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The Emergence of German Idealism

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1. *Introduction*

According to Immanuel Kant's well-known account of his own intellectual development, it was the skeptic David Hume who roused him from his dogmatic slumber.[1] According to some popular accounts of post-Kantian philosophy, it was the soporific speculation of the idealists that quickly returned German philosophy to the Procrustean bed of unverifiable metaphysics, where it dogmatically slept for half of the nineteenth century. This popular picture of post-Kantian German philosophy receives some apparent support from the relevant evidence. After all, Kant had allegedly demonstrated the illegitimacy of all metaphysical speculation that transcends the bounds of experience, and the writings of the German idealists—filled as they are with references to what is putatively "absolute" and "unconditioned" —seem to violate Kant's strictures.

In place of this popular conception, I seek to sketch out a rather different picture of German idealism. The development of post-Kantian German idealism is best described, not as a turning away from skepticism, but rather as a *radicalization* of it. The radicalization of skepticism from Kant through Fichte to Hegel, however, does not lead away from systematic philosophy. The movement of thought from Kant to Hegel coincides with the gradual realization that skeptical thought is not external to systematic philosophy, but is in fact internal to, or even identical with, it.[2] This thesis concerning the progressive "radicalization" or "inter-

1. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics,* trans. Paul Carus, rev. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1977), p. 5.

2. Thus I believe that Michael Forster is correct to say that the German idealists were "distinguished by a shared recognition of the importance of skepticism and by a determined effort to answer it on behalf of their systems"; see Michael Forster, *Hegel and Skepticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 99. Nevertheless, I would contend that it is somewhat misleading to say, as Forster does, that the German idealists sought

nalization" of skepticism in German idealism receives some prima facie support from the relevant writings of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* in the section on "The Antinomy of Pure Reason," Kant explains that the skeptical method, or the method of provoking "a conflict of assertions," is "essential" for the development of a genuinely scientific transcendental philosophy.[3] The skeptical method, however, cannot resolve the conflict of assertions that it reveals. At best, the skeptical method is "a means to awakening [reason] from its sweet dogmatic dreams, and of inducing it to enter upon a more careful examination of its own position" (*CPR,* A757/B785). Echoing Kant, Fichte also acknowledges the indispensability of the skeptical method in the development of systematic philosophy: "It is undeniable that philosophizing reason owes all the human progress which it has made so far to the observations of skepticism concerning the insecurity of every resting place yet obtained by reason."[4] But Fichte goes beyond Kant to suggest that the skeptical method is not merely a means to an external end, but that skepticism's own immanent *telos* is nothing other than systematic philosophy: "Nothing is more to be desired," writes Fichte, "than that skepticism might crown its [own] labors and drive inquiring reason on to the attainment of its lofty goal," namely, the transformation of philosophy into a science.[5] Going beyond both Kant and Fichte, Hegel suggests that skepticism and scientific philosophy (properly understood) amount to the same thing. In his 1802 essay on the "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy," Hegel claims that "skepticism itself is in its

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to provide an "answer *to*" or a "defense *against*" skepticism (p. 117; emphasis added). This is misleading because (as I seek to show) the strategy of the German idealists was not merely to offer an externally related *alternative* to skepticism; instead, their strategy was to show that the dangers of skepticism could be avoided only if self-conscious skepticism and systematic philosophy were shown to be in some sense identical.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 395 (A423–24/B451–52). All subsequent references to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* will be made parenthetically in the text, using the acronym CPR and the page numbers of the A and B editions.

4. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus,*" in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings,* trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 59.

5. Ibid. Following Fichte, Schelling also observes that transcendental philosophy necessarily begins with "general doubt as to the reality of the objective." For Schelling, this general doubt must be a kind of "absolute scepticism—not the half-scepticism which merely contends against the common prejudices of mankind, while never looking to fundamentals, but rather that thoroughgoing scepticism which is directed, not against individual prejudices, but against the basic preconception, whose rejection leads automatically to the collapse of everything else." See F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism,* trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), pp. 7–8. Unlike Fichte and Hegel, Schelling allows his skepticism to be quickly overtaken by his nonskeptical, speculative impulses. As a result, the philosophy of Schelling will not figure prominently in my analysis of "the role of skepticism in the emergence of German idealism."

inmost heart at one with every true philosophy."[6] And in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807, Hegel argues that the doubting, despairing pathway toward scientific philosophy, a pathway that is itself already scientific, must be nothing other than the pathway of "self-fulfilling skepticism" (*dieser sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*).[7]

As I shall try to show, the development of German idealism can be understood as the gradual unfolding of the basic claim that skeptical thought, when properly radicalized and raised to the level of self-consciousness, amounts to systematic, scientific philosophy. If this thesis is correct, then German idealism can be understood as a reenactment of Socrates' fundamental insight: ignorance that has become self-conscious of itself *as* ignorance is not simply a blind, empty state of not-knowing, but is in fact a form of wisdom.[8]

2. *Kant, Skeptics, and Supporters*

Kant understands skepticism, or the skeptical method, as essentially external to genuine, systematic philosophy. More specifically, Kant sees skepticism as a midway stage in reason's ascent to self-knowledge. The first stage of reason, reason in its infancy, is the dogmatic stage; the second stage, the skeptical stage, subjects reason to doubt and thus induces reason to begin asking about its own powers and limits; the third stage, the criticism of reason (exemplified by Kant's own philosophy), undertakes "to subject to examination, not the facts of reason, but reason itself, in the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure *apriori* modes of knowledge" (*CPR*, A761/B789). According to Kant, the stage of skepticism is only "a [temporary] resting place for human reason. . . . But it is no dwelling place for permanent settlement" (*CPR*, A761/B789). At most, the skeptical method "*prepares the way* [to systematic philosophy] by arousing reason to circumspection," but it "cannot of itself yield any *satisfying* answer to the questions of reason" (*CPR*, A769/B797). In order to satisfy the questions of reason and thus overcome the threat of skepticism, one must move to a third position that is external to and beyond both dogmatism and skepticism. That third position is constituted by adequate self-knowledge, provided by "transcendental philosophy."

6. G.W.F. Hegel, "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy, Exposition of Its Different Modifications and Comparison to the Latest Form with the Ancient One," trans. H. S. Harris, in *Between Kant and Hegel*, ed. George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 322–23.

7. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 50.

8. See Plato, *Apology* 21c–e.

Early in his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant tells us: "I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with our way of knowing objects [*unsere Erkenntnisart von Gegenständen*] insofar as this way of knowing is to be possible *apriori*" (*CPR,* A11–12).[9] Transcendental philosophy thus entails a kind of "return to the subject," or "call to self-knowledge" (*CPR,* Axi). Through transcendental philosophy, one attains knowledge of one's own knowing insofar as such knowing is possible a priori. That which is a priori in our knowing is "indispensable for the possibility of experience itself" (*CPR,* B5), and thus what is a priori in our knowing is itself a condition of the possibility of our having experience at all. Accordingly, the aim of transcendental philosophy is to effect a "return to the subject" in order to grasp our way of knowing insofar as this is not conditioned by, but is rather a condition of, experience.

With his return to the subject and his articulation of the a priori conditions of our knowledge of objects within experience, Kant claims to have set philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular onto the sure path of a science. Since all that is a priori in our knowledge has its own systematic unity (*CPR,* Axiii; A67/B92; A474/B502; A845/B873), and since it is just such unity that raises a mere aggregate of knowledge to the rank of science (*CPR,* A832/B860), it follows that transcendental philosophy can be assured of its unity and completeness and thus can claim the status of a "science." In virtue of its scientificity, Kant argues, transcendental philosophy can also show the way by which metaphysics can become scientific. The metaphysics that is scientifically grounded through transcendental philosophy would 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,* Bvii); the sure path of science, "once it has been trodden, can never be overgrown, and permits of no wandering" (*CPR,* A850/B878).

With his transcendental philosophy, Kant thought that he had cleared the path by which genuine philosophy could leave skeptical doubts behind once and for all. However, critics began planting new seeds of doubt upon Kant's "sure path of science" almost as soon as the path had been cleared. From the point of view of the later German idealists, Kant's "sure path of science" remained vulnerable to such doubts, precisely because Kant regarded the activity of skeptical questioning as something essentially *other* than the activity of systematic philosophizing. Kant's strategy of exclusion ultimately doomed his project to failure, because any system

9. Here I have modified Kemp Smith's translation slightly.

of philosophy that tries to leave skeptical questioning behind as something external to itself automatically renders itself partial and less than comprehensive through that very act of exclusion. In turn, a system of philosophy that is not comprehensive cannot be fully systematic, and thus cannot adequately stand up to the attacks of skepticism. In order to address skepticism adequately, systematic philosophy must learn to see the doubting, questioning activity of the skeptic as nothing other than the not-yet-self-conscious activity of systematic philosophy itself.[10]

This basic failing, as seen by the German idealists, can be expressed in slightly different terms. Kant erroneously regarded skepticism as a temporary stage that could eventually be left behind, to be replaced by true self-knowledge. Accordingly, Kant believed that the content of genuine self-knowledge must be derived from some principle or source that is essentially *other* than skeptical doubting. As a result, genuine self-knowledge for Kant must present itself as external to skeptical doubt, as an alternative to such doubt. However, the essence of *radical* skepticism is to question the validity of *any* claim that presents itself as an alternative to doubt. Thus any putative claim to self-knowledge that appears as external to skeptical doubt will be vulnerable to further attack.[11] If one is to address the challenge of *radical* skepticism, then self-knowledge must be regarded not as external to skepticism, but as the same as skeptical questioning, only raised to the level of self-consciousness. In order to prevent a perpetual oscillation between epistemic claims and skeptical attacks, one must learn to see how skepticism and systematic philosophy are actually identical, in spite of their immediate opposition.

For the post-Kantian idealists, then, there is an essential identity-in-difference between skeptical questioning and systematic philosophy. However, this identity-in-difference remained hidden from Kant and his immediate critics.[12] As a result, the early skeptical concerns about the Kantian system at first appeared to spring from sources entirely *external*

10. Similarly, Socrates realized that the threat of skepticism is not to be met by leaving skepticism behind and seeking refuge in some principle or source that is allegedly available to us in a realm beyond, and immune from, such skeptical questioning. An answer to skepticism can be achieved only by entering into dialogue with the skeptic and by demonstrating how a certain kind of knowledge is implicit in the skeptic's own questioning. In short, one can philosophize in a manner that is immune to skeptical questioning only by radicalizing the skeptic's own questioning and showing how that questioning is not ultimately different from systematic philosophy.

11. Hegel alludes to this problem when he addresses the question of *how* genuine philosophy is to make its appearance in the midst of skeptical concerns: "But Science, just because it comes on the scene, is itself an appearance: in coming on the scene it is not yet Science in its developed and unfolded truth. . . . *One* bare assurance is worth just as much as another." See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,* pp. 48–49.

12. Among the early critics, it seems that only Maimon had an implicit sense of the necessary identity-in-difference of skepticism and systematic philosophy.

to the Kantian system, rather than from the *internal* failings of the Kantian system itself. In order to address the skepticism adequately, Kant would have to make his philosophy more systematic by making it more skeptical. That task, however, was left to the later German idealists.

The early skeptical attacks upon Kant took on many forms, but the most powerful and important early criticisms centered around the basic conviction that Kant had failed to respond adequately to the skeptical challenge of Hume. Kant's alleged failure to meet the Humean challenge can be expressed in three fundamental claims: (1) Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself is riddled with inconsistencies; (2) Kant's metaphysical deduction is only inductively valid and thus lacks the necessity and completeness that are proper to science; and (3) Kant's transcendental deduction is essentially circular and thus question-begging.[13]

Perhaps the most famous critique of Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself was articulated by F. H. Jacobi. Jacobi's critique focuses on the notion of "transcendental objects," or objects beyond consciousness that allegedly cause representations within consciousness. In the "Appendix" to a book appropriately entitled *David Hume,* Jacobi argues that Kant's appeal to transcendental objects is a necessary feature of the Kantian system, but also inconsistent with the system. For Jacobi, the notion of a transcendental object is necessary to the Kantian system, since Kant starts by assuming that human sensibility is purely passive. As a necessary correlate to this assumption, Kant must posit the existence of some external object or objects that act upon sensibility and with respect to which human sensibility is passive. Within the same system, however, Kant also argued that human knowledge cannot transcend the bounds of possible experience; thus we cannot have knowledge of anything that lies beyond experience. Accordingly, we cannot have any knowledge about the alleged existence or activity of those transcendental objects with respect to which sensibility is said to be passive. Thus the notion of a transcendental object (or thing-in-itself) is both mandated and outlawed by the Kantian system: "I need the assumption of things-in-themselves to enter the Kantian system; but with this assumption it is not possible for me to remain inside it."[14]

Skeptics like Platner, Schulze, and Maimon articulated similar arguments against Kant's notion of the thing-in-itself. In his *Philosophische*

13. The self that provides the basis for self-knowledge in Kant is not the self that is simply the activity of radical, self-conscious questioning (as in Socrates); rather, it is the ready-made self that finds itself endowed with categories, full-blown from the head of Aristotle.

14. See F. H. Jacobi, "Beylage," to *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus, ein Gespräch,* in *Werke,* 6 vols., ed. F. H. Jacobi and F. Köppen (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1812), 2.304. See also Jacobi's *Werke,* 6 vols. (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1815), 3.304.

Aphorismen, Platner argues that even Kant's denial that we can have knowledge of the thing-in-itself is insufficiently skeptical. If we really could have no knowledge of the thing-in-itself, Platner argues, then we would not even know whether the thing-in-itself is unknowable. For Platner, then, genuine skepticism requires that we remain open to the possibility that the thing-in-itself might actually be knowable to us as something existing in space and time.[15] Schulze argues that any belief in a transcendental object beyond consciousness is inconsistent with Kant's own restriction of human knowledge to the objects of possible experience, regardless of whether the transcendental object is conceived as a thing-in-itself, a noumenon, or a transcendental idea.[16] Maimon's critique of Kant's thing-in-itself is perhaps the most penetrating of all. According to Maimon, if Kant were true to his own skepticism regarding the thing-in-itself, then there would be no purpose in postulating the existence of the thing-in-itself; for if the thing-in-itself were genuinely unknowable, then it would be empty of all explanatory content. The notion of the thing-in-itself is not only inconsistent with the Kantian system as a whole, it is superfluous.[17]

The second skeptical charge against Kant alleges that the metaphysical deduction, or Kant's derivation of the categories of the understanding from the forms of judgment, has only empirical or inductive validity. Gottlob August Tittel, for example, argues that Kant's derivation and organization of the categories is merely "rhapsodic."[18] According to Tittel, Kant arrived at his table of categories by observing and abstracting from the kinds of judgments that we actually make about objects within our experience. Since the categories are inductively derived, there can be no guarantee that the table of categories is complete. And because Kant has not shown that the table of categories is comprehensive, he cannot justifiably claim that his critical philosophy has really achieved the status of a science.[19] In short, the doubts that Hume had articulated concerning induction in general can apply equally to Kant's derivation of the categories: the same lack of necessity and universality that Hume had

15. See E. Platner, *Philosophische Aphorismen* (Leipzig: Sigwart, 1784), pp. viii ff.

16. G. E. Schulze, *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementarphilosophie,* ed. A. Liebert (Berlin: Reuther und Reichhard, 1912), pp. 116–30.

17. S. Maimon, *Gesammelte Werke,* 7 vols., ed. V. Verra (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), 2.372; 4.415; 5.404–6, 412–13.

18. Gottlob August Tittel, *Kantische Denkformen oder Kategorien* (Frankfurt: Gebhardt, 1787), pp. 44, 94.

19. Similar criticisms of Kant are expressed by Garve and Weishaupt. See Garve, "Kritik der reinen Vernunft," *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek,* supp. to 37–52 (1783), 842 ff.; and Weishaupt, *Gründe und Gewissheit des menschlichen Erkennens: Zur Prüfung der kantischen Critic der reinen Vernunft* (Nurenberg: Gratenau, 1788), pp. 48–49.

demonstrated with regard to our knowledge of objects also affects Kant's derivation of the categories. Of course, Kant would argue that the categories are not merely derived from experience, but constitute the a priori conditions of experience itself. But the objection cannot be so easily dismissed; for even if the categories themselves do not have their source in experience, the fact remains that Kant's own "hitting upon" these particular categories (and no others) has taken place within experience, and thus (in the absence of any further justification) Kant's derivation of the categories is vulnerable to doubt.

The third skeptical charge against the Kantian system alleges that the transcendental deduction is viciously circular and thus question-begging. The purpose of Kant's transcendental deduction is to demonstrate how the categories of the understanding can relate a priori to the objects of our possible experience; Kant's demonstration of the validity of the categories consists in showing that the objects of possible experience would not be constituted *as* objects if it were not for the a priori categories of the understanding. This demonstration, however, entails a fundamental circularity. In effect, Kant tried to demonstrate the validity of the categories by referring them to our regular and orderly experience; but conversely, he tried to demonstrate the orderliness and regularity of experience by referring experience back to the categories. If asked how we can know that the objects of our experience really do exhibit the necessary and universal structures that we attribute to them, Kant would have to appeal to the a priori structures that we bring to experience. But then, if asked how we can know whether these a priori structures actually do underlie our experience, Kant would have to appeal to experience itself. Thus a vicious circularity infects the transcendental deduction. Because of this circularity, the transcendental deduction can only be question-begging in the face of Humean doubt. As Platner argues: Kant has only shown that, *if* we have regular and orderly experience, then such experience will necessarily conform to the a priori structures of our knowing. Of course, it is the necessity of such regularity and orderliness that skeptics like Hume question in the first place.[20]

These three skeptical criticisms aimed at Kant are interrelated, since the fundamental failings in Kant that make him vulnerable to such criticisms are themselves interrelated. For example, Kant finds it necessary

20. Platner, *Philosophische Aphorismen*, § 699. Reinhold also acknowledges that Kant's very notion of experience implies that there is a necessary and lawlike connection among perceptions. As a result, any antiskeptical argument that *begins* with Kant's notion of experience will be circular. See Karl Leonhard Reinhold, "Über das Verhältnis der Theorie des Vorstellungsvermögens zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft," in *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Mißverständnisse der Philosophen* (Jena: Johann Michael Mauke, 1790), 1.281.

to appeal to a reality outside of consciousness as that in relation to which sensibility is passive, since Kant simply assumed that there is an absolute dichotomy between receptivity and spontaneity. Once he accepted this dichotomy as given, Kant was forced to appeal to something outside of the spontaneous activity of the knowing self (the thing-in-itself) as the ground of the self's receptivity. Kant's acceptance of the dichotomy between receptivity and spontaneity also explains the inductive or rhapsodic character of his derivation of the categories in the metaphysical deduction. Because Kant simply accepts the dichotomy of sensibility and understanding as given, he is forced to regard sensibility and understanding as two different faculties that are simply found alongside one another. Because these two faculties remain only contingently related, Kant is unable to find anything other than a contingent unity among the various acts of judgment (i.e., the acts within which the heterogeneous contributions of sensibility and understanding are combined). Since the unity of the table of judgments is empirically based, Kant's derivation of the categories from the table of judgments can have only inductive validity.

Finally, the question-begging nature of Kant's transcendental deduction is related to the problems outlined above. The purpose of the transcendental deduction was to demonstrate how the categories of the understanding can relate a priori to the objects of possible experience. Unfortunately, Kant cannot demonstrate this in a non-question-begging way, since he starts by presupposing the heterogeneity of sensibility and understanding. Because Kant takes sensibility and understanding to be heterogeneous as matter of fact, he cannot demonstrate noncircularly how the categories of the understanding relate a priori to what is given a posteriori through the intuitions of sensibility. Kant's acceptance of the dichotomy between sensibility and understanding *as given* makes it impossible for him to demonstrate that there exists anything but an a posteriori, contingent relation between the two. Once again, Maimon seems to offer the most penetrating analysis of the problem. Maimon notes that the transcendental deduction becomes necessary within the Kantian system because Kant presupposes a dualism between sensibility and understanding; if receptivity and spontaneity in human knowing were not assumed to be heterogeneous in the first place, then there would be no need to demonstrate how the concepts of the understanding could relate a priori to the objects given within experience. On the other hand, the Kantian dualism between sensibility and understanding also prevents the transcendental deduction from being anything but circular and question-begging. Taken together, this means: the assumption that makes the transcendental deduction necessary for Kant (i.e., the assumption of the fundamental heterogeneity of receptivity and spontane-

ity) also makes the transcendental deduction impossible. In short, there is a fundamental tension in Kant's understanding of the aims and limits of his own transcendental project.[21]

In the wake of these and other skeptical attacks, Karl Leonhard Reinhold came to the defense of the Kantian system. Through the publication of his "Letters Concerning the Kantian Philosophy" (1786–1787), Reinhold had already earned public recognition, as well as the approval of Kant himself. While still a committed Kantian, Reinhold gradually came to believe that the Kantian system could not claim the status of a science, and thus could not successfully withstand the attacks of skepticism, unless it were reformed and revised. Reinhold does not question the truth of the propositions that make up the Kantian system; he does, however, argue that Kant had not properly demonstrated the scientific character of his own system. Kant had presupposed the validity of several claims and distinctions that constitute his system, but he did not show how these various claims and distinctions could be derived formally and rigorously from a single, self-evident first principle. Reinhold's proposal for systematic reform takes its inspiration from Kant himself. Kant had argued that the scientific character of philosophy is guaranteed by its systematic unity and completeness (*CPR*, A832/B860). In order to demonstrate the unity and completeness of the Kantian system, Reinhold argues, one must not simply accept Kant's various claims and distinctions as given; rather, one must show how these claims and distinctions can be derived from a single, self-evident, first principle. For Reinhold, the requisite derivation is only implicit in the Kantian system,[22] and must be made explicit.

The single, self-evident first principle that provides the basis for Reinhold's reformulation of the Kantian system is called the "principle of consciousness" (*Satz des Bewußtseins*). For Reinhold, the most general concept within consciousness and the concept that is presupposed by all other possible contents of consciousness, is the concept of "representation" (*Vorstellung*). The principle of consciousness declares: "In consciousness the subject distinguishes the representation from the subject and the object and relates [the representation] to both [subject and object]."[23] According to Reinhold, all conscious states exhibit the same basic structure, the structure of representation, or *Vorstellung;* thus all consciousness involves not only a subject and an object, but also a distinguishing

21. See S. Maimon, *Werke,* 2.62–65, 182–83, 362–64.

22. E.g., Kant suggests that sensibility and understanding might have a single "common root" (*CPR,* A15/B29).

23. Reinhold, "Neue Darstellung der Hauptmomente der Elementarphilosophie," in *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Missverständnisse der Philosophen,* 1.167.

and relating that holds between subject, object, and representation. In all representation, the subject of consciousness makes a distinction between itself and its representation and between its representation and the object of which it is a representation. Furthermore, within consciousness, the subject relates the representation to itself and relates the representation to the object of which it is the representation. With this, Reinhold is not making any claims about the "independent" existence of the object of representation. He is only claiming that the activity of conscious representing necessarily implies a set of *relations* and *differences* among the representation, the subject (which does the representing), and the object (of which the representation is a representation). It is quite possible that the "object" is not "independent" at all, but entirely contingent upon consciousness itself.

For Reinhold, the skeptic may very well be able to doubt whether there is anything at all outside of consciousness; however, even the most radical skeptic cannot deny the principle of consciousness itself. The principle of consciousness is immediately self-evident to anyone who is conscious at all: "*Consciousness* forces everyone to agree that to every representation there pertains a representing subject and a represented object, *both* of which must be *distinguished* from the *representation* to which they pertain."[24] According to Reinhold, one can begin with nothing more than the principle of consciousness itself and derive from it all the specific content of the Kantian system, including, for example: the regularity and orderliness of experience, the dichotomy between sensibility and understanding, the two forms of intuition, the twelve categories, and even the unknowability (or nonrepresentability) of the thing-in-itself.[25] Reinhold offers just such a derivation in his *Elementarphilosophie*.[26]

We need not examine the details of Reinhold's derivation in order to appreciate the significance of his role in the emergence of German idealism. Reinhold's groundbreaking claim is that one can derive all the specific content of Kant's system, even the *apparent* externality of the thing-in-itself, from entirely within the *immanence* of consciousness itself. In making this claim, Reinhold is effectively arguing that objective consciousness (our consciousness of objects) is to be understood as a modification of self-consciousness. This, of course, is a step toward idealism that Kant himself refused to take; but it is equally a moment in the radi-

24. Reinhold, *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens* (Prague and Jena: Widtmann und Mauke, 1789), p. 200.

25. For Reinhold's derivation of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself, see, e.g., Reinhold, *Beyträge*, 1.185, and *Versuch*, p. 299.

26. For a helpful and illuminating account, see Daniel Breazeale, "Between Kant and Fichte: Karl Leonhard Reinhold's 'Elementary Philosophy,'" *Review of Metaphysics* 35 (1982): 785–821.

calization of skepticism. In making this claim, Reinhold is saying that the genuinely scientific philosopher need not and should not begin by presupposing the existence of anything whatsoever outside of consciousness, or—correlatively—by presupposing the dichotomy between sensibility and understanding. A genuinely scientific demonstration of transcendental philosophy should begin by exercising extreme skepticism regarding both the dichotomy between sensibility and understanding *within* consciousness and the alleged existence of anything *beyond* consciousness. Precisely because Kant did not begin with sufficient skepticism about these kinds of claims, his presentation of transcendental philosophy remained vulnerable to skeptical challenge.[27]

Reinhold's thought aims to be purely descriptive, accepting only what is accessible within consciousness itself. For Reinhold, what is accessible within consciousness is the concept of representation. The "object" with respect to which the representation is said to be a representation does not necessarily refer to anything outside of consciousness itself. Similarly, the "subject" that relates itself to and distinguishes itself from the representation is not the Kantian subject that appears on the scene already outfitted with the forms of intuition and categories of the understanding, full-blown from the head of Aristotle. Instead, the "self" that constitutes the originary source for self-knowledge in Reinhold's reformulation of transcendental philosophy is a highly purified self. The self, for Reinhold, must start out as nothing more than the self that has representations, relating itself to and distinguishing itself from both the representation and the object to which the representation refers. All further claims and distinctions are supposed to be derived rigorously from what is immediately self-evident in the structure of representation itself.

Reinhold was certainly more sensitive to the challenge of skepticism than Kant was; yet from the point of view of later German idealism, Reinhold himself was still not sufficiently skeptical. For Fichte and Hegel, the problem with Reinhold was that he sought to address the challenge of skepticism by radicalizing skepticism only up to a point. In other words, Reinhold sought to radicalize skepticism only until he hit upon a concept or first principle that would itself be immune to skeptical doubt. This concept or first principle was then supposed to provide an unshakable foundation for deriving the specific content of a scientific, transcendental philosophy. In short, Reinhold radicalized skepticism beyond Kant, but then he sought to overcome skepticism by appealing to a foun-

27. In seeking to derive all the content of the Kantian system (including the thing-in-itself) from within the immanence of consciousness, Reinhold effectively replaced the Kantian dichotomy between what is "inside" and what is "outside" the knower with his own dichotomy between what is "conscious" and what is "unconscious" in knowing.

dation that is itself essentially *different* from the activity of skeptical doubting itself. Thus he did not radicalize skepticism as far as he could have. For Fichte and Hegel, the problem of skepticism can be addressed adequately only if skepticism is fully radicalized and (what amounts to the same thing) if the "foundation" that provides the "way out" of skepticism is in some sense identical to the activity of skeptical questioning itself.

The first crucial step in the radicalization of skepticism after Reinhold was taken by Gottlob Ernst Schulze, in a work entitled *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie* (1792).[28] This work presents itself as a dialogue between Hermias, a proponent of transcendental philosophy, and Aenesidemus, a Humean skeptic.[29] Using Aenesidemus as his mouthpiece, Schulze points to a number of weaknesses in Reinhold's attempt to demonstrate the scientific character of transcendental philosophy. Two major aspects of Schulze's attack are of particular importance here.

First of all, Schulze argues that the concept of representation as it is articulated by Reinhold cannot possibly be the first and highest concept of consciousness. Schulze bases this criticism on Reinhold's own "principle of consciousness." Reinhold, we will recall, held that all consciousness involves a dual relationship between subject and representation: the subject distinguishes itself from its representation while at the same time relating this representation to itself as subject. Without this dual relationship of distinguishing and relating, the subject would not be a conscious subject. Schulze, however, observes that if all consciousness involves a conscious distinguishing and relating between subject and representation, and if this activity of distinguishing and relating occurs within consciousness itself (as Reinhold says it does), then the subject that distinguishes itself from and relates itself to the representation must itself be known through some further kind of representation. That is, the subject's own awareness of itself (which is necessary for distinguishing itself *from* and relating itself *to* a representation) must take place through some kind of representation; but if the subject that does the distinguishing and relating is aware of itself through some kind of representation, then we need yet another subject to distinguish itself from and relate itself to that representation of the first subject, and so ad infi-

28. Gottlob Ernst Schulze, *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie,* ed. A. Liebert (Berlin: Reuther und Reichhard, 1911). Reprinted in *Aeteas Kantiana* (Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1969).

29. For a brief account of this work and its influence on subsequent thought, see Daniel Breazeale, "Fichte's *Aenesidemus* Review and the Transformation of German Idealism," *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981): 545–68.

nitum. On Reinhold's own terms, then, the concept of representation cannot serve as the highest and most general concept for establishing a systematic and unified philosophy of consciousness: *either* we find ourselves stuck with an infinite regress (which is contrary to the very idea of a systematic, unified transcendental philosophy), *or else* there would have to be something "behind" or "beyond" the concept of representation that would provide the true foundation for a rigorous, scientific demonstration of transcendental philosophy. Since Reinhold has not identified the requisite condition "behind" or "beyond" the concept of representation, his system cannot claim to be truly scientific.[30]

The second, more general aspect of Schulze's skeptical attack on transcendental philosophy emerges from the first. Schulze suggests that the same basic problem that affects Reinhold's attempted demonstration of the scientific character of transcendental philosophy will also affect any other attempted demonstration as well. This is because any concept or first principle, so long as it has any determinate explanatory content at all (including content based on the internal structure of representation), must be the result of some act of abstraction from (internal or external) experience. Such abstraction, by definition, must leave at least something out of account. As a result, one can never know for sure whether a principle that is thus derived actually has universal, or merely inductive, validity. It is always possible that there is something beyond the scope of the principle itself that relativizes the principle's validity. Any attempt to capture what is beyond the scope of the principle will require yet another principle, which, in turn, may have only relative validity, and so on ad infinitum. In order to avoid this infinite regress, one might suggest that we appeal to some concept or first principle that is not the product of any act of abstraction. This strategy, however, is plausible only in theory. For in fact, any concept or principle that has any intelligible, determinate content at all will have to be the product of some act of abstraction. Where there is no abstraction at all, there is no intelligible conceptual content, and thus no explanatory potential.

For Schulze, Reinhold failed to demonstrate that the concept of representation as expressed in the principle of consciousness is universally valid, that is, valid for every possible state of consciousness. At most, Reinhold demonstrated only that the structure of representation is valid for some forms of consciousness, but not necessarily all.[31] Thus the skep-

30. See sections 2–5, *Aenesidemus*. For another account of the problem of this infinite regress, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 71.

31. Schulze, *Aenesidemus*, pp. 53–55, 65.

tic remains free to doubt the universal validity of the structure of representation as it is articulated by Reinhold. According to Schulze, Reinhold's project fails not because of any personal lack or individual oversight, but rather because the project of scientific philosophy is itself doomed from the start. For Schulze, no intelligible, determinate principle (i.e., no principle that is derived from an act of abstraction) can ever provide an adequate starting point for a scientifically grounded philosophy, for the alleged universality of such a principle can always be questioned. Conversely, no contentless, indeterminate principle (if such a term makes sense at all) can ground a scientific philosophy, for such a principle is devoid of all explanatory content. In short, one can purchase determinate content (and thus explanatory power) only at the expense of universality, and universality only at the expense of content (and thus explanatory power). With this critical observation, Schulze injects radical skepticism into the very heart of transcendental philosophy, rending apart what Kant and Reinhold had tried to unite, namely, the synthetic (that which introduces determinate content) and the a priori (that which is necessary and universal).[32]

3. *Fichte*

Schulze's skeptical criticism of Reinhold had a dramatic effect upon Fichte, as Fichte himself acknowledged in a letter to 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.[33]

Schulze had convinced Fichte that Reinhold's reformulation of the Kantian system had failed; nevertheless, Fichte was still not convinced that scientific philosophy itself was impossible. In fact, Schulze's attack upon Reinhold helped inspire Fichte to attempt the scientific demonstration that had eluded both Kant and Reinhold. Fichte attempts to establish philosophy as a science, not by seeking refuge in some concept or principle that is allegedly immune to skeptical doubt, but by accepting the radical doubt in all of its severity and by articulating what is implicit in the activity of doubting.

32. Some have questioned whether Schulze misunderstood Reinhold and Kant by regarding the transcendental argumentation as an empirical generalization.

33. Letter to J. F. Flatt, November or December 1793. From *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings,* trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 366.

For Fichte, Reinhold displayed the right kind of skeptical strategy when he sought to bracket all belief in the existence of an external world and then derive the specific content of transcendental philosophy from within the immanence of consciousness itself. Reinhold, however, was insufficiently skeptical insofar as he did not turn his doubt upon all possible facts that can be found even *within* consciousness. Thus Schulze was able to show that no first principle based on any given fact whatsoever (regardless of whether that fact is alleged to be internal or external to consciousness) can provide an adequate starting point for a scientific, systematic philosophy. Fichte accepts Schulze's demonstration up to this point; however, he does not accept Schulze's claim that the project of scientific philosophy is necessarily doomed to failure. Fichte seeks to avoid Schulze's conclusion by rejecting a basic assumption, an assumption that *both* Reinhold and Schulze shared. Both of these thinkers wrongly assumed that *if* transcendental philosophy is to be scientifically grounded in a first principle, *then* the first principle must be based on a fact, such as the fact articulated in the principle of consciousness (describing the basic structure of representation).[34] Against both Reinhold and Schulze, Fichte argues that the starting point of philosophy need not be based on any given fact at all.

If Fichte does not begin with at least some given fact, then how can he begin at all? Fichte's starting point is not any fixed fact or claim, but simply the activity of being radically skeptical. To be radically skeptical is to be aware that all given content (including the content contained in Reinhold's principle of consciousness) is subject to doubt. To be radically skeptical is to be aware that no given content is necessarily determinative for the self's thinking, that no given content necessarily imposes itself on the self and causes the self to accept it as binding. Thus to be radically skeptical is to be aware that the self's thinking is not determined by any external necessity. To refer to any kind of external necessity or causality upon the self would be to assume the existence or efficacy of something that is outside of the self; but such an assumption has already been ruled out by the radicalization of skepticism. Finally, to be aware that the self's thinking is not determined by any external necessity is to be aware that the self is radically undetermined and *free* as a thinking self.

In order to remain true to this radical skepticism, one must be careful not to conceive of the radically skeptical, radically free, thinking self in terms of any particular content or idea that might be subject to doubt. Thus Fichte understands the self as nothing other than the activity of

34. See Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus*," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, pp. 60–61.

being aware of oneself as radically doubting and radically free, undetermined by any given content. The skeptical self cannot consistently define itself by reference to anything *other* than such activity, for that would involve the nonskeptical claim that the self can have knowledge of some determinate state or condition that is allegedly external to its own thinking. The self is simply the activity of thinking of itself as radically free and undetermined by anything external to itself.

From this it follows that the self's awareness (or thinking) of itself as radically skeptical and free must be a *nonrepresentational* kind of awareness. After all, any determinate representation would involve at least some content that is given to the self. Since all such given contents are subject to doubt, the skeptical self may not understand itself by reference to any such given content. The self's awareness is entirely nonrepresentational. The term "awareness" is potentially misleading here. The awareness that constitutes the self's being does not depend on any given content or fact (*Tatsache*) whatsoever, but is simply an activity (*Tathandlung*), namely, the activity of being aware, in a nonrepresentational way, of oneself as free and undetermined by any given content. Of course, there is a circularity here. What is the self? It is the nonrepresentational activity of self-awareness. What is the content of this awareness? Nothing other than the nonrepresentational activity itself. If the act of awareness and the content of the awareness did not fully coincide, then the self would implicitly be claiming to have knowledge of something that is *external* to its own self or (what amounts to the same thing) external to its own self-awareness. But such a claim would contradict the policy of radicalized skepticism. As a fully self-referential activity, this self-awareness is something that one must *do* for oneself.

The nonrepresentational self-awareness that constitutes the self's being is described by the first principle of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre:* the pure *Ich = Ich.*[35] Fichte also discusses this nonrepresentational self-awareness as the activity of self-positing, or pure "being *for* self." The "content" of the first principle of the *Grundlage* is not really any content at all, but is simply the activity of self-positing, or being *for* self in a nonrepresentational way. In this activity, the act of self-awareness and the "content" of the act fully coincide; all that the self is, is simply its own selfhood as the act of being for self: "*To posit oneself* and *to be* are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical. Thus the proposition, 'I am, because I have posited myself' can also be stated as: '*I am absolutely* [*schlechthin*], *because I am.*' "[36]

35. J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge,* trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 96.

36. Ibid., p. 99.

In describing the radically skeptical, self-positing self, Fichte uses terms such as *absolut, unbedingt,* and *schlechthin;* however, this terminology can be misleading. To say that the self "absolutely" or "unconditionally" posits itself is not an attempt to infinitize or absolutize the self, but rather an attempt to express the radicalness of the self's skepticism. To say that the self "absolutely" or "unconditionally" posits itself is to say that the self is so self-consciously skeptical that it may not explain itself or (what amounts to the same thing) explain its awareness of itself by appealing to any thing that is other than itself. Any attempt to explain the self by appealing to something that is *other* than the self (i.e., some external state of affairs) would run counter to the self's radical skepticism. To say that the skeptical self posits itself unconditionally (*unbedingt*) is to say that it cannot explain itself by reference to any thing (*Ding*) that is allegedly other than itself.

Just as the skeptical self cannot explain itself by reference to any external thing or state of affairs, so too it cannot think of itself as any kind of substance or thing that differs from the bare activity of being skeptical. To refer to any substrate or substance as the basis of the self would be to refer to some form of being or existence that can allegedly be known to exist as it is in itself, apart from the activity of the self's thinking. Thus any reference to some underlying substance or substrate would contradict the activity of skepticism that the self *is.* As Fichte writes, the radically free, skeptical self "is an act, and absolutely [*absolut*] nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something [*ein Thätiges*]."[37] In short, the radically skeptical self is simply the "pure activity" of nonrepresentational, nonsubstantialist self-awareness.

Thus far, Fichte's radicalization of skepticism has yielded a highly purified and abstract notion of the self. But if the radically skeptical self cannot consistently base any of its claims on any given content or representation, then how can the analysis proceed any further? It would seem that such an abstract and empty notion of the self can provide no explanatory content at all. For Fichte, genuine explanatory content begins to emerge as soon as the self begins to understand what is implied by its own radically skeptical activity. The radically skeptical self knows that no given representation or content necessarily imposes itself on the self. However, one "thing" that does "impose" itself on the self is the "fact" that the self must have *come-to-be* aware of itself as thus radically skeptical and undetermined by any given content. The self's coming-to-be the radically skeptical self that it is must "happen" to the self, apart from any deliberate or self-conscious choosing by the self. The radically skeptical

37. Ibid., p. 21.

self can never freely or self-consciously choose to become the self that it has become; after all, "prior" to this coming-to-be, the self is "not yet" a self-consciously skeptical or free self at all. The radically skeptical self necessarily emerges *out of* a "prior" state of *not* being the radically skeptical self that it is. Since the self-positing self was not *always* the self that it is, the self-positing self cannot be the totality of all that is, for coming-to-be necessarily implies some form of otherness. Insofar as the self-positing self is not the totality of everything that is, there must be something "other" to the self, or a not-self *(Nicht-Ich)*. This not-self is the subject matter of the second principle of Fichte's *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre.*[38]

The necessity of the not-self can also be explained by reference to the skeptical self's ability to ask questions. All question-asking implies some sense of otherness. As long as any question is not yet answered, there is something that persists as an *other* to the self's awareness of itself as a self (an awareness that is the same as the self's being). Insofar as there is some otherness to the self, the self is not the totality of all that is, and there must be a not-self. One might challenge this conclusion by arguing that the sense of otherness implied by question-asking does not necessarily pertain to a *real* otherness, but might refer only to an *illusory* otherness (in which case the self just might be the totality of all that is). This argumentation, however, only confirms the necessity of the not-self. If the otherness implied by the self's question-asking referred only to an illusory otherness, then the self's being (its awareness of itself) would already be the totality of all that is. But if that were the case, then the self would already know that much, for it would already know everything about everything by virtue of being aware of its own self. Yet if that were the case, then the self could not even *begin* to wonder whether the sense of otherness were real or illusory. It would already know. Indeed, the self could not even begin to wonder about anything at all. In short, even the *appearance* of a *possible* otherness is necessarily a *real* otherness for a self whose being consists in the bare activity of self-awareness.[39]

38. In his *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy,* Fichte explains more fully how this "prior" state of not being fully self-conscious corresponds to the sphere of the not-self. See *Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy Wissenschaftslehre (novo methodo),* trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 121–33.

39. The necessity of the not-self can be explained still differently. A careful analysis of self-positing will reveal that the self could not be *for* itself, if there were no not-self *out of which* the self reflected upon or returned to itself. In other words, if there were no not-self, then the self would be an unchecked activity extending out to infinity without reflecting back on itself; but in that case, the self would not be *for* itself, and thus the self would not be a self at all. While the necessity of the not-self can be expressed in a variety of ways, it seems that Fichte found it pedagogically helpful to explain it by reference to the self's own "prior" state of inactivity, or *not*-being the fully self-positing self that it is.

The radically skeptical, self-conscious self must acknowledge the existence of a not-self. Thus Fichte's radicalization of skepticism does not lead to a complete solipsism or nihilism or emptiness. The negating power of skepticism, when radicalized and made self-conscious, acknowledges and preserves its own indebtedness to the otherness out of which it has arisen (the sphere of the not-self). Thus the power of negation that characterizes Fichte's radicalized skepticism is not an abstract, annihilating form of negation, but is rather a form of negation that preserves some relation to otherness: it is a *determinate negation.*[40] While Fichte radicalizes skepticism, he nevertheless avoids wholesale solipsism; and he does so without limiting his skepticism or relying ultimately on the validity of some content as given. Instead, solipsism is avoided insofar as the skeptical self becomes self-conscious and acknowledges its own relatedness-to-otherness (without which it would not be the question-asking, skeptical self that it is).

In order to be a fully self-conscious, skeptical self, the Fichtean self must acknowledge its own relatedness to a not-self. This necessary relatedness of the self to the not-self constitutes the primordial unity of *spontaneity* (corresponding to the purely self-positing self) and *receptivity* (corresponding to the sphere of the not-self) in the Fichtean system. Unlike Kant, Fichte does not have to speculate about the possible unity of these two "stems" of human knowledge (*CPR,* A15/B29); according to Fichte, the self's own activity of self-conscious skepticism *shows* the necessary unity of the two. Similarly, Fichte does not find it necessary to posit a thing-in-itself as the external ground of the subject's receptivity. For Fichte, the self's pure spontaneity, as self-conscious, necessarily implies the existence of a not-self, and therefore implies receptivity within the self's own being. Without the problematic postulate of the thing-in-itself, Fichte can develop a system of knowledge that avoids the various difficulties that plagued the Kantian system.

The Fichtean self, as presented thus far, is an intrinsically contradictory self. On the one hand, the self's radicalized skepticism implied that the self may not consistently explain or account for itself by reference to anything allegedly other than, or external, to itself. The self's being is

40. While the terminology of "determinate negation" comes from Hegel, it was Fichte who first showed how such determinate negation actually takes place. Hegel's contrast between "abstract negation" and "determinate negation" adequately describes how Fichte's self-conscious skepticism is different from abstract, empty skepticism. Hegel writes: "The scepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along. . . . But when, on the other hand, the result is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a *determinate* negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen." See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,* p. 51.

fully exhausted by its awareness, and its awareness is simply the nonrepresentational awareness of itself as radically free and not determined by any given content. Thus the self is simply the pure act of self-awareness, where the act of self-awareness and the content of the act of self-awareness fully coincide. On the other hand, the skeptical self also had to acknowledge that it has come to be. In order for the self to have come to be, there must be an other *for* the self, or a not-self (corresponding to the self's prior state of not being the fully self-positing self that it is). However, if there is an other *for* the self, an other that somehow coexists alongside the self's awareness of itself, then the self cannot be the pure and simple act of being for self, where the act and the content of the act fully coincide. Thus the Fichtean self is self-contradictory.

If this contradiction were left to stand in its immediacy, then consciousness would be impossible. This is because the activity of pure self-positing (pure self-consciousness) is *by definition* incompatible with any relation to otherness (empirical consciousness). Pure consciousness of self seems both to require and to exclude all consciousness of otherness. It thus becomes necessary to overcome this contradiction, while still preserving the two sides that are necessary for conscious selfhood (pure self-positing and relation-to-other). As Fichte writes, it is necessary to eradicate this fundamental contradiction, yet "without doing away with the identity of consciousness."[41] Indeed, the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* can be understood as an extended series of attempts to eradicate this basic contradiction. Throughout the *Grundlage,* the self-conscious, self-contradictory self seeks to resolve its internal contradiction, as we philosophical observers look on.

Every attempt in the *Grundlage* to eradicate the basic contradiction within consciousness ultimately fails. However, the result is not merely negative, since the enactment and failure of the series of attempts demonstrates two things. First of all, it shows that the resolution of the contradiction is not be conceived as an accomplished *fact* that the self actually experiences, but only as a *process,* a perpetual *task.* Secondly, the failure of the various attempts to eliminate the contradiction does not amount to a dead end, but in fact yields a set of thought categories, namely, the categories by which the contradictory self seeks to explain itself. The thought categories are not self-consciously "chosen" by the self-contradictory, skeptical self, but emerge "behind its back" as a *necessary* part of the strategy by which the self seeks to eliminate the contradiction that it is. As a result, the skeptical self at first does not recognize the thought categories as the products of its own freedom. With philo-

41. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge,* p. 107.

sophical hindsight, we observers realize that the emerging thought categories constitute the hidden conditions of the possibility of the self's own ability to think at all. Our ability to observe the emergence of the categories and to grasp them together in their necessary unity constitutes a fully rigorous transcendental deduction. For example, in its attempt to account for itself as a unified self, the skeptical self *must* think of the category of "limit," for the unified coexistence of self and not-self *requires* that the two sides mutually limit one another.[42] In turn, the self's ability to think of the category of limit depends on the category of "quantity,"[43] and so forth. When the end of the series coincides with the beginning (and thus when the entire system forms a circle), the transcendental deduction is complete and we have a fully consistent, self-accounting system of knowledge. In this way, Fichte shows how all the self's thought categories emerge *necessarily* from the its own internal struggle as the radically *free,* skeptical self that it is. Thus, unlike Kant, Fichte does not need to borrow the categories as ready-made from Aristotle or any other external source. Similarly, Fichte shows how the very concept of "representation" (*Vorstellung*) originally emerges from the self's own self-related activity.[44] Thus unlike Reinhold, Fichte does not have to *begin* by presupposing the concept of representation as given.

Fichte's *Grundlage* recounts the "history of the human mind."[45] In recollecting this "history," we philosophical observers comprehend how the self's own self-related activity generates a series of thought categories in terms of which the self *must* think in order to be the radically skeptical, *free* self that it is. The contradictory unity of self and not-self constitutes the fundamental synthetic a priori from which all other synthetic a priori contents are systematically and rigorously derived. We can now see how skeptical questioning, properly understood and raised to the level of self-consciousness, does not amount to an empty state of not-knowing or to the annihilation of all determinate content, but rather to a system of knowledge that generates content of its own. Fichte's transcendental deduction of the categories does not depend on any contingently derived content, but simply on the self's own attempts to explain itself as both self-conscious and conscious of otherness. The specific content of systematic philosophy is derived, yet without compromising or restricting the skepticism that gave rise to the need for systematic philosophy in the first place. The content of transcendental philosophy emerges out of the very activity of radicalized, skeptical questioning becoming self-con-

42. Ibid., pp. 105–19.
43. Ibid., pp. 128–30.
44. See Fichte's "Deduction of Presentation [*Vorstellung*]," in *Science of Knowledge,* pp. 203–18.
45. Fichte, *Science of Knowledge,* pp. 198–99.

scious.[46] Precisely because the activity of skeptical questioning produces its own content, the content that is thus derived has more than inductive validity, and is immune to skeptical doubt. Indeed, the content thus derived is shown to be the *necessary* condition of self-conscious, skeptical doubting. Skepticism is thus answered by being radicalized and made self-conscious. Finally, Fichte's demonstration addresses Schulze's skeptical claim that one can secure determinate content for philosophy only at the expense of universality, or universality only at the expense of determinate content. Schulze's observation clearly applies to content that is derived from a source that is external to the skeptical self; however, it does not apply to the Fichtean strategy of recollecting the thought categories that *necessarily* emerge from the self's attempts to account for its own radicalized skepticism.

4. Hegel

Fichte's *Grundlage* tells the story of a radically skeptical, self-contradictory self whose attempts to grapple with its self-contradiction generate the content of a fully critical, systematic philosophy. In many ways, Hegel's *Phenomenology* is similar to Fichte's *Grundlage.* Like the *Grundlage,* Hegel's *Phenomenology* presents a series of attempts whereby consciousness seeks to account for itself as both purely self-positing and yet related to some form of otherness. As consciousness attempts to account for itself in its relation to the other, we philosophical observers look on and "recollect" the emergence of the thought categories as they are generated "behind the back" of consciousness itself. The entirety of the series of thought categories thus derived grounds the Hegelian system of knowledge.

While there are significant similarities between Fichte and Hegel, there are also substantial differences. For example, Hegel asserts, contra Fichte, that the self's various attempts to eradicate the self-contradiction at the heart of its being do not all end in failure, and the desire for theoretical self-consistency or wholeness need not play itself out as a perpetual striving. On the face of it, the Hegelian assertion of the possibility of consistency and closure seems to undermine the claim that Hegel's

46. In a similar vein, Fichte argues, in his *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre,* that all the determinate content of practical philosophy, including a theory of rights, emerges from the activity of radicalized skepticism becoming self-conscious. He argues, for example, that the not-self which exists for the self must be another free self whose relation to the first self is mediated by property relations, and so forth. See J. G. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre,* in *J. G. Fichte Gesamtausgabe,* ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1966), 1.3–4.

systematic philosophy can be understood as the radicalization of skepticism beyond Fichte. This claim can begin to make sense, however, if we situate Fichte's radicalized skepticism within the context of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Roughly speaking, the skeptical, self-contradictory self that sets up the main problem to be resolved in Fichte's *Grundlage* finds its logical parallel in the "skepticism" section of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In the "skepticism" section, the self realizes that no given content is necessarily determinative for it: "the wholly unessential and non-independent character of [the] other becomes explicit *for consciousness*."[47] Skeptical thinking "annihilates the being of the world in all its manifold determinateness, and the negativity of free self-consciousness comes to know itself."[48] Unlike earlier forms of consciousness, which experience the vanishing of objective content as something that just "happens," skepticism knows that it is itself responsible; it knows that it "*makes* this 'other' which claims to be real, vanish."[49] Through its awareness of its power to negate, skeptical consciousness "procures for its own self the certainty of its freedom."[50] Skeptical consciousness thus experiences itself as fully self-positing, unable to explain itself in relation to anything other than itself, for its "self-certainty does not issue from something alien."[51] However, instead of being purely self-identical and related only to itself (which is what a purely self-positing self *would* be), the radically skeptical self experiences some form of otherness outside of it. This is shown by the fact that the skeptical self still has unanswered questions and is confused; that is, the skeptical self does not already know everything that is to be known. Since there exists some form of otherness for it, the skeptical self cannot be purely self-related and self-identical. By virtue of this otherness, the self is rendered "contingent, single, and separate."[52] Accordingly, the skeptical self finds itself oscillating between "the one extreme of self-identical self-consciousness" and "the other extreme of the contingent consciousness" that is related to and conditioned by an other, a not-self.[53]

In skepticism, Hegel writes, "consciousness truly experiences itself as internally contradictory."[54] If skeptical consciousness were only the contradictory unity of self-identity and relation-to-otherness, and nothing more than that, then it would not be aware of itself *as* contradictory; it would be a *blind* oscillation between pure self-identity and relation-to-otherness. Skepticism, however, is explicitly conscious of its contradic-

47. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 123.
48. Ibid., p. 123.
49. Ibid., p. 124.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., p. 125.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 126.

tory state; thus it is "*one* consciousness which contains within itself these two modes."[55] Nevertheless, skeptical consciousness cannot yet explain the strange unity that it is. The next shape of consciousness, the Unhappy Consciousness, explicitly addresses the problem of reconciling the two contradictory modes of skeptical consciousness: that is, the pure, unchangeable self-positing, self-identical self (which can be called the transcendental self), and the contingent, changeable self that finds itself related to some otherness (which can be called the empirical self). The task of reconciliation is undertaken by the Unhappy Consciousness in the religious language of the reconciliation between God (the purely self-identical unchangeable consciousness) and the human pilgrim (the contingent, changeable, dependent consciousness).

The Unhappy Consciousness, Hegel writes, is really *both* the unchangeable and the changeable consciousness at once. However, the possible unity of the two sides, as they are immediately given, remains an unsolved problem, and so the question of their reconciliation is approached from the point of view of the contingent, changeable consciousness. The changeable consciousness at first takes the two sides to be, not the same, but *opposites* in need of being brought together; furthermore, it views itself as inessential and the unchangeable as essential.[56] Now the problem of articulating the unity of the unchangeable (purely self-related, transcendental) self and the changeable (other-related, empirical) self is logically equivalent to the fundamental problem that animates Fichte's *Grundlage.* For Hegel, Fichte was quite right to set up the basic problem as the problem of articulating the unity of transcendental selfhood (purely self-positing, self-identical selfhood) and empirical selfhood (selfhood that has an other for it). However, Fichte was not sufficiently skeptical about his own approach to the problem. Fichte correctly identified the terms to be reconciled; however, he uncritically assumed that his identification of the terms to be reconciled already included an adequate understanding of the *meaning* of those terms (i.e., the meaning of the transcendental self and the empirical self). For Hegel, the meaning of the terms is not transparent at the outset of the analysis, but emerges only gradually as a *result* of the analysis itself. And just as the *meaning* of the terms becomes clear through the analysis, so too does the *possibility* of their fundamental *unity.* By accepting the *meaning* of the terms as given at the beginning of his analysis, Fichte effectively prevented himself from seeing how the two terms could actually be reconciled. The grounds of this logical problem can be gleaned from Hegel's section on the Unhappy Consciousness.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., pp. 126–27.

At the beginning of the section on the Unhappy Consciousness, the changeable consciousness takes the two sides in need of reconciliation to be *opposites,* and regards itself as inessential and the unchangeable as essential.[57] With this starting point (which corresponds to Fichte's starting point in the *Grundlage*), the unity of the changeable and the unchangeable becomes possible only to the extent that the changeable sheds the relatedness-to-otherness that makes it the contingent, particular self that it is. After all, as long as there is any particularity or otherness attached to the changeable, empirical self, it must be *different* from the purely self-positing, unchangeable self with which it seeks to be united. Unfortunately, the changeable, empirical self's loss of particularity or relation-to-otherness would also entail its loss of consciousness. For without some relation-to-otherness, the self would be an unchecked activity extending out to infinity without reflecting back on itself; and if that were the case, then the self would not be a conscious self at all. Given the basic terms of the analysis, then, the changeable self can never (consciously) *experience* its reconciliation with the unchangeable, transcendental self.

In accordance with the foregoing problem, the changeable self conceives of its reconciliation with the unchangeable as something "beyond" its present, conscious state. Within the context of the Unhappy Consciousness, this is the religious "beyond" of the afterlife; within the context of Fichte's philosophy, this is the practical "beyond" of the self's unfulfilled, perpetual striving. Furthermore, the changeable self must conceive of its reconciliation with the unchangeable as something that *happens to it* by virtue of an agency *outside* of itself. After all, the reconciliation cannot result from the self's own conscious, deliberate activity. For as long as the self remains conscious at all, there must be an other for it, in which case it must be *different* from the purely self-positing, unchangeable self with which it seeks to be united. The changeable self's own consciousness thus prevents, rather than facilitates, its unity with the unchangeable self.[58] The reconciliation can be effected only by an external agency. Within the context of the Unhappy Consciousness, the external agency is the religious minister, who effects the unity of changeable and unchangeable by stripping the religious pilgrim of all the particularity that makes the pilgrim a particular, conscious self (something that the pilgrim cannot do to himself).[59] Within the context of Fichte's

57. Ibid.

58. An analogy may be helpful here: just as the changeable, empirical self cannot *consciously* relinquish the particularity and other-relatedness that make it conscious, so too a person cannot *consciously* cause himself to go to sleep.

59. See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,* pp. 136–37.

philosophy, the external agency is the Ephorate, which stands above the people and oversees the harmony of the general will and particular wills (since no particular will *within* the populace can ever conceive of the general will while still remaining a conscious, particular will).[60]

What emerges from Hegel's analysis of the Unhappy Consciousness is an implicit criticism of Fichte's insufficiently skeptical starting point. Fichte began by assuming that the terms to be reconciled (self-positing selfhood and empirically conditioned selfhood) were essentially different. Thus within the Fichtean system, the changeable, empirical self is able to conceive of its unity with the unchangeable, transcendental self only as something "beyond" and only as something that *happens to* it by virtue of some agency outside of itself. That is, the changeable self can conceive of its unity with the unchangeable only if it imagines itself from a point of view *outside* of itself and conceives of itself as being stripped of its particular consciousness.[61] As Hegel points out, however, this position is contradictory. The empirical self, qua empirical self, cannot even begin to imagine itself as being stripped of all particularity while still remaining an empirical self.[62] Furthermore, the imaginary position of viewing oneself from a point of view outside of oneself is suspiciously similar to the uncritical claim of the realist that Fichte had already criticized (i.e., the claim that one can know the object as it is "in itself," as if from a point of view outside of all contingent subjectivity). In short, Fichte's insufficiently skeptical starting point forced him in the end to make untenable claims about how one must understand the unity of transcendental selfhood and empirical selfhood.

If the Fichtean approach fails because of its insufficient skepticism, then the Hegelian solution is to radicalize the skepticism. Accordingly, Hegel questions Fichte's presumption that the meaning of the terms as given (the pure, self-related, transcendental self and the contingent, other-related, empirical self) must be determinative for the entire course of the analysis. In their givenness, the two terms certainly do appear to be *opposites;* however, one should be open to their possible identity. Thus at the beginning of the section on the Unhappy Consciousness, Hegel warns that it would be wrong to assume that the reconciliation of the changeable and the unchangeable must be the movement of one side alone. It is possible that the terms to be reconciled are *not* essen-

60. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Principien der Wissenschaftslehre,* in *J. G. Fichte—Gesamtausgabe,* 1.3.440ff.

61. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,* p. 137.

62. As Hegel puts it, the changeable consciousness is implicitly contradictory because it "disclaims all power pertaining to its own independent existence, ascribing it all to a gift from above, but which in this very disclaimer, holds on to its own particular existence" (*Hegel's Phenomenology,* p. 137).

tially different, and that the story of the pilgrimage of the believer is equally the story of God's own coming-to-be.[63] Fichte was not open to this possibility, since he began his analysis by thinking of the act of self-positing as an immediate act that is radically discontinuous with all objectivity. Thus Fichte famously insisted that one could enter into his system only by making an immediate and radical break with all dependence on otherness.[64] The immediacy of Fichte's starting point compelled him to think of transcendental and empirical selfhood as essentially different, and thus incapable of being reconciled *for* the contingent, empirical self. By contrast, Hegel implicitly questions whether the pure, self-positing, transcendental self must be what it *appears* to be at first, and thus whether it is really discontinuous with all otherness.

Hegel's *Phenomenology* does not begin with an immediate act of self-positing that requires a break with all otherness. For Hegel, it is sufficient to begin with a minimalist sense of self-positing. For Hegel, self-positing is not an activity that is radically other than all given objectivity, but is rather an activity that manifests itself only *in* the objective appearances themselves. The sense of self-positing with which Hegel begins is simply the (limited) ability of ordinary consciousness to exist "beyond" what is immediately given to it ("beyond" the appearance) and to question its own relation to what is thus given. Already included in this very ability to question is a basic sense of being-for-self, or self-relation, "beyond" the given. Unlike Fichte's notion of self-positing, the meaning of self-positing as it appears in the various stages of the *Phenomenology* is intrinsically related to and conditioned by the appearances as given. As the movement of the *Phenomenology* unfolds, the meaning of this activity of self-positing will be enriched, and we philosophical observers will realize that "pure" self-positing is both pure and not pure at once. It will reveal itself as the perpetual ability of the self to be "beyond" any given appearance, while always simultaneously interpreting itself *out of* some particular appearance. Unlike Fichte, Hegel holds that self-positing is not essentially different from all relation-to-otherness, but actually depends on the determinacy of the other in order to be the pure self-positing that it is. The act of pure self-positing is intrinsically dependent on the movement of objectivity; or stated more precisely, the activity of pure self-positing is *identical* to the movement of objectivity-becoming-conscious.

With this insight, we return (appropriately) to our starting point, the slumber-disrupting skepticism of Hume. From the Hegelian point of

63. Ibid., p. 128.

64. See, e.g., Fichte's "First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge," in the *Science of Knowledge*, where he argues that the starting points of realism and idealism are absolutely incompatible.

view, one might say that the skeptic Hume was correct to show that the knowing self can never find itself as an independent, stable entity within experience. What one calls the "self" is not a self-sufficient, self-transparent being at all, but is simply the product or effect of the movements of objectivity. However, Hegel would also say that Hume was wrong to conclude that selfhood is fully explicable as the effect of objectivity and nothing else. For if the self's being were exhausted by its being-affected by the movement of objectivity (e.g., through custom and habituation), then the self could never become conscious of this alleged fact about its own self. That is, if the self were merely the plaything of objective occurrences, then this very fact about it would remain just beyond its own awareness. The self would never catch *itself* in the act of being affected, but could only speak of a *past* self being affected. For Hegel, then, the Humean skeptic is right to assert the fundamental *identity* of subjectivity and objectivity. But beyond Hume, fully self-conscious skepticism also implies a *difference:* subjectivity is not just objectivity as given, but is objectivity in the act of becoming conscious of itself.