §98.

*Rph* Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991). This work, too, is divided into consecutively numbered sections, referred to thus: *Rph* §135. Occasionally, Hegel's own published remarks are indicated by an “R” suffix to a section number; notes on Hegel's lectures supplied by his editors are indicated with a “Z” (*Zusatz*) suffix.

*KdrV* Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in two significantly different editions. The standard convention is to refer to the first edition as “A” and the second as “B.” Since this method of citation is unique in the field, in most cases I simply refer to “A” and “B” page references (e.g., A182–4/B225–7) without including *KdrV*. The original pagination of the two German editions is carried through all recent translations of Kant's first *Critique*.

- PH* Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Sextus Empiricus 1934). This work is contained in the first of the four volumes of Sextus Empiricus' *Works* (1934). The abbreviation derives from the Latin title, *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes*. This work is cited by book and section numbers thus: *PH* I §§112–4. Very occasionally, other works by Sextus are cited by volume, book, and section numbers thus: 2:IV §§15–8.
- CP* Russell, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (Russell 1994). Russell's collected papers are cited by volume and page numbers thus: *CP* 9:45.
- KFI* Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Dretske 1981).

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# ONE

## Introduction

1 Hegel's *Phenomenology* is notoriously challenging, in form and structure as well as in content. His apparent ambitions in the *Phenomenology* and his highly unusual presentation have often made it difficult to relate it to more familiar philosophical views and issues. Hegel demands much of his readers. At the beginning of a chapter or subsection, for example, Hegel states a philosophical view often to argue (by indirect proof or *reductio ad absurdum*) against that view, though sometimes only to argue against a defective account or justification of that view. Precisely what view he criticizes can at times be difficult to determine, often because he states some essential points of an historical philosopher's view without mentioning whose view it is. Hegel unfortunately tends to refer to passages from the history of philosophy the way Medieval philosophers referred to Aristotle. They would write "the philosopher says . . .," expecting, and knowing they could expect, the reader to know exactly which passage from which work of Aristotle's was being quoted or paraphrased. Hegel, however, only rarely mentions his frequent paraphrasing or quotation—though his use of such references should not have misfired nearly so often as it has.

Three examples illustrate these points nicely. Russell famously complains that Hegel fails to distinguish "the 'is' of identity" from "the 'is' of predication."<sup>1</sup> However, Russell didn't recognize that Hegel conflated them only as an assumed first premise of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to show that identity is distinct from predication!<sup>2</sup> A second example comes from the critical German edition of Hegel's works, which has performed an enormous service in tracking down a plethora of possible and definite references or allusions that Hegel makes to other philosophers. However, Hegel's second chapter, "Perception," defied those efforts; the critical apparatus contains only eight references for it, all of them merely cross-references within Hegel's text (*GW* 9:495). In fact, "Perception" is all about Hume's epistemology in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, specifically, in "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses" (I.iv §2).<sup>3</sup>

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1. Russell (1914), 48–9 note; *CP* 6:365.

2. Westphal (1998a), §7.

3. *Ibid.*, *passim*.

A third example is especially important for the present discussion: in the middle of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel paraphrases exactly the Dilemma of the Criterion from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.<sup>4</sup> Roderick Chisholm (1973, 1) called this Dilemma "one of the most important and one of the most difficult of all the problems of philosophy."<sup>5</sup> It has received only scant attention from analytic epistemologists, and far less from Hegel scholars. Yet the Dilemma of the Criterion is the central methodological issue of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to which Hegel provides by far the most sophisticated and successful response I have found anywhere.

Thus one reason why it is so fitting to introduce Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in view of his epistemology is that epistemology is central to the *Phenomenology*, it is central to philosophy, and it is central to much philosophical education. Introducing Hegel's *Phenomenology* via his epistemology is also timely because philosophers are once again occupied with issues that occupied Hegel: conflicts between realism and historicist relativism. Generally, realism is conjoined with individualist theories of knowledge, while historicist relativism is associated with social or nonindividualist theories of knowledge. One key aim of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to show that a properly constructed social and historical theory of human knowledge requires realism about the objects of our knowledge. By the same token, one reason Hegel's epistemology has gone unrecognized is that philosophers have too often supposed that combining realism with a social and historical epistemology is impossible. "Realism," as used here, is the view that things (of whatever sort) exist and have characteristics unto themselves (e.g., our bodies and the rest of the natural world), regardless of what we think, say, or believe about them. "Epistemological realism," then, specifies further that we can know at least something about such things.<sup>6</sup>

4. Westphal (1989a), 11, 14; (1998b); and Chapter 5 in this book.

5. He immediately adds: "I am tempted to say that one has not begun to philosophise until one has faced this problem and has recognized how unappealing, in the end, each of the possible solutions is" (1). Unfortunately, Chisholm unduly restricted his list of possible solutions by ignoring the possibility and prospects of self-criticism.

6. When introducing technical terms in this discussion, such as those just used, I have tried to characterize them briefly, clearly, and adequately for present purposes. Further discussion of these terms and their associated issues may be found in the Blackwell *Companion to Epistemology* or in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

To say that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is centrally epistemological immediately poses another problem: it certainly doesn't *read* like epistemology in any familiar sense. Hegel's *Phenomenology* has a complex expository structure. On the one hand, Hegel distinguishes among three points of view: his own as author and narrator, our point of view as readers and "observers," and the point of view of observed "forms of consciousness." Various "forms of consciousness" (defined and discussed in Chapters 2 and 5) are brought forth to illustrate various philosophical views or theses. Hegel purports that, in his examination, each uncovers problems with its own key ideas through some form of self-critical experience. This expository structure lends Hegel's *Phenomenology* a unique literary cast that, together with the difficulties of identifying within it standard philosophical issues, has suggested to some that his book is primarily literary rather than philosophical. This is an understandable misimpression. Hegel's *Phenomenology* does have a unique literary structure, though Hegel developed it for *philosophical* reasons and purposes. These are discussed in Chapters 2 through 4.

Basic issues that inform Hegel's phenomenological method are introduced in Chapter 2. The expository structure of the *Phenomenology* is further developed in Chapter 3, which shows why key features of Hegel's phenomenological method are modeled on Sophoclean tragedy, most clearly illustrated by Creon's role in *Antigone*. These points are brought together in Chapter 4, which considers the role of philosophical reflection in Hegel's phenomenological method. These three chapters jointly provide the basis for considering the basic features of Hegel's solution to the Dilemma of the Criterion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 summarizes some of the main features of Hegel's epistemology. Chapter 7 explores some significant thematic connections between his views and contemporary epistemological problems. With these materials in hand, Hegel's views are considered in relation to twentieth-century empiricism (Chapter 8), Dretske's information theory (Chapter 9), and the continuing debate between realists and historicist relativists (Chapter 10).

One central, recurring theme of this book is the nature and role of reflection in judgment and rational justification. This theme is introduced in Chapter 1, which reviews some basic features of Hegel's "phenomenological" method and his reasons for adopting it. The theme of reflective judgment is raised again at the end of Chapter 2 and developed in Chapter 3, which examines what Hegel very likely learned about it from Sophocles' *Antigone*. Chapter 4 develops this theme further, by highlighting the kind of reflective judgment Hegel seeks to facilitate for and encourage in his readers. The nature and role of reflective judgment in

philosophical assessment is expanded in Chapter 5, by linking it to Hegel's analysis of the self-critical structure of self-conscious human awareness. Chapter 5 explicates reflective assessment in terms of "mature judgment" and indicates the role of mature judgment in Hegel's fallibilist account of epistemic justification and his pragmatic account of rationality. In summarizing Hegel's central epistemological arguments in the *Phenomenology*, Chapter 6 indicates how and where Hegel introduces mature judgment as a topic of the *Phenomenology*. Chapters 7 through 10 then invite the reader to consider the nature and role of mature judgment in philosophical assessment by exercising such judgment while reconsidering some central philosophical issues and apparent dilemmas, discussed in these chapters, that have profoundly guided philosophical thought from the Enlightenment to the present day. These include basic assumptions that steered philosophers toward empiricism and individualism in twentieth-century epistemology, or that generated serious misunderstandings that have precluded either recognition or serious philosophical consideration of Hegel's epistemology.

Three specific issues among these are that Hegel anticipated by 150 years the recent rejections in epistemology of concept-empiricism (see §§12, 13.5, 21, 22) and of individualism (§§32ff.). More importantly, Hegel showed how rejecting these positions does not require rejecting epistemological realism about the objects of empirical knowledge. Hegel achieved this insight, in part, by rejecting "internalism" about mental content (§§5, 13.6), semantic meaning (§19), and justification (§§10.2, 10.5, 12.2, 18, 28).<sup>7</sup>

The recent wave of anti-Cartesianism in epistemology and philosophy of mind has much to learn from Hegel. Benefiting from Hegel's insights and analyses, however, requires understanding just what were his aims, methods, and arguments in epistemology. These, however, have eluded most commentators, whether critical or sympathetic. So I begin with Hegel's expository and philosophical methods (§§1–11).

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7. Section numbers like these are internal references within this book. Section numbers that refer to any other works are preceded by a reference to the relevant work.

The technical terms just used are defined when these issues are discussed in detail in the indicated sections. It should be no surprise that Hegel espoused various "externalist" views, that factors of which someone is unaware affect, e.g., what he or she means, or whether what he or she means is justified. Kant's transcendental analysis of the necessary a priori conditions for the possibility of unified self-conscious experience *is* externalist, *avant la lettre*, because it concerns a set of conditions that must *be* satisfied if and whenever we are self-conscious, regardless of whether we are aware either of these conditions or of their satisfaction.

Please note two caveats, one substantive and one methodological. In focusing this book on Hegel's epistemology in the *Phenomenology* I do not claim that epistemology is his sole concern in the *Phenomenology*, which also includes rich discussions of moral philosophy and Occidental cultural history (including its Oriental roots). Hegel's concern with *Kultur-Kritik* does lend his book many important narrative aspects. These have been analyzed especially well by Henry Harris (1997) in *Hegel's Ladder*.<sup>8</sup> These crucial strands of Hegel's *Phenomenology* ultimately do bear on his epistemology. However, these topics are vast and intricate and can only be touched on in this brief conspectus (mainly in Chapters 9 and 10).

Because this book provides a philosophical overview of some central aspects of Hegel's epistemology, many important points can only be discussed in their barest essentials. I have not shied away from stating the issues and Hegel's stand on them directly. I am keenly aware of the contrast between this approach and the requirements of a full-scale exposition and defense of a philosophical position. I have endeavored to meet those requirements elsewhere, and in parts of the following. Chapters 2 and 5 through 7 are summary in character; the remainder are not. Chapters 3 and 4, on Hegel's method, are entirely new. In Chapters 9 and 10 I consider some important social aspects of Hegel's epistemology much more closely than I have previously.

A full-dress treatment of any significant philosophical issue makes for demanding reading. Understandably, philosophers want and deserve some advance assurance that such reading rewards the effort. This expectation is especially urgent in areas where philosophical rewards are least expected. Notoriously, this is the common view of Hegel's philosophy. I hope that the present introduction, synoptic (even sketchy) as it often is, may help students and nonspecialists to see that studying Hegel is deeply rewarding philosophically, even or especially when it is most philosophically challenging. I hope it may also help Hegel scholars see that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is deeply philosophically rewarding in ways they had not anticipated. Finally, I hope the following may suggest some fruitful ways in which the "Continental" and "Analytic" traditions of philosophy can engage, illuminate, and benefit each other.

Before delving into these rich issues, I might suggest one central thought guiding the vigorous mix of contemporary, historical, analytic, and continental philosophy that is advocated (and I hope also exhibited) in this book: such multiperspectivalism aims to increase our acuity in understanding and assessing philosophical views and thus to mitigate, so far

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8. For discussion, see Westphal (1998c).

as we are able, a grave professional liability. This liability has been put very well by James Griffin (1996, 2):

One might succeed in making every argument that one actually deployed wassertight. But one does not usually go seriously wrong in philosophy over the details of one's argument. One goes seriously wrong in the biggest things, in the things one does not even think of, in one's whole orientation. At the very best, one's orientation will allow one a glimpse of an important truth or two, but it will also certainly be responsible for one's overlooking a dozen others. In philosophy generally . . . we are at present, and always shall be, groping in the dark simply to get a sense of some of the large contours of our subject. One's only reasonable hope is that, by groping, one will find something, and that others will take a look.

In a notoriously fractious field, we can all benefit by this kind of inquiring modesty, which whets the appetite for philosophy far more than do faction and favoritism.

---

## Two

# Introducing Hegel's Phenomenological Method

2 Hegel's phenomenological method is so unusual that it and its origins cry out for explanation. Several philosophical issues and sources help elucidate some important features of Hegel's phenomenological method. These are discussed in the present chapter. Chapter 3 provides some essential literary background to Hegel's method and exposition. Chapter 4 draws these two strands together to provide some conclusions regarding Hegel's phenomenological method.

2.1 The best single sentence about Hegel's phenomenological method was written by Jonathan Robinson (1977, 2), who observed:

The full strength of Hegel's position [in the *Phenomenology*] is appreciated only when it is understood that he is arguing that bad theory makes for bad practice, and that the bad practice shows up the logical difficulties of the theory.

Robinson highlights the important fact that Hegel's *Phenomenology* considers philosophical issues, views, and principles, not in abstraction, but in close connection with their intended uses for comprehending their intended range of phenomena (*ta phainòmena*, in Aristotle's sense), including the opinions of the many and the wise. More importantly, Robinson's statement stresses that Hegel's phenomenological method critically assesses philosophical views by considering carefully the ways in which and the extent to which the intended use of philosophical principles substantiates, qualifies, or undermines them. Hegel's phenomenological method involves a dialectical juxtaposition of principles and the actual practices they purport to guide, by exhibiting them for our benefit in the figure and actions of their paradigmatic exponent. Uniquely, the internal critique central to Hegel's method is not driven by an interlocutor; it is driven by the very proponent of the relevant principles him- or herself, though the proponent's self-criticism is presented for the benefit and insight of an audience consisting of Hegel's readers. What makes this dialectic "phenomenological"?

One important clue to Hegel's unique style of phenomenology comes from the title of the last chapter of Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of*

*Natural Science*, "Phenomenology." In that chapter Kant examines the metaphysical principles undergirding Newton's efforts to determine the true locations and motions (orbits) of the planets, based on observational data regarding their apparent locations and motions. Analogously, Hegel's *Phenomenology* examines a series of "forms of consciousness" (*Gestalten des Bewußtseins*). "Forms of consciousness" are apparent or putative forms of knowledge. (Later in the *Phenomenology*, these forms of consciousness are also forms of practical agency; Hegel contends that knowledge is rooted in practice.) The forms of consciousness Hegel considers in the *Phenomenology* are based on various ways in which human knowledge appears, both in the expressions and behavior of the many and in the theories of the philosophically wise. All of these appearances are, Hegel believes, more or less adequate and more or less accurate manifestations of our actual cognitive capacities and abilities, and of the actual objects and events we engage through those capacities and abilities. These forms of apparent knowledge manifest, to some degree and in some way or ways, our actual cognitive situation because they are rooted, however distantly, in our actual cognitive situation. Hegel's careful, detailed, internal critique of these forms of apparent knowledge aims to enable us ultimately to grasp the nature and scope of true or genuine knowledge, which concludes his book.

Hegel's use of the term "absolute" deserves comment. Hegel defines genuine or "absolute" knowledge in the first sentence of the *Phenomenology* as "*das wirkliche Erkennen dessen, was in Wahrheit ist*": "the actual knowledge of what in truth is" (*PhdG* 9:53). This phrase specifies Hegel's meaning of his term "*das Absolute*," which Hegel sets in apposition to this phrase later in this same sentence. In these introductory remarks he does not, and is not entitled to, take any particular stand on what ultimately there is "in truth." The remainder of his first paragraph (indeed, the remainder of the *Phenomenology*) sustains this use and meaning of "absolute." The common assumption that "absolute" is supposed to modify grammatically *how* we know "what in truth is" is spurious and imports the common epistemological fixation on "certainty" into Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which in fact gets his views backwards. Hegel repeatedly analyzes various "certainties" in the *Phenomenology*. These certainties are antecedent convictions about what there is and how or whether we know what there is (or, in practice, can achieve what we intend). Hegel examines these "certainties" in order to expose them as premature and at least somewhat erroneous convictions that, however insightful or informative, cannot ultimately be justified.

Reading Hegel effectively requires taking to heart Frege's lesson that the meaning of any word is only determinate within a sentence. Most im-

portantly, Frege's lesson concerns *each* sentence individually in which a term occurs (Conant 2002, 384–5, 398–9). Hegel is *the* past master of contextually defining and redefining key terms as their context of use is developed. Thus his texts must also be read with sensitivity to Carnap's (1956, 49–52) related point that the meaning of a term is specified by identifying which inferences can, and which cannot, be drawn using that term. Assimilating Hegel's terms to other familiar usage is guaranteed to confuse and obscure. Unfortunately, this has too often been the fate of Hegel's readers.

A third important characteristic of Hegel's phenomenological dialectic derives from his concern to avoid the five skeptical modes of Agrippa (infinite regress, relativity, assumption, circularity, and discrepancy).<sup>1</sup> Hegel avoids these five modes by solving the Pyrrhonian Dilemma of the Criterion (below, Chapter 5). Hegel's solution to this Dilemma involves a subtle and powerful analysis of the possibility of constructive self-criticism. According to Hegel, human consciousness has a self-critical structure, regardless of whether we acknowledge or exploit it. Hegel purports to exhibit our self-critical capacity in the structure and behavior of the "forms of consciousness" examined in his *Phenomenology*. Hegel aims to avoid begging the question by supporting his own positive philosophical conclusions solely on the basis of an internal critique of opposed philosophical views. This is an extremely demanding requirement, which Hegel fulfills astonishingly well.

2.2 Each form of consciousness is guided by a basic pair of conceptions: a conception of itself as a form of consciousness, either cognitive or practical, and a conception of its proper object or objects. I use the term "conception" in order to denote conceptual representations that individuals use, know, and can master. Hegel uses the term "*Begriff*" ("concept") also to designate objective structures in the natural world (see §12.5). Distinguishing these two ideas terminologically helps clarify Hegel's view. (Philosophical German recently adopted the Anglicism "*Konzeption*" to remedy precisely this want in philosophical usage.)

Hegel's phenomenological method treats these pairs of conceptions as instantiated in and used by a representative "form of consciousness" in

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1. *PH I* §§164–9. "Discrepancy" concerns "interminable conflict [both among ordinary people and philosophers] because of which we are unable to choose a thing or reject it, and so fall back on suspension" (*PH I* §165). On the importance of the Five Modes of Agrippa within contemporary epistemology, see Westphal (1989a), chs. 4, 5; (1998b); and Fogelin (1994). For a concise synopsis of Pyrrhonian skepticism, see Westphal (1989a), 11–6.

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