

Chapter 2

Situating Hegel: From Transcendental Philosophy to a *Phenomenology of Spirit*



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This chapter aims to situate Hegel’s philosophical outlook by illuminating it against the backdrop of Immanuel Kant’s transcendental philosophy, some early skeptical critiques of that philosophy, Fichte’s philosophy of freedom, and finally the Spinozistic thinking of Schelling and of Hegel himself. Hegel’s philosophical project does not represent a return to pre-critical (or “dogmatic”) metaphysics, even though Hegel does endorse some central ideas drawn from pre-Kantian metaphysics. Similarly, Hegel’s project is not an entirely negative or skeptical one, even though Hegel’s thought does incorporate some key insights drawn from post-Kantian skepticism. In a sense, Hegel’s philosophy can be seen as an attempt to pay off some of the promissory notes that Kant had issued in connection with his transcendental, “scientific” philosophy. The Hegelian pay-off, in rough outline, takes place through a strategy that seeks to combine the pre-Kantian thought of Spinoza with the post-Kantian thought of Fichte. In the spirit of post-Kantian skepticism, Fichte had argued that the mind (or knowing) is radically free and uncaused insofar as it is always possible for the mind (or knowing) to question, doubt, and negate (and therefore to abstract or separate itself from) what is merely given to it. In the spirit of pre-Kantian rationalism, Spinoza had argued that the mind and the world are not two independent or separable entities, and so it is a mistake to think that the mind is capable of abstracting from or separating itself from the world as given. Hegel seeks to unite these two seemingly incompatible perspectives by arguing in favor of what he calls “determinate negation.” Determinate negation is an ongoing, negating activity that is radically free and unbounded (quite in line with what Fichte had argued). But precisely because the activity of determinate negation is unbounded and infinite, it is also not an activity that takes place by means of abstraction or separation from the world as given (quite in line with what Spinoza had argued).

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1 Kant's Transcendental Philosophy

Early in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains: "I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with our way of knowing objects insofar as this way of knowing is to be possible a priori" (*CPR*, A11–12). Transcendental philosophy thus involves a certain kind of "return to the subject that knows," or a certain kind of "call to self-knowledge" (*CPR*, Axi); but this is not an unqualified return to the subject. Transcendental philosophy is concerned with our way of knowing objects "insofar as this way of knowing is to be possible a priori."

The term a priori refers to that which is independent of experience, and independent not merely of this or that instance of experience, but "absolutely independent of all experience" as such (*CPR*, B2–3). When Kant speaks of "independence" here, he is referring to the origin, or source, of that which is said to be a priori: that which is "independent" of experience is that which does not have its origin, or source, in experience. For Kant, experience is "cognition through connected perceptions" (*CPR*, B161); and perception is "sensation of which one is conscious" (*CPR*, A225/B272). Hence, to have experience is to have cognition of "objects" insofar as such cognition includes not only consciousness of what is presented in sensation (i.e., perception) but also an apprehension of the connectedness of the perceptions that are thus presented.

The project of transcendental philosophy implies not only that there may be something about our way of knowing which is independent of experience in the sense described. It also implies that what is a priori about our knowing is itself a *condition* of our having any experience in the first place: it is "indispensable for the possibility of experience" (*CPR*, B5). Furthermore, that which is a priori about our way of knowing is not just an external condition of our possible experience of objects. What is a priori in our knowing also plays a role in enabling the objects of experience to be objects of experience in the first place. Without such an enabling condition, our experience could not be an experience of objects (interconnected perceptions) at all, but only a "blind play of representations, less even than a dream" (*CPR*, B112). Without the connectedness of perceptions made possible by the a priori in our knowing, nothing could even make an appearance as an "object"; for without such connectedness, "all relation of cognition to objects" would disappear, and what might otherwise count as an "object" would "be as good as nothing for us" (*CPR*, A111). Thus, the a priori conditions of possible experience are at the same time the conditions of the possibility of the experienced objects themselves (*CPR*, A111).

Because that which is a priori in our knowing plays a role in enabling the objects of experience to be objects of experience in the first place, it is possible to speak not only about "our way of knowing" as a priori, but also about the knowledge itself as a priori. Kant thus speaks frequently about "a priori knowledge," and offers a second, slightly different account of what is meant by the term, "transcendental": the term "transcendental" has to do with "the a priori possibility of

knowledge, or its a priori use" (*CPR*, A56/B80). This reveals a further aspect of transcendental philosophy as such. Transcendental philosophy involves a "return to the subject," but transcendental philosophy cannot be solely concerned with the knowing subject; that which is a priori also belongs, in some sense, to the known object; and so the knowing subject, even in its pursuit of self-knowledge, "has to deal not with itself alone but also with objects" (*CPR*, Bix). Thus, for Kant, "what alone can be entitled transcendental is the knowledge that these [a priori] representations are not of empirical origin, and the possibility that they can yet relate a priori to objects of experience" (*CPR*, A56/B81).

Transcendental philosophy is concerned with both our way of knowing and the object-character of the known objects insofar as these cannot be explained naturalistically (or on the basis of what happens within experience). It would be misleading, however, to think that transcendental philosophy aims at providing a kind of alternative "explanation" for the occurrences of experience or for what happens within experience. For one commonly thinks of explanation as a matter of tracing one state of affairs back to another, or of giving an account of one object (or set of objects) in terms of another (or others). As noted earlier, transcendental philosophy is concerned not with objects as such, but rather with our way of knowing objects and with the object-character of objects, insofar as these are a priori. Even if transcendental philosophy does offer what might be called an "explanation" of some kind, such an explanation would have to be understood in terms quite different from our more common notions of explanation. The kind of explanation characteristic of transcendental philosophy is not based on tracing one set of objects or states of affairs back to another. After all, transcendental philosophy is concerned with the very conditions of our being able to speak of "objects" or "states of affairs" in the first place.

This feature of transcendental philosophy is also the reason why, for Kant, it is possible for transcendental philosophy to claim the status of a "science." According to Kant, no explanatory system which takes its bearings from objects of experience can ever be assured of its unity and completeness as a system, since the domain of possible objects of experience is inexhaustible (*CPR*, B23; A12–13; B26). Because of this inexhaustibility, there remains the ineluctable possibility that the discovery of new objects, or features of objects, could force a revision of such explanations. By contrast, argues Kant, transcendental philosophy is concerned with our way of knowing and with the object-character of the known objects, only insofar as these are a priori. Since all that is a priori has its own systematic unity (*CPR*, Axiii; A67; B92; A474; B502; A845; B873), and since it is just such a unity which raises a mere aggregate of knowledge to the rank of science (*CPR*, A832/B860), it follows for Kant that transcendental philosophy can, at least in principle, claim the status of "science." Here, "science" is not to be understood in terms of the more restricted, contemporary notion of "science," which is commonly taken to denote "empirical science." Transcendental philosophy, for Kant, does not focus on what can be discovered within experience about objects; it focusses instead on what is a priori about our way of knowing objects.

Along these lines, Kant argues that transcendental philosophy is immune, and can recognize itself as immune, to the kinds of revision which might be demanded by the discovery of new objects or new features of objects within experience. Transcendental philosophy involves no extension of our knowledge of things (*CPR*, A11–12/B25–26; A135/B174); precisely because of this it can be called “science.” While the discovery of new objects can never be complete, one can rest assured that, in the field of the a priori, “nothing can escape us” (*CPR*, Axx). In fact, transcendental philosophy constitutes the very idea of science as the system of all that is a priori in our knowing and in the objects known (*CPR*, A13/B27).

For Kant, a metaphysical system which is scientifically grounded by means of transcendental philosophy will likewise be immune to any further revision or elaboration, save in the manner by which it might be expressed or taught (*CPR*, Axx/Bxxiv; Bxxxviii). Metaphysics, once it has been placed upon the sure path of science, will no longer have to retrace its steps, or attempt any new lines of approach (*CPR*, vii); for the sure path of science, “once it has been trodden, can never be overgrown, and permits of no wandering” (*CPR*, A850/B878). Kant suggests that transcendental philosophy will be able to place metaphysics on the “sure path of science” insofar as it imitates what has already been done in mathematics and natural science, where the scientific character of each was achieved by means of “a revolution brought about all at once” (*CPR*, Bxv–xvi).

If transcendental philosophy succeeds in its scientific aspirations and thus in laying the groundwork for metaphysics as a science, then it becomes possible to adjudicate disputes in metaphysics going back to ancient philosophy by relying on the single, systematic vantage point that transcendental philosophy provides. For example, Zeno’s claim that God is neither finite nor infinite can be fully justified if understood properly in light of transcendental thought (*CPR*, A502–07/B530–35). Similarly, “if we set aside the exaggerations in Plato’s methods of expression,” we can appreciate “that which accords with the nature of things” in his doctrine of the ideas (*CPR*, A313–19/B370–75; see also A471/B499). Furthermore, the defects which characterize Aristotle’s table of categories can be remedied if the content and divisions of the table are “developed systematically from a common principle”; and this cannot be done inductively, as Aristotle tried, but only transcendently (*CPR*, A81/B107). Finally, the Scholastic teaching concerning the convertibility of unity, truth, and goodness can be shown to have “its ground in some rule of the understanding which, as often happens, has only been wrongly interpreted” (*CPR*, B113–114).

2 Early Skeptical Critiques of Kant’s Transcendental Philosophy

In 1792, the skeptical philosopher Gottlob Ernst Schulze published a relatively short work with a rather long title: *Aenesidemus, Or Concerning the Foundations of the Philosophy of the Elements Issued by Prof. Reinhold in Jena Together with*

a Defense of Skepticism Against the Pretensions of the Critique of Pure Reason. This work was presented as a dialogue between Hermias (a representative of Kant's transcendental philosophy) and Aenesidemus (a Humean critic of Kantian philosophy). Schulze's argumentation was ostensibly aimed at the post-Kantian theorizing of Karl Leonard Reinhold, whose "philosophy of the elements" or "elementary philosophy" sought to show that Kant's transcendental philosophy could be understood and formulated in a way that would make it defensible against the skeptical criticisms that at the time were being directed against the transcendental philosophy. In taking aim at Reinhold, Schulze succeeded in raising serious doubts not only about Reinhold's reformulation of Kantian philosophy, but also about the viability of Kant's transcendental philosophy in general.

Using the character of Aenesidemus as his mouthpiece, Schulze argued that Kant's transcendental philosophy did not and could not deliver on the promises that it had made. A fundamental problem was that transcendental philosophy sought to account for how we know certain features of objects which make an appearance within experience by appealing to what is a priori in our way of knowing, even though these a priori conditions of our own knowing do not themselves make an appearance as objects within experience. As part of his transcendental argumentation, Kant had directly acknowledged that we as knowers never know ourselves as we really are in ourselves, but only as we appear as objects within experience. Thus Kant writes that we "know even ourselves only through inner sense, thus as appearance" (*CPR*, A278/B334). Kant had sought to illuminate the object-character of those objects which make an appearance within our experience by giving an account of the transcendental conditions of such experience, even though the "transcendental" source of such "objectivity" remained outside the scope of our possible experience and thus unknowable as it is in itself. Focusing on Kant's attempt at providing a transcendental or a priori account of human knowing, Schulze observed:

For since we know nothing of what the mind is in itself, as the *Critique of Pure Reason* also concedes, by choosing one derivation over the other [by choosing a transcendental derivation over an empirical one], we do nothing more than substitute one form of non-knowledge for another. After all, if the origin of the necessary and synthetic judgements is to be more comprehensible when traced to the mind rather than to the objects outside of us, we must be able to know at least *one* property in the mind which objects lack that would indeed make the origin of those judgements in the mind more comprehensible. But the *Critique of Pure Reason* has failed altogether to identify any such property in the mind. (Schulze 2000, 118)

Kant's transcendental philosophy, Schulze argues, amounts to an intolerable, unphilosophical attempt at accounting for what is more known to us (objects within experience) by appealing to what is less known (an unknown and indeed unknowable mind which allegedly underlies and makes possible experience, but never in itself makes an appearance as any object within experience). For Schulze, to explain what makes an appearance as objects for us within experience by appealing to the "mind" (which allegedly makes possible but in itself never appears within experience) is as philosophically respectable as explaining experience by discussing a transcendental author of nature:

To wish to explain certain properties of our cognitions from a transcendental being, or from a supra-natural subject and its modes of operation “in-itself,” of which we understand nothing at all, is just as unphilosophical and as much an encouragement to intellectual sloth as to explain the order and purposiveness of nature, not on natural grounds and according to natural laws, but by appeal to a transcendental author. (Schulze 2000, 124)

A young Johann Gottlieb Fichte was deeply moved and disturbed by the anti-Kantian criticisms which Schulze had formulated in his *Aenesidemus* dialogue, for Fichte realized that Schulze’s critique undermined not only Reinhold’s attempt at reformulating the Kantian system but also the entire Kantian system itself. As Fichte wrote in a 1793 letter to his friend J.F. Flatt:

Aenesidemus, which I consider to be one of the most remarkable products of our decade, has convinced me of something which I admittedly already suspected: that even after the labors of Kant and Reinhold, philosophy is still not a science. *Aenesidemus* has shaken my system to its very foundations. (*EPW*, 366)

Furthermore, Fichte saw that the problem which Schulze had identified in Kant’s transcendental philosophy was related to other difficulties in the Kantian system. These other difficulties revolved around the fact that Kant’s transcendental philosophy was committed to the view that an adequate account of human knowing must take care to maintain a sharp distinction between human knowing and divine knowing. A key difficulty had to do with the question of how one can account for the finite character of human knowing without making knowledge-claims which, according to the Kantian system itself, were not sustainable as valid knowledge-claims.

According to Kant, human knowing (unlike divine knowing) is essentially finite. Insofar as it is finite, human knowing is dependent upon that which is given to it by means of sensory (non-intellectual) intuition. Human knowing is dependent on sensible intuition, and such intuition “takes place only insofar as the object is given to us” (*CPR*, A19/B33). If our knowing were not dependent on such givenness by means of sensible intuition, then we would be capable of a kind of “originating” or “original” intuition (*intuitus originarius*). But if we human knowers were capable of “originating” or “original” intuition, then our activity in knowing would be the very origin or source of that which is known by us. In that case, our knowing could not be sharply distinguished from divine knowing (which, as “original intuition,” is the full and complete origin or cause of that which it knows). The difficulty was therefore the following: on the one hand, Kant argued that there is something a priori about our way of knowing; that which is a priori in our knowing is not caused by and does not arise out of any encounter with objects in experience but instead makes possible such experience in the first place. On the other hand, Kant argued that our way of knowing—even though it is not derived from or dependent on what is encountered within experience—must nevertheless be dependent on that which is given to it by means of sensible intuition.

If human knowing is to be understood as finite and thus as dependent upon that which is given to it by means of sensible intuition, then how can one give a coherent and credible account of this givenness and this dependence? It would

seem that, for Kant, this dependence could not be understood as a kind of causal dependence, since—according to Kant’s own theory—our knowledge of causal relations is valid knowledge only insofar as it pertains to objects which can appear as objects within possible experience. But if that which is “given” by means of sensible intuition and which renders human knowing finite and dependent is not to be understood in terms of any kind of causal dependence, then how is it to be understood at all? Kant ended up having to argue that human knowing, since it is finite and dependent on some kind of sensible “givenness,” is not fully self-determining but rather limited and determined by something apart from or independent of itself. Yet this givenness, which somehow limits and finitizes human knowing, cannot be known to stand in any causal relation (or relation of causal dependence) with the knower, since objectively valid knowledge pertains only to objects of possible experience.

For Kant, then, we must think—but never quite know on theoretical, objective grounds—that human knowing is genuinely limited and finite; and we must think of such finitude by thinking of such knowing as being related to and finitized by an unknown and unknowable “transcendental object” or “thing-in-itself.” The Kantian system required us to think that human knowing is rendered finite and dependent because of its dependence on a “transcendental object” or “thing-in-itself” that stands outside of such knowing. Nevertheless, according to Kant’s own argument, it is wrong to think of such a thing-in-itself as causally related to knowing, since the thing-in-itself stands outside of all knowing and all possible experience, and causality is valid only for relations within possible experience. And so Jacobi complained that Kant’s system of transcendental philosophy made it necessary to think of human knowing as being dependent upon an independent “transcendental object” or “thing-in-itself” that somehow finitizes human knowing. At the same time Kant’s system apparently made it impossible to think coherently about this independent something or thing-in-itself, since the system also holds that one cannot licitly think of the thing-in-itself as playing any kind of role within a causal relation or a relation of causal dependence. Thus, Jacobi observed: “*without* that presupposition [of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself], I could not enter into the [Kantian] system, but *with* that presupposition, I could not stay within it” (Jacobi 1994, 336).

Fichte accepted the criticism that the finite or dependent character of human knowing could not coherently be explained on the basis of an allegedly independent “something” or thing-in-itself. Furthermore, Fichte saw that problems surrounding the Kantian notion of a thing-in-itself were related to problems surrounding the idea which Schulze had identified: the idea that the mind exists as a kind of “substrate” which is unknown and unknowable “in itself” but which nevertheless underlies and makes possible the object-character of the objects which are known within experience. These two ideas, then, are really two instantiations of the same idea: the idea of the mind as a non-experienced “substrate” which underlies and makes possible our finite experience of objects, even though in itself it never shows up as an object within experience; and the idea of a “transcendental object” or “thing-in-itself” which limits our knowing and ensures that our knowing

is always a finite knowing of objects within experience, even though in itself it never shows up as an object within experience. Writing to his friend Friedrich Immanuel in 1793, Fichte put the two problems together. For Fichte, attempting to explain the character and scope of human knowing by appealing to an unknowable, underlying “substrate” which allegedly makes such knowing possible is not essentially different from attempting to explain human knowing by appealing to an unknowable, independent “thing-in-itself.” For as far as our own knowing is concerned, the idea of an unknowable, underlying “substrate” is nothing other than the idea of an unknowable, underlying “thing-in-itself”:

Kant demonstrates that the causal principle is applicable merely to appearances, and nevertheless he assumes that there is a substrate underlying all appearances – an assumption undoubtedly based on the law of causality (at least this is the way Kant’s followers argue). Whoever shows us how Kant arrived at this substrate without extending the causal law beyond its limits will have understood Kant. (*EPW*, 369)

The system of philosophy that Fichte sought to develop during the 1790s and early 1800s—Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*—is nothing other than Fichte’s attempt at understanding Kant better than others had previously understood Kant; and indeed it is an attempt at understanding Kant better than Kant even understood himself. Interestingly, in his own *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had invited readers to try understanding him better than he understood himself, even if this invitation was not issued intentionally, or with full and transparent self-knowledge. Kant wrote:

when we compare the thoughts that an author expresses about a subject, in ordinary speech as well as in writings, it is not at all unusual to find that we understand him even better than he understood himself, since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intentions. (*CPR*, A314/B371)

In his own attempt to understand Kant better than Kant understood himself, Fichte went so far as to argue that a philosophical interpreter is not only permitted but is indeed required to go beyond “the letter” in order to apprehend “the spirit” of an earlier philosopher’s work. It is necessary to go beyond “the letter,” Fichte argued, because genuinely philosophical thinking must be pursued freely and actively. Adherence to the mere “letter” of an earlier philosopher’s work renders an interpreter both passive and unfree, and thus ultimately unphilosophical.¹

3 Fichte’s Philosophy of Freedom

Fichte’s attempt to reformulate and complete Kant’s transcendental philosophy can be viewed as an extended reflection on what it means for the finite human knower to apprehend itself as genuinely free. For Fichte, Schulze’s and Jacobi’s skepticism regarding the Kantian system can provide a good starting point for understanding the nature and extent of the human knower’s freedom. As Schulze

and Jacobi had argued, there is something problematic in Kant's suggestion that an account of human knowing can rely on an appeal to some unknowable, underlying "substrate" or some unknowable, independent "thing-in-itself" that allegedly makes human knowing possible. Other post-Kantian thinkers had regarded this unknowability (whether articulated in terms of the underlying "substrate" or an independent "thing-in-itself") as a serious defect, which made the Kantian system ultimately untenable. By contrast, Fichte tried to show that this "unknowability" was a hidden strength, and that a careful, sustained unfolding of the implications of this "unknowability" would make it possible to develop a systematic philosophy.

A key element in Fichte's theorizing is the recognition that the "unknowability" of the underlying "substrate" or the independent "thing-in-itself" is not an altogether unknown or unacknowledged unknowability. Rather, it is a kind of unknowability that we knowers are able to recognize for what it is: what is unknowable—what cannot be known "in itself"—is any given content or determinacy or entity (any underlying "substrate" or independent "thing in itself") that allegedly is what it is (and is known to be just what it is) apart from the knower's own activity in knowing it. For Fichte, to recognize the inescapable unknowability of that which allegedly is what it is apart from our knowing, is to recognize that no given content or determinacy or entity outside of our knowing is able to cause or determine our knowing to be what it is. To recognize this, in turn, is to recognize that our knowing is in a crucial sense free (uncaused, or undetermined, by anything outside of it). Another way of saying this is that, regardless of what sort of content or material seems to be externally "given" and seems to cause or determine our knowing, it is always possible for us knowers to doubt whether such an apparently external givenness really is—as it is "in itself"—playing the externally determining or causal role that it might, at first, appear to be playing.

For Fichte, then, our knowing of the "unknowability" of what allegedly is "in itself" (apart from our own activity as knowers) is itself an indicator of our radical freedom as knowers. In being aware of our own capacity to question, to doubt, or to negate the allegedly independent or "in itself" character of anything that seems to be externally "given" to us as knowers, we are also aware (if only implicitly) of our own radical freedom. And so an awareness of one's own freedom is connected to a kind of radicalized skepticism about what can be known (a radicalized skepticism about the very knowability of anything that allegedly is what it is, "in itself," apart from our activity in knowing it). Fichte's emphasis is not on the skepticism as such, but rather on the kind of self-awareness that is operative or implicit in such skepticism. One might say that the aim of Fichte's system of philosophy—his *Wissenschaftslehre*—is to begin with such skepticism about theoretical knowing (to begin with the inescapable unknowability of anything that allegedly is what is "in itself," apart from its relatedness to our knowing), and to develop an entire system of freedom by unpacking what is implicit in such skepticism.

A crucial step in Fichte's development of a system of freedom is his argument to the effect that the unknowability of any independently given "in itself" cannot be understood as any kind of unknowability that is somehow inscribed into

the nature of things as they are simply given. Rather, it is an unknowability that is manifest, or that prevails, or that counts as an unknowability, only because of the knower's own activity—only because of what the knower actively does—as a knower.

In his popular work, *The Vocation of Man* (published in 1800), Fichte sought to explain how the unknowability of things as they are “in themselves” is not really a function of any things “in themselves,” but rather a function—a product—of our own doing. First of all, argues Fichte, the knower is led to the idea of a thing that exists outside of knowing (a thing that simply is, “in itself,” apart from the knower's activity of knowing), only because the knower is not satisfied with—the knower is able to question, doubt, or negate—the alleged self-sufficiency or independence of any entity that appears as an entity within the knower's own consciousness or experience:

I find something to be determinate in such and such a way. I cannot be satisfied with knowing that it *is* so, and I assume that it has *become* so, and that not through itself but through an outside force. This outside force which made it *contains* the cause, and the expression through which it made it so *is* the cause of this determination of the thing. That my sensation has a cause means that it is produced in me by an outside force. (VM 42; GA I/6, 230)

However, after having posited the existence of an “outside force” in order to explain the appearance of an object within the knower's own consciousness, the knower also expresses dissatisfaction over the idea of an allegedly external force outside of consciousness itself. For the allegedly external force is not really an independent force that is altogether outside of consciousness, but is only a product of the knower's own skepticism and dissatisfaction regarding what is present to it within consciousness. The knower thus extends the skepticism and dissatisfaction by questioning, doubting, and negating even the independent, “in itself” character of the external force that allegedly exists outside of consciousness. In other words: the demand that there be something “outside” of consciousness in order to explain what happens “within” consciousness—along with the positing of a connection between what is “inside” and what is “outside” of consciousness—is just a disguised expression of consciousness's own ongoing dissatisfactions and its ongoing attempts to remedy those dissatisfactions.

Of a connection *outside of consciousness*, however, I cannot speak. I have no way of conceiving such a connection. For, just in that I speak of it I know of it and, since this consciousness can only be of a thinking, I think this connection. And it is quite the same connection which occurs in my ordinary natural consciousness, and no other. I have not gone beyond this consciousness by a hair's breadth, just as little as I can jump over myself. All attempts to think of such a connection in itself, of a thing in itself which is connected with the ego in itself, only ignore our own thinking. (VM 58–59; GA I/6, 246)

For Fichte, then, no appeal to something that simply is “in itself” apart from the knower's own activity (whether this “in itself” is construed as an “underlying” substrate or as an “external” thing) can do any meaningful work towards explaining the knower's own knowing activity. Even “*the consciousness of a thing outside of us is absolutely nothing more than the product of our own presentative*

capacity” (VM 59; GA I/6, 246). In the final analysis, our activity as knowers can be adequately explained only by reference to what is internal to that activity itself. That is, it can be explained only by reference to the knower’s own activity of being skeptical and dissatisfied with the mere givenness of what appears within experience, and thus being motivated to come up with the ideas of determining causes and external things in themselves.

Two important implications follow from Fichte’s account. First, the knower’s awareness of its own freedom as a knower (or what amounts to the same thing, the knower’s awareness that no given content can simply cause or determine its own knowing) cannot be a representational kind of awareness. More pointedly: the knower’s awareness of its own freedom as a knower can never be the awareness of any determinate content or entity that appears within experience (including even a content or entity that is imagined or thought to be some hidden “substrate” that somehow underlies the knower’s own activity as a knower). The knower’s own activity as free never directly makes an appearance—it always remains “invisible”—and never shows up as any kind of entity or presence within experience. After all, the knower’s awareness of its own freedom consists precisely in the awareness that every given content can be questioned, doubted, and negated, and therefore that no given content can cause or determine the knower’s own knowing. The knower’s awareness of its own freedom is thus a non-representational, non-representable kind of activity and nothing more. It is not an awareness of any determinate *thing* that shows up within experience, but consists only in the activity of knowing—or perhaps better, the activity of actualizing—the questionability, the doubtability, the negatability, or the non-self-sufficiency of any determinate thing that does show up within experience. Fichte thus writes that the knower’s awareness of its own freedom—an awareness that constitutes the knower’s very being as a knower—does not refer to any given content or fact [*Tatsache*] whatsoever, but is simply an activity [*Tathandlung*], namely the activity of being aware, in a non-representational way, of being essentially free and uncaused in one’s knowing. For Fichte, the self that engages in knowing: “is an *act*, and absolutely nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something” (SK 21; GA I/4, 200). Fichte’s use of the term, *Tathandlung* (often translated as “fact-act”) indicates something about the kind of counter-intuitive argument he is trying to make. For Fichte, the self that engages in knowing is not nothing; it is a kind of “fact” or “deed” (*Tat*). However, it is a “fact” or “deed” that consists in nothing that can be “found” as merely present or representable; rather, it consists in being the pure act (*Handlung*) of knowing (in a non-representational way) that it is simply the uncaused, free activity that it is.

The second implication that follows from Fichte’s claim is that it is altogether impossible for the knower to “step outside” or “go beyond” its own consciousness in seeking to give an account of that consciousness. That is, it is never possible for the knower to find any “outer limit” or “outer boundary” to its own activity as a knower. This is because any allegedly outer limit or outer boundary that might be found by the knower is—precisely because it is found and thus allegedly known to the knower—always within the knower’s own knowing

or consciousness. Thus the knower's activity as a knower has a certain kind of unbounded, unlimited, or infinite character to it. The knower can never discover that its own activity as a knower is limited or bounded from the outside by anything external to it. Precisely because the knower's activity in knowing is free—it cannot be understood as being caused or determined by any underlying substrate or independent thing that lies outside of the knower's own activity of knowing—the knower cannot account for its own activity by reference to anything that allegedly bounds or limits or finitizes this activity from the outside. Fichte wants to hold (just as Kant did) that the knower's activity in knowing is somehow finite. At the same time, he also argues that it is never possible for the knower to account for such finitude by claiming to have knowledge of any externally-given constraint or limit or boundary (an externally-given thing in itself) which somehow impinges upon it and renders it finite. Thus, Fichte does not deny that the knower's activity in knowing is somehow finite; what he does deny is that the knower can come to know the finite character of its own knowing by knowing the existence of some independent thing (a thing-in-itself) that the knower somehow knows to exist apart from its own activity as a knower. For Fichte, then, there is something infinite, unbounded, and unlimited about the knower's activity as a knower: it is not limited or constrained or bounded on the outside by anything which is known to exist outside of itself, but is somehow limited or constrained or bounded only by means of its very own activity.

The two implications of Fichte's account are intimately connected with one another. If one were to hold (wrongly) that the knower's awareness of its own freedom were a representational kind of awareness, then one would be holding—in effect—that the knower's free activity could make its appearance within experience as a limited, bounded thing (that is, an extensive magnitude) whose spatial-temporal limits and boundaries were determined by other, similarly limited and bounded things (extensive magnitudes) immediately surrounding it and abutting it in space and time. Yet, as we have seen, for Fichte, the knower's awareness of its own freedom is not a representational kind of awareness, and so the knower's activity is not any kind of representable thing (it is not any kind of extensive magnitude) that shows up as an item within experience. It is for this reason, furthermore, that the knower's activity is also a kind of unbounded, infinite activity. Rather than being any kind of extensive magnitude (rather than being any kind of bounded, representable thing among other things), the knower's activity is more like an unbounded whole (a kind of infinite magnitude) within which all bounded, representable things make their appearance but which does not, itself, make any appearance. Along these lines, Fichte sometimes refers to the activity of the knower as the activity of an "absolute I" (see, for example, *SK*, 97, 109). This is the activity of rational, knowing consciousness within which every representable thing shows up, even though the wholeness which is consciousness itself does not—and cannot—show up as any kind of thing at all.

4 Schelling's Turn to Spinoza

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling was an early Fichtean follower and enthusiast, but as he grappled with the problems and prospects of Fichte's philosophy in the 1790s, he began to distance himself from the Fichtean system. Schelling grew increasingly uneasy about what he regarded as unresolved, interconnected problems in Fichte's system. Two of these problems are especially relevant here.

First, Fichte had argued that there was something absolute, unbounded, or infinite about the knower's activity in knowing. However, he denied that this absoluteness or infinitude could itself ever become known to the knower as a matter of theoretical reason. For Fichte, what is absolute or infinite about the knower's activity can never become an item of theoretical knowledge but must forever remain an article of faith. To be sure, such faith for Fichte was a matter of moral or practical faith, i.e. faith in the meaningfulness of one's ongoing, infinite striving towards transforming the world as given and making it conformable to moral purposes. Yet, the absolute or the infinite in one's activity remained for Fichte always a matter of faith and never one of knowledge.

Secondly and relatedly, the way in which Fichte presented and argued for his system implied that there was something individualistic, subjective, and perhaps even arbitrary and voluntaristic about the way in which others were expected to appreciate and enter into the system. Fichte had argued, for example, that his own critical philosophy (his "idealism" or his system of freedom) was entirely incompatible with and thus dogmatically opposed to all systems of realism (or what he called "dogmatism"). For this reason, Fichte argued, it was impossible for him to provide any kind of theoretical or argumentative "bridge" that could lead realist (dogmatic) thinkers into accepting his system. In what has become one of his most frequently-quoted statements, Fichte reinforced the impression that entry into his system could be achieved only through an apparently arbitrary, unreasoned, and voluntaristic "all-at-once" leap into it: "What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is..." (*SK*, 16; *GA*, I/4, 195). Fichte even suggested that he would have regarded his own efforts as a failure if certain kinds of individuals (dogmatic or realist philosophers who have "lost themselves" through "protracted spiritual slavery") were capable of appreciating his system: "I would be sorry if they understood me" (*SK*, 5; *GA*, I/4, 185).

Starting in late 1794 or early 1795, Schelling began to develop the idea that the completion of systematic philosophy, and thus the overcoming of the remaining shortcomings in Fichte's system, might best be accomplished by means of a passage through Spinoza's seemingly dogmatic (pre-Kantian and unscientific) metaphysics. Writing to Hegel in February of 1795, Schelling excitedly explained, "I have become a Spinozist! Don't be astonished. You will soon hear how" (*Letters* 32–33; *Briefe* I, 22). There can be little doubt that Schelling's interest in Spinoza was heavily influenced by Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel's and Schelling's mutual friend and former roommate at the *Tübinger Stift* (the Tübingen Seminary). In a letter that Hölderlin wrote to Hegel roughly one week before Schelling

announced his own conversion to Spinozism, Hölderlin suggested to Hegel how it might be possible to think about Fichte's philosophy of freedom by connecting it with Spinoza's seemingly dogmatic metaphysics. According to Hölderlin, "... [Fichte's] Absolute Self, which equals Spinoza's Substance, contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it, is nothing" (*Letters* 33; *Briefe* I, 19–20).

In a document that was probably authored a year later (this document is now known as the "Earliest System Programme of German Idealism"), the possibility of connecting Fichteanism with Spinozism is spelled out further. The text of this document is written out in Hegel's hand, even though it is not entirely clear whether Hegel or someone else was its original author.² What is clear, however, is that the ideas expressed in the document were ideas that Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel were together discussing and grappling with as they sought to make sense of Fichte's philosophy in light of the metaphysics of Spinoza. The document explains that the knower's unbounded activity as a knower is an activity that not only actualizes the knower's own non-representational awareness of itself (its "being for self") as a knower, but also actualizes the being of an entire world for the knower. The knower's actualization of itself as a kind of unbounded whole is also an actualization of the unbounded whole that is the world. For this reason, it is possible to speak about the actualization of unbounded knower (mind) and unbounded known (world) as a kind of dual *creation out of nothing*—indeed, this is the only kind of "creation out of nothing" that the critical, post-Kantian philosopher can regard as worthy of intellectual assent. Through this activity of "creation out of nothing," both unbounded knower (mind) and unbounded known (world) come to be "all at once," so to speak:

The first Idea is, of course, the presentation of *my self* as an absolutely free entity. Along with the free, self-conscious essence there stands forth – out of nothing – an entire world – the one true and thinkable *creation out of nothing*.³

The Spinozistic and thus anti-Cartesian lesson of the "Earliest System Programme" is clear enough: we should not think about mind and world in the way that Descartes suggested we should think about them. We should not think about mind and world as two different entities or substances (or kinds of substances) that somehow succeed or fail at entering into relation with one another. It is altogether wrong to think of mind and world as two different substances or entities at all. One might say that mind and world—understood properly—are something like infinite magnitudes that are fully co-extensive, fully inter-penetrating, fully inter-permeating, and fully overlapping with one another. What is in the world as such does not exceed and does not fall outside of what is in the mind as such; and what is in the mind as such does not exceed and does not fall outside of what is in the world as such. As Spinoza famously declared in his *Ethics* (Book II, Proposition 7): "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (Spinoza 1985, 451). Finally, since mind and world are not two different entities or substances but rather two different ways of being of the one and the same infinite, unbounded, original activity (an activity outside of which there is nothing), it makes no sense to think that there is any kind of "third

thing” (e.g., a transcendent God), which stands outside of this activity and somehow explains or guarantees the connectedness of mind and world.

According to the Spinozistic view, mind and world are fully co-extensive with and fully overlapping with one another, and thus not related to and bounded by one another. For if they were related to and bounded by one another, they would not be infinite. This leads to the question: how does mind (or knowing) come to know itself as the free, unbounded, infinite activity that it is, and thus come to know its own co-extensiveness with a world that is seemingly given to it from the outside, even though this world is not at all given from the outside but is—like mind itself—equally infinite and unbounded from the outside? It should be clear by now that the mind (or knowing) cannot come to know this about itself by finding or discovering something that is present to itself as knower. For anything that is present to the mind is something that is related to the mind in the way that one thing is related to another thing. But if one thing is related to another thing, then both of the things thus related must be finite; neither thing can be co-extensive with everything that is (neither thing can be infinite), since each thing is related to (and thus bounded by) something that is other than it. Stated differently: if what is present to the mind is something other than the mind, then what is present to the mind is rendered finite; it is finitized insofar as it is related to something (mind) that is other than it. Reciprocally, something that is found or discovered by mind also renders the mind itself finite, since the mind itself is related to (and thus bounded by and finitized by) something other than it which it (as mind) has found or discovered.

It appears, then, that mind (or knowing) cannot come to know itself as the free, unbounded activity that it is (an activity that is co-extensive with an equally unbounded world) by any kind of finding or discovery. Instead, it appears that mind (or knowing) can come to know itself only by virtue of what it *does*, or only by virtue of its own *activity* as infinite. This, however, also seems impossible. For how can mind *know* itself as the infinite, unbounded activity that it is, except by somehow becoming an activity that is present to itself (or that makes an appearance to itself) as something to be known? The problem is that anything made present to mind as something to be known (even if what is made present is an activity) cannot be mind as it is in itself. For what is made present to mind is something that is related to mind, and thus is something that is finitized—but in that case, it is not the infinite, unbounded activity of mind as it is in itself. In summary: it appears that mind can come to know itself only by somehow becoming present to itself, or by becoming objective, or by making an appearance to itself. If, however, it becomes present to itself, or becomes objective, or makes an appearance to itself, then it is thereby finitized and thus is not known as it really is in itself.

Reflection on these difficulties led Schelling to conclude, by the end of the 1790s, that the infinite, unbounded activity that is the activity of mind (or knowing) could never become known to the mind (or knowing) as a matter of theoretical or speculative reason.⁴ Thus, in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (published in 1800), Schelling argued that it is not philosophy but only art that can provide access to what theoretical reason vainly seeks to apprehend: “art is at

once the only true and eternal organ of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form..." (*Heath* 231; *SW* I/3, 627). In his later philosophy, Schelling continued to grapple with the meta-philosophical issues that he first sought to articulate in 1800. However, he never departed from his quasi-Romantic conviction that reason (or mind) can never provide a satisfactory theoretical account of the co-extensiveness of mind and world (or thought and being). According to what Schelling would later call his "positive philosophy," the co-extensiveness of mind and world (or thought and being) cannot be comprehended or explained by mind (thought) itself, but must always be presupposed (in which case mind and world—thought and being—are not fully co-extensive with one another, after all).

5 On the Way to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit

Hegel had been an early follower and ally of Schelling's philosophy, but he was not willing to follow Schelling into holding that mind (or knowing) cannot come to know itself philosophically, or by means of theoretical reason, as the free, unbounded, infinite activity that it is (an activity that is co-extensive with an equally infinite and unbounded world). Hegel surely agreed that mind cannot come to know itself philosophically as any kind of object or entity or substance that appears to it, or is present to it, or is related to it. But for Hegel, it does not follow from this that mind is altogether unable to know itself philosophically as it really is in itself, that is, as it is in its unboundedness, its infinity, and its co-extensiveness with an equally unbounded, infinite world. For Hegel, mind can come to know itself philosophically, as it is in itself, insofar as it can come to know itself as an unbounded activity that is reflected out of, or mirrored out of, an equally unbounded, infinite world.

Yet how does mind come to know itself as thus reflected out of the world? It does so, as Fichte already suggested, only by means of its own activity: by means of its activity of being free always to question, to doubt, to negate that which is merely given to it; its activity of being always dissatisfied with the given as given; its activity of always driving itself beyond the merely given so as to posit (within itself and never beyond itself as mind) a cause whose positing is meant to account for the givenness of the given; its activity of knowing (in a non-representational way) that no given content as merely given is ever determinative of its own knowing.

Hegel accepted these fundamental insights from Fichte's philosophy of freedom; but Hegel developed them in a direction that Fichte himself did not anticipate. Hegel argued that this activity of being free to question, to negate, and to doubt, is never an activity that makes an appearance (or that can be known) all-at-once as the kind of activity that it is. For Hegel (and contrary to the implications contained in the philosophy of Fichte and Descartes), the mind's questioning, doubting, and negating activity can never be understood as a wholesale, global,

all-at-once kind of activity. As Spinoza had already argued (against Descartes), the mind's questioning, doubting, and negating activity never shows up and thus never knows itself as a global, wholesale, comprehensive doubting of everything (of all givenness) all at once. For Spinoza, mind is able to doubt something only because the idea being doubted is connected to something else that is not doubted:

if the Mind perceived nothing else except the winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence, or any faculty of dissenting, unless either the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which excluded the existence of the same horse, or the Mind perceived that its idea of the winged horse was inadequate. (Spinoza 1985, 489)

Accordingly, the mind's (the knower's) activity of doubting never shows up as an all-at-once, global, wholesale, world-negating activity, but rather shows up only as a kind of movement, or a kind of passing over from one thing (one idea) which is doubted to some other thing (some other, connected idea) which is not (or not yet) doubted. In a similar vein, Hegel argues (against Fichte) that entry into a true system of freedom cannot be an entry that is actualized through the all-at-once "leap" of an individual thinker who—in making such a "leap"—sets herself in opposition to less capable (or morally obtuse) dogmatic thinkers.

Another way of saying this is that for Hegel (unlike for Fichte), mind knows itself as the activity of being reflected out of the world—and thus knows itself philosophically as the activity that it is in itself—insofar as it knows its activity as the activity of ongoing determinate (and not merely abstract) negation. The activity of determinate negation is a doubting, negating activity that does not actualize itself by separating itself, or standing apart from, that which is to be negated. It does not actualize itself by operating as if there are given, fixed, discernible boundaries that can be erected and known as existing between itself (as negating activity) and what is given (what it is to be negated). Rather, determinate negation is a negating activity that negates only by seeping into and permeating and becoming immersed in the given. As we have already seen, the turn to Spinoza in post-Kantian thought is motivated by the idea that mind and world are infinities that are fully co-extensive, fully interpenetrating, fully inter-permeating, and fully overlapping with one another. The infinite and unbounded activity of mind, insofar as it is an activity of determinate and not abstract negation, is an activity which negates by seeping into, interpenetrating, inter-permeating, and mixing itself fully (and this means—as we shall see—mixing itself invisibly) into what appears as given.

For Hegel, only determinate negation (and not abstract, external, boundary-erecting negation) can allow both mind and world to be the fully co-extensive, fully interpenetrating, fully inter-permeating, and fully overlapping infinities that they are. In determinate negation, mind genuinely actualizes the kind of unbounded negating activity that it is as mind. It is crucial that determinate negation is not any kind of activity whereby mind and world are somehow set alongside one another or bounded by one another or related to one another. Determinate negation is very different from abstract negation. With abstract negation, mind

sees itself or finds itself as somehow standing apart from the world and negating the givenness of the world by means of a global, all-at-once, abstractive, discrete act of its own. By contrast, determinate negation is the activity of negating the givenness of the world by means of an activity that fully interpenetrates and inter-permeates the world: it is an activity that is immersed in the world and that negates the givenness of the world by dissolving this givenness “from within,” so to speak. The activity of determinate negation is an ongoing, continuous (i.e., “synechistic” in C.S. Peirce’s sense), laborious, world-permeating activity that does not apprehend the world from an external or abstractive point of view, but is in fact continuous with the world’s own (immanent) activities and negations. It follows from this account that mind as the ongoing activity of determinate negation does not and cannot immediately or directly make an appearance to itself (it cannot be known immediately or directly to itself) as any kind of entity or object or presence which shows up in the world. Rather, the activity of determinate negation shows up only as a kind of perpetually operative negativity or non-presence in the midst of what is present. It reveals itself only as the ongoing coming-to-be of absences or privations in the midst of what is present. It manifests itself only as the ongoing vanishings of presences which *had been* present to mind but have now been passed over (negated and doubted) as they make way for other presences (which are, for the moment at least, not negated or doubted).

Some insight from the history of philosophy might be helpful in this regard. In Book IV, Chapter 12 of his *Enchiridion*, Augustine famously argued that what we call “privation” is nothing that is present or that has being in its own right. Instead, our talk of “privation” refers only to what is a kind of non-presence (or gap or void or hole or fissure or break) that resides within being or in the midst of what is present. It is significant that Spinoza himself held that error or ignorance is nothing in itself but only a kind of privation or not-knowing in the midst of knowing. In a similar vein, Hegel holds that the activity of determinate negation (which is the ongoing, infinite, unbounded, negating, interpenetrating, inter-permeating, dissolving activity of mind) does not itself show up or appear or become known as any kind of being or object or presence within the world. Rather, the activity of determinate negation makes its showing within the world only indirectly, insofar as it shows up negatively as the coming-to-be of privations or gaps or non-presences in the world of what is given. It makes its showing only negatively as the showing up of instances of absence or not-knowing which reside in the midst of what is present or known.

As Fichte had already suggested (though not fully comprehended), the doubtability, questionability, and negatability of what is given within the world of appearances need not lead us into positing some kind of thing-in-itself or underlying substrate beyond (or beneath) the appearing world. Instead, this doubtability (which appears only as a kind of privation or “known not-knowing” in the midst of what is known) is only the reflecting-back of the knower’s (or mind’s) own activity, which is the negating activity of being dissatisfied, skeptical, doubtful, and unwilling to accept the given as given. Privations, negations, absences,

gaps, fissures, and opacities, which show up within the world of being or presence, are able to show up *as such* (that is, show up precisely as *nothing present* at all) only because of the knower's (or mind's) dissatisfaction or unwillingness to accept being or presence as merely given. They show up *as privations*, only because of the knower's (or mind's) non-representational awareness that (1) in the midst of knowing what is merely given or present, it also knows that no given content or presence can cause or determine its own knowing; and (2) it is always free to negate what is merely present or given (and thus free to go "beyond" the merely present or given, even while never going "beyond" or outside of its own activity or its own consciousness of the world as a whole).

Furthermore, as Fichte had suggested, the privations or absences, which show up within the world of appearance, are instances of a kind of not-knowing that resides in the midst of what is known, given, or present. But these instances of not-knowing are not altogether empty, blind, abstract, or wholesale instances of not-knowing; they are always instances of a *known* not-knowing. Accordingly, these privations or absences can show up in the world as the "little nothings" (the little non-presences or privations) that they are, only because they are instances of the knower's own (indirect, non-immediate, "reflected back") self-knowing; they are reflections of the mind's (the knower's) own activity of being aware (non-representationally) that no given content can cause or determine its own knowing; they are reflections of the knower's perpetual dissatisfaction and skepticism about the allegedly independent or self-sufficient character of any determinate thing that is merely "present" or "given."

According to Hegel, Fichte had failed to recognize the possibility of an activity such as determinate negation. Accordingly, Fichte thought that entry into his own system of freedom could be accomplished by the knower only through a kind of individualistic, voluntaristic, all-at-once, wholesale, abstract negation of (or self-separation from) the world of appearance or being or givenness. By contrast, Hegel suggested that there was a way of entering into a system of freedom (which at the same time would be a post-Kantian, post-Spinozistic system of metaphysics) through the mind's (or knower's) activity of determinate negation. This is an activity which negates the mere givenness or being or presence of the world, not through separation and boundary-erecting, but only through the activity of immersion, inter-permeation, and seepage into the world as given.

For Hegel, because the activity of determinate negation (the ongoing, negating activity of mind) does not and cannot itself show up or appear as any kind of being or object or presence in the world, it is an activity that mind, at first, does not and cannot know as its own. At first, mind knows the privations, negations, gaps, and absences that reside within the appearing world only in an immediate and direct way. As a result, it knows them at first only as privations, negations, gaps, and absences that appear to belong to the world simply on its own, as if the world could be the world itself apart from mind. Accordingly, mind at first apprehends the privations, negations, gaps, and absences that appear in the world as if these were only features of the interactions (the comings-to-be and the passings-away,

the appearings and the vanishings, the births and deaths) of things within a world alone. This world apparently exists independently of the mind and needs no mind in order to be itself as world. For Hegel, even though mind (or knowing) does not know itself directly by means of what it sees within the world, it can come to know itself (or what amounts to the same thing: it can come to know its own activity) indirectly, by means of how it sees itself “reflected” or “mirrored” out of what it sees in the world as given.

The activity of determinate negation might be likened to the activity of an invisible sculptor. Because the sculptor is invisible, the sculptor is unable to see herself; and so the sculptor’s own activity as a sculptor does not and cannot appear to the sculptor as anything that is immediately visible or present to be seen. However, the sculptor’s activity, not immediately visible to the sculptor herself, can be known to the sculptor insofar as this activity is reflected back to the sculptor out of what the sculptor does (that is, out of what the sculptor sees as the result of her doing). This activity can be reflected back to the sculptor by means of the differences that the sculptor’s own activity makes to what is seen; it can be reflected back by means of the privations, negations, fissures, and gaps that the sculptor herself brings about in the given medium (e.g. in the clay) by means of her own, invisible activity. The sculptor’s activity is reflected back to the sculptor, not as any kind of presence that is seen as one presence among others; rather, this activity is reflected back—and thus knowable—to the sculptor only through the non-presences (privations, gaps, and fissures) that the sculptor herself is responsible for introducing into the given. The invisible sculptor does not and cannot immediately see or know her own activity, but can come to know that activity insofar as she knows the coming-to-be of privations, non-presences, gaps, and fissures in the midst of what is visible or present to her.

For Hegel, the mind (or knowing) is like the invisible sculptor in this respect. It cannot directly or immediately come to know itself as the kind of (invisible, non-object-like) activity that it really is. It can come to know itself only indirectly, as a kind of determinately negating activity which must be reflected out of what directly appears, where this appearing must seem as if it is the appearing of something other than the mind’s (the knower’s) very own activity. It is for this reason, Hegel argues, that the coming-to-be of self-knowing (in the *Phenomenology*) can be actualized only indirectly, i.e., only by means of a methodological distinction: the distinction between “observing” and “observed” consciousness. According to the argument of the *Phenomenology*, “we philosophical observers” look on in order to see how “ordinary” (“observed”) consciousness encounters various objects as given to it and how this other (“ordinary, observed”) kind of consciousness attempts (though always inadequately) to give an account of itself as the kind of knowing activity that it is. The argument of the *Phenomenology* is completed when “we philosophical observers” (we readers of the *Phenomenology*) come to recognize that the “ordinary, observed” consciousness which we have been observing all along is really nothing other than our own activity engaged in the activity of coming to know itself.

Ultimately, for Hegel, mind knows itself as the infinite, unbounded activity that it is, (1) when mind knows that it cannot be itself as mind, if its activity as mind is not reflected out of a seemingly given otherness (world); and (2) when mind knows that the world—in turn—cannot be itself as world, if the world is not also the otherness (or “mirror”) which reflects mind back to itself and thereby enables mind to be itself (as mind) in the first place.⁵ According to Hegel, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides the “ladder” by means of which the unscientific knower is able to arrive at the standpoint of “scientific” philosophy. This is philosophy which recognizes itself as having come to recognize that mind and world are not two independent or separate entities but in fact are infinite, unbounded activities which fully interpenetrate and inter-permeate one another. In the *Phenomenology*, the activity by means of which “observing” consciousness *comes to know that its own object* (“observed” consciousness) is not really an object that is external to it, is identical to the activity by means of which “observing” consciousness *comes to know itself* as the fully infinite, unbounded activity that it is. For an activity that is not bounded by any object external to it, is an infinite, unbounded activity.

Notes

1. For more on this, see Fichte’s set of lectures, “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy” (*EPW*, 185–215; *GA*, II, 3: 315–342).
2. Some scholars have argued that “The Earliest System Programme” was originally written by Schelling (or by Schelling and Hölderlin) and that the fragment which we now have is the result of Hegel’s having copied what he had read from a now-lost original text. However, Otto Pöggeler and H. S. Harris have both argued that this fragment was not only written out in Hegel’s own hand, but also originally authored by Hegel himself. See Harris (1972, 249–257); and Pöggeler (1969, 17–32).
3. This translation of the text is taken from H. S. Harris (1972, 510).
4. Andrew Bowie has helpfully explained Schelling’s problem in the following way: “For Schelling, as by Jacobi and Hölderlin, it is clear that the Absolute cannot appear as itself, precisely because it cannot become an object.... The issue is simply the problem of reflexivity, or self-referentiality, which is the key problem of Romantic philosophy.... Any attempt to encompass a totality must adopt a perspective outside the totality, and thus include the totality in itself only as a relative totality, or face the problem that totalities cannot describe themselves as totalities, in that the description must then include a description of the description, and so on ad infinitum” (Bowie 1993, 49–50). Accordingly: “Philosophy therefore cannot positively represent the Absolute because reflexive thinking operates from the position where absolute identity has always been lost in the emergence of consciousness” (*ibid.*, 53).
5. Thus there is an important way in which Hegel diverges from Augustine. For Augustine, the relation between being (positing, presence) and privation (negation, absence) is an asymmetrical one: there cannot be privation without being, but there can be being without privation. Hegel denies this asymmetry: for Hegel, privation cannot be privation without its being a privation within being; but conversely for Hegel (and not for Augustine), being cannot be being (it cannot be itself and actualize itself as being) if it does not show up (if it does not actualize itself) as having determinacy (negation, privation, being-for-other) within it.

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