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From Kant's Highest Good to Hegel's Absolute Knowing

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Hegel's most abiding aspiration was to be a *Volkserzieher* (an educator of the people) in the tradition of thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).[1] No doubt, he was also deeply interested in epistemology and metaphysics, but this interest stemmed at least in part from his belief (which Kant also shared) that human beings could become truly liberated to fulfill their vocations as human beings, only if they were also liberated from the illusions and contradictions that plagued uncritical thinking about self, world, and God. Thus to appreciate Hegel's work in epistemology and metaphysics, one must first appreciate how he (following Kant) sought to think beyond the "special metaphysics" of self, world, and God as developed by Descartes and other pre-critical philosophers. The aim of this chapter is to analyze aspects of Hegel's critical appropriation and transformation of Kantian thought, shedding light not only on Hegel's own understanding of his move beyond Kant, but also on the philosophical reasons that might justify such a move.

1. Kant's Anti-Cartesianism

Kant's theory of knowledge is marked by three significant departures from Descartes's theory of knowledge. First, while Descartes held that our perception of ourselves as finite is to be explained by reference to our more primordial perception of the infinite,[2] Kant sought to show that our ideas of the infinite are – on the contrary – to be explained as products of our own reason as finite.[3] Second, while Descartes held that the knowing subject could come to know itself and its epistemic capacities in the absence of any knowledge about empirically given objects, Kant sought to show that the knowing subject could come to know itself and its epistemic capacities only through its knowing of empirically given objects.[4] Third, while Descartes held that any adequate justification of the reliability of our knowledge claims will depend on establishing the existence and interrelationship of three different kinds of being (namely, self, world,

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and God), Kant sought to show that our talk of self, world, and God as three separate and theoretically knowable kinds of being will not only fail to deliver the desired justification, but will also lead our reason into irresolvable conflicts with itself. Indeed, the three central chapters of the Transcendental Dialectic in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (i.e., the chapters on the Paralogisms of Pure Reason, the Antinomy of Pure Reason, and the Ideal of Pure Reason) correspond to the three kinds of being that play a pivotal role in the Cartesian project of epistemic justification (and in turn, these three kinds of being correspond to the three different branches of special metaphysics, namely: rational psychology, rational cosmology, and rational theology). In the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant argues that our ideas of self ("a simple substance that ... persists in existence with personal identity"; *CPR*, A672/B700), world ("the sum total of all appearances"; *CPR*, A672/B700), and God ("a highest being as the supreme cause"; *CPR*, A679/B707) do not refer to any independently existing, theoretically knowable entities or kinds of being, but only to the *rules* or *maxims* that we give to ourselves for the purpose of extending our empirical knowledge and bringing about the greatest possible systematic unity in such knowledge. Accordingly, the three central chapters in Kant's Transcendental Dialectic – taken together – can be understood as an implicit argument against the Cartesian attempt to make use of our ideas of self, world, and God (construed as referring to independently existing, theoretically knowable entities) for the purpose of demonstrating the reliability of our knowing.

It follows from Kant's account in the Transcendental Dialectic that it is a mistake to think that our idea of God refers to a theoretically knowable, independently existing entity whose supposed existence and goodness can provide an epistemic guarantee of the correctness of our judgments about an external world. For Kant, the pure concept or idea of God is merely a "schema" or "heuristic" that serves to show us how, under its guidance as a pure concept or idea, "we ought to *seek after* the constitution and connection of objects of experience in general" (*CPR*, A671/B699). In other words, the idea of God represents no theoretically knowable, independently existing reality, but only a certain kind of task or imperative that our own reason gives to itself. The task or imperative is to consider the sum total of all appearances within possible experience (that is, to consider the world of sense itself) *as if* it had "a single, supreme, and all-sufficient ground outside its range, namely an independent, original, and creative reason" (*CPR*, 672/B700); or to "consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic unity, hence *as if* they had all arisen from one single, all-encompassing being, as supreme and self-sufficient cause" (*CPR*, A686/B714). For Kant, in other words, the traditional metaphysical idea of God (just like the traditional metaphysical ideas of self and world) is "not a constitutive principle for determining something in regard to its direct object" (*CPR*, A680/B708), but a merely "regulative principle for the greatest possible empirical use of my reason" (*CPR*, A679/B707).[5]

Kant goes further and argues not only that it is a mistake to regard the idea of God as referring to "an actual thing to which one would think of ascribing the ground for the systematic constitution of the world" (*CPR*, A681/B709), but also that there is something self-defeating in any account that would seek to explain the systematic unity of the empirical world by reference to a theoretically knowable divine being that is thought to exist independent of and external to such a world. For Kant, the act of regarding God as an independently existing, theoretically knowable entity that allegedly

grounds the systematic unity of nature will actually end up undermining our attempts at appreciating this systematic unity. Kant writes:

> if I antecedently make a highest order being the ground [of the unity of nature], then the unity of nature will in fact be done away with. For then this unity is entirely foreign and contingent in relation to the nature of things, and it cannot be cognized from the universal laws thereof. (*CPR*, A693/B721)

The problem, in other words, is that the very act of regarding the divine being as something independent and beyond the scope of nature will inescapably lead one to think of this divine being "anthropomorphically," and this in turn will lead one to regard the systematic unity of nature as something that must be imposed on nature "forcibly" and "dictatorially" (*CPR*, A692/B720). But if systematic unity is something that must be imposed on nature in such a forcible, external manner, then this unity will become unintelligible and mysterious to us finite inquirers; for we can understand and appreciate the unity and coherence of nature only "on the path of physical investigation," by attending to nature's own (*internal*) universal laws.

For Kant, as long as we regard the systematic unity of the natural world as something that is imposed upon it from without (i.e., by a divine being conceived anthropomorphically), we will have to regard this systematic unity as something inaccessible and inscrutable to us. And as long as we regard nature's systematic unity as something inaccessible and inscrutable to us, we will be tempted to think that this unity can be explained only by reference to an independent divine being that exists beyond us and beyond nature. Thus, Kant suggests, we will find ourselves trapped in a "vicious circle" (*CPR*, A693/B721): the act of thinking that nature's systematic unity can be explained only externally (by reference to an independently existing divine being) will ensure that the systematic unity of nature appears mysterious and inscrutable to us; and in turn, this ongoing, obstinate inscrutability will incline us all the more vigorously to think that nature's systematic unity can be explained only externally (by reference to an independently existing divine being). We will be trapped not only in a vicious circle, but in a vicious circle *of our own making*. And as long as we fail to recognize this, we will continue to make theoretical claims that inescapably bring our reason into a state of internal contradiction, or into a state of war with itself (*CPR*, A751/B779).

When we find our reason entering into contradiction with itself, Kant acknowledges, it is tempting to think that the contradictions arise from accidental defects in our reason, or from some hidden causes lying in the "nature of things" outside us. Kant insists, however, that the contradictions are generated from the characteristic activities of our very own reason, and thus can be explained adequately by reference to the nature of our reason itself, without recourse to any talk about accidental defects or extrinsic causes in the "nature of things":

> [A]ll the concepts, indeed all the questions that pure reason lays before us, lie not in experience but themselves in turn only in reason, and they must therefore be able to be solved and their validity or nullity must be able to be comprehended. We are, also, not justified in repudiating these problems under the excuse of our incapacity, as if their solution really lay in the nature of things, and in rejecting further investigation, since reason has given birth to these ideas from its very own womb alone, and is therefore liable to give account of either their validity or their dialectical illusion. (*CPR*, A763/B791)[6]

With these remarks, Kant is elaborating a theme already suggested – though in a very rudimentary way – by his notion of a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. As Kant argued in the Second Preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the difficulties and contradictions that we encounter in metaphysics will continue to seem irresolvable to us, so long as we persist in thinking that their source lies in the nature of things outside us. And we will persist in thinking that their source lies in the nature of things outside us, so long as we adhere to a precritical or pre-Copernican stance that fails to recognize that our reason is legislative in relation to the things that it knows. In other words, the apparent obstinacy and intractability of the metaphysical difficulties and contradictions we encounter will only serve to confirm our (pre-critical or pre-Copernican) view that we ourselves have not generated such problems for ourselves, but are instead only the passive victims of mysterious forces or causes outside us. And in turn, as long as we continue to think that the metaphysical difficulties and contradictions we encounter have their source in things outside us, we will remain incapable of adopting a critical, Copernican stance, which alone is capable of illuminating our legislative activity in relation to the things that we know and liberating us from our self-made metaphysical difficulties. The problem, in short, is that the pre-Copernican stance that we ourselves uncritically adopt leads us into the difficulties that we encounter in metaphysics; and the obstinacy of these difficulties seemingly confirms the rightness of this pre-Copernican stance, according to which it is the nature of things outside us (rather than our very own stance) that is the cause of our ongoing metaphysical difficulties.

Hegel's own approach, especially in the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can be understood as an implementation, for *all* shapes of insufficiently critical consciousness, of the basic strategy that Kant implemented in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* regarding precritical, metaphysical consciousness. For Hegel, each shape of insufficiently critical consciousness takes a stance regarding the world within which it knows objects, and yet remains unaware of the extent to which its own stance-taking is responsible for the way in which objects in its world appear to it. When such insufficiently critical consciousness experiences difficulties and contradictions within its own experience, it naturally thinks that these problems have been caused – and can only be remedied – by some being or causality outside itself. The emergence of absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology* will coincide with the realization by consciousness that it is itself responsible for having generated such problems for itself, and thus is ultimately not the victim of an external causality, and not dependent on an alien, transcendent being for remedying them. A key shape of consciousness that eventually leads to the emergence of absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology* is the shape represented by Kantian "morality" and Kant's moral proof of the existence of God, to which we now turn.

2. Kant on the Highest Good and the Practical Necessity of Belief in God's Existence

Kant held that we cannot attain theoretical knowledge of God's existence or attributes; however, he argued that belief in God is not only rational, but also necessary from a moral point of view. Kant's argument – his so-called moral proof of God's existence[7] – depends on the notion of the "highest good."[8] For Kant, there are two different senses

of the "highest good": on the one hand, the highest good might mean the "supreme" good; on the other hand, the highest good might mean the "most complete" or "most perfect" good (*CPrR*, 5:110). A morally good will (one that acts out of pure duty or respect for the moral law) is supremely and unconditionally good; but a morally good will is not the only possible good. While moral virtue is the "supreme" good insofar as it is the unconditioned condition of all other goods, it does not follow that it is the "most complete" or "most perfect" good. What is required for the "highest good" in the sense of "completeness" and "perfection" is not just the morally good will, but also a proportionality between happiness and moral goodness (i.e., between happiness and worthiness to be happy).

Kant goes on to argue that we as finite rational human beings have a moral duty to promote the highest good (*CPrR*, 5:125). According to Kant, a world in which a person is "in need of happiness and also worthy of it," but still does "not partake of it" is a morally defective world, one that "could not be in accordance with the complete volition of an omnipotent rational being" (*CPrR*, 5:110). On Kant's account, to have a morally good or virtuous will is the same as to be worthy or deserving of happiness (*CPrR*, 5:110); accordingly, our moral duty to promote the highest good is at the same time a moral duty to promote a proportionality between desert and reward. But a proportionality between desert and reward is the same as justice (*CPrR*, 5:115, and 5:123). It follows, then, that our moral duty to promote the highest good is equally a moral duty to promote justice. Furthermore, since virtue is an effect of our freedom alone, and happiness is an effect of natural causes insofar as they relate to our desires and inclinations, it also follows for Kant that the duty to promote the highest good is also duty to bring about a harmony between freedom and nature. Kant thus speaks of the highest good as "the kingdom of God on earth"[9] and "the Kingdom of God in which nature and morality come into harmony with one another" (*CPrR*, 5:128).

On Kant's account, the fact that we have a moral duty to promote the highest good leads to a difficulty, and solving the difficulty leads us to the argument of the "moral proof." For Kant, we have a duty to promote the highest good; but the highest good involves a proportionality or harmony between two entirely heterogeneous elements, namely virtue and happiness; accordingly, any posited connection between these heterogeneous elements must be synthetic and not analytic (*CPrR*, 5:126–127). Now the synthetic connection between virtue and happiness can be conceived in only two possible ways: either the desire for happiness is the ground of virtue, or conversely the maxim of virtue is the ground of happiness (*CPrR*, 5:113). The first option, Kant argues, is impossible, for the first option (if true) would destroy the autonomy of practical reason by locating the determining ground of the will in the desire for happiness. But the second option is equally impossible: for a person's actual enjoyment of happiness does not depend only on the moral goodness of that person's will, but rather on (often unexpected) effects and consequences as they arise in the world of nature. While we have a moral duty to promote the highest good, there seems to be no ground that could possibly guarantee the requisite connection between virtue and happiness (or desert and reward, or freedom and nature). The world as we know it seems irremediably unjust: morally good people suffer, while morally bad people thrive.

Now Kant famously holds that an obligation that obliges us to do what is beyond our control cannot be an obligation at all.[10] Thus if it seems that we are morally obligated

to promote the highest good, but nevertheless unable to do so through our own acts of willing, then any apparent moral obligation to promote the highest good must be null and void. In turn, the emptiness of this obligation would entail the invalidity of the moral law itself, since there is an intimate connection between the obligation to promote the highest good and the moral law. As Kant explains:

> no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws. Now, since the promotion of the highest good, which contains this connection in its concept, is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law, the impossibility of the first must also prove the falsity of the second. If, therefore, the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false. (*CPrR*, 5:113–114).

In the face of this difficulty, Kant holds that there must be some way in which we can think it possible to promote the highest good through our own moral agency; otherwise, the moral law itself would lose its binding force.

Kant begins to address this problem by pointing out that the initial absence of any guaranteed connection between virtue and happiness leads to an insuperable difficulty *only if* one first assumes that the ground of any such connection must reside in the moral activity of *finite* wills alone. The moral activity of such wills, as finite, necessarily presupposes the pre-existence of a given natural world *upon which* such activity is exercised. In other words, the finitude of such moral agents entails that the whole natural world upon which their moral activity is exercised is itself not *already* a product of their *own* moral activity (*CPrR*, 5:124). But since the natural world upon which such moral activity is exercised is itself not a product of this very moral activity, and since there seems to be no other source from which the natural world might acquire moral significance or direction, there seems to be no conceivable ground that can guarantee the complete harmony between virtue and happiness, freedom and nature. In other words, nature is at first simply "given" as indifferent and unrelated to the moral activity of finite rational agents. And because nature, so considered, is morally indifferent, there can be no guarantee that our finite moral activity can ultimately bring about the highest good as a harmony between virtue and happiness, freedom and nature. Accordingly, any obligation to promote the highest good seems to require something that is beyond our control, and so the obligation – along with the moral law connected to it – appears to be null and void.

Kant goes on to argue that this conclusion can be avoided only if one assumes the existence of a will that is not finite like our own, and thus not dependent on a pre-existing natural world – that is, only if one assumes the existence of a good and all-powerful God who created the natural world, and indeed created it such that it is not wholly indifferent to our moral purposes but completely conformable to them insofar as they are morally virtuous. Thus even though there is no necessary connection between *my* finite moral activity and the causes and effects that occur in the natural world, I can *think* of this connection indirectly, as mediated and guaranteed by the will of "an intelligible author of Nature" (*CPrR*, 5:115). For Kant, then, our belief in the

existence of God is not only justified but also required as a matter of practical reason, insofar as we have an obligation to promote the highest good:

> Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good; hence there is in us not merely the warrant but also the necessity, as need connected with duty, to presuppose the possibility of this highest good, which, since it is possible only under the condition of the existence of God, connects the presupposition of the existence of God inseparably with duty; that is, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God. (*CPrR*, 5:125).

Furthermore, Kant's "moral proof" justifies belief not just in the existence of a deistic, impersonal God, but in the existence of a God whose causality with respect to nature is "in keeping with the moral disposition" (*CPrR*, 5:125). In other words, the God that emerges in Kant's "moral proof" is a knowing and willing personal God who must possess the various attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity, etc.) traditionally predicated of God by the Christian religion (*CPR*, A815/B843; see also *CPrR*, 5:140). Finally, Kant argues, this return to religion in general, and to the Christian religion in particular, does not in any way render our thinking heteronomous. For the kind of religious thinking that is justified through the "moral proof" involves the "recognition of all duties as divine commands" where these commands are not understood as the "arbitrary and contingent ordinances of a foreign will, but as essential laws of any free will as such" (*CPrR*, 5:129). Thus:

> the Christian principle of morality is not theological and thus heteronomous, being rather the autonomy of pure practical reason itself, because it does not make the knowledge of God and His will the basis of these laws but makes such knowledge the basis only of succeeding to the highest good on condition of obedience to these laws. (*CPrR*, 5:129)

For Kant, what we take to be divine commands are not binding on us simply because they are divine commands; rather, we regard certain imperatives as divine commands because they are already binding on us in accordance with the self-legislated imperatives of our own reason (*CPR*, A819/B847; *CPrR*, 5:131).[11]

3. The Moral Proof at the *Tübinger Stift* and Its Fate

Kant's moral proof garnered a great deal of attention at the Protestant seminary (the so-called *Tübinger Stift*) where Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin were not only fellow students and friends, but for a period in 1790 even shared accommodations together. On the one hand, Kant's moral proof was extremely suggestive and inspiring to the three young progressives, who – echoing Kant's own account of the highest good – shared excited thoughts about "the Invisible Church" and the "kingdom of God" on earth.[12] On the other hand, the three were also wary of the way in which some of the professors at the *Stift*, especially Gottlob Christian Storr (1746–1805) and Johann Friedrich Flatt (1759–1821), made use of Kant's critical philosophy in order to support some of their own conservative theological conclusions. Both Storr and Flatt argued, for example, that Kant's decisive critique of the pretensions of metaphysical reason

allowed us to draw the conclusion that only revealed religion could save us from moral despair by providing us with answers to the speculative questions that we human beings can neither avoid asking, nor succeed in answering, on our own. Storr, furthermore, claimed that Kant's moral proof and his position on the postulates of practical reason might lead us not only to religion in general, but also to many positive doctrines of the Christian religion in particular (including even the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection).[13]

To the young Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, this reworking of Kant's critique of reason for the sake of adducing dogmatic conclusions amounted to the construction of an insidious Trojan horse whose attempted breach at the gates of the critical philosophy had to be vigorously resisted. And even after they had left the *Stift*, the three young progressives continued to complain to one another about the perversions of Kant's critical philosophy at the hands of the dogmatic theologians. In a letter to Hegel dated January 5, 1795, Schelling could hardly contain his disdain for the orthodox theologians' attention to the letter of Kant's philosophy at the expense of its spirit:

> I am firmly convinced that the old superstition of so-called natural religion as well as of positive religion has, in the minds of most, already once more been combined with the Kantian letter. It is a delight watching how keen they are at pulling the moral proof around on their string. Before you can turn around, the *deus ex machina* pops up, the personal individual Being who sits in heaven above![14]

Echoing his friend's sentiments, Hegel observes three weeks later that he is not surprised by the reactionary attitude of the orthodox theologians, since their clinging to orthodoxy is supported by powerful material and political interests. Anticipating his later notion of "immanent critique,"[15] Hegel suggests that the attempt to use Kantian materials in order to build a dogmatic theological fortress would be likely to undermine itself from within:

> Orthodoxy is not to be shaken as long as the profession is bound up with worldly advantages and interwoven with the whole of the state. This interest is too strong for orthodoxy to be given up so soon, and it operates without anyone being clearly aware of it as a whole. As long as this condition prevails, orthodoxy will have on its side the ever-preponderant herd of blind followers and scribblers devoid of higher interests and thoughts. ... I believe it would be interesting, however, to disturb as much as possible the theologians who in their antlike zeal procure *critical* building materials for the strengthening of their Gothic temple, to make everything more difficult for them, to block their every escape until they no longer find any way out and have no choice but to fully display their nakedness in the light of day. Yet, amidst the building materials they carry away from the funeral pyre of Kantianism in order to prevent the conflagration of dogmatics, they are carrying home with them some live coals. ...[16]

In spite of his suggestive observation about a possible immanent critique of the Tübingen orthodoxy, Hegel seemed not to have any clear sense about how such an immanent critique might proceed. Indeed, Hegel seemed to have overlooked some of the problems inherent in the moral proof itself, problems which had already led Schelling to doubt the proof as a whole. In a revealing passage from his letter of late January 1795, Hegel expresses his puzzlement over Schelling's suggestion that Kant's moral proof cannot, after all, justify belief in any personal God:

> There is one expression in your letter concerning the moral proof that I do not fully understand: "which they know how to manipulate so that the individual, personal Being pops up." Do you think that we don't actually get so far [with the moral proof]?[17]

Schelling's response to Hegel, dated February 4, 1795, was prompt, direct, and illuminating:

> Now for a reply to your question of whether I believe we cannot get to a personal Being by means of the moral proof. I confess the question has surprised me. ... Personality arises through the unity of consciousness. Yet consciousness is not possible without an object. But for God – i.e., for the Absolute Self – there is no object *whatsoever*; for if there were, the Absolute Self would cease to be absolute. Consequently there is no personal God. ...[18]

A week earlier, in a letter dated January 26, 1795, Hegel's other friend from the *Stift*, Hölderlin, had provided a similar explanation of the impossibility of belief in a personal God, referring directly to the thought of Fichte and Spinoza:

> [Fichte's] Absolute Self, which equals Spinoza's Substance, contains all reality; it is everything, and outside of it, is nothing. There is thus no object for this Absolute Self, since otherwise all reality would not be in it. Yet a consciousness without an object is inconceivable; and if I myself am this object, then I am as such necessarily limited even if only in time, and thus am not absolute. Thus, in the Absolute Self, no consciousness is conceivable; as Absolute Self I have no consciousness; and insofar as I have no consciousness, to that extent I am – for me – nothing.[19]

With the help of the Fichte-inspired arguments from Schelling and Hölderlin, Hegel had become convinced by August 1795 that Kantian arguments about the highest good could not support belief in a personal God. For a personal God would have to be a God possessed of consciousness; but a being can be conscious only if it is conscious of something that counts as an object for it, and its consciousness of what counts as an object (or some "otherness") for it inescapably renders it finite or limited. Thus a personal, conscious God would have to be a finite God, which is to say that a personal, conscious God could not be a God at all. While rejecting the notion of a personal God, Hegel nevertheless told Schelling of his ongoing interest in discerning "what it might mean to approach God," and he thanked Schelling for helping to clarify "what previously floated before my mind darkly and in undeveloped form."[20] In the same letter, Hegel indicated his intention to proceed along the lines suggested by Kant's critical philosophy, according to which the failures of speculative reason are to be explained not by reference to any mysterious or ineluctable causes outside reason, but only by reference to "the very nature of reason" itself.[21]

4. Self-Positing and the "Only True and Thinkable Creation Out of Nothing"

To followers of Fichte, Kant's attempt at demonstrating the necessity of belief in a personal God must have seemed like an unfortunate lapse into the sort of uncritical

"special metaphysics" (of self, world, and an anthropomorphically conceived God) that Kant himself had criticized in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For just as the Cartesian *Meditations* had relied on the notion of an all-knowing and all-benevolent (personal) God for the sake of establishing an epistemic connection between self and world, so too Kant's moral proof relied on the notion of an all-knowing and all-benevolent (personal) God for the sake of establishing a moral connection between the self and world. To some Kantians, it might have seemed possible to defend the moral proof's reliance on the triad of self, world, and God by saying that the triad in Kant's critical philosophy was not a triad of three separate and theoretically knowable entities (as it was in the Cartesian *Meditations*), but only a triad of regulative ideas that the self postulates for itself in order to make sense of its own moral aims. But to those who had imbibed Fichte's radical new philosophy, this possible defense of Kant – grounded on a firm distinction between theoretical and practical reason – was also untenable. To them, Fichte had shown that the distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason is not a fixed, unrevisable distinction that holds for all contexts or that is grounded in the very nature of reason itself. Rather, it is a contingent or relative distinction, and its relativity can be shown when one considers the founding act of all systematic philosophy: the act of self-positing.

According to Fichte, the act of self-positing is nothing other than the act through which the self both *is* itself and *is for* itself; that is, the act of self-positing is the act through which the self enacts both its *being* and its *being for itself* insofar as its being consists in nothing but its being for itself. Stated differently, what the self *is* and what the self *brings about* are identical in the act of self-positing; thus the act of self-positing can be characterized as an act of theoretical reason and an act of practical reason at once. As a result, the act of self-positing (which for Fichte is the founding act of all systematic philosophy) shows the untenability of any final or fixed distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason.

It is important to note that the act of self-positing, on Fichte's account, is the act of "being *for* self" where this "being for self" does not have the character of being any kind of "entity" or "content" that can be represented as an *object* for consciousness. For Fichte, the act of self-positing and the "content" of the act of self-positing fully coincide. In the act of self-positing, all that the self *is*, is simply its own act of being for self; and conversely, all that is *for* the self, is simply its act of being for self. In the act of self-positing, the act of *being a self* and the act of *being for self* fully coincide. And so in the act of self-positing, the self cannot have a conscious or object-like representation of the selfhood that it is; or (what amounts to the same thing) it cannot have a conscious or object-like representation of the selfhood that is its own act of self-positing. After all, such a conscious or object-like representation would require a distinction between the representer and represented; but if there were such a distinction, then the self doing the representing and the self being represented would not fully coincide. In the act of self-positing, however, the act of being a self and the act of being for self do fully coincide; but this is just to say that in the act of self-positing, the act of *being a self* (which is the same as the act of *being for self*) cannot be made into a representation or object for the self.

Fichte further explains: "*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.'*"[22] To say that the self "simply" or "absolutely" posits itself is to say that the self's act of self-positing, or its act of being the self that it is (whereby its act of being itself and its act of being for itself are identical) cannot be explained by reference to any represent-able or objectify-able cause or substance of which the self might become conscious. After all, if the self happens to have consciousness of any cause or substance whatsoever, then it has such (representational or object-like) consciousness only insofar as the self is also "for" itself in some non representational, non objective way. The self's act of *being itself* and (what amounts to the same thing) its act of *being for itself* is always presupposed by (and can never be explained by) its consciousness of some cause or substance that it might represent to itself. To say that the self "simply" or "absolutely" posits itself is to say that it is absolutely unable to explain itself or (what amounts to the same thing) it is unable to explain its being for itself by reference to any content, entity, or object that it might represent to itself. The presence to it of any represent-able content, entity, or object always already presupposes its own act of self-positing or its own act of being for self.

Fichte further observes that it would be a mistake to regard the self-positing self even as a kind of "thinking thing" or "thinking substance." The self-positing self is not a thing that also happens to think (a *res cogitans*); it is nothing but the activity of being for self that is non representationally present in (or presupposed in) all conscious thinking. In other words, the self "is an *act*, and absolutely [*absolut*] nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something [*ein Thätiges*]."[23] Any attempt to think of the self-positing self as an underlying substance or substrate that sometimes does and sometimes does not include being for self, would mischaracterize what is meant by the act of self-positing. To think of the self-positing self as an underlying substance or substrate would be to think of it as a kind of independent "thing-in-itself" that allegedly has being or existence on its own, apart from the self's own activity of being for self.[24] But as we have already seen, the act of *being* and the act of *being for self* are perfectly identical in the act of self-positing. To say that the self-positing self might be an instance of being, but not being for self, would be a contradiction in terms.

From the foregoing analysis, it follows that the way in which the self-positing self is *for* itself, is very different from the way in which any represent-able entity or object can be for a conscious self. Recall the Fichtean argument by means of which Schelling and Hölderlin had shown Hegel in 1795 that a God possessed of personality and consciousness must be finite, and thus must not be a God at all. That Fichtean argument entailed that a being can be conscious, only if it is conscious of something that counts as an object for it, and its consciousness of what counts as an object for it inescapably renders the being finite or limited. Now, by contrast, the Fichtean notion of self-positing involves a self that is for itself, but not in the way that any object or representation can be for it. The self-positing self is for itself, but in an entirely non objective, non representational way; indeed, if the self-positing self were not for itself in this way, then no object or representation could ever be for it either.[25]

If the self-positing self is not for itself in the way that a representation or an object can be for a self, then how is the self-positing self for itself at all? We can give an initial answer to this question by observing that the self-positing self must be for itself in much the same way that an idea of pure reason, in Kant's system, is said to be for the self. For an idea of pure reason is for the self, not as any represent-able object or entity *within*

the world of experience, but only as the implicit (non-represent-able) *criterion* or *maxim* for determining how one ought to think of objects within the world of experience, or how objects are to count as objects within the world of experience. Now based on this initial answer, one might be tempted to think that the self-positing self (like an idea of pure reason) is *for* the self, precisely to the extent that the self-positing self postulates for itself or gives to itself a kind of "template" or "framework" within which anything else that is given to the self might be regarded an object for the self. But to think in this way about the self-positing self's being for self would also be misleading. The being for self of the self-positing self cannot be regarded simply as the being for self (or the self-giving to the self) of a "template" or "framework" within which something else, as given to the self, might then count as an object for the self. After all, it would be wrong to think that the being for self of the self-positing self (or the self-positing self's act of giving to itself a kind of criterion or maxim for determining how objects are to count as objects) could somehow enable the self to become conscious of, or to regard as "objective," some sort of "raw material" that is known to exist somewhere, apart from the self's own activity. As Fichte had argued, the notion that there is some "raw material" that already exists somewhere, even though it does not exist for the self, is the same as the notion that there is an independent "thing in itself" that somehow exists apart from the self's knowing activity and yet nevertheless exercises a causal influence on the self's knowing activity. A truly critical philosophy (one that fully accepts the Kantian view that we cannot know of causal relations apart from the world of possible experience) must reject such a notion.

To make the same point differently: a truly critical philosophy will recognize that it is illicit to think that the being for self of the self-positing self (i.e., the self-positing self's act of giving to itself a kind of criterion or maxim) enables the self to bring objective "form" or "structure" to some independently existing material or content that is allegedly already present somewhere apart from the self-positing self's own activity. As Kant himself had argued (even though he did not do so with complete consistency), any given material that is thought to be present somewhere apart from the apperceptive (or self-positing) self's own activity, can only count as "nothing" for the self (*CPR*, B 131–132). Furthermore, the perspective of the critical (anti-Cartesian) philosopher must always remain the perspective of what is the case *for* the self, and not what might be the case for an external being (such as a God) who is imagined to hover above the self as a third-party guarantor of the self's epistemic claims. Accordingly, the critical philosopher must conclude that the self-positing self's being for self does not involve the *bringing-to-bear* of a criterion or maxim on some independent "raw material" that is thought already to exist somewhere, but rather the *bringing-into-being* of an entire world *for* the self. For apart from the self-positing self's own act of being for self, there simply is nothing that could count for the self as an existent thing at all. Apart from the self-positing self's own act of being for self, there is simply nothing for the self – no objects, no consciousness, and no world at all.

To illustrate this further, one might say that when the self-positing self ceases to be, the entire world that is *for* a self also ceases to be.[26] But even stating the matter in this way can be misleading, since the hypothetical ceasing-to-be of the world for a self (just like the self's own ceasing-to-be a self) can never be an actual event or happening *for* a self. It is for this reason that the world as it exists for a self will naturally appear to the

self as if it were a world that must have existed apart from the self's own activity. Stated more fully: the uncritical self will naturally regard the world as something that had already existed and will continue to exist, even apart from its own activity as a self, since the coming-to-be or ceasing-to-be of the world (just like the coming-to-be or ceasing-to-be of the self) can itself never be an actual event or happening *for* a self.[27] By contrast, we critical philosophers know that the world as it exists for the self *can* exist for the self only through the self's own activity which makes possible not only the being for self of the self, but also the being of the entire world for the self.

Along these lines, the young Hegel noted that the act of self-positing which actualizes not only *the being for self of the self* but also *the being for the self of an entire world*, is a kind of *creation out of nothing* – indeed, it is the only creation out of nothing that a critical philosopher can accept. In this act of "creation out of nothing," both the self-positing self *and* the entire world that exists for the self come to be "all at once," so to speak. In a fragment that has come to be known as the "Earliest System Programme of German Idealism," Hegel discusses such a "creation out of nothing," and he connects it with the Kantian claim that our talk about God can henceforth make sense only within the context of our own activity:

> Since the whole of metaphysics in the future falls under *morality* – of which Kant with his pair of practical postulates has given only an *example*, and has not *exhausted* – this Ethics will be nothing but a complete system of all Ideas or (what is the same thing) of all practical postulates. The first Idea is, of course, the presentation *of my self* as an absolutely free essence. Along with the free, self-conscious essence there simultaneously emerges an entire world – out of nothing – the only true and thinkable *creation out of nothing* [*die einzig wahre und denkbare Schöpfung aus Nichts*]. ...[28]

From this account of the activity of the self-positing self as a kind of creation out of nothing, we can draw the following important lesson: contrary to pre-critical "special metaphysics" and to Kant's moral proof, our ideas of self, world, and God do not pertain to three essentially separate things that can be understood as bearing some kind of external relation to one another. Rather, self, world, and God – understood most fundamentally – are coextensive with one another, since they are different aspects under which the same, originary activity of self-positing (or creation out of nothing) might be articulated discursively. In this activity of self-positing, there is no world that is not always already *for* a self; there is no self that is not always already mirroring the *entire* world[29]; and there is no external, transcendental God that is ultimately separable from the activity of self-positing (or "creation out of nothing") through which self and world come to be in the first place.

In his 1801 essay on *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, Hegel no longer discusses the activity of self-positing as a "creation out of nothing" through which self and world come to be. But he gives expression to this same thought when he identifies the activity of self-positing as a "pure thinking" or "pure self-consciousness" that is neither subject nor object alone, but both at once: a "Subject-Object."[30] And in his 1802 essay on *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel connects the notion of self-positing selfhood (whereby both self and world come to be in the first place) with Kant's thought about the highest good, which – if understood correctly, apart from

Kant's own anthropomorphizing tendencies – is nothing other than the thought of the identity of thought and being, self and world, freedom and nature:

> If we remove from the practical faith of the Kantian philosophy some of the popular and unphilosophical garments in which it is decked, we shall find nothing else expressed in it but the Idea that Reason does have absolute reality, ... that infinite thought is at the same time absolute reality – or in short we shall find the absolute identity of thought and being. ... This Idea of the absolute identity of thought and being is the very one which the ontological proof and all true philosophy recognize as the sole and primary Idea as well as the only true and philosophical one. Kant, to be sure, recasts this speculative Idea into humane form: morality and happiness harmonize. This harmony is made into a thought in its turn, and the realization of this thought is called the highest good in the world. ...[31]

5. The Way to Absolute Knowing in Hegel's *Phenomenology*

We have succeeded in distinguishing between two kinds of self. First, there is the conscious self that is conscious only insofar as it is confronted by, and thus limited or finitized by, that which counts as an object for it. It was on account of this notion of (finite) selfhood that Hegel became convinced in 1795 that God, as infinite, could not be possessed of personality or consciousness (in which case Kant's moral proof had to be rejected). But second, there is the self-positing self that is not finitized by any object of which it is conscious, but is rather an unbounded Subject-Object that is co-extensive with the world as a whole;[32] and the activity of the self-positing self is identical with a kind of "creation out of nothing" by means of which self and world come to be in the first place. Accordingly, we have (first) the always-finite self that is inescapably related to an other as to its object; and then we have (second) the self-positing self that is not related to or caused by anything outside itself, and so must be understood as unbounded and infinite.

For Hegel, every conscious self is necessarily both (a) a finite self that is conscious and represents to itself something that counts as an object for it, and (b) an infinite self that posits itself and in positing itself also posits an entire world that is coextensive with itself (thus it is neither subject nor object, but an unbounded Subject-Object). Furthermore, for Hegel, the (infinite) self's act of self-positing just *is* its act of instituting a world for itself; and in turn, its act of instituting a world for itself just *is* its act of giving to itself a (non objective, non representable) criterion or maxim for determining how objects are to count as objects within the world of experience, or for determining what may "show up" as an object of experience in the first place.

Significantly, Hegel holds that a conscious self can be finite only insofar as it is infinite, and infinite only insofar as it is finite. The reason for this is that a conscious, finite self can be conscious at all, only insofar as it regards something as an object for itself (for consciousness is always consciousness of an object); and it can regard something as an object for itself, only insofar as it (as infinite or self-positing) has instituted a world for itself and thereby given to itself a criterion or maxim for determining how something is to count as an object. But conversely, the conscious self can be an infinite self, only insofar as it is also a finite self. For only a finite self can be a conscious self; if infinite

selfhood were infinite only, then there could never emerge any kind of consciousness or awareness. That is, an infinite self that was *only* infinite would not really be a self, since it would forever remain an unconscious, blind substance.[33]

On Hegel's account, we are to regard every conscious self as both a finite self and an infinite self at once; or perhaps better, we are to regard every conscious self as a self that is finite only insofar as it is infinite and as infinite only insofar as it is finite. The two moments (of being-infinite and being-finite) that constitute conscious selfhood are inseparable from one another and co-determine one another. Furthermore, for Hegel, the conscious self's moment of being-infinite (its moment of self-positing whereby it institutes an entire world for itself and thereby gives itself a criterion or maxim for determining how objects are to count as objects within the world of experience) is necessarily a moment that the self actualizes without any direct consciousness of its own activity in doing so. This is because the self, in its moment of (infinite, unbounded) self-positing, is not a self that stands over against anything that can be directly present as an object for it; and since *nothing* can be directly present to it as an object *for* it, it follows that it cannot *be* an *object* for itself.

In its moment of (infinite) self-positing, the self can have no direct consciousness of its very own activity of self-positing.[34] And yet even in its (infinite, non conscious) act of self-positing, the self is *for* itself in some fashion (for the self-positing self is still a self, and not just an infinite, blind substance). Since it cannot be for itself in the way that an object is directly for it, the (infinite) self-positing self can be for itself only as an idea or maxim that at first appears to the self under the guise of something that is regarded as external to itself.[35] It is for this reason that the uncritical self naturally mischaracterizes the infinite (self-positing, world-creating, criterion-instituting) moment of its own selfhood and thinks of this moment under the guise of some externally given being or personage (e.g., a transcendent God).

We can illustrate this by reference to the self that is observed in the "Unhappy Consciousness" section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. First of all, this self marks a genuine advance beyond the preceding forms of selfhood, since – unlike the preceding forms – it recognizes the imperative to bring about the unity of the Changeable Consciousness (the moment of finite selfhood) and the Unchangeable Consciousness (the moment of infinite selfhood). Furthermore, it recognizes that this imperative is not just a matter of external force; it is not an imperative imposed upon it by an alien master that aims only to serve his (the master's) own purposes. Rather, the self of the Unhappy Consciousness recognizes this imperative as essential to its own being or to its own vocation as a self. The problem, however, is that the self of the Unhappy Consciousness believes (a) that it cannot act so as to satisfy this imperative (to bring about the unity of the Changeable and the Unchangeable, or the unity of itself and God) without being pridefully sinful (even the act of self-renunciation for the sake of holiness and unity with God, is the self's own act, in which case it is really not an act of self-renunciation; see *PS*; 134); and therefore (b) that its unity with the Unchangeable can come about only through a kind of submission to God that is ultimately not its own doing. To the self of the Unhappy Consciousness, it lies in the very nature of things (and not in its own stance, or in its own act of self-positing) that justification (or unity with God) can never be achieved through its own actions, but only through an act of divine grace (*PS*; 137–138).

Like the self of the Unhappy Consciousness, the self of Kantian "morality" recognizes the imperative to bring about the unity of its own will and God's will (i.e., to promote the highest good, which is nothing other than "the kingdom of God on earth"). It also recognizes that this imperative is essential to its own vocation as a self. But unlike the self of the Unhappy Consciousness, the self of Kantian "morality" realizes that its own self-assertive activity aimed at bringing about this unity is not a prideful sin against a theoretically knowable, transcendent God; rather, it recognizes that its asserting itself with the aim of promoting the highest good is precisely what a God would command it to do. In addition, the self of Kantian "morality" enjoys a deeper (although not complete) appreciation of the intrinsic unity of the two moments (infinite and finite) of its own selfhood. On the one hand, it realizes that it could not regard itself as subject to the imperative to promote the highest good, if it were not an infinite self; for it realizes that it is bound by this imperative, not because the imperative is commanded by an external divine being, but only because it is an imperative that it gives to itself or legislates for itself. On the other hand, the self of Kantian "morality" also realizes that it could not regard itself as subject to the imperative to promote the highest good, if it were not also a finite self; for it realizes that it is bound by this imperative, only because it is confronted (and thus finitized) by an objective state of affairs in the world that it regards as morally deficient (as falling short of complete justice or the highest good), and thus in need of morally guided transformation. If the self of Kantian "morality" did not regard itself as thus confronted (or perhaps better, *affronted*) by a morally deficient or unjust world, then it would be incapable of apprehending any moral duty to do anything at all. Phrased differently: if the state of affairs that the self confronts were already morally perfected (if the highest good were already achieved), then the self could not possibly feel drawn or compelled by any moral "ought" to do anything at all. In fact, one might say: if the highest good were already achieved and the self nevertheless acted in some way to change things, then the self would be acting *immorally* (for in acting, it would be upsetting an already-achieved highest good). But even this way of stating the matter would be misleading; after all, if the highest good were already achieved, then the self would be incapable of apprehending *any* moral "ought" whatsoever – in which case all moral consciousness would disappear, and the self would be incapable of acting morally *or* immorally (all of the self's acts would be altogether *non*moral, in which case they would not really be the acts of a "self").

These observations allow us to begin to see why the self of Kantian "morality" cannot really be serious about the way that it talks about its own self-legislated moral imperative (to promote the highest good); and this, in turn, allows us to begin to see why Kantian "morality" is insufficiently self-critical. Recall that the self of Kantian "morality" can be the moral self that it is, only if it is confronted by a state of affairs that it regards as morally deficient, or as falling short of the highest good. If the self of Kantian "morality" were to succeed in bringing about the highest good, then a consequence of such success would be the complete elimination of all moral consciousness and therewith the complete elimination of itself as a moral self. But no moral self can seriously aim at a goal whose achievement would entail the elimination of itself as the moral self that it is. Stated differently, if (hypothetically) the moral self were to succeed in bringing about the highest good, then it would never "live to see" (or to have any conscious enjoyment of) its own success. For the achievement of the highest good

would entail the elimination of all moral consciousness (it would entail the elimination of the consciousness of every moral "ought"), in which case the moral self would be incapable of consciously experiencing that its own moral "ought" (to promote the highest good) has actually been fulfilled (one must have consciousness of a moral "ought" in order to have consciousness that the "ought" has been fulfilled). But once again, this way of stating the matter would be misleading: for if there were no longer consciousness of any moral "ought," then there would no longer exist a "moral self" at all (see *PS*, 376–377).

Fichte was deeply sensitive to the difficulties in the moral world-view as articulated by Kant. For Fichte, Kant's fundamental mistake was to argue – as he did in his various contexts – that the nature upon which human beings exercise their moral agency is in the first instance simply given to them as unrelated to their own activity. According to Fichte, if nature were simply given in this external way, then it could never be regarded by humans beings as morally deficient (as falling short of complete justice or the highest good), and thus in need of morally guided transformation. Kant rightly observed that nature considered in itself lacks any moral significance whatsoever; but he was not entirely consistent in drawing out the fuller implications of this observation. Moral significance is not a function of the ways in which human beings relate to an externally given nature, but – Kant realized – of the ways in which they *relate to one another with respect to nature* (that is, the ways in which they relate to one another by manipulating nature and dividing it up amongst themselves). But if this is the case, then human beings can never be morally affronted by nature considered in itself, but only by nature insofar as it is a reflection of what human beings do to one another.

Aiming to develop a key point that Kant had touched upon but not sufficiently plumbed, Fichte insisted that consciousness that there is some moral deficiency in nature (that is, consciousness of any moral "ought" whatsoever, and thus moral consciousness in general) arises not on account of the way that human beings relate to nature as such, but only on account of the way that they relate to one another through nature.[36] Because of this, nature – considered on its own – can never provoke or awaken in human beings a sense of moral obligation or "oughtness." Thus the "gift" of moral consciousness (and thus of moral selfhood in general) is given to human beings by themselves alone, or through their own interactions with one another. Accordingly, we humans do not need to think of our moral selfhood as given to us by a transcendent God who also presents us with an external, indifferent nature upon which we are supposed to exercise our God-given moral agency. Furthermore (and contrary to Kant's moral proof), we do not need to rely on the thought of a transcendent God in order to make sense of how we might succeed in fulfilling our duties as moral beings. Just as we can make sense of how we give to ourselves our own duties as moral beings, so too we can (without relying on the thought of a transcendent God) make sense of how we are actually able to fulfill those duties.[37] As Fichte explains in his 1798 *System of Ethics*, we know that we are fulfilling our moral duties, not by undertaking action and then relying on the thought of a transcendent God to ensure the conformability of nature to our moral purposes (or to ensure that the consequences of our actions eventually contribute to justice or the highest good); rather, we know that we are fulfilling our moral duties simply by undertaking action with the genuine and immediately certain *conviction* that we are doing the right thing.[38] For Fichte, the God that ensures the

success of our moral activity is not a transcendent God, but is an immanent one; it is the God that is immediately present to us and indistinguishable from the voice of our own conscience. Thus for Fichte, action in fulfillment of one's "pure duty" is not something beyond or opposed to action in fulfillment of one's particular duties; rather, "pure duty" is simply the uncompromising, compelling character of the way in which each individual (acting out of genuine conviction) is bound to abide by his or her own conscience in fulfilling particular duties.[39]

With his notions of conscience and conviction, Fichte has come close to articulating the fundamental unity of the infinite and finite moments of selfhood (or the Unchangeable Consciousness and Changeable Consciousness, or God's will and our will). But for Hegel, Fichte came close without quite succeeding. The problem, as Fichte himself acknowledges in his *System of Ethics*, is that the conscientious, conviction-driven individual is never able to know for certain whether or not his or her conscientious action might be taken as an infringement, offense, or affront to other conscientious individuals with differing convictions.[40] Hegel, by contrast, explains that we *can* have certainty, but certainty of a different sort. For Hegel, we can be certain that the conscientious, conviction-driven action of one individual *will* be taken as an infringement, offense, or affront to others. For as noted above, the condition of the possibility of moral consciousness and moral selfhood in general is that there is some awareness that things are not as they ought to be (and this awareness emerges only through the way in which human beings relate to one another, and not to nature considered in itself). And furthermore, according to Hegel: not only is it the case that the conscientious, conviction-driven individual's action will be an affront to others; it is also the case that the individual's very being (and continued being) as a moral agent depends on the fact that he or she has always already been offended and affronted by others. In other words, the individual owes his or her own moral consciousness, and indeed his or her own very being as a moral agent, to other individuals whose actions have served as a moral affront and thus as an awakening to moral consciousness. For Hegel, contrary to Fichte, the condition of the possibility of moral consciousness is not a pre-established harmony among conscientious, conviction-driven individuals,[41] but rather a pre-established (i.e., necessary) *disharmony* among them.

Because there is an inescapable disharmony, Hegel concludes that a conscientious, conviction-driven individual – in order to be fully self-critical – will recognize the need for reciprocal forgiveness between itself and other conscientious individuals with differing convictions. After all, a fully self-critical individual will recognize that he or she owes his or her own moral consciousness to the affronting, provoking actions of other individuals who were only acting conscientiously on the basis of their own genuinely held (but differing) convictions. Furthermore, a fully self-critical individual will also recognize that these other selves *had* to act as they did, since they were acting as they were inescapably bound to act, from within a seemingly self-validating circle of their own making. Finally, a fully self-critical individual will recognize that his or her own actions are not essentially different from the actions of these others who happen to have differing convictions. Just as the actions of these others *had* to appear as an affront to those with differing convictions, so too the fully self-critical individual will recognize that his or her own actions *must have* appeared as an affront to others. Thus the fully self-critical individual will seek forgiveness from others with differing convictions, and

will at the same time recognize the need to offer forgiveness in turn. Engaged in this activity of reciprocal forgiveness, the individual will know that his or her own doing is in essence no different from the doing of those affronting-and-forgiving others, who stand on the other side of such reciprocal activity; that is, the individual will be engaged in the activity of universal or absolute knowing, or knowing "itself in its absolute opposite" (*PS*, 409).

According to Hegel, individuals within such a community of reciprocally forgiving and forgiven selves will recognize that there is no duty that is not fundamentally a duty given to individuals through the community itself, and that there is no affront or infraction by individuals that is not fundamentally forgivable through the community itself. And so this kind of community will be one whose members realize that there is no need to appeal to an external, transcendent personage in order to explain how they – as individuals – acquire moral duties and can fulfill their moral duties. Members of this community will realize that the appearing of God (the One alone who binds and looses sins) is possible only in and through a community of conscientious, conviction-driven, and reciprocally forgiving individual selves. Indeed, such a community will recognize itself as nothing other than the "kingdom of God on earth," or as "God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowing" (*PS*, 409).[42]

Notes

1 See H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development*, vol. 1: *Toward the Sunlight (1770–1801)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), chapters 1and 2.

2 Thus in his Third Meditation, Descartes tells us that we know of our own finitude only because we know that we are limited and imperfect in comparison with a being that is entirely unlimited and perfect: "Thus the perception of the infinite is somehow prior in me to the perception of the finite, that is, my perception of God is prior to my perception of myself. For how would I understand that I doubt and that I desire, that is, that I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I might recognize my defects?" See René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis, Ind./Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), 118.

3 Regarding the idea of God, Kant explains: "For it is always only an idea, which is by no means related directly to a being different from the world but rather referred to a regulative principle of the world's systematic unity, but only by means of a schema of that unity. ... This idea is therefore grounded entirely *respective to the use* our reason makes of it *in the world* ..." (emphasis in the original). See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 619–620. All subsequent references to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* will be based on this translation and cited parenthetically in the text in the following format: *CPR*, A697–698/B725–726 (referring to the pagination in the 1781 A edition and the 1787 B edition of the *Critique*).

4 Along these lines, Kant famously notes that the nonempirical conditions of the possibility of experience are at the same time the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience (*CPR*, A111). For Kant, then, if we knew nothing about objects as given to us within experience, we would also know nothing about our capacity to know (see also *CPR*, A108).

5 Or stated differently: the idea of God is "nothing but a regulative principle of reason for attaining to the highest systematic unity by means of the idea of the purposive causality of

the supreme cause of the world, *as if* this being, as the highest intelligence, were the cause of everything according to the wisest aim." (*CPR*, A688/B716).

6 Here one is reminded of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous statement in Book I, Chapter 1, of the *Social Contract:* "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 49. As Rousseau goes on to argue, it is tempting to think that the human being's condition of servitude must be explained by reference to the "nature of things" outside us; but further analysis will reveal that this servitude arises not through any external cause, but only through the characteristic activities of our own reason.

7 But this label can be misleading. Kant's "moral proof" does not aim to demonstrate that we can know of God's actual, independent existence. It aims to demonstrate only that we are rationally justified (indeed, rationally compelled) to believe that God exists, on moral and not theoretical grounds.

8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 227. All subsequent references to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* will be based on this translation and cited parenthetically in the text in the following format: *CPrR*, 5:108 (referring to the Akademie-edition volume and page number).

9 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 87–89.

10 See, for example, Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project," in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 338. The Akademie-edition reference is 8:338 (referring to the volume and page number).

11 The argument presented in this section recounts part of the argument that I made in "Kant's Moral Proof: Defense and Implications," in *Philosophical Theology: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, ed. Michael Baur (New York: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 2001), 141–161.

12 See, e.g., Hegel's letter to Schelling from late January of 1795. *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), I: 15–18. This letter is translated in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 30–32.

13 See G.C. Storr, *Bemerkungen über Kants philosophische Religionslehre* (Tübingen: Cotta, 1794).

14 *Briefe*, I: 14; Butler and Seiler, 29.

15 See, for example, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1976), 580–581.

16 *Briefe*, I: 16–17; Butler and Seiler, 31.

17 *Briefe*, I: 18; Butler and Seiler 32.

18 *Briefe*, I: 21–22; Butler and Seiler, 32–33.

19 *Briefe*, I: 19–20; Butler and Seiler, 33.

20 *Briefe*, I: 29; Butler and Seiler, 41.

21 *Briefe*, I: 30; Butler and Seiler, 41.

22 J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 99.

23 J.G. Fichte, "First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge," *Science of Knowledge*, 21.

24 In his "Aenesidemus Review" of 1794, Fichte makes the same point when he says that we should not even think of the self-positing self as a kind of "faculty of representation" that exists on its own and somehow underlies our actual acts of representing. For to think of it in this way, is to think of it as a "thing in itself" which exists "independently of its being

represented." See J. G. Fichte, "Review of *Aenesidemus*," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 66–67.

25 Kant makes a similar point when he says that the "I think" of pure apperception "must be able to accompany all my representations," even though the "I think" is not itself any kind of representation; if the self-positing self (the "I think" of pure apperception) were not for itself in this non objective, non representational way, then every possible representation "would be nothing for me" (*CPR*, B131–132).

26 Kant makes this point when he notes: "If I were to take away the thinking subject, the whole corporeal world would have to disappear. ..." (see *CPR*, A383).

27 Kant touches upon this point when he observes that a self's experience of any happening always presupposes that something else preceded the happening; but the self can never have experience of an empty time that allegedly preceded some happening (see *CPR*, A188/B231-A195/B240). Accordingly, the self can experience only the coming-to-be and the ceasing-to-be of things *within* the world, but never the coming-to-be or the ceasing-to-be of the world itself. In order to be able to experience the coming-to-be or the ceasing-to-be of the world itself, the self would have to be able to experience the world either as preceded by or as followed by an empty time – but such is impossible.

28 The text of this fragment is written out in Hegel's hand, and most likely dates back to 1796, when Hegel was living in Berne. Some scholars have argued that "The Earliest System Programme" was originally authored by Schelling (or by Schelling and Hölderlin) and that the surviving fragment is merely the result of what Hegel copied down from a now-lost original text. However, both Otto Pöggeler and H.S. Harris have argued convincingly that this fragment was not only written out in Hegel's own hand, but also originally authored by Hegel himself. See H.S. Harris, *Toward the Sunlight (1770–1801)*, 249–257; and Otto Pöggeler, "Hegel, der Verfasser des ältesten Systemprogramms des deutschen Idealismus," in *Hegel-Studien, Beiheft* 4 (1969): 17–32.

29 The relevant model for this claim is the Leibnizian monad, which perceives or reflects the entire world "all at once," so to speak, and is thus co-extensive with the entire world. Schelling makes this clear in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* from 1800: "For nobody, surely, who has once seen how the objective world, with all its determinations, develops out of pure self-consciousness without any affection from outside, will still find need for another world independent of this; which is approximately the view taken in misinterpretations of the Leibnizian theory of pre-established harmony." See F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 35.

30 See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 119.

31 G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 94.

32 And just as Kant had argued, the "world as a whole" is not a bounded extensive magnitude, and so it is never given as an object for conscious selfhood (only objects *within* the world are thus given). Nevertheless, the idea of the "world as a whole" is a non representable or non objective idea that the self necessarily gives to itself (this self-giving just *is* the act of self-positing), in order to determine how objects are to be regarded as objects of possible experience for it (see *CPR*, A505/B533; A508/B536-A510/B538; and A651/B679).

33 This observation helps to explain why, on Hegel's account, Spinoza's system was ultimately inadequate. Schelling, in his 1797 *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, provides a helpful explanation of the matter: "[In Spinoza's system], I myself was only one of the Infinite's thoughts, or rather just a constant succession of presentations. But Spinoza was unable to make intelligible how I myself in turn become aware of this succession. ... For, generally speaking, as

it came from his hand, his system is the most unintelligible that ever existed. ... How affections are and can exist in an Absolute external to me, I do not understand. ..." See F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

34 Thus this activity of self-positing by means of which the self institutes a world for itself and thus makes it possible for objects to count as objects in the first place, must occur "behind the self's own back," so to speak. See *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 56. All subsequent references to Hegel's *Phenomenology* will be based on this translation and cited parenthetically in the text, in accordance with the following format: *PS*, 56.

35 Or, as Kant had argued, the ideas of self, world, and God (which for Hegel are not three separate things but three aspects under which one might apprehend the self's own originary act of self-positing or "creation out of nothing") are given by the self to itself, even though the uncritical self continues to regard these as three separate, independently existing entities that are given to the self from outside itself and apart from the self's own activity.

36 Here one is reminded of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's observation (in Book II of *Émile*) that the dependence of human beings on things (in nature) involves no morality, and that morality pertains only to the dependence of human beings on one another. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J.M. Dent; North Clarendon, Vt.: Tuttle Publishing, 1993), 58.

37 From Fichte's point of view, Kant continued to think of nature as given apart from the activities of human moral agents, since he continued to think of the source of such nature (God) as an external and transcendent (even if not theoretically knowable) entity; and conversely, Kant continued to think of God as an external and transcendent entity, because he continued to think of nature as given apart from the activities of human moral agents. Thus for Fichte, Kant was caught in a seemingly self-validating "vicious circle" precisely of the kind that Kant himself had diagnosed and criticized in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CPR*, A693/B721).

38 See J.G. Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 148 and 159–161. See also *PS*, 386–388.

39 In a similar vein, Fichte holds that the "thing in itself" is not something that is given apart from or beyond experience; rather, the "thing in itself" is simply the residual lack of determinacy or lack of intelligible (conceptual) unity that is given as a feature *within* all possible experience (and thus it is given as a task that reason gives to itself).

40 See Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 159 and 221–223.

41 See Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 230: "How then can one become aware of that upon which everyone agrees? This is not something one can learn simply by asking around; hence it must be possible to presuppose something that can be viewed as the creed of the community. ..."

42 I would like to thank Stephen Houlgate for his very helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter. Of course, I am solely responsible for any remaining shortcomings or errors to be found in the account that I present here.