



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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31 1 Kant's Transcendental Philosophy

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

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

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

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



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

83 Transcendental philosophy is concerned with both our way of knowing and the
84 object-character of the known objects insofar as these cannot be explained natu-
85 ralistically (or on the basis of what happens within experience). It would be mis-
86 leading, however, to think that transcendental philosophy aims at providing a kind
87 of alternative “explanation” for the occurrences of experience or for what happens
88 within experience. For one commonly thinks of explanation as a matter of tracing
89 one state of affairs back to another, or of giving an account of one object (or set
90 of objects) in terms of another (or others). As noted earlier, transcendental philos-
91 ophy is concerned not with objects as such, but rather with our way of knowing
92 objects and with the object-character of objects, insofar as these are a priori. Even
93 if transcendental philosophy does offer what might be called an “explanation” of
94 some kind, such an explanation would have to be understood in terms quite differ-
95 ent from our more common notions of explanation. The kind of explanation char-
96 acteristic of transcendental philosophy is not based on tracing one set of objects
97 or states of affairs back to another. After all, transcendental philosophy is con-
98 cerned with the very conditions of our being able to speak of “objects” or “states
99 of affairs” in the first place.

100 This feature of transcendental philosophy is also the reason why, for Kant,
101 it is possible for transcendental philosophy to claim the status of a “science.”
102 According to Kant, no explanatory system which takes its bearings from objects
103 of experience can ever be assured of its unity and completeness as a system,
104 since the domain of possible objects of experience is inexhaustible (*CPR*, B23;
105 A12–13; B26). Because of this inexhaustibility, there remains the ineluctable pos-
106 sibility that the discovery of new objects, or features of objects, could force a revi-
107 sion of such explanations. By contrast, argues Kant, transcendental philosophy is
108 concerned with our way of knowing and with the object-character of the known
109 objects, only insofar as these are a priori. Since all that is a priori has its own sys-
110 tematic unity (*CPR*, Axiii; A67; B92; A474; B502; A845; B873), and since it is
111 just such a unity which raises a mere aggregate of knowledge to the rank of sci-
112 ence (*CPR*, A832/B860), it follows for Kant that transcendental philosophy can, at
113 least in principle, claim the status of “science.” Here, “science” is not to be un-
114 derstood in terms of the more restricted, contemporary notion of “science,” which is
115 commonly taken to denote “empirical science.” Transcendental philosophy, for
116 Kant, does not focus on what can be discovered within experience about objects; it
117 focusses instead on what is a priori about our way of knowing objects.



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

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

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

154 2 Early Skeptical Critiques of Kant’s Transcendental 155 Philosophy

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



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

170 Using the character of Aenesidemus as his mouthpiece, Schulze argued that
171 Kant's transcendental philosophy did not and could not deliver on the prom-
172 ises that it had made. A fundamental problem was that transcendental philoso-
173 phy sought to account for how we know certain features of objects which make
174 an appearance within experience by appealing to what is a priori in our way of
175 knowing, even though these a priori conditions of our own knowing do not them-
176 selves make an appearance as objects within experience. As part of his transcen-
177 dental argumentation, Kant had directly acknowledged that we as knowers never
178 know ourselves as we really are in ourselves, but only as we appear as objects
179 within experience. Thus Kant writes that we "know even ourselves only through
180 inner sense, thus as appearance" (*CPR*, A278/B334). Kant had sought to illumi-
181 nate the object-character of those objects which make an appearance within our
182 experience by giving an account of the transcendental conditions of such experi-
183 ence, even though the "transcendental" source of such "objectivity" remained out-
184 side the scope of our possible experience and thus unknowable as it is in itself.
185 Focusing on Kant's attempt at providing a transcendental or a priori account of
186 human knowing, Schulze observed:

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

329 **3 Fichte’s Philosophy of Freedom**

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



335 and Jacobi had argued, there is something problematic in Kant's suggestion that
336 an account of human knowing can rely on an appeal to some unknowable, under-
337 lying "substrate" or some unknowable, independent "thing-in-itself" that alleg-
338 edly makes human knowing possible. Other post-Kantian thinkers had regarded
339 this unknowability (whether articulated in terms of the underlying "substrate"
340 or an independent "thing-in-itself") as a serious defect, which made the Kantian
341 system ultimately untenable. By contrast, Fichte tried to show that this "unknow-
342 ability" was a hidden strength, and that a careful, sustained unfolding of the impli-
343 cations of this "unknowability" would make it possible to develop a systematic
344 philosophy.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

431 Two important implications follow from Fichte’s account. First, the knower’s
432 awareness of its own freedom as a knower (or what amounts to the same thing,
433 the knower’s awareness that no given content can simply cause or determine its
434 own knowing) cannot be a representational kind of awareness. More pointedly: the
435 knower’s awareness of its own freedom as a knower can never be the awareness of
436 any determinate content or entity that appears within experience (including even
437 a content or entity that is imagined or thought to be some hidden “substrate” that
438 somehow underlies the knower’s own activity as a knower). The knower’s own
439 activity as free never directly makes an appearance—it always remains “invisi-
440 ble”—and never shows up as any kind of entity or presence within experience.
441 After all, the knower’s awareness of its own freedom consists precisely in the
442 awareness that every given content can be questioned, doubted, and negated, and
443 therefore that no given content can cause or determine the knower’s own know-
444 ing. The knower’s awareness of its own freedom is thus a non-representational,
445 non-representable kind of activity and nothing more. It is not an awareness of any
446 determinate *thing* that shows up within experience, but consists only in the activ-
447 ity of knowing—or perhaps better, the activity of actualizing—the questionabil-
448 ity, the doubtability, the negatability, or the non-self-sufficiency of any determinate
449 thing that does show up within experience. Fichte thus writes that the knower’s
450 awareness of its own freedom—an awareness that constitutes the knower’s very
451 being as a knower—does not refer to any given content or fact [*Tatsache*] whatso-
452 ever, but is simply an activity [*Tathandlung*], namely the activity of being aware,
453 in a non-representational way, of being essentially free and uncaused in one’s
454 knowing. For Fichte, the self that engages in knowing: “is an *act*, and absolutely
455 nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something” (SK 21; GA I/4,
456 200). Fichte’s use of the term, *Tathandlung* (often translated as “fact-act”) indi-
457 cates something about the kind of counter-intuitive argument he is trying to make.
458 For Fichte, the self that engages in knowing is not nothing; it is a kind of “fact”
459 or “deed” (*Tat*). However, it is a “fact” or “deed” that consists in nothing that can
460 be “found” as merely present or representable; rather, it consists in being the pure
461 act (*Handlung*) of knowing (in a non-representational way) that it is simply the
462 uncaused, free activity that it is.

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



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

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

513 **4 Schelling's Turn to Spinoza**

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

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

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

546 Starting in late 1794 or early 1795, Schelling began to develop the idea that the
547 completion of systematic philosophy, and thus the overcoming of the remaining
548 shortcomings in Fichte's system, might best be accomplished by means of a pas-
549 sage through Spinoza's seemingly dogmatic (pre-Kantian and unscientific) meta-
550 physics. Writing to Hegel in February of 1795, Schelling excitedly explained, "I
551 have become a Spinozist! Don't be astonished. You will soon hear how" (*Letters*
552 32–33; *Briefe* I, 22). There can be little doubt that Schelling's interest in Spinoza
553 was heavily influenced by Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel's and Schelling's mutual
554 friend and former roommate at the *Tübinger Stift* (the Tübingen Seminary).
555 In a letter that Hölderlin wrote to Hegel roughly one week before Schelling



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

639 Reflection on these difficulties led Schelling to conclude, by the end of the
640 1790s, that the infinite, unbounded activity that is the activity of mind (or know-
641 ing) could never become known to the mind (or knowing) as a matter of theo-
642 retical or speculative reason.⁴ Thus, in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*
643 (published in 1800), Schelling argued that it is not philosophy but only art that
644 can provide access to what theoretical reason vainly seeks to apprehend: “art is at



645 once the only true and eternal organ of philosophy, which ever and again contin-
646 ues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form..." (*Heath*
647 231; *SW I/3*, 627). In his later philosophy, Schelling continued to grapple with
648 the meta-philosophical issues that he first sought to articulate in 1800. However,
649 he never departed from his quasi-Romantic conviction that reason (or mind) can
650 never provide a satisfactory theoretical account of the co-extensiveness of mind
651 and world (or thought and being). According to what Schelling would later call
652 his "positive philosophy," the co-extensiveness of mind and world (or thought and
653 being) cannot be comprehended or explained by mind (thought) itself, but must
654 always be presupposed (in which case mind and world—thought and being—are
655 not fully co-extensive with one another, after all).

656 5 On the Way to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

722 For Hegel, only determinate negation (and not abstract, external, bound-
723 ary-erecting negation) can allow both mind and world to be the fully co-exten-
724 sive, fully interpenetrating, fully inter-permeating, and fully overlapping infinities
725 that they are. In determinate negation, mind genuinely actualizes the kind of
726 unbounded negating activity that it is as mind. It is crucial that determinate nega-
727 tion is not any kind of activity whereby mind and world are somehow set along-
728 side one another or bounded by one another or related to one another. Determinate
729 negation is very different from abstract negation. With abstract negation, mind



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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

879 Notes

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



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