



The Phenomenology of Thinking

An Encounter with Hegel and the “I that is We”

Where is the homunculus?

At its most basic, our experience of thinking — which we normally assume is happening somewhere inside our head, brain or mind — is simply another phenomenon arising in awareness alongside everything else we experience.

A thought appears. A sound appears. The room appears. A bodily sensation appears. They are different kinds of phenomena, but in immediate experience they are all appearances in awareness. The familiar distinction between an inner world of thought and an outer world of things may be useful for navigating everyday life, but under closer inspection that boundary is surprisingly difficult to find.

Once this is directly noticed, it becomes difficult to put thought back into its customary bottle, like a genie, and locate it securely somewhere “inside me”.

So what is the genesis of a thought?

If I try to follow a thought back to its source, I encounter a mystery. There is no little homunculus sitting at the centre of my experience churning out “my” thoughts. Indeed, I don’t know what my next thought will be until it appears. Even when I deliberately think about something — when I pose a question or turn my attention towards a problem — I can direct my attention and create the conditions for thought, but I cannot observe myself manufacturing the particular thought that subsequently arises.

Thoughts simply appear, often in response to whatever else is arising at the same time: something seen or heard, a bodily sensation, a memory, another thought, something another person has said.

And then something else happens. The thought that has arisen becomes “*my thought.*”





But when I look for the act by which “I” created it, I cannot find one. The sense of ownership seems to attach itself to the thought once it has arisen. It may be more accurate, phenomenologically, to say that thought arises through this particular embodied perspective than to say that an independently existing thinker produces it.

This does not mean that thoughts are arbitrary or disconnected from the person through whom they arise. They clearly bear some relationship to this particular body, history, language, memory, situation and field of attention. Nor does it mean that thoughts are without consequence. A thought arising can change attention, provoke an emotion, alter perception or lead this embodied being to act.

But none of that requires the little thinker sitting behind experience whom we ordinarily assume must be there.

So before asking what thought *is*, perhaps there are some simpler phenomenological questions to explore.

Where, in direct experience, does a thought occur?

What can actually be found of its source?

At what point does a thought become *my* thought?

And what changes if, rather than beginning with the assumption that thought belongs to an isolated thinker, we simply attend to the way thinking actually arises?

When another person enters the picture

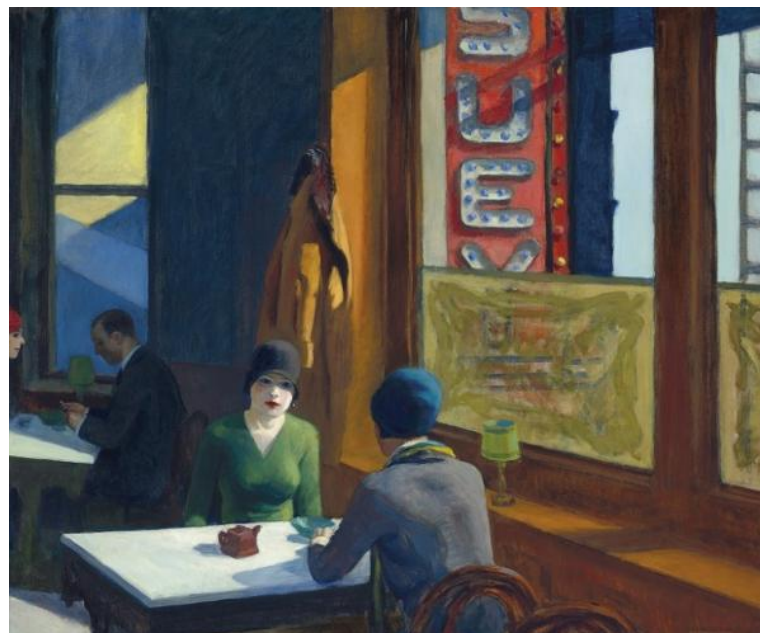
Something further becomes apparent when another person enters the experience.

A thought arises here and is expressed in words. Those words are heard by another person and something arises there in response. That response is expressed and, on hearing it, something new may arise here.

Thought has become a medium of exchange.

Again, if I stay close to the phenomenology, it becomes surprisingly difficult to establish where the unfolding movement of thought began. Something you say gives rise to a thought in me. I express it. My response changes what you are seeing, and your next response alters what I see. Each thought may appear locally, through a particular embodied perspective, but the unfolding sequence is increasingly difficult to attribute to either of us alone.

And yet something else can happen.





The thought arising here becomes *my position*. The thought arising there becomes *your position*.

Attention contracts around the content of our respective thoughts. I begin defending mine, you defend yours, and difference becomes opposition. Thought, which provided the medium through which we could encounter one another, now reinforces the apparent boundary between us.

But attention can move.

Rather than asking which thought is correct, we can become interested in what our different thoughts are pointing towards. Your disagreement no longer needs to threaten my position. It becomes additional information. I can become curious about why you see something that I don't.

The difference remains, but our relationship to the difference has changed.

I remember experiencing this many years ago in a discussion about personal responsibility. Some of us believed that we were responsible for our actions; others argued that, since there was ultimately no separate self, there could be nobody there to exercise responsibility.

At the level of our competing conceptual positions, the disagreement seemed irresolvable.

But when we stopped defending our positions and each investigated what could actually be found in our own experience, we discovered something unexpected. None of us could locate the ultimate source of thought, intention or action. Equally, none of us could establish experientially that there was *no one* there.

We met in the mystery.

Our different interpretations remained available, but they were no longer what held our attention. What connected us was the shared investigation of something none of us could finally explain. The different interpretations now seemed to add richness and depth to that shared experience rather than contradict one another. The general sense of the moment was wonder and joy. The need to fix an answer disappeared into the mystery we all acknowledged.

Looking back, I can see that the very question which had initially divided us became part of the means through which we connected.

This suggests another question.

Perhaps thought is not inherently divisive or connective. Perhaps what matters is *where attention is located in relation to it*.

When attention contracts around ownership and content — *my thought, my position, my understanding* — difference can readily become separation.

When attention expands to include the context in which different thoughts are arising, those differences can become generative. We don't have to agree. Indeed, the fact that you see something differently may allow something to become visible that neither of us could see alone.



Thought still appears locally. Difference remains. But the thinking is now occurring within a relational process in which each contribution changes the conditions from which the next thought emerges.

At that point another question begins to present itself.

Are we still simply exchanging our individual thoughts, or has thinking itself begun to happen between us?

I don't yet know.

But phenomenologically, it seems a question worth staying with.

Another way of listening

There is another experience which complicates this further.

Some time ago I was listening to Daniel Garner (O.G. Rose) and noticed my usual way of attending to another person's ideas. As he spoke, part of me was continually analysing what he was saying — comparing it with what I already thought, agreeing, disagreeing, making connections and preparing responses. The way he spoke made approaching his thinking in this way difficult. I simply couldn't keep up.

So, I tried something different.

I let go of the attempt to analyse what he was saying and surrendered instead to receptivity. Rather than trying to understand each thought, evaluate it and fit it into what I already knew, I simply followed the movement of his thinking wherever it went.

Something unexpected happened.

I began to have the peculiar experience of inhabiting his thinking as it unfolded. I wasn't standing outside it trying to understand a sequence of ideas. As Daniel spoke, I seemed somehow to be moving with the thinking itself. One thought opened into another and, for brief periods, the distinction between his thinking and my listening to his thinking became much less clear.

This wasn't a loss of myself. Daniel remained Daniel and I remained me. Nor did it mean that I necessarily agreed with everything he was saying. Agreement and disagreement had simply ceased to be where my attention was located, although I did recognise resonance with certain of his ideas as they emerged in the flow of his thinking.

Afterwards I could step back, reflect, question and interpret. But during the encounter there had been something more immediate: a receptivity to the movement of thought before I turned it into what I thought about his thought.

And that raises another phenomenological question.

Where was the thinking during those moments?



Clearly Daniel was speaking and I was listening. There is no need to make any mysterious claim about thoughts somehow passing directly from one mind into another. But the lived experience seemed richer than information being transferred from one separate thinker to another.

By relaxing my grip on my own thinking, I seemed able, temporarily, to participate in the movement of thinking as it unfolded through his speaking and my listening.

Perhaps this is another example of the role attention plays. When my attention is centred on what I think about what you are saying, your thought becomes an object for my thought. When that activity relaxes, another possibility seems to appear: I can become receptive to the movement of your thinking before converting it into my understanding of your thinking.

The distinction between us remains.

But perhaps the boundary has become a little more permeable.

Pause. Rewind.

Before going any further, I want to pause and rewind, because something rather interesting is happening in the writing of this essay itself.

I didn't set out to write an essay about the phenomenology of thinking.

It began when I encountered an essay by Jeffrey Reid in *Pryche* about Hegel. The tagline caught my attention:

"For Hegel, your thoughts aren't trapped in a cerebral box: they act on the world, making meaning and expressing your freedom."

Something about that sentence made me pause.

At that point I didn't have an argument. I hadn't formulated a connection. There was simply a recognition — a sense that something in Hegel's understanding of thought might correspond with things I had encountered in my own experience, particularly in the relational work of the Between-Us Groups.

So, I followed it.

As I explored the resonance, further correspondences began appearing. One thought led to another. Experiences I hadn't initially connected with the question suddenly became relevant. An old memory of a discussion about responsibility surfaced. Questions about ownership of thought appeared. And gradually I realised that before absorbing Hegel's account of thinking, I needed to establish what I could actually say about thinking from my own direct experience.

That investigation produced everything you've just read.

Which leaves me in a rather deliciously circular situation.



I have been investigating how thought arises while experiencing that very process in the emergence of this essay.

So where is this coming from?

I certainly seem to be involved. I'm the one sitting here, noticing, selecting words, accepting some formulations and rejecting others, following one thread rather than another. But I can't honestly say that I conceived the argument in advance and am now simply writing it down.

The process doesn't feel like that.

It feels more like an arising.

First there was a recognition whose source I cannot locate. Then attention turned towards it. Thoughts appeared in response. And, rather like my experience listening to Daniel, instead of trying immediately to pin them down, I found myself becoming receptive to where they might lead. Those thoughts were articulated and entered into conversation. The responses changed the context from which further thoughts arose. Memories appeared that I hadn't deliberately searched for. Connections became visible that I hadn't previously known were there.

Even the recognition that began the whole process presents the same mystery. What recognised the correspondence between that sentence about Hegel and something in my previous experience? Where was that recognition located? Who or what connected the two?

I don't know.

What I can say is that this particular moment seems somehow suffused with thinking around this question. There is a creative impulse, an unfolding inquiry, and I appear to be one of the places where it is being noticed and given form.

Perhaps I am less the originator of the thinking than an action point within it — the place where something fleeting becomes articulated and eventually takes form as an object in the shared world: words on a page that can be read, questioned, disagreed with and developed by someone else.

And then, presumably, the process begins again.

Someone encounters these words. Something catches their attention. A recognition occurs. Another thought arises.

Where is the thinking then?

And who, if anyone, is doing it?

I still haven't properly read Hegel.

Perhaps now I should.



Enter Hegel



Armed with my own thinking about thinking — and with these questions about selfhood, identity and agency still very much unresolved — I turned to Jeffrey Reid's essay and tackled Hegel more seriously.

I found a great deal that resonated.

For Hegel, thought is not something passively occurring inside a private mental world. Thinking is active. It has agency. Indeed, Reid describes the agency of thought as intimately connected with freedom itself.

We do not simply receive the world as something fixed and given, a background within which we operate. Through thought we discover connections, imagine possibilities, create meanings and act upon what we find. Ideas therefore have real purchase on reality. What we think can change what we do, and what we do changes the world in which subsequent thinking takes place.

There is a fascinating paradox here. The freedom of thought allows us to imagine and create structures which may subsequently constrain that very freedom. An idea becomes an institution, a convention, a law, a social identity,

perhaps an orthodoxy. Something originating in the freedom of thought becomes part of the apparently given world of limitation encountered by those who come afterwards.

Hegel also challenges the simple division between a thinking subject in here and an objective world out there. Thought is always thought about something. So, the world as I experience it cannot be entirely separated from my thinking about it: experience arises through a relationship between what appears and how it is apprehended.

I can even turn thought upon myself, making myself an object of my own thinking. And, as my experience listening to Daniel had suggested, even the boundary between my thinking and another person's thinking may be less clear-cut than I normally assume.

And this is where a question begins to nag at me.

If the experienced world and thought arise relationally, why assume the self that is doing the thinking stands outside that same relational process?

Perhaps the self is also one of its products.

This matters because Hegel seems to give considerable weight to the agency of the thinking self. Yet my own phenomenological investigation has already made that self rather less secure. I can find thought arising. I can find intention and action. I can certainly find the experience of agency. But when I look for the originating thinker — the one supposedly producing the thought — I encounter that same mystery again.

Perhaps, then, the self is not what establishes the relationship between thought and world. Perhaps selfhood itself emerges *within that relationship*.



This doesn't make the self unreal. It may remain functionally important while remaining *emergent rather than foundational*: a sufficiently coherent embodied identity through which thought acquires agency in the world, without necessarily being the ultimate source of the thoughts from which that agency proceeds.

And then another person enters the picture.

I encounter another person as an object within my experience but recognise something extraordinary: they are also a subject, *and from their perspective I am an object within their experience*. To know myself fully as a self therefore requires recognising selfhood in the other — and being recognised by them in return.

For Hegel, this mutual recognition becomes foundational to genuinely shared social life. If I claim full selfhood for myself while denying it to you, relationship becomes domination. Something different becomes possible when each recognises the other as another centre of freedom.

Hence Hegel's remarkable formulation:

The "I that is We."

This landed strongly for me.

It also complicated the question I had already begun asking. If the self is not the originating source of thought but something that emerges within the relationship between thought and world, what happens when another self enters that relationship? And what happens when, rather than standing apart and evaluating their thinking, I become receptive enough to participate in its unfolding?

Hegel's account seemed to point somewhere particularly interesting.

The other person doesn't simply encounter an already completed me. What they say changes what I think. Their recognition changes how I understand myself. Their difference reveals possibilities unavailable from my perspective. My response changes them in turn.

The relationship isn't merely occurring *between two finished selves*.

It may be participating in their continuing formation.

Suddenly Hegel's *"I that is We"* becomes even more interesting to me. The "We" may not simply be the community created when independent selves recognise one another. Relationship may be one of the processes through which those differentiated selves continually come into their particular being.

And perhaps this helps explain something we have repeatedly noticed in the Between-Us Groups.

Belonging need not diminish individuality.

Under the right conditions, it seems to do almost the opposite. The more securely I belong, the less I need to defend a fixed identity. Difference becomes less threatening. I can risk uncertainty, change my mind, discover something I didn't previously



know about myself, and become more receptive to ways of thinking other than my own. Other people's differences cease to be obstacles to coherence and become resources from which a richer coherence can emerge.

Greater communion can permit greater differentiation.

And if that is so, Hegel's "I that is We" leaves me with another question: what if relationship doesn't simply connect selves, but participates in bringing them into being?

One question remains

My entire investigation began with the observation that thought and the experienced world appear in awareness. Whatever selfhood emerges from the interplay of thought, memory, action and relationship also appears there.

So, I find myself wanting to prise apart two things which Hegel, at least as I currently understand him, seems to hold much more closely together:

thinking and awareness.

If thinking participates in the creation of selfhood, what is the status of the awareness in which both thinking and selfhood appear?

Perhaps the difficulty lies in imagining awareness as something separate from what appears within it — a kind of container or background against which experience unfolds. That isn't what I find when I look. I cannot locate awareness apart from what is appearing, any more than I can locate what is appearing apart from awareness.

Perhaps thinking, self and the experienced world are forms awareness is presently taking.

If so, the distinction between thinking and awareness becomes rather curious. Thought changes continually. Thoughts arise and disappear. Selves develop, relationships alter, worlds change. Yet amid all this flux, there is something profoundly consistent in the experience of awareness itself. The content is continually changing, but the simple fact of awareness seems not to change with it.

Perhaps this constancy also contributes to the curious sense of continuity we attribute to the self. The self is continually changing and being reconstructed, yet somehow I experience myself as the same 'I' moving through time. Could it be that the changing self borrows something of its apparent continuity from the constancy of awareness itself?

And if I cannot locate the thinker who supposedly originates thought, what exactly do I mean when I say that I think?





I am certainly not claiming, after encountering Hegel through a single essay, that I have identified a gap in his thinking. That would be hubris of the highest order.

But I am tempted to follow the question and see where it leads.

Because perhaps thought and world don't first require a separate self to bring them into relationship.

Perhaps the self is not the enduring source of this process, but one of the forms it takes.

One further complication

There is one participant in the emergence of this essay I have not yet fully acknowledged.

AI.

I used ChatGPT partly to help me unlock some of the complexities of Hegel's philosophy, but its role in this inquiry went considerably further than research and explanation. I brought my own responses, questions and half-formed intuitions into the conversation. The AI suggested connections, asked questions and offered formulations. Something in those responses would sometimes spark another recognition in me, which I would feed back into the conversation. That in turn changed the context of the exchange and generated another response.

The process became iterative.

Importantly, I did not simply accept what the AI produced. I recognised some connections and rejected others. Sometimes its response clarified what I was already sensing; sometimes it prompted a connection I had not previously made; sometimes what mattered was my disagreement with it. My responses similarly changed the direction of what came next.

What I brought to the conversation, however, was lived experience. The AI could identify patterns in my descriptions of that experience, make connections and offer interpretations, but it could not supply the experience itself. And I could usually tell when an interpretation had become detached and remote from what I had actually encountered: however plausible the words, they simply didn't land with conviction.

All of this sounds remarkably familiar.

Earlier I asked whether, when two people enter into an inquiry together, they are simply exchanging individual thoughts or whether thinking itself can begin to happen between them.

But what happens when one of the participants isn't human?

I don't want to rush towards an answer by claiming that an AI thinks in the same way that I do, or that there is some mysterious consciousness inhabiting the machine. That would replace investigation with speculation.



But something observable has happened here. Ideas have entered a relational exchange, been responded to, modified, rejected, connected and returned in altered form. That process has changed my thinking and contributed directly to the physical object you are now reading.

So perhaps there is another question waiting beyond Hegel's "*I that is We.*"

What happens to our understanding of thought and its agency in the world when the relational partner through which thinking develops is an artificial intelligence?

I don't know the answer to that either.

But it seems like another question worth staying with.