

Skepticism and Negativity in Hegel's Philosophy

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Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that the topic of skepticism is central to Hegel's philosophical work. However, I contend that in returning to the subject of skepticism throughout his career, Hegel does not treat skepticism simply as an epistemological challenge to be overcome on the way to truth, as some commentators suggest, but as part of the very truth which it is philosophy's task to explain. I make this case by considering three texts through which Hegel develops the connection between skepticism and the 'negative' or 'dialectical' dimension of reality: "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy" (1802), the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and the *Encyclopedia Logic* (1817). In this, I also demonstrate how the topic of skepticism informs the development of Hegel's speculative metaphysics throughout his career and, thus, present a problematic that sheds light on the important continuity between these different phases of Hegel's project.

"It cannot be denied," Fichte once observed, "that philosophical reason owes every noticeable advance it has ever made to the observations of skepticism upon the precariousness of the position where it has for the moment come to rest" (Fichte, 1985, p. 137). Fichte's words naturally call to mind Kant's famous confession in the *Prolegomena* that it was Hume's skeptical view of causation that roused him from his 'dogmatic slumber' and inspired his own critique of metaphysics. But in truth philosophers have often turned to skepticism in order to challenge the sufficiency of existing discourses and the normative authority of received truths. After all, before Kant employed his own "skeptical procedure" to uncover the extravagant claims of supersensible metaphysics (Kant, 1998, A769/B797), Descartes had already followed a program of methodical doubt, aiming to cast aside the "loose earth and sand" (Descartes, 1985, p. 125) of

mere opinion and uncover epistemic bedrock. Indeed, thanks to the work of scholars like Luciano Floridi (2002) and Richard Popkin (2003), we now know that the rediscovery of ancient skeptical texts in the fifteenth century – most notably, Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* – played a decisive role in the development of Renaissance and Early Modern thinking.

Yet the modern relationship to skepticism has often been ambivalent. While many philosophers in the modern period were eager to employ skeptical arguments as a way of exposing unjustified beliefs, most were also cautious to limit the scope of these arguments and to defend philosophy itself against skepticism’s most devastating challenges. No sooner, for example, does Descartes invoke the specter of a deceiving demon than he dismisses such skeptical considerations as ‘hyperbolic’ and merely ‘metaphysical.’ And Kant, for his part, was quite clear that skepticism may be a “resting-place for human reason, which can reflect upon its dogmatic peregrination [...], but it is not a dwelling-place for permanent residence” (Kant, 1998, A761/B789). For such thinkers then, skepticism can serve an important methodological function, but cannot be relied upon to generate positive claims to truth. As such, it should be considered external to if not an obstacle for the project of philosophy proper.

It may seem to some as though skepticism plays no significant role in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. After all, Hegel’s explicit engagement with skepticism is quite limited in his major works. However, a number of scholars have recently challenged this conception, arguing that meeting the epistemological problems posed by skepticism count among Hegel’s foremost concerns. Michael Forster (1989), for instance, finds in Hegel’s work “an elaborate network of defenses erected to protect his philosophical system” (p. 102) against such problems.¹ In this way, Hegel has come to be seen as sharing Kant’s concern to maintain skepticism as a ‘resting-place’ and not a ‘permanent residence,’ that is, as viewing skepticism as ultimately external to

the project of philosophy. In this paper, I will argue that the topic of skepticism is indeed central to Hegel's philosophical work. However, I contend that in returning to the subject of skepticism throughout his career, Hegel does not treat skepticism simply as an epistemological challenge to be overcome on the way to truth, but as part of the very truth which it is philosophy's task to explain. In other words, I argue that skepticism plays a crucial role in Hegel's speculative metaphysics. More specifically, from his 1802 article for the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* to the 1831 *Lectures on Logic*, Hegel consistently identifies skepticism with the 'negative' or 'dialectical' dimension of reality. Accordingly, I argue that Hegel's various bouts with skepticism offer us a glimpse not only into the epistemological concerns animating his system, but also into his conception of negativity, the core of his speculative metaphysics. Hence, if Hegel identifies skepticism with negativity, then this means that it need not and, indeed, *cannot*, be refuted, as it constitutes "the principle of all movement, all life, and all actual activity" (*EL* 129/168 [§81 Zus 1]). For this reason, there is perhaps no philosophy which better embodies the spirit of Fichte's remark than that of Hegel.

In what follows, I will make this case by considering three texts through which Hegel's thinking on skepticism and negativity develops. I begin with Hegel's "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy," his 1802 article for the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* where he first engages the topic of skepticism. It is here, in engaging with G.E. Schulze's Neo-Humean challenge to Kant's critical project, that Hegel first develops the link between skepticism and negativity, finding that "skepticism is in its inmost heart at one with every true philosophy" (*RSP*, p. 323). Next, I turn to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, published six years later, where Hegel returns to the theme of skepticism. Here I argue that, while skepticism is one among many forms of consciousness that Hegel takes up on the way to absolute knowing, it has a

greater significance for Hegel's argument throughout this major work. In Hegel's text, skepticism comes to represent the moment of negativity in the dialectical process by which natural consciousness advances to absolute knowing. Indeed, Hegel describes the whole development of consciousness that takes place in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as one of "self-completing skepticism" (*PS*, p. 52). Finally, I turn to Hegel's *Logic*, his most mature work, where skepticism is regarded not merely as part of the process by which one arrives at truth, but as an essential aspect of truth itself. Here, in examining the logical structure of absolute reality, Hegel identifies skepticism with its 'dialectical' or 'negatively rational' moment. It is in this work that Hegel offers his final and most sophisticated account of the relationship between skepticism and negativity.

Rather than focus my analysis on one of Hegel's texts, I have chosen here to engage with several. While this approach must necessarily limit the depth of my discussion of any one text, I have chosen it for two reasons. First, I am concerned to show that Hegel remains committed throughout his career to the notion that philosophy and skepticism are not ultimately antagonistic. Secondly, I want to show that Hegel's persistent engagement with skepticism allows him the opportunity to refine his conception of negativity over the course of his career. If Hegel regards skepticism not as a challenge to philosophy, but as part of the reality to be explained by the latter, I contend that that part of reality which skepticism represents takes on greater conceptual clarity as one moves through Hegel's philosophical corpus.

I. "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy" (1802)

Hegel's first sustained engagement with skepticism appears in his 1802 article for the *Critical Journal* on the "Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy." In this piece, Hegel

considers G.E. Schulze's latest efforts² to raise skeptical doubts about Kant's critique of metaphysics and to apply them to theoretical philosophy as such.³ Schulze charges Kant and his rationalist predecessors with illicitly inferring features of objective reality from their merely subjective necessity. In response, Hegel charges Schulze with redeploying against Kant the same arguments that first inspired Kant's critical revision of metaphysics and thus with a grievous misunderstanding of Kant's critical project. What is remarkable about Hegel's essay, however, is its unexpected suggestion that Schulze's misinterpretation of the critical philosophy betrays an even more fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of skepticism:

Without the determination of the true relationship of skepticism to philosophy, and without the insight that skepticism itself is in its inmost heart at one with every true philosophy, and hence that there is a philosophy which is neither skepticism nor dogmatism, and is thus both at once, without this, all the histories, and reports, and new editions of skepticism lead to a dead end (*RSP*, pp. 322-3).

The problem with Schulze's critique of theoretical philosophy, as Hegel suggests here, runs much deeper than its mischaracterization of the Kantian project. The problem is that it is predicated upon a problematic conception of the relationship of skepticism and philosophy. Thus, rather than defend the critical philosophy from the skeptical charges leveled against it, Hegel takes Schulze to task in the "Skepticism" essay for falling short of the standard set by ancient works like Plato's *Parmenides* and Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Thus his critique of Schulze is an occasion for Hegel to articulate what he understands as the speculative character of ancient skepticism, that is, its pivotal role in the generation of genuine philosophical insight and not just its capacity for destruction. Indeed, this is why, in his "Skepticism" essay, Hegel gives clear priority to ancient over modern skepticism, describing Plato's *Parmenides*, for example, as "a perfect and self-sustaining document and system of genuine skepticism" (*RSP*, p. 323).

The deep conceptual connection that Hegel discovers between skepticism and negativity in the 1802 essay comes clearly into view when we consider his treatment in the essay of two ancient works, Plato's *Parmenides* and Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Let us first consider his treatment of Plato's text. While many read Plato's *Parmenides* as an aporetic text demonstrating the inadequacy of the forms to express the nature of reality, Hegel sees something more definite emerge in the dialogue. On Hegel's reading, the enduring value of Plato's text lies in the fact that it makes evident the metaphysical significance of negativity. This happens when, in response to the contradictions that they encounter when attempting to explain reality on the supposition of the forms, Parmenides suggests to the young Socrates that the forms might be contradictory in themselves. In Parmenides' words, a certain "wandering between opposites" can be observed even among "those things that one might above all grasp by means of reason and might think to be forms" (Plato, *Parmenides*, line 135e3-4). To demonstrate this point, Parmenides explains, one must consider in turn the consequences that follow from the assumption that one *is* and from the alternative assumption that not-one (or many) *is*, for each of the forms, taken both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other. This 'gymnastic' training which spans the latter half of the dialogue proceeds from the initial hypothesis, "if one is," and leads to the apparently paradoxical conclusion that whether one or not-one is, "it and the others [e.g., like, unlike, part, whole, motion, rest, etc.] both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other" (Plato, *Parmenides*, line 166c3-6). On Hegel's view, the recommended gymnastic training reveals the limits of such 'one-sided' concepts for articulating the nature of absolute reality. It might therefore be seen as a useful skeptical tool for demonstrating the insufficiency of the theory of the forms. However, for Hegel, Plato's skeptical text accomplishes more than just this.

In revealing the limitations of these concepts, the dialectical demonstration in the *Parmenides* offers a positive determination of reality itself. Or, as Hegel puts it in the “Skepticism” essay, it “is itself the negative side of the cognition of the absolute” (*RSP*, p. 323).

Through his reading of the *Parmenides* in the “Skepticism” essay, Hegel comes to recognize a general principle that will inform his thinking of negativity going forward. Indeed, for Hegel, what emerges “in its pure *explicit* shape” in the *Parmenides* is a principle that is “*implicit* in every genuine philosophical system” (*RSP*, p. 324). Hegel formulates this principle as follows:

... (I)f in any one proposition that expresses a cognition of reason, its reflected aspect – the concepts that are contained in it – is isolated, and the way that they are bound together is considered, it must become evident that these concepts are together sublated, or in other words they are united in such a way, that they contradict themselves; otherwise it would not be a proposition of reason but only of understanding (*RSP*, p. 324).

In the *Parmenides*’ dialectical exercise, then, Hegel finds a set of arguments that do not simply clarify the limitations of the concepts of the understanding but that reveal the play of opposition itself as an important dimension of reality – a dimension that can be grasped no better by one of these one-sided concepts than by its opposite. This play of opposition, then, is not the limit of philosophical inquiry but constitutes, according to Hegel, the “negative side” of reason.

Having clarified the connection that Hegel develops between skepticism and negativity in his reading of the *Parmenides*, let us now consider the way that this connection is developed in his remarks on Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* – the other important document of ancient thought that he focuses on in the “Skepticism” essay. Hegel’s discussion of the Five Modes of Agrippa that are introduced in Sextus’ text is particularly illuminating in this respect. Hegel considers this series of five skeptical arguments to be remarkably effective in contesting the dogmatic claims of ordinary common sense. Indeed, he affirms that “there are no better

weapons against dogmatism on finite bases” (*RSP*, p. 335) than these five skeptical tropes. However, he finds that when they are directed against genuine philosophical cognition, these skeptical tropes become themselves ‘dogmatic.’⁴ Hegel’s engagement here with the Five Modes can be understood along these lines as an attempt to define their legitimate scope of application. What emerges from this ostensive analysis of the limits of these ancient skeptical arguments, however, is a positive articulation of the nature of absolute reality. Reason comes into view here not simply as what remains untouched by the modes of skepticism; Hegel is able to give reason a determinate shape in this early essay precisely through exhibiting its invulnerability to these skeptical arguments. Let us briefly summarize the Five Modes before turning to consider the metaphysical significance they hold for Hegel in the 1802 essay.

Sextus Empiricus introduces the Five Modes of Agrippa in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* as part of a larger discussion of the general modes of suspension of judgment. These modes or tropes are arguments that can be used in order to achieve the mental tranquility [*ataraxia*] that, for those of the Pyrrhonian persuasion, follows the eradication of belief “as a shadow follows the body” (Sextus, 1994, p. 11). The skeptical modes are thought to achieve this eradication of belief or suspension of judgment [*epokhē*] by pointing up the equipollence [*isosthenia*], that is, the equal persuasive power, of opposing claims. Of the seventeen skeptical arguments that Sextus discusses in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, the Five Modes of Agrippa are arguably the most devastating in that they play on the conceptual oppositions that support our deepest intuitions regarding the nature of justification. Consider the second, third, and fourth. According to the mode deriving from relativity, Sextus explains, “the existing object appears to be such-and-such relative to the subject judging and to the things observed together with it, but we suspend judgment on what it is like in its nature” (1994, p. 41). If it can be shown, in other words, that

there are certain factors mediating one's access to the matter in question, the simple identification of such factors is sufficient to induce the suspension of judgment. The third mode can be used in this way to challenge any given claim by drawing attention to the myriad conditions under which it is enunciated – conditions that are thought to undermine its claim to truth. The fourth mode can be used to similar effect, as Sextus indicates, whenever one “begin[s] from something which they do not establish but claim to assume simply and without proof in virtue of a concession” (1994, p. 41). Closely related to the informal fallacy of *petitio principii* or, ‘begging the question,’ the hypothetical mode works to induce the suspension of judgment by insisting upon the hypothetical and hence tentative status of any claim offered in absence of supporting evidence. On its own, the fourth mode is relatively weak, applying only to cases involving assumptions, presuppositions, or other unsubstantiated claims; in conjunction with the second mode, however, it forms a powerful dilemma of seemingly limitless application. The second mode argues that, whenever one gives evidence for a claim, that evidence itself requires further evidence, and so on *ad infinitum*. Taken together, the fourth and second mode then present one with the following dilemma: in offering a claim, one may attempt to ground it in some sort of evidence, in which case the Pyrrhonist can insist, in accordance with the second mode, that one ground this further piece of evidence, and so on, in this way opening themselves up to an infinite regress of unending justification. Alternatively, one may refuse to do so and be compelled, in accordance with the fourth mode, to consider their claim as no more credible than any other offered in want of evidence. In these ways, the second, third, and fourth modes challenge some of our most familiar intuitions about the nature of justification.

For Hegel, however, the Five Modes of Agrippa take on an additional layer of significance. They allow something about the nature of reality to come to light. Take, for

instance, Hegel's treatment of the third mode. Whereas, for Sextus, the third mode served to destabilize the object of knowledge by drawing attention to the various conditions under which it appears, Hegel argues that reason is impervious to this skeptical difficulty. "It cannot be proved about the rational that it only exists within the relationship, that it stands in a necessary relation to another; for it is itself nothing but the relationship" (*RSP*, p. 336). Since the mode of relativity effectively pits the object under investigation against the relations by which it is constituted, Hegel finds that this mode meets its limit when it is directed against reason. Reason, Hegel argues, cannot be reduced to either objects of knowledge or the conditions in which they appear, as it is expressed more fully in the relationship between these two. Likewise, Hegel argues that reason cannot be reduced to either side of the opposition presented by the fourth mode. This is because reason "is not an unproved assumption, in accordance with the *fourth* trope, so that its counterpart could with equal right be presupposed unproven in opposition to it; for the rational has no opposed counterpart; it includes both of the finite opposites, which are mutual counterparts [i.e., ground and consequent], within itself" (*RSP*, pp. 336-7). In pointing toward the limits of the fourth mode, Hegel once again comes to a positive discovery concerning the nature of reason. The very oppositions that the Pyrrhonist treats as obstacles to a secure apprehension of reality (e.g., condition and conditioned, ground and consequent, and so on), are, for Hegel, direct expressions of its intelligibility. What emerges from Hegel's treatment of Sextus' Five Modes, then, is the insight that reality is not something that lies in wait beyond these conceptual oppositions but is rather made comprehensible through them. This is what Hegel suggests when he says of the Five Modes that "their rational aspect is already in reason" (*RSP*, p. 336).

This insight into the positive role of opposition in the structure of reality also forms the basis of Hegel's view that the impulse to refute skepticism is philosophically misguided, as skepticism is in an important sense *self*-refuting. Hegel concludes his discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism in his 1802 article by suggesting that this form of skepticism "was strictly bound to become inconsistent; for the extreme cannot maintain itself without the opposite," explaining, "pure negativity or subjectivity, is either nothing at all, because it nullifies itself at the extreme, or else it must at the same time be supremely objective" (*RSP*, p. 338). These two alternatives, between a form of skepticism that is self-defeating and one that is self-completing, will become united in the itinerary of that work of Hegel's that we turn to next, namely, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

First, though, let us consider how the above interpretation of the basis of Hegel's preference for ancient skepticism challenges the account given by Michael Forster in his book, *Hegel and Skepticism*. On Forster's interpretation, Hegel gives ancient skepticism priority over its modern counterpart based on its adherence to what Forster (1989) describes as its 'method of equipollence': an ancient "method of setting into opposition equally strong propositions or arguments on both sides of any issue which arises [...], thereby producing an equal balance of justification on both sides of the issue" (p. 10). Strict adherence to this method, Forster suggests, is an effective way of avoiding 'dogmatic'⁵ claims. This is why, according to Forster, this method proves to be, for Hegel, superior to the tools of the modern skeptics. Modern skeptics, like Schulze, rely for their attacks on beliefs that they leave dogmatically insulated from criticism. Schulze, for example, follows Hume in failing to subject to skeptical scrutiny his belief in an ontological distinction between mental representations and the external objects to

which they problematically refer. By contrast, ancient skeptics, in abiding by the method of equipollence, arguably manage to avoid holding any beliefs whatsoever.

Forster's explanation of Hegel's preference for ancient skepticism is revealing, as it clarifies how he understands the significance of skepticism in Hegel's thought. Forster explains Hegel's persistent engagement with skepticism as "an almost obsessive pursuit to achieve epistemological security for his system" (1989, p. 3). Conceiving of skepticism as a "general procedure for attacking claims or beliefs regardless of their content" (1989, p. 10), Forster argues that Hegel uses skepticism to identify dogmatic claims, claims that are offered without adequate justification, and to demonstrate the epistemological security of his own system by demonstrating how it is impervious to such attacks. For Forster, then, Hegel's interest in skepticism is chiefly methodological. It is a general methodological tool for identifying dogmatic beliefs that must be rejected and attesting to the strength of those beliefs that pass its test.

Forster's analysis of the theme of skepticism in Hegel's work does well to combat the view that Hegel was careless or indifferent in his treatment of epistemological problems. Still, it is difficult not to notice that Forster's own presentation of skepticism as merely methodological reflects the very dualism – between skepticism and philosophy – that Hegel's early essay attempts to subvert. Forster, after all, presents skepticism as a tool that Hegel employed methodologically to test and to justify beliefs – including his own beliefs about the nature of reality. In this, however, Forster unduly separates Hegel's metaphysics from his epistemology – his theory of reality from his theory of its intelligibility. While Forster acknowledges that Hegel is indeed advancing a theory of reality, in arguing that Hegel used skepticism (especially ancient skepticism) as a tool for justifying his own philosophical standpoint, he implausibly suggests that

Hegel came to develop this philosophical standpoint independently of his engagement with skepticism. That is, Forster gives the misleading impression that Hegel already had his theory of reality fully worked out before he gave serious consideration to the vexing problems of justification classically formulated by the skeptics.

Hegel is quite clear in the “Skepticism” essay that a proper analysis of the philosophical significance of skepticism requires more than a consideration of its epistemic value. Indeed, while it is true that Sextus Empiricus characterizes the Pyrrhonian *agōgē* as a method for avoiding inadequately justified beliefs, for Hegel, the philosophical priority of ancient skepticism only becomes apparent when viewed in light of the metaphysical unity of thinking and being which he here calls ‘reason’ or ‘absolute.’ With the attainment of this philosophical standpoint, Hegel explains, “the concepts of skepticism which allow it to be viewed *only* in the particular form in which it comes on the scene as skepticism pure and simple, disappear” (*RSP*, p. 322), and its role in the structure of absolute reality is thrown into relief. No longer just a tool for evaluating claims about reality, skepticism comes to signify for Hegel a central aspect of reality itself. As he begins to develop already here in the 1802 essay, it is that dimension of reality that he calls ‘negativity.’

II. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)

Hegel’s early confrontation with skepticism in the *Critical Journal*, as we have just seen, presented him with the opportunity to shed light on that otherwise dark and recalcitrant dimension of reality which he characterized there as reason’s ‘negative side.’ It presents us, on the other hand, with a way of approaching the culminating achievement of Hegel’s philosophical activity in Jena – his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this latter work, Hegel charts out the

“path of natural consciousness which presses forward towards true knowledge” (*PS*, p. 52), elaborating in often dizzying fashion the terrain traversed along this course. Along Hegel’s ‘voyage of discovery,’ however, the modes of skepticism light the way. Indeed, as I will argue in this section, the speculative insight into the relationship between skepticism and negativity that Hegel arrives at in his 1802 article for the *Critical Journal* informs the ambitious skeptical examination he undertakes a few years later of the “entire range of consciousness” (*PS*, p. 53).

At first glance, it may seem that skepticism plays a somewhat limited role in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and that Hegel has largely moved on from his interest in skepticism by 1807. After all, it is but one among many of the transitory shapes of “natural consciousness” that one is met with on the way to ‘absolute knowing.’ Over the last several decades, however, more scholars have come to recognize skepticism as pivotal to the project that Hegel undertakes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Indeed, recently, several scholars have argued that the *Phenomenology* accomplishes its task by employing a modified version of skepticism.⁶ While commentators have offered a variety of proposals regarding how exactly this occurs, the majority mirror the approach by Forster presented above. They suggest, in other words, that Hegel, like Descartes, employs skepticism as a methodological tool for justifying his own philosophical standpoint – a standpoint which he then regards as impervious to further skeptical scrutiny. While there is certainly much to be gained by such an approach, I will argue that this reading nevertheless gives the misleading impression that Hegel considered skepticism to be external to the core theoretical concerns that animate the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel examines the oppositions that characterize our pre-philosophical encounter with the world. For Hegel, this encounter is organized around familiar oppositions such as that between self and other, subject and predicate, or concept and object.

While these oppositions are surely indispensable for making meaningful claims to knowledge, for Hegel, as for Sextus, they also introduce difficulties that threaten to bring knowledge to a standstill. A Pyrrhonian skeptic, as we have already seen, will attempt to exploit these oppositions in order to induce the suspension of judgment. For Hegel, however, these oppositions only mark the limits of a specific form of knowledge – namely, the one he refers to in the *Phenomenology* as ‘natural consciousness;’ they do not designate the limits of knowing as such.

Hegel offers a general description of the oppositional structure of natural consciousness in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There he writes that

consciousness *distinguishes* something from itself while at the same time it *relates* itself to it. Or, as it is expressed: This something is something *for consciousness*, and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being* of something *for a consciousness*, is *knowing*. However, we distinguish this being-for-another from *being-in-itself*. That which is related to knowing is just as much distinguished from knowing and is posited as *being* also external to this relation. The aspect of this in-itself is called *truth* (*PS*, p. 55).

Natural consciousness, in other words, is organized around the familiar opposition between concept and object – that is, between an epistemological standard and what is to be examined on the basis of that standard – or, in Hegel’s terminology, between ‘being-for-another’ and ‘being-in-itself.’⁷

This distinction between ‘being-for-another’ and ‘being-in-itself’ would seem to provide a reliable basis for testing knowledge-claims. It is only natural, after all, to assume that a claim to knowledge and the standard for testing this claim must remain quite separate and independent of one another. In the *Phenomenology*, however, Hegel points up the skeptical difficulties which emerge from natural consciousness’ oppositional structure. In attempting to compare the object of knowledge (being-in-itself) with the concept or standard by which it is to be evaluated (being-

for-another), natural consciousness comes to regard these two aspects of its knowing activity as ontologically independent – that is, as representing two separate, mutually exclusive dimensions of reality. If the object of knowledge is presented in this way as only externally related to consciousness' own conception of it, however, one might wonder what reason there is for treating the latter as an appropriate standard by which to judge the former. Indeed, must being-in-itself not be already in some sense known if it is to serve as the object of knowledge? Or, as Meno once asked Socrates: “how will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know” (Plato, *Meno*, line 80d)?

The insight that the object of knowledge is not absolute but always, of necessity, relative to the activity of the knowing subject may lead natural consciousness into skepticism. Finding that it cannot successfully isolate being-in-itself from being-for-another, it may come to regard the standard that it looked to in order to validate its claims to knowledge as no more credible than these claims themselves – that is, as equipollent – and to conclude on this basis that the opposition that was so decisive in formulating the knowledge it claimed to possess has led it to a dead end. Rather than providing it with a reliable basis for testing its claims to knowledge, natural consciousness takes the opposition between being-in-itself and being-for-another as preventing it from recognizing as legitimate any knowledge whatsoever. It treats opposition, in other words, as grounds for the suspension of judgment.

On Hegel's account, however, the relationship between being-in-itself and being-for-another needn't entail this skeptical result. It is only because natural consciousness regards these two opposing moments of its knowing activity as separate and externally related that it is led to see “always only *pure nothing*” (*PS*, p. 53) resulting from its inquiries. As Hegel argues,

however, the oppositional structure of natural consciousness also occasions an important opportunity for the development of knowledge. Indeed, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is precisely Hegel's account of how, in confronting its own constitutive limits, natural consciousness gives way to a more comprehensive form of knowing (i.e., what Hegel refers to as the standpoint of 'philosophical science' or 'absolute knowing').

Hegel characterizes the development of natural consciousness in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* as 'the path of despair' to underscore the negative and destructive features of this undertaking:

Natural consciousness will prove to be only the concept of knowing, or it will prove to be not real knowing. But while it immediately regards itself rather as real knowing, this path has negative meaning for it, and what is the realization of the concept will count instead, to it, as the loss of itself, for on this path, it loses its truth. This path can accordingly be regarded as the path of *doubt*, or, more properly, as the path of despair: on this path, what happens is not what is customarily understood as doubt [...]. Rather, this path is the conscious insight into the untruth of knowing as it appears, a knowing for which that which is the most real is rather in truth only the unrealized concept (*PS*, p. 52).

Insofar as it prompts natural consciousness to abandon its one-sided pretensions to knowledge, the *Phenomenology* can be understood as a typical work of philosophical skepticism. Yet, in the very next passage after the one quoted above, Hegel is quick to clarify that this is not just any skeptical work but, more precisely, a work of 'self-completing' [*sich vollbringende*] skepticism in which natural consciousness is 'cultivated' into philosophical science.

Let us compare this self-completing skepticism to the Pyrrhonian variety. A Pyrrhonian skeptic, as we have seen, attempts to induce the suspension of judgment by demonstrating the equipollence (i.e., equal persuasive power) of competing claims to knowledge. Finding that they have no good reason to prefer a given claim over its opposite, a Pyrrhonian skeptic comes to see this opposition as ultimately external to the matter under consideration, reflecting at most a

failure on the side of the subject to properly conceive its object. In the self-completing skepticism of the *Phenomenology*, by contrast, the oppositions into which consciousness finds itself embroiled signify not the absence of knowledge, but rather the very activity by which it is constituted. As Hegel argues, if the opposition between being-in-itself and being-for-another can only be said to be valid *for consciousness* – if, that is, the object of knowledge cannot be treated as independent of our own knowing activity, then any opposition between these moments must be regarded as constitutive of that activity and not simply as an impediment to its possibility. Indeed, each of the oppositions through which a given pattern of consciousness articulates its claim to knowledge in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* serves at the same time as a conceptual bridge to further, increasingly precise formulations of its object: “while the result is grasped as it is in truth, as *determinate* negation,” Hegel writes, “a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation, the transition is made whereby the progression through the complete series of shapes comes about on its own accord” (*PS*, p. 53). It is, however, precisely in failing to recognize the significance of the oppositions to which they appeal that the Pyrrhonian skeptic, on Hegel’s view, comes to see in the result of their arguments “always only *pure nothing* and... abstracts from the fact that this nothing is determinately the nothing *of that from which it results*” (*PS*, p. 53). This is what differentiates the self-completing skepticism of the *Phenomenology* from the ‘one-sided’ skepticism more familiar to us from the Pyrrhonian tradition.

Thus, to understand the way in which the *Phenomenology* is a work of skepticism, it is imperative to understand what is distinctive about its ‘self-completing’ status for Hegel. In contrast to the abstract ‘pure nothing’ that the Pyrrhonian skeptic finds in the result of their arguments, the *Phenomenology* uncovers the ‘determinate nothing’ that emerges from each of the specific claims to knowledge raised in a pattern of consciousness, calling special attention to

the way that these oppositions form the basis for increasingly sophisticated claims concerning the nature of its object. Hence, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* leads its reader to interpret the skeptical impasses into which thought finds itself driven as constitutive of the reality that the work seeks to explain.

We can now see how Hegel's treatment of the role of opposition in the self-completing skepticism of the *Phenomenology* helps to contribute to the development of his understanding of negativity. While in the "Skepticism" essay, Hegel had already begun to conceive of opposition as a structural component of absolute reality – namely, as reason's 'negative side,' he had not yet articulated that reality as a movement of "determinate negation" whereby consciousness comes to know itself precisely through the oppositions in which it is entangled. It is not until the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, therefore, that Hegel is in the position to explain the way that opposition belongs not only to the object of knowledge, but also to the subjective activity by which knowledge is constituted: "As subject, it is pure, *simple negativity*, and, as a result, it is the estrangement of what is simple, or, it is the doubling which posits oppositions and which is again the negation of this indifferent diversity and its opposition" (*PS*, p. 12).

It should also be clear now why it is misleading to suggest that skepticism has only a methodological or preparatory function in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While it is true that the oppositional structure of natural consciousness is in an important sense overcome with the transition to absolute knowing in the conclusion of Hegel's work, the self-completing skepticism of the *Phenomenology* is precisely not like those 'purgatives' to which Sextus likens the skeptical tropes that "after driving the fluids out of bodies eliminate themselves as well" (2005, p. 183). As we have seen, the basic opposition through which a given pattern of natural consciousness articulates the knowledge it claims to possess also furnishes the 'determinate

nothing' by which consciousness advances from one pattern to the next: "while what at first appeared as the object degenerating for consciousness into a knowing of the object, and the *in-itself* becomes a *being-for-consciousness of the in-itself*, this latter is the new object" (*PS*, p. 58). Far from cancelling itself out, the opposition persists in each subsequent formulation of its object, providing the basis for increasingly determinate claims regarding the nature of knowledge. Indeed, even with the conclusion of this process in absolute knowing, the opposition of natural consciousness between being-in-itself and being-for-another is not altogether eliminated but rather reconceived as two constitutively interconnected moments of one single knowing activity. "However much this negative now initially appears as the inequality between the I and the object," Hegel writes, "still it is just a much the inequality of the substance with itself. What seems to take place outside of the substance, to be an activity directed against it," he continues, "is its own doing, and substance shows that it is essentially subject" (*PS*, p. 23). It is misleading, therefore, to suggest that skepticism has a merely methodological or instrumental function in the *Phenomenology*, as it is inextricably connected to the reality that Hegel seeks there to explain.

III. *The Encyclopedia Logic* (1817)

Thus far, we have seen how Hegel's engagement with skepticism shapes crucial developments in the early phase of his speculative project. One may wonder about what relevance skepticism might have, however, in the most mature phase of this project. During the last two decades of his life (from 1812-1831), Hegel published and revised two main versions of his *Logic*, the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*. The purpose of these texts was to articulate the structure of reality through an immanent deduction of the basic categorial

determinations that account for its intelligibility. Believing Hegel's engagement with skepticism to be preparatory, nearly all scholars who have written on the role of skepticism in Hegel's philosophy focus on the earlier works and not on the *Logic*.⁸ Yet already in his introductory remarks to the *Encyclopedia Logic* (first published in 1817), Hegel broaches the topic and suggests that skepticism could play an important role in establishing a proper beginning for the system. Because, as Hegel explains, the scientific status of the system is contingent upon its claim to achieve 'total presuppositionlessness,' he specifies that all "presuppositions or prejudices must be surrendered" at its entry (*EL* 125/167 [§78]). Since the skeptical tropes have proven to be particularly effective in exposing the 'vacuousness' of all such presuppositions, Hegel suggests that skepticism might serve as an introduction to the system. No sooner, however, does he raise this possibility than he signals the limits of such an approach:

But this path would be not only unpleasant but also superfluous since the dialectical element is itself an essential moment of the affirmative science... Moreover, skepticism would have to find the finite forms in a merely empirical and unscientific way and take them up as given. The demand for such a complete [*vollbrachten*] skepticism is the same as the demand that science ought to be preceded by doubting everything, i.e. by total presuppositionlessness. This demand is actually fulfilled in the resolve to engage in pure thinking and through the freedom that abstracts from everything and grasps its pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking (*EL* 125/168 [§78 R]).

Thus, the topic of skepticism appears in the *Logic* as well. But what does this passage suggest about Hegel's appraisal of the philosophical significance of skepticism at this stage in his thinking? If Hegel finds that skepticism is in some sense "superfluous" to the system of philosophical science, is this because he believes that the former has already been effectively refuted (e.g., with the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*) and therefore no longer continues to pose any real threat to the latter? Or, on the contrary, might Hegel's comments here be construed as something like a capitulation before the skeptic – an acknowledgement of

philosophy's ineluctable vulnerability to skeptical argumentation? In this final section, I will explain how Hegel's discussion in the *Encyclopedia Logic* of the 'dialectical' or 'negatively rational' moment in the logical structure of absolute reality makes clear why both suggestions, while instructive, are ultimately misleading. Moreover, I will explain how this discussion in the *Encyclopedia Logic* represents not a retreat from the topic of skepticism but, in fact, the clearest and most explicit account of the relationship of skepticism and negativity that Hegel offers.

"Every concept" and, indeed, "everything true in general," Hegel explains, can be said to contain three distinct, but ultimately inseparable elements: "(α) *the abstract side or that of the understanding*, (β) *the dialectical or negatively rational side*, (γ) *the speculative or positively rational side*" (*EL* 125/168 [§79]). Often referred to as the three moments of his 'dialectic,' these moments represent for Hegel not merely the method or procedure by which reality becomes accessible to thought but constitute its most basic and fundamental structure – the "absolute rhythm of all that is alive" (2008, p. 75).

The first moment or side, which Hegel links to the activity of the 'understanding' [*Verstand*], pertains to the identity, determinacy, and fixity by which an object becomes minimally intelligible. Though it is impossible, according to Hegel, "to arrive at any firmness and determinateness without the understanding" (*EL* 126/169 [§80 Zus]), he cautions that such determinacy can only be achieved through a process of abstraction in which thought secures its object by isolating it from its larger context of significance and arresting it within fixed and finite forms. Accordingly, Hegel finds that this first moment is not "something ultimate" but rather something that "pushed to the extreme, turns over into its opposite" (*EL* 128/172 [§80 Zus]). While the moment of abstraction imparts to thought the semblance of possessing a fixed and determinate content (in Hegelian terms, of being true 'in itself'), the 'dialectical' or 'negatively

rational' moment reveals this same content to be intrinsically incomplete, to pass over into its opposite, and to depend upon this opposite for its own intelligibility.

The dialectical moment is not an external art or formal method that one might apply to whatever subject matter in order to produce confusion and the mere appearance of contradiction but constitutes rather the “true nature of the determinations of the understanding, of things, and of the finite in general” (*EL* 128/172 [§81 R 2]). Hegel is quite insistent on this point. If certain thinkers have been able to exploit the one-sided determinations of the understanding in order to bolster their own sophistical arguments, this is ultimately on account of the negative character of these determinations themselves – their own inherently fleeting, finite, and transitory mode of existence. “[T]he finite,” Hegel explains, “is not limited merely from outside but, by virtue of its own nature, sublates itself and changes into its opposite on account of itself” (*EL* 129/173 [§81 Zus 1]). Thus, the dialectical moment exhibits, for Hegel, the self-sublation of the determinations of the understanding, the immanent process by which such determinations transition into their own opposites, relinquishing the identity that they formerly possessed.

Insofar as it exposes the unstable and untrustworthy nature of even the most basic conceptual determinations, the dialectical moment can be fruitfully compared to the modes of skepticism. In fact, Hegel draws this comparison here explicitly, stating that “the dialectical [moment], when taken in isolation by the understanding, constitutes *skepticism*” (*EL* 128/172 [§81 R 1]). As this passage indicates, Hegel continues to see skepticism as relevant to the concerns of speculative philosophy. However, rather than signify the “negative side of the cognition of the absolute” (*RSP*, p. 323) or the path upon which natural consciousness advances to absolute knowing, here skepticism⁹ figures as the second moment of the dialectic taken in abstraction from the other two moments with which it forms an inseparable unity. As Hegel

goes on to explain in his discussion of the third moment, “the *speculative* or the *positively rational* [moment] grasps the unity of the determinations in their opposition, the *affirmative* that is contained in their dissolution and their passing over into something else” (EL 132/176 [§82]). His suggestion is that the skeptic, however, is prevented from recognizing anything positive in the oppositions they elicit because they have isolated their own negative activity from the greater speculative unity in which it is situated and considered it only from its abstract side. In claiming, therefore, that the dialectical moment, taken in isolation by the understanding, constitutes skepticism, Hegel is suggesting that skepticism can be explained in terms of the logical structure of absolute reality – namely, in terms of the abstract opposition between its first and second moments.

With this in mind, we can now better appreciate why in the beginning of the *Encyclopedia Logic* Hegel dismisses the suggestion that skepticism serve as an introduction to the system of philosophical science. To use skepticism as an introduction to philosophy is not only to treat these as separate and only externally related to one another, but also to regard the modes of skepticism as valid on their own account – that is, as so epistemically secure that they can be relied upon to clear away all the presuppositions that stand between ordinary human understanding and genuine philosophical cognition. On this point, however, Hegel is quite clear: skepticism owes whatever validity it may be said to possess to the dialectical moment, and not vice versa. Indeed, Hegel characterizes the dialectical moment as the “moving soul of the scientific progression” (EL 128/173 [§81 R 2]) precisely in order to draw attention to its crucial role in the self-grounding activity through which the system achieves its scientific status. “The one thing needed to *achieve scientific progress*,” as Hegel puts it in the *Science of Logic*, “is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive” (SL 33/21:38). Since the

categorical determinations examined in the *Logic* entail their own immanent supersession, as the dialectical moment makes evident, there is no need to use skepticism to expose their negative character. It is in this sense that skepticism is, for Hegel, ‘superfluous’ to the system of philosophical science.

On the other hand, the foregoing discussion also makes clear that Hegel remains committed to the view, first introduced in his early article for the *Critical Journal*, that philosophy and skepticism are not ultimately at odds with one another, and that the former needn’t be concerned with refuting the latter. If skepticism represents, for Hegel, an abstract articulation of the negative activity he locates at the heart of the system, then it cannot be refuted without endorsing an abstract conception of negativity – that is, it cannot be refuted without committing the same metaphysical error of failing to acknowledge the positive contained in the negative that he consistently imputes to the skeptic. This is why, rather than exile the claims of skepticism from the system of philosophical science, rendering their validity null and void, Hegel’s approach is to clarify the logical structure which accounts for their intelligibility and from which they ultimately derive their normative authority. Thus, Hegel’s argument in the *Logic* should be recognized as the culmination of an investigation many years in the making. Hegel’s 1802 article for the *Critical Journal* led him to insights into the relationship between skepticism and philosophy that he would draw from and deepen for the remainder of his career. In this, Hegel demonstrates that skepticism is neither just an effective tool for arriving at justified beliefs nor an existential threat to philosophical science.

¹ See also Franks (2005), Heidemann (2007), and Westphal (1998).

² Schulze's *Kritik der theoretischen Philosophie* builds on the skeptical arguments he had earlier put to Kant and Reinhold in his infamous "Aenesidemus". Here, however, Schulze raises these doubts against the very project of theoretical philosophy itself. See Schulze (1801 and 1985).

³ For an excellent treatment of the intellectual context of Hegel's critical review of Schulze, see Bristow (2007, pp. 117-168). See also Beiser (1987, pp. 226-284).

⁴ "The essence of dogmatism," as Hegel conceives of it in this early essay, "consists in this that it posits something finite, something burdened with an opposition (e.g. pure Subject, or pure Object, or in dualism the duality as opposed to the identity) as the Absolute; hence Reason shows with respect to this Absolute that it has a relation to what is excluded from it, and only exists through and in this relation to another, so that it is not absolute, according to the third trope of relationship" (*RSP*, p. 335).

⁵ On Forster's reading, Hegel uses the term 'dogmatic' to refer to any beliefs that suffer from inadequate justification. Accordingly, Forster suggests that modern skepticism, for Hegel, is "*dogmatic* in the sense of being founded on beliefs themselves vulnerable to skeptical attack" (1989, p. 11).

⁶ See, for instance, Pippin (1989), Maker (1994) Vieweg (1999), and Houlgate (2006).

⁷ Kenneth R. Westphal (1998) is helpful on this point: "A form of consciousness is an expository device consisting of a pair of basic principles. One of these principles specifies the kind of empirical knowledge of which a form of consciousness presumes itself capable. The other principle specifies the general structure of the kind of object which that form of consciousness presumes to find in the world" (pp. 83-4).

⁸ Exceptions to this trend include Dunphy (2020) and Hentrup (2019).

⁹ Hegel makes it clear that the skepticism he has in mind here is the 'high-minded' variety presented by Sextus Empiricus and not the modern forms that "partly preceded and partly developed out of the Critical philosophy" (*EL* 131/176 [§81 Zus 2]).

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