

THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION AND HEGEL'S MODEL FOR EPISTEMIC INFINITISM

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I

G. W. F. Hegel has been an inspiration for nonfoundationalist epistemology.¹ This essay is an extension of that broadly Hegelian tradition. I will argue here that Hegel's epistemology, because it is circular and historicist, is a form of epistemic infinitism. My core argument is a series of conditionals about Hegel's epistemology:

1. If we are to solve the problem of the criterion, the criterion must come from within cognition.
2. If a criterion is from cognition, it must be in terms of cognition's historically situated satisfactions.
3. Cognition is satisfied only if knowledge is complete.
4. Knowledge is complete only if it is systematic.
5. Knowledge is systematic only if it is made explicit by philosophy.
6. If a system is made explicit by philosophy, both the system and the articulation must be circular and ongoing.
7. If philosophy's articulations are circular and ongoing, then they are procedurally infinite.
8. If philosophy is to be procedurally infinite, it must be practiced in a cultural-political climate of an open society with a state protecting freedoms.

My main conclusion is that Hegel has presented a unique form of epistemic infinitism, where infinite series of inferences provide justification but the infinite series of inferences are over a finite circular

system. My subsidiary conclusion is that Hegel's system demonstrates the interdependence of epistemology and politics.

II

To some, Hegelian epistemology is an oxymoron. J. B. Baillie writes that, "there was . . . no initial problem regarding knowledge."² The question of knowledge Hegel "never seems to have considered, at any rate, never discussed at length" (42). However, this take on Hegel's objectives is unjustified. Both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (PS) and Hegel's reflections on it in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (E) are motivated by epistemological concerns. Hegel's introduction to the *Phenomenology* is a consideration of the problem of the criterion and a proposal as to how to address it.³ He motivates the dialectical consideration of finite states of consciousness as failed answers to the problem. Additionally, both the *Phenomenology* and the *Encyclopedia* close with considerations of Absolute Knowledge as answering the problem of the criterion.

The confusion is that only the *Phenomenology's* opening and close are explicitly epistemological. Most of the work ranges from Hellenistic ethics to a theory of art and revelation. The challenge of an interpretation of Hegel's epistemology is to provide a theory of knowledge wherein those disparate political, aesthetic, and religious issues contribute to knowledge generally.⁴ What follows are forms of historicism and holism for Hegel's epistemology. Historicism follows because the progression of consciousness, reason, and ultimately Spirit from the problem of knowledge to an account of Absolute Knowledge is one that is played out over time, with each successive state appropriate but also unsatisfying for its circumstances. Holism follows because all applications of human cognitive life are relevant to the clarification of knowledge, as they all, according to the dialectic, grew out of the problem of knowledge and each contribute to its solution both in the satisfactions and dissatisfactions they yield.

The problem of the criterion motivating the *Phenomenology* is the question as to how one knows when one knows. If one uses a criterion that distinguishes true knowledge from only apparent knowledge, one must know it is a reliable criterion. But one can know the criterion is reliable in sorting cases of knowledge only if one already knows what purported cases of knowledge truly are cases of knowledge. Consequently, the critical questioning of cognition, even if it were to possess the right criterion, makes the responsible use of it problematic. The dilemma is that cognition, if an instrument of revealing truth, "reshapes it and alters it," and if only a medium by which truths come to us, the truth we receive is "only as it exists through and in this medium" (PS §73).⁵

Neither option is appealing. Hegel's third option is that "the essence of the criterion would lie within ourselves" (PS §83), namely, that in inquiring into truth, "consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself" (PS §84). Hegel reasons that knowledge, if it is to be "*our* knowledge," must be "*for us*." Our knowledge must be something that satisfies us insofar as we are content over time with our answers (PS §83). Tom Rockmore glosses Hegel's thought: "Consciousness is equipped with its own criterion of knowledge, which consists in comparing what it expects, or the theory, and the object as experienced, both of which are located in consciousness."⁶ We know when we can answer questions from all quarters and no longer feel the doubts gather. Knowledge for us is when thought rests satisfied.

Foundationalism was originally a solution to a structurally similar problem, that of the regress. The regress problem and that of the criterion are posited on the same two epistemic principles, namely, that (i) in order to know, one must have a reason and (ii) in order to have a reason *as a reason*, one must be able to account for how it is a reason.⁷ These two requirements, if we ever take ourselves to know, quickly put us on the road to regress. In the case of the problem of the criterion, it is the endless switching back and forth between criteria for and cases of knowledge, and with the regress, it is the series of iterated reason-introductions one must make in order to introduce any reason as a reason. With both problems, foundationalism is the view that there are primitives for knowledge.⁸ With the problem of the criterion, foundationalism runs that there are paradigm cases of knowledge one must start with. With the regress problem, there are reasons for which one needs no further reasons. Sense certainty is a view that purports to satisfy both objectives, and Hegel, following Immanuel Kant, criticized the strategy by showing that our sensory awareness is mediated by our application of concepts (PS § 108–110). Hegel's model for non-foundationalist epistemology is posited on this requirement of concept-mediation.

The mediation of concepts, especially given the breadth of the concepts on offer in the dialectic's progression, requires a wide scope of relevance for Hegel's holism. In fact, for an application of a concept to be satisfactory, it must not be in tension with any other, and it must fit systematically with the rest of our concept-applications. Each of the finite states of consciousness find its situated historical satisfactions in its applications yet also uncover consequent dissatisfactions, which in each state's unique way yield expanded and more developed ways of coping with reality. As each instantiation is reformulated, consciousness strives for more complete satisfaction. If the criterion for knowing is consciousness's satisfactions, then knowledge, to address the breadth

of consciousness's needs, must be progressively more complete. Consequently, for knowledge to be fully satisfying, it must be wholly complete. And for knowledge to be complete as such, it must be systematic for inquiring consciousness—the cases of knowledge have relevance to each other as a system of explicit logical relations. Knowledge, as required by the system of these relations, is coordinate with truth. Hegel's model for this system is a series of questions and answers that form a circle:

The whole becomes systematically articulate . . . as a *circle of circles of which each is a necessary moment of the whole moment*. . . . The *Truth* can only exist as a totality systematically developed: only the whole is the true (E §6–7).

If cognition provides its own criterion for knowledge and if that criterion is cognition's satisfaction with its answers, then all sources of occurrent concern or dissatisfaction must be addressed, which implies that all our endeavors bear on our concerns for knowledge. If knowledge is relevant to our lives, then the relevance must be reciprocal. The width and breadth of human concern are relevant to and a criterion for our disparate knowledge claims. The perfection of knowledge, *Wissenschaft*, is the sum total of knowledge, interconnected, developed, and disciplined as a totality, not as a mere aggregation of known facts but as a systematic view of things.⁹

For knowledge to be satisfying, it must not only be complete, but it must be explicitly systematic to the knowers who possess it. Philosophical explicitness, then, as the recognition of the systematic completeness of truth, is a necessary condition for the completeness of knowledge:

Philosophy is the Science of Comprehensiveness wherein the totality of Being becomes aware of itself. . . . Only in philosophy is comprehension at home with itself, comprehending also contingencies, natural pressures, and all sorts of relations to externality within itself (E §5).

Philosophy's structure, in articulating the whole and its comprehensiveness, itself must mirror such systematicity. Thus, it, too, must be circular; hence both what Rockmore calls "self-justifying" (*On Hegel's Epistemology*, 24) and what Westphal calls "self-critical" (*Hegel's Epistemology*, 39).¹⁰

III

The question that dogs circular epistemology is how it is not mere closed-off dogmatism that, once the circle of reasons is closed, one is not *caught within* the circle.

The crucial element to Hegel's epistemology is not simply its synchronic view of the structure of reasons (that of a circle) but the diachronic

management of that system of beliefs. One's beliefs are justified not because of how one has arranged them as a series but how one manages them over time. Hegel describes this diachronic element to knowledge "indicated only in its process of coming-to-be, or in the moments of that aspect of it which belongs to consciousness as such" (PS §789). The difference between virtuous and vicious circles is their output and control. Hegel's account of circularity is designed to address this difference, and his account, as I take it, is that the circle must be continually running and continually being revised in terms of cognition's developing needs and dissatisfactions.

The regress problem, again, was that, since each justifying reason must itself be justified, we may either go in a circle or on to infinity. But these two options are not exclusive—that one has closed a circle of reasons does not mean that one's reasoning has ended. There may be a finite number of reasons to traverse, but the reasoning required for justification itself may be infinite. Consequently, the finite structure of a circularist epistemology underdetermines the demands of the reasoning required to run it responsibly. Hegel's circular epistemology is set directly to embody this aspiration, as he takes it that philosophy's task is of making knowledge explicit in its totality, and this task requires that no piece of knowledge be presupposed:

When philosophy reaches logical maturity it is a *Science*. It requires abandoning all dogmatic assumptions, subjective presupposition, and one-sided standpoints. . . . Philosophy as *science* contains all assumptions with itself but also shows why it cannot rest satisfied with any one of them (E §35–36).

Philosophy's task is to "think through" the warrant for and consequences of all contents of thought, to subject all the interconnected cases of knowledge to critical scrutiny (E §36). Closing a circle of reasons does not close an issue. Therefore, Hegel's epistemology is structurally circular but procedurally infinite.

The ongoing nature of philosophy requires perpetual revisiting of questions. Because philosophy must be presuppositionless but also systematic, the justification of knowledge claims is emergent from the critical scrutiny of inquirers. The dialectic progresses by criticism, rejection, and reformulation. Dialectic, like all fallibilisms, is a close cousin to skepticism, but the progression of failed forms of knowledge should not yield skeptical equipollence and intellectual paralysis but, rather, further inquiry.¹¹ Hegel notes that dialectical testing distinguishes the task of absolute knowing from skeptical equipollence:

The movement might also be presented as a total *skepticism* in which all finite forms of cognition meet their doom. . . . The decision to think

radically, to call everything into question . . . is both complete doubt and desperation as well as a complete freedom. (E §36)

The task of absolute knowing is perpetual reopening of issues, demonstrating the limits of the various perspectives and explicitly recognizing the limitlessness of the task. The absoluteness of the knowing is that the process of knowing becomes entirely independent of anything but itself, but it is not by having knowledge retreat from the world, but by making all enterprise and all interest relevant to knowledge. But this expansion, in making knowledge more relevant, makes it that much more incomplete from the perspective of finite consciousness. Such acknowledgments may yield doubt and desperation, but to be true to the project of philosophy, the proper response is resolution because the essence of life itself is “the pure movement of axial rotation, its self repose being an absolutely restless infinity” (PS § 169).¹²

The task is infinite, and this task is one that risks the *bad infinites* Hegel assesses of the Kantian dialectic. The bad infinites are ones determined by negations of boundaries—the bad infinite is represented by extended nonrepeating series with successors beyond our ken at some limit. Kant’s undetermined was such a bad infinite by Hegel’s lights because Kant had set limits to reason but nevertheless ventured beyond those limits to reason about it.¹³ The reasoning, no matter how oblique, undermines its absoluteness as infinite—because it determines the undetermined by its not being finite. “The finite reappears in it as its other, since the infinite only is infinite in relation to what is finite” (PS § 164). The proper infinite is the continuous functioning of a finite system, one determined as infinite (and absolute) not by relation to an “other” that must be negated but by its relation to itself.¹⁴ Knowledge, then, is emergent as absolute from this ongoing process of critique and reformation, doubt and resolution (cf. Rockmore, “Hegel and Epistemological Constructivism,” 187).

Contemporary epistemic infinitisms are posited on the thought that the requisite condition for justification is an infinite series of nonrepeating reasons. Peter Klein, Jeremy Fantl, myself, and John Turri, despite our differences as to what constitutes virtuous as opposed to vicious infinite series of reasons, all are committed to this thought that infinite series of reasons required to answer the regress problem must be serial and nonrepeating.¹⁵ This is clearly because we hold infinitism to be an alternative to coherentism and other versions of circularism. However, it is clear that infinitism need not be construed as exclusive of circularity as an answer to the regress problem. Consequently, a Hegelian model for infinitism occupies a unique position in the logical landscape on the issue.

Additionally, Hegel's infinitism has a distinct advantage over the current versions of infinitism because the set of beliefs in the system is finite. A regular objection to epistemic infinitism is that human minds do not have infinite beliefs and, consequently, cannot possibly have the requisite commitments to fulfill the demand that, in order to be justified, one must have an infinite number of reasons. Skepticism, then, ensues, and as a consequence, infinitism is rendered absurd.¹⁶ Because the circle is closed around a finite number of commitments, each being refined over time, Hegel's system is one that is inhabitable by finite minds, ones capable of traversing the reasoning to the system and autonomously endorsing it. Consequently, Hegel's model avoids the difficulties attendant on contemporary forms of infinitism.

A second advantage a Hegelian model for infinitism has over contemporary versions is its systematicity. For contemporary infinitists, an infinite series of reasons must be available for a subject for that subject to be justified in each and every commitment. The regress problem can be posed for any belief, and if infinitism is the solution to the problem, there must be infinite series of reasons for each of those beliefs. This requirement compounds the earlier problem of finite minds for infinitism. However, on this Hegelian model, there is one infinite series of reasonings (but a finite set of reasons to traverse). The interconnectedness of knowledge, on Hegel's model, is what makes inquiry without limit possible for finite creatures.

IV

The conditions for the breadth of critical cognition are themselves broad. Philosophy, for its practitioners to cast their nets as widely as they can for issues to investigate and for them to investigate until they are satisfied, must be practiced under circumstances that allow such questioning. And this is a significant feature of Hegel's phenomenological method and its attendant holism—epistemology and politics are mutually dependant. For knowledge to be complete, those who pursue it must be free to inquire where their questions lead them, and such inquiry is possible only in a free civil society protected by a well-ordered state. And not only must those inquirers be free within that state, they must be free to subject that state to inquiry.¹⁷ Hegel, in presenting this theory of absolute knowing and the end of history only appears to be producing theological eschatology. The eschatology and its grounding metaphysics are only in the service of encouraging our pursuit of the axiological conclusions. As Pinkard notes, Hegel has argued that, "insofar as the conception of freedom is concerned, European modern life has reached a point where there seems to be nothing in principle

left to be developed" (*Hegel's Phenomenology*, 336). A constitutional state with accountable public institutions promoting an open market of goods and ideas and protecting familial bonds yields the conditions for nonalienated spirit and, hence, satisfied cognition.¹⁸ The culmination of political history coincides with the culmination of epistemic aspiration—a society promoting free and systematic inquiry. This is precisely why the intervening chapters of the *Phenomenology* are about art, politics, and ethics—they are the requisite background conditions for the proper management of cognitive economy. If we are to come to know, we must not only have our beliefs in the proper order but we must have ourselves in the proper order.¹⁹ We cannot be worried that newspapers print only propaganda. We cannot have the worry that, if we were to ask certain questions, we would be jailed. We cannot have the thought that some conclusions will get us killed. Otherwise, we are alienated from what we believe because we will assess ourselves to believe what we do *because of those conditions*. In those cases, we cannot take those beliefs to be reflective of the truth; we cannot fully and autonomously endorse them. We only see them as symptoms of the political environment.

Questioning the institutions that make knowledge possible is a task of constant vigilance because the political order that makes inquiry possible is fragile. It is not fated that open societies will win out. Such a life can founder on some series of unfortunate circumstances—a nuclear holocaust, a pandemic, a giant meteor. Political and epistemological history has a teleology, but those ends are fragile, and were the order to founder, future Hegelian-styled philosophers might look back on our age in the same way Hegel himself looked upon the promises of Greek life and art, as a form of life that offered much, but now is consigned to near oblivion.²⁰

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NOTES

1. For example, Wilfrid Sellars's criticism of the Given (*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 2d ed. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997]), Richard Rorty's alternative to the Mirror of Nature (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975]), Robert Brandom on the sociality of reason (*Making It Explicit* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994]), and Tom Rockmore on epistemic constructivism (*On Constructivist Epistemology* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005]).

2. J. B. Baillie, *The Origin and Significance of Hegel's Logic* (1901; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 43.

3. All quotations from Hegel are taken from the following two editions:

The Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and.

Encyclopedia of Philosophy trans. G. E. Mueller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

4. Cf. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–4.

5. William Maker calls this the “objectivity problem” that motivates the *Phenomenology* (*Philosophy without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 222).

6. Tom Rockmore, “Hegel and Epistemological Constructivism,” *Idealistic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 186.

7. See Andrew Cling’s account of the structural similarity of the two problems (“Reasons, Regresses, and Tragedy: The Epistemic Regress Problem and the Problem of the Criterion” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 4 [2009]: 333–46).

8. See, for example, the case made by Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973).

9. Cf. Tom Rockmore, *On Hegel's Epistemology and Contemporary Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 18.

10. Hegel’s avowed debt to Baruch Spinoza is clear here, as the requirements for thought to be adequate to its object are that it not only be continuous with it but participate in its structure as a reciprocal relation between finite modes. For discussion of the depth of this influence, cf. Moira Gatens and Genevive Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 69.

11. Michael Forster has argued that Hegel’s epistemology demonstrates that the only answer to skepticism is not to stand on any finite form of knowledge, because it will reveal itself to be incomplete. Rather, he holds that the answer to skepticism is the view of all the failures of finite forms of knowledge, which he holds is dialectic (*Hegel and Skepticism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989], 133). The *Phenomenology* is a skeptical exercise of acknowledging skeptical equipollence with knowledge claims, but to pursue the truth in each finite case of knowledge’s reconstructions. It is a processive answer to skepticism—one cannot synchronically answer the skeptic, but can do so diachronically.

12. Christopher Lauer interprets the continuousness of consciousness’s overcoming of its limits as the model for absolute knowing, which ultimately demands Spirit’s self-sacrifice (“Space, Time, and the Openness of Hegel’s Absolute Knowing,” *Idealistic Studies* 36, no. 3 [2006]: 174–75). It is unclear

what this self-sacrifice of Spirit is, in the end, but the model, as he notes, is procedurally infinite.

13. This charge, of course, is exceedingly contentious, as it casts Kant's project of articulating limits for thought to be self-defeating. Whether this reading of Kant is itself correct is not something I think is important to my thesis, though I doubt it is correct. What is important is that the epistemic infinitism I am here attributing to Hegel not have a similar structure to what Hegel rightly or wrongly sees as a "bad" infinity. The point about Kant's Undetermined, then, should be taken only as a heuristic.

14. There is certainly a Cartesian concern here, as on René Descartes's model for infinity expressed in Meditation III, but this is merely a form of indefinite inquiry, not infinity (CSM II, 31).

15. See Peter Klein, Peter. 1999. "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," in *Philosophical Perspectives 13: Epistemology*, ed. James Tomberlin, 279–325 (Malden, MA: Blackwell); Jeremy Fantl, "Modest Infinitism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2003): 537–62; S. F. Aikin, "Who Is Afraid of Epistemology's Regress Problem?" *Philosophical Studies* 126, no. 2 (2005): 191–217; and John Turri, "On the Regress Argument for Infinitism," *Synthese* 166, no. 1 (2009): 157–63.

16. Cf. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 24; and Michael Bergmann, "Is Klein and Infinitist about Doxastic Justification?" *Philosophical Studies* 134, no. 1 (2007): 22.

17. See Kenneth Westphal's discussion of Hegel on *Antigone*, which runs that, given the complexity of civil goods, all laws and institutions must be open to public criticism (*Hegel's Epistemology: A Philosophical Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003], 23).

18. The state must be, as J. N. Findlay terms it, "well-ordered" so that Spirit may not be alienated from its applications (*Hegel: A Re-Examination* [New York: MacMillan, 1958], 332). And one of the crucial elements of the well-ordered state is its commitment to encouraging inquiry, not patriotism, since the latter limits Spirit, restricts where it may question. Rather, Absolute Spirit, as achieving absolute knowledge must be free to pursue truth, while the necessities and contingencies of nature and history may only function as conditions for its revelation, not its content (PS §552).

19. The conditions that assure what Robert Brandom, in commenting on Hegel's account of freedom, calls "expressive freedom" must be preserved for inquiry to be possible ("Freedom and Constraint by Norms," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 [1979]: 194).

20. Thanks go to Jason Aleksander, Norman Fischer, Gregg Horowitz, Jonathan Neufeld, Aaron Simmons, and Jeffrey Tlumak for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.