

# The Problem of Objectivity in Classical German Philosophy

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## Introduction

The traditional home of the concept of objectivity is in epistemology, or the theory of knowledge (*Wissen*) and cognition (*Erkennen*). As a result, it is knowledge or cognition that is usually called objective, and for knowledge to be objective simply means for it to be true. However, to speak of ‘objective’ knowledge makes sense only in contrast with something like ‘subjective’ knowledge, since knowledge as such is by definition true knowledge, and to call it ‘objective’ would otherwise be pleonastic. It is only when the possibility of true knowledge has come into question that a distinction between objective and subjective knowledge needs to be drawn. Subjective knowledge is then usually identified with belief or opinion, i.e., knowledge that is believed to be true but not known to be true. Subjective knowledge *might* be true, but it could also be false or erroneous like a false belief, an erroneous opinion or a mistaken assumption. Hence, one should speak of subjective knowledge with reference to someone who merely *believes* his or her opinion to be true but has no way of demonstrating it to be so or has never felt the need to question its alleged truth.<sup>1</sup>

The question of whether and how objective knowledge is possible can be traced back to the Pre-Socratics. It is here also that the original intrinsic connection between knowledge and reality was established. For if something is known to be true, or to exist, the object of that knowledge – whether this be a fact or a state of affairs or a thing and its properties – is considered to be real or a part of reality. Consequently, the concept of objectivity is likewise central to ontology and metaphysics. As Parmenides put it, only that which is real can be thought and known, whereas not-being cannot.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the concepts of objectivity, knowledge, truth and reality are co-dependent on each other. This fact will become important in understanding the development of the concept of objectivity in German idealism from a primarily epistemological to a primarily ontological concept. Ordinary language reflects the dual meaning of objectivity in that we call judgments or assertions objective but also speak (again somewhat pleonastically) of objective reality or objective facts.

## 1. Kant

The attempt to secure the possibility of objective knowledge or, as Kant puts it, of knowledge that possesses both “objective validity” (B 122f., 137) and “objective reality” (B 148f.) is at the very center of Kant’s so-called Copernican revolution.<sup>3</sup> Kant frames the issue in terms of an investigation into the possibility of “a priori knowledge of objects” (B xvi-xix), which is knowledge that is expressed in “synthetic a priori judgments” (cf. B 10-24). The complete set

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<sup>1</sup> The Platonic dialogues are paradigms of identifying, exposing and dismantling the unexamined beliefs of Socrates’s interlocutors. The dialogues can generally be characterized as the dialogical enterprise to find the kernel of truth in a haystack of opinions under Socrates’ guidance and with the help of analogies, allegories and myths.

<sup>2</sup> “... you could not know what is not – that cannot be done – nor indicate it [sc. in speech]” (KRS 245, DK28 B2 = fr. 2).

<sup>3</sup> The *categories* of the understanding confer *objective validity* on our judgments, whereas *objective reality* is based on the availability of *sensory intuition*. For further clarification see Allison (2004) 173-197.

of these synthetic a priori judgments is systematically derived and presented in the *Analytic of Principles* in the First Critique (cf. B 193-202). To demonstrate the possibility of objective knowledge then means to demonstrate the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments. While objectivity is here a property of judgments or, in contemporary parlance, of propositions, what those judgments are about is thought to be objectively real (in a qualified sense still to be determined). It is important to realize that the objectivity of the objects is derived from and dependent on the objectivity of the judgments and not the other way around.

A general explanation of Kant's project to secure the objectivity of knowledge is best approached via his Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the so-called B edition of 1787, which is a revision of the first, or A, edition of 1781) and its Introduction. In this B edition Preface, Kant's real concern is with the fate of philosophy itself. First, philosophy must claim to be able to possess a priori knowledge of objects, i.e., knowledge of reality that is universally and necessarily true, if it is to remain a viable science. Knowledge that is not a priori but a posteriori, i.e., derived from experience, observation and experiment, is the domain of the empirical sciences and is always subject to revision and fallible. If that were all the knowledge humans were capable of, then there would be no basis for philosophy as a science distinct from the empirical sciences, and that means that there would be no basis for philosophy at all. Philosophy would be reduced to formal logic. Therefore, the possibility of philosophy itself hinges on the possibility of a priori knowledge of objects. But we immediately see the problem that arises here: If philosophical knowledge must be (a) a priori and (b) of objects and yet (c) cannot be derived from experience, then what could the source of such knowledge possibly be? Now traditionally, philosophy had for centuries claimed to possess a priori knowledge of objects (or of being or reality in general) under the name of metaphysics. According to Kant, however, the only source of this alleged knowledge was logical reasoning based on presupposed definitions of concepts and their implications. Metaphysicians like Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz used a few logical principles such as the principle of non-contradiction and that of sufficient reason to devise a systematic account of reality without the slightest proof that anything really corresponded to their conceptual constructs, since all their reasoning was nothing but a "groping among mere concepts" (B xv). But concepts are mere objects of thought, Kant argued, and have no intrinsic connection to reality. They enable us to think, but not yet to know anything about objects.<sup>4</sup> The primordial question then becomes: How do concepts in a judgment acquire an intrinsic relation to objects (or, how can judgments be synthetic, i.e., refer to objects) without, however, being derived from or determined by them (that is, how can judgments nonetheless be a priori)? Simply put, how can we know anything about objects without deriving that knowledge from them? Kant answers as follows:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have ... ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge (B XVI).

This classic statement of the Copernican turn in philosophy raises two major problems. First, how can objects be made to conform to our knowledge in the first place? And second, if they can be made to conform to our knowledge, will not this alter their nature or appearance and thus give us a false picture of them? Kant answers the first question by pointing out that for us to become aware of objects at all they must be 'given' or received through our senses. Our sensibility, however, is structured by two pure forms of intuition (*Anschauung*) called space

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<sup>4</sup> See distinction between thinking and knowing at B xxvi, footnote a.

and time that impose an a priori spatial and temporal order on any sensible material received. As Kant demonstrates in the Transcendental Aesthetic, space and time exhibit a priori structures (such as the simultaneity and unity of all parts of space and the irreversible succession of all moments in time) to which all sensible data must necessarily conform.<sup>5</sup> Taken as a mere “raw material” (B 1), however, the sensible intuitions in space and time mean nothing to us. They are unrecognizable data. Using Kant’s famous metaphor, we may call them “blind”, just as concepts without sensible intuition are “empty” (B 75). The solution to the second problem builds on this argument from the ‘blindness’ or unrecognizability of all merely intuited sensory data. Unless these data, also called a manifold, are conceptualized through acts of synthesis in accordance with a set of categories or pure concepts of the understanding, they cannot have any meaning for us. Consequently, the categories of the understanding, functioning as universal rules for the combination of the sensory material, turn unrecognizable data into identifiable objects. Contrary to the assumption that the nature of the objects might be altered or even distorted due to the conceptual organization applied to them by the human understanding, it turns out that this very organization is the foundation of their objectivity. The understanding, in a step that is logically, if not chronologically, prior to experience (hence, a priori), thus organizes the spatio-temporal sensible manifold into an objective world or into the domain of objects of any possible experience.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, Kant generates the objectivity of knowledge by making cognition dependent on a necessary conjunction of the a priori forms of both intuition and the understanding. In Kant’s formulation, this so-called *complementarity thesis* runs as follows:

Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind (B 75).<sup>7</sup>

Kant’s proposal, then, or what we might call his *transcendental thesis*, is that the investigation into the necessary and universally valid conditions of human cognition will yield the necessary and universally valid ontology of the world of human experience.<sup>8</sup> An examination of the a priori forms of the *subject* of cognition allows us to extract the objectivity structures of the *objects* of cognition as experienced by us, because the latter must necessarily conform to the cognitive conditions supplied a priori by the epistemic subject. In Kant’s words:

We ... assert that the conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are likewise conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*, and that for this reason they [sc. the conditions of the possibility of experience] have objective validity in a synthetic *a priori* judgment (B 197).

The ontological structures in question are derived in the Analytic of Principles of the First Critique in the form of synthetic a priori judgments, judgments that prescribe certain ontological features to empirical objects prior to or independently of their being experienced.

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<sup>5</sup> See Kant’s arguments in the Transcendental Aesthetic, B 37-53.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. B 1: All knowledge *begins* in time with experience, but the conditions of knowledge do not all *arise* out of experience.

<sup>7</sup> See also B 74: “Intuition and concepts constitute ... the elements of all our knowledge, so that neither concepts without an intuition in some way corresponding to them, nor intuition without concepts, can yield knowledge.”

<sup>8</sup> Kant defines transcendental knowledge as follows: “I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori* (B 25; see also B 80-81).

These features concern primarily the quantitative, qualitative, causal and interactive properties of things in space and time. They form the indispensable basis for the natural sciences as well as for our everyday interaction with the world.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that the objective knowledge thus secured will be limited to data that can be 'given' through sensibility, i.e., sensations that are then synthesized into empirical objects in space and time. Consequently, the objects of experience governed by the a priori structures are things as they must appear to the human mind (things as *appearances*), not things as they are 'outside' of human experience (called *things-in-themselves* by Kant). But note that appearance here refers to the empirical things as we see, touch or manipulate them, not to the way they look under changing empirical conditions such as lighting etc.<sup>10</sup> Kant's so-called *restriction thesis* excludes any knowledge of objects beyond space-time reality. It therefore also excludes any metaphysical knowledge in the traditional sense.

Kant's truly revolutionary and probably his most influential idea, however, is contained in his claim that no experience, no objectivity and no knowledge, not even thought, would be possible without the "original synthetic unity of apperception" (B § 16), which he also calls the original unity of self-consciousness or *transcendental unity of apperception* (B § 16, B 139). Only with this unity are the epistemic conditions of objectivity complete. The argument is that without an original unity of all representations in one self-consciousness neither the consciousness of a unified object nor that of myself as a unified self would be possible. This synthetic a priori unity of self-consciousness is generated through the absolute spontaneity of the self-unifying self. It is a necessary condition of empirical self-consciousness and must be distinguished from the analytic unity of self-consciousness (i.e., the thought that all my representations are mine), since the latter can arise only on the basis of the former. The transcendental unity of apperception thus turns out to be the ultimate transcendental condition of there being a world as an object of experience and of myself as an experiencing subject. When combined with the categorial syntheses of the understanding, the transcendental unity of apperception becomes the "objective unity of consciousness" (B § 18), the representation of the objective world with ourselves in it that is the same for all human beings. The objective unity ensures that we all refer to the same objective world. It is the necessary condition for developing a "subjective unity of consciousness" (ibid.), i.e. the individual world view that differs from one person to the next against the backdrop of a shared unified world.

Despite the fact that the transcendental unity of apperception provided a single fundamental principle for Kant's theoretical philosophy, a number of apparently irreconcilable dualisms remain, among them that of matter and form, of intuition and concept, of the phenomenal and the noumenal, of freedom and necessity, and of theoretical and practical reason. Much of the subsequent development in German idealism turns around the overcoming of these dualisms.

## 2. Fichte

With Fichte, objectivity begins to take on a different meaning. Whereas for Kant objectivity is an epistemic concept that refers to the quality of judgments about the object world as well as to the necessary and universal categorial structures of the latter, for Fichte objectivity connotes primarily the existence or the being (*Sein*) of things. Something possesses

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<sup>9</sup> Kant believed that he had thus overcome Hume's skepticism regarding the foundations of natural science and our presumption to believe in the predictability of events based on past experience.

<sup>10</sup> Hence Kant distinguishes between appearances in the transcendental sense (= empirical things) and in the empirical sense (= the look of things or the 'appearance' of appearances): see B 62-63.

objectivity, if (a) it has genuine being or (b) exists independently of consciousness. In fact, (a) and (b) designate different kinds of being and hence also of objectivity. Genuine being belongs only to the fundamental principle of Fichte's philosophy, the absolute self or 'I'. Mind-independent existence, on the other hand, is spontaneously attributed by us to all objects 'external' to consciousness, i.e. to things in space and time. As we shall see, this kind of being or objectivity is derivative. According to Fichte, both kinds of objectivity are in need of explanation, since neither the being of the absolute self nor the existence of the object-world can be considered to be self-evident truths. But without either of them, the fact of the experience of a mind-independent world and of ourselves in it would be inexplicable. It is the task of the *Science of Knowledge* or *Wissenschaftslehre* to justify these existence claims. Fichte devoted his entire life as a philosopher to this task, producing ever new versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the course of which his initial "critical" or "transcendental idealism"<sup>11</sup> inspired by Kant eventually developed into a metaphysics of the absolute inspired by Plato and Neo-Platonism. We will limit ourselves to the initial presentation of what he also called "my system" (FW I 420; HL 4) in the *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* of 1794/95 and the First and Second Introduction thereto.

For Fichte, the task of philosophy is "to *discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge" (FW I 91; HL 93) in order then to explain the possibility of experience generally. As we mentioned above, this involves two fundamental problems the philosophy of critical idealism must solve. It must, first, demonstrate the existence and the objectivity of the absolute self and, second, the existence and objectivity of the world of experience. First, the philosopher must demonstrate the existence of the absolute self, because *qua* "ground of all experience" (FW I 423; HL 6) the absolute self must necessarily lie "outside what it grounds" (FW I 425; HL 8). As a result, it cannot be found immediately in experience. The peculiar problem with the absolute self as ground, then, is that it is both a *transcendental* (or epistemic) as well as a *transcendent* (or metaphysical) condition of all experience, a curious combination of a transcendental and a metaphysical principle. Fichte's endeavor will be to demonstrate how it is nonetheless possible to arrive at an awareness of the absolute self by starting from the standpoint of experience. This path is described by him as one of a "reflection" on one's own self-consciousness that makes "abstraction" from all finite external reality.<sup>12</sup> It leads to an "intellectual intuition" (FW I 463; HL 38) of the absolute self as pure being. Once this has been established, the "genesis" of the "entire system of experience" can be reconstructed (FW I 458; HL 34). Moreover, since the reflection on one's own self-consciousness takes place within the immanence of the thinking subject, the question arises "how ... the philosopher [is] to ensure the objectivity of this purely subjective act?" (FW I 460; HL 35). In other words, Fichte asks, how the activity of reflection and abstraction can lead to a demonstration of the being or the existence of the absolute self. The argument will be that the existence of the absolute self can be shown to be a necessary and indispensable condition of the very existence of the act of reflection. To make such an existence claim on behalf of the absolute self is more than to say that the absolute self is a necessary epistemic (or logical) condition for the existence of reflection.

We will understand more clearly, why a demonstration of the objective being of the absolute I should be of paramount importance for Fichte, when we now turn to the second fundamental task of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, namely, the derivation of the experience of an objectively existing external world. The reason why this becomes a problem in the first place is explained

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<sup>11</sup> FW I 441; HL 21.

<sup>12</sup> For a description of this path see FW I 427. See also *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797) in FW I 519-534.

by Fichte in the First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge. He makes a crucial methodological decision by starting with an introspective approach. Proceeding in a quasi-phenomenological vein, he discovers two different kinds of representations that we may distinguish in our consciousness. On the one hand, we find there representations that we assume to be freely caused by ourselves (such as a fantasy image). Since we experience ourselves as free beings, we have no problem identifying their cause: it is we who create them. On the other hand, we are conscious of representations that seem to be dependent on things existing independently of our freedom, representations that we seem to receive from outside of ourselves and that we therefore spontaneously refer to something that exists outside of our consciousness. We have no choice in their determination, since they seem already to be determined through their external cause. Accordingly, we believe that in trying to interpret them our cognition should adapt itself to the objects they represent. In short,

... we may say that some of our representations are accompanied by the feeling of freedom, others by the feeling of necessity (FW I 423; HL 6).

Now it would be easy to explain the existence of representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity (or external representations, for short), if we were to embrace some causal theory of perception. In that case, we would simply say that external objects are the causes of these representations in the mind. Fichte calls any such causal theory “dogmatism”, his primary target being followers of Kant who (falsely) attributed to Kant the view that things-in-themselves are the causes of external representations in us. For various reasons, such a theory makes little if any sense, neither as a quasi-Kantian nor as an empirical theory, since, for one thing, representations are mental entities whereas objects in space and time are physical things whose effects must also be something physical, not mental. But quite apart from such reasons, Fichte has arguments to reject dogmatism, even though he admits that a dogmatist system of philosophy is not directly refutable (provided we ignore the problem of how matter could possibly be the cause of a phenomenon like consciousness). Instead he embraces idealism, since the philosopher “must represent himself as free” (FW I 432; HL 14).<sup>13</sup>

The decision in favor of idealism as “the only possible philosophy” (FW I 439; HL 19) has a crucial consequence for the possible solution to our second problem. If external representations cannot be understood as having been caused by some external object, then the only alternative is that they must be caused by the subject or self. If so, however, we run the risk of declaring reference to external objects to be an illusion – and the existence of an external world along with it. As a result, the question regarding the ground of our belief in a mind-independent world becomes even more acute. The question the *Wissenschaftslehre* has to answer is therefore:

Whence arises the system of representations accompanied by the feeling of necessity?  
or: How do we come to attribute objective validity [*objective Gültigkeit*] to what in fact is only subjective? or, since objective validity is described as being [*Seyn*]: How do we come to believe in [the] being [sc. of an external world]? (FW I 456; LH 31).

We can now see that the situation would be even more problematic, not to say calamitous, if the objective reality of the absolute self were itself in doubt! In that case, the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* would collapse, since without a ground there would not be a grounded and the explanatory project of critical idealism would evaporate. Moreover, if there is no external being, how do we justify the feeling of necessity that accompanies external representations?

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<sup>13</sup> For Fichte’s discussion of the arguments pro and con dogmatism and idealism see I 426-440; 9-20. He comes to the conclusion that “idealism is left as the only possible philosophy” (FW I 439; HL 19).

Do we need to return to Kant's assumption that there exists an external reality to support appearances, even if we cannot know what it is in itself.<sup>14</sup> But this is impossible after Fichte's reformulation of idealism as a position of the *radical immanence of all reality in the absolute self*. And if the self is the only reality, then the metaphysical reality of Fichte's first principle must be secured at all costs. Hence his many attempts to prove that an intellectual intuition of our own self can be used to infer its transcendent being.

The consequences of Fichte's methodological decision to start with a regression into and a reflection on the subject's consciousness and thus to build the system on the reality of self-consciousness are now becoming visible. First, the ground of all reality must be continuous with, and hence of the same kind as, the reality of the subject's self-consciousness. It cannot be a thing or substance of any kind, since the reality of self-consciousness consists in nothing other than self-reflective thinking. Fichte therefore calls it a "pure activity" (FW I 96; HL 97). Second, as an ultimate principle it cannot be dependent on anything else, and consequently its being or existence must be self-caused:

The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists* [*es ist*]; and conversely, the self *exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing [*vermöge seines blossen Seyns*] (FW I 96; HL 97).

Obviously, such an existence claim concerning the self-positing absolute self remains problematic as long as there is a legitimate suspicion that the only real reason for positing this *causa sui* is the need to avoid an infinite regress.

From what has been said, another major consequence follows. If the feeling of necessity that accompanies external representations is caused by the self, then what does this imply for the presumed reality of the external world? Clearly, the feeling of necessity is real enough, but what about the trustworthiness of the belief in a mind-independent world to which this feeling gives rise? It seems obvious that this belief must be a deception, even if the feeling of necessity is not. For there can be no reality *outside* the self or 'I':

... critical philosophy is ... *immanent*, since it posits everything in the self (FW I 120; HL 117).<sup>15</sup>

Fichte's decision to opt for a position of radical immanence is a response to the Kantian problems with the externality requirement. In order to avoid an empirical idealism à la Berkeley, Kant needed to preserve some connection with a subject-independent source of material upon which transcendental imagination and the understanding can perform their various syntheses. For this reason, he introduced the empirical manifold. Strictly speaking, we are not supposed to ask where this manifold comes from. Its obvious source would be the thing-in-itself. But if we were to allow such a connection, we would be making the illegitimate move of implying the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a transcendent entity and the empirical manifold. Consequently, Fichte eliminated all potential reference to a thing-in-itself such that all reality is now posited by the ego in the ego.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> See Kant's statement in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Preface: If we do not at least *think* things-in-themselves, "we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears" (B xxvif.).

<sup>15</sup> See also FW I 109; HL 117.

<sup>16</sup> For Fichte's discussion of the Kantian thing-in-itself see FW I 482-489; HL 54-60.

absolute self must therefore include what Fichte calls the not-I or not-self, i.e., the object-world, within itself. It is in fact a unity of subject and object.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, this does not yet solve the problem of explaining the feeling of necessity associated with external representations. Fichte builds upon an analysis of the essential nature of self-consciousness in order to derive the consciousness of an external world. Originally, there is only the absolute ego and its activity of self-positing. However, for the self to become conscious of itself it needs an other, something that is not the self, from which it may distinguish itself. Without a differentiation between self and other there is no consciousness of self, only the activity of self-positing. Consequently, the not-I, while equally posited by the absolute I (cf. FW I 218; HL 195), must emerge in consciousness as something that is encountered, not posited, for otherwise it could not function as a limitation on the activity of the I, i.e. as a genuine other. Fichte describes it as an *Anstoß*, a ‘check’.<sup>18</sup> The counter-positing of a not-I by the absolute I is an act of self-limitation that results in a finite consciousness for which the not-I *appears* as something existing independently of itself, in other words, as an objectively real world. The representations referring to this objective world are the work of the imagination insofar as it reflects upon what appears to it to be an external obstacle. Ultimately, the check is due to a limitation of the will whose response is to overcome the otherness of the objective world through infinite striving. In the final analysis, the feeling of necessity that attaches to external representations is the result of the impossibility of the will to overcome all otherness in the not-I. Overcoming it remains an infinite task.

It is interesting to note that Fichte secures the objectivity of empirical knowledge not primarily through the application of the categories to a manifold, as Kant had done. Instead, he justifies the objective validity of empirical knowledge ‘wholesale’, as it were, by deriving a not-I from the absolute I. It is important to remember, however, that this derivation does not amount to a proof of the existence of the external world in the ordinary sense.<sup>19</sup> Rather, its purpose is to explain the *feeling of necessity* connected with external representations, i.e., to justify a feature that is immanent to consciousness. Even the ‘check’ that is responsible for the feeling of necessity is an immanent feature of consciousness. While consciousness experiences the check as objective, the philosopher knows that this experience is grounded in the self-limiting activity of the absolute I. The reality of the external world remains parasitic upon the reality of the absolute I.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Schelling

In his attempt to explain the objectivity of knowledge, Schelling represents a significant departure from the epistemological approach pursued by Kant and Fichte. And yet, Schelling goes back to the same starting-point that Kant and Fichte also regarded as the fundamental challenge to philosophy. The most pressing question philosophy faces, he says, is not how the external world came into existence, but rather how the *experience* of the objective reality of an external world could arise in consciousness (cf. SW I 353f.; HH 23). With this, Schelling raises the original question of how to bridge the epistemological hiatus between subject and

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<sup>17</sup> See FW I 98, footnote to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of 1802: “... *the self* is a necessary identity of subject and object: and is so absolutely, without further mediation.”

<sup>18</sup> Cf. FW I 210; HL189.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Beiser interprets Fichte’s in this way: see Beiser (2000) 325-333.

<sup>20</sup> This is also borne out by the subsequent development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: see Brachtendorf (1995).



object, idea and object, mind and world, mind and body, and spirit and nature, once the “separation” had arisen through the act of philosophical reflection (cf. SW I 336f.; HH 10), i.e., – we might add – once Descartes had definitively cut the connection between mind and world in the First Meditation. Why are we justified in claiming that our representation of the causal order in the series of phenomena is “objective and real” (SW I 367; HH 32), that is to say, *not* made or imposed by us?

And yet, while Schelling follows Fichte’s lead in denying the possibility of an external causal influence on the mind by things existing outside it, he nonetheless rejects Fichte’s subjective immanentism. Neither Kant nor Fichte, he argues, were able to show convincingly that our belief in the objectivity of our experience is legitimate and well-founded. The point is that for experience to be truly objective, nature or the world itself must be objectively ordered, not just the ideas or representations we have of it. Indeed, the latter can be objectively ordered, if and only if the former are so ordered in and of themselves:

... that our ideas follow one another in this precise order, that for example the lightning precedes the thunder, ... for this we do not seek the reason *in us*; it does not matter *to us* how we let the ideas follow one another; the reason must, therefore, lie in *the things*, and we declare that this particular succession is a succession of the *things themselves*, not merely of our ideas of them. Only insofar as the phenomena *themselves* follow one another thus and not otherwise are we compelled to represent them in this order; only because and insofar as this succession is *objectively* necessary is it also *subjectively* necessary (SW I 354; HH 23).

For Schelling who, after all, continues to hold on to the fundamental idealist convictions, this is a revolutionary statement. It is nothing less than the dismissal of the transcendental approach that seeks to establish the objective structure of the world by grounding it in the subjective a priori features of the mind.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Schelling re-establishes the commonsensical view that we can know the truth only, if the truth exists independently of ourselves in the things themselves and is not a construct of the subjective mind functioning as the lawgiver of nature.

But now there is a problem. Since Schelling rejects as totally unintelligible what Fichte had called the dogmatist view, i.e., that things can cause representations in the mind (cf. SW I 339-345; HH 12-17), it seems impossible to show where the objective order among our representations derives from. It can come neither from inside the mind nor from the outside. This is true, however, only as long as we continue to hold on to the original separation and opposition of spirit and nature, mind and matter, mind and body or idea and object. If instead we assume that there exists an original identity of these opposites, the situation changes. Schelling points to such conceptions of identity in Spinoza and Leibniz (SW I 359-362; HH 27-29). For Spinoza, for instance, thought and extension, mind and matter, are at bottom identical and merely two aspects of one and the same undivided reality. Consequently, Schelling suggests that we regard idea and thing, mind and matter, spirit and nature, or, in one word, subject and object as originally one:

Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind the invisible Nature. Here then, in the absolute identity of Mind *in us* and Nature *outside us*, the problem of the possibility of a Nature external to us must be resolved (SW I 380; HH 42).

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<sup>21</sup> To see this very clearly, one might want to contrast Schelling’s above statement with Kant’s Second Analogy argument in favor of the objective succession of cause and effect in our subjective time experience (cf. B 232ff).

Both mind, or spirit (*Geist*), and nature, then, are the same reality that manifests itself in two different ways, nature as unconscious spirit and spirit as nature conscious of itself. But if this is so, then the structures in both should be identical as well. Or, rather, there should be only a single structure that translates into two forms of expression, an ideal series of representations that is the mirror image of a real series of phenomena and *vice versa*.<sup>22</sup> Is there evidence of such an identity of the real and the ideal in the real *and* in the ideal series of phenomena? Schelling argues that the phenomenon of *organic life* is just such an example (SW I 364ff; HH 30ff). For, on the one hand, an organism could not *exist* in reality unless it were already a *unity* of matter and form (or matter and concept, as Schelling also puts it) and on the other hand, the concept of an organism cannot be *thought* except as a unity of matter and form. In both cases, neither matter nor form can exist or be thought as two separate entities. Separated one from the other, they are nothing by themselves. Only in their unity are they conceivable both as idea and as existing phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Schelling rejects the Kantian argument that purposiveness is a property we superimpose on what is essentially a mechanistic arrangement of material parts:

... when you think of each plant as an individual, in which everything concurs together for one purpose, you must seek the reason for that in the *thing outside you*: you feel yourself constrained in your judgment; you must therefore confess that the unity with which you think it is not merely *logical* (in your thoughts), but *real* (actually outside you) (SW I 367; HH 32).<sup>24</sup>

To clinch the argument, Schelling makes the further point that purposiveness, the self-referential and self-directedness of organic life, presupposes some kind of intelligent design, if we may call it that. The co-operation of all the functions of an organism towards the single goal of maintaining the organism's life, he argues, cannot be explained mechanistically. Instead, such co-operation must involve

a higher principle, which we can no longer explain in terms of matter alone, a principle that orders all individual movements, holds them together, and so first creates and brings forth a whole out of a multiplicity of motions which ... mutually produce and reproduce themselves. So here again, we meet that absolute unification of Nature and Freedom in one and the same being. The living organism is to be a product of *Nature*: but in this natural product an ordering and coordinating *mind* [*Geist*] is to rule (SW I 372; HH 36).

In other words, nature itself is not without intelligence. Natural beings such as organisms are just as self-referential, self-organizing and self-determining as intelligent beings. Nature carries intelligent structures within itself, intelligence is embodied in nature. We have a subject-object identity on both sides, and the whole is an absolute unity of subject and object.

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<sup>22</sup> This synchronized parallelism of an ideal and a real series Schelling borrows again from Spinoza. It is present in a different form also in Leibniz under the title of a pre-established harmony.

<sup>23</sup> An implicit reference to Aristotle's conception of a form embedded in matter, which cannot exist apart from its matter, suggests itself here as well.

<sup>24</sup> See also: "That which is form in the things, they say, we initially impose on the things. But I have long sought to know just how you could be acquainted with what the things are, without the form which you first impose on them, or what the form is, without the things on which you impose it. You would have to concede that, *here* at least, the form is absolutely inseparable from the matter, and the concept from the object" (SW I 367; HH 33).

As we can see, the impossibility to bridge the epistemological gap between mind and world prompts Schelling to look for a solution in an entirely different direction. Instead of trying to explain objectivity as a product of the ego or of subjectivity as Kant and Fichte had done, he explains it as one aspect of a totality whose other aspect is subjectivity. Subject and object are thereby re-defined as two sides of the same reality. And since they both are a unity of both, the agreement or correspondence between representation and object is no longer a problem – mind mirrors nature and nature expresses mind. The epistemological impasse in establishing a connection between representations and things is thereby made obsolete. At the same time, subjectivity and objectivity are located in a new context and assume a new meaning. The one totality of the real, or what Schelling calls “the absolute” or “the Idea” (SW I 386-388; HH 46-48), this subject-object unity is “an eternal act of cognition” (ibid.) that differentiates itself in itself while remaining identical with itself. The “absolute knowing”

is not one in which subjective and objective are united as opposites, but one in which the entire subjective is the entire objective and *vice versa* (SW I 386; HH 46f).

Schelling has thus turned subjectivity and objectivity into ontological categories. They stand for two manifestations of one reality, the ideal and the real, or spirit and nature. He thus means to re-establish the unity of mind and world as it existed before the act of reflection that divided the totality into two opposed worlds, mind and matter, representation and object, spirit and nature. In the wake of this separation, nature became a mysterious self-moving mechanism, while mind became a world of ideas without reference.

#### 4. Hegel

The shift from epistemology back to ontology or metaphysics is the result of Schelling’s early philosophy and in particular of the so-called identity philosophy (*Identitätsphilosophie*) of the early 1800s. It paved the way for Hegel’s ontological definition of subjectivity and objectivity in the *Science of Logic*. Subjectivity and objectivity now attach to types of being or structures of the real, not to statements about such structures. In particular, types of being or ‘objects’ can now exhibit the structure of subjectivity or of being a subject, as was the case with organisms in Schelling.

With Hegel, this shift leads to a fundamental change in the understanding of the very task of philosophy. There is perhaps no better way to highlight this change than to look at Hegel’s redefinition of the concept of truth. For Hegel directs the focus of philosophical thought away from the Cartesian concern with the precarious connection between the ideas in the mind and the things in the world towards the question which objects are most intelligible in terms of their rational structure. As a result, Hegel dismisses the conception of truth as an agreement of *my* representations or concepts with the objects in favor of truth as an agreement of the object with *its own* concept or of objectivity in general with *the* Concept (i.e., with reason). He distinguishes between (ontological) truth on the one hand and (epistemological) correctness on the other:

... the truth is this, that objectivity corresponds to the concept, – not that external things correspond to my representations; these are only *correct* representations that *I, this person ...* have (EL § 213 Remark).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See also EL § 24 Addition 2: “Usually we call truth the agreement of an object with our representation of it ... In the philosophical sense, by contrast, truth means in general the agreement of a content with itself ...”, i.e. with its own concept or normative idea. Hegel points out that this philosophical understanding of truth is also

In other words, things (or, rather, their concepts) carry a normative standard of objectivity or truth within themselves, and it is not our subjective norms by which they should be judged. In fact, *my* judgment is ‘objective’ only to the extent that it measures the object against its own inner standard.<sup>26</sup> Subjective and objective become ontological characteristics, they attach to types of being, not to propositions about, or representations of, types of being. To call something subjective now means to attribute the characteristics of subjectivity to it, which are likewise the characteristics of the Concept, in particular those of self-referentiality, self-organization and self-determination.

Furthermore, Hegel introduces a substantive element into the notion of truth such that something can be more or less true, i.e., more or less in agreement with its concept or the Concept. The usual true/false distinction is replaced by a progression in the adequacy of a given concept or category to *the* Concept, whereas the Concept itself is subject to a “development” from the so-called subjective concept to the absolute idea.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the categories of being and essence in the Logic express the structure of the Concept inadequately or one-sidedly and hence are less fully intelligible than the Concept itself.

One might ask whether the epistemological problem of objectivity that centers on the question of the agreement of concepts or judgments with things or states of affairs has completely disappeared from Hegel’s view. Here one could point out that Hegel is indeed mindful of the problem concerning the relationship of consciousness and world. But he believes that the Cartesian hiatus between the two – or what he calls the “opposition of consciousness” (HW V 43; SL 49) – is only a transitory stage in the reflection of thinking about thought’s relationship to reality. Even the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is meant to teach consciousness to overcome this opposition, starts with a position of immediacy – called Sense-Certainty – which implicitly contains both consciousness and the object-world in a unity.<sup>28</sup> Once consciousness has climbed the ladder of the *Phenomenology*, it realizes that it has itself become part and parcel of the subject-object unity that is spirit. Its function as consciousness is merely to give expression to the truth of spirit from a subjective point of view (much like the member of the religious congregation that celebrates the union of man and God in Christ<sup>29</sup>). The relationship of consciousness and world has ‘sublated’ itself into an identity of the individual with the universal spirit.

The closest Hegel himself comes to an epistemological investigation is in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit, where he analyzes the relationship of self and world at different levels of complexity, from the soul’s relationship with nature via consciousness’ relationship to external objects to that of the will with the objects of desire.<sup>30</sup> When discussing Kant in the

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part of our ordinary thinking, for instance, when we call someone a “true” friend, a friend who behaves according to the normative idea of how a genuine friend should behave.

<sup>26</sup> This is practically the inversion of what we saw above in Kant, where objectivity depended on the judgment, rather than the object.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. EL §§ 161-162. Note that strictly speaking there is no falsity in the system anymore, since ontological entities cannot be false, only more or less adequate in expressing the structure of the Concept.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel makes this point in the Introduction by arguing that not only the for-itself of the object (its appearance) but also the object’s in-itself (its nature or essence) is *for* consciousness (cf HW III 76-78; PS §§ 82-85). In the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit, Hegel points out that consciousness or the I overarches the object from the start, i.e., the separation between mind and object falls within the mind itself (cf. ES § 413)..

<sup>29</sup> Cf. HW III 570f; PS § 784.

<sup>30</sup> A thumbnail sketch of an epistemological treatment of sensation, representation and concept is to be found at EL § 20 Remark.

Introduction to the *Encyclopedia*, however, he does use the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity in the traditional epistemological sense. His comment there puts an interesting gloss on Kant's project in the First Critique. In his attempt to secure objectivity for knowledge, Hegel says, Kant included objectivity within the sphere of the epistemic subject and thus created a subjective objectivity, an objectivity of the finite human point of view, so to speak:

... the Critical Philosophy expands the opposition [between subjectivity and objectivity] in such a way that experience *in its entirety*, i.e., both those elements together, belong to *subjectivity* and nothing remains opposite it but the *thing-in-itself* (EL § 41).

In other words, when objectivity becomes the product of the subject's a priori syntheses, *true* objectivity re-emerges again opposite the subject, albeit now as an unknowable reality. By contrast, for Hegel the opposition of consciousness must be overcome in such a way that the sphere of things themselves is re-included in the domain of thought so as to arrive at an objective objectivity of knowledge. And it must be overcome *before* one starts to do philosophy, Hegel claims:

... pure science [i.e., the Logic] presupposes liberation from the opposition [sc. of consciousness]. It contains *thought in so far as this is just as much the object in its own self, or the object in its own self in so far as it is equally pure thought* (HW V 43; SL 49).

Hegel calls this identity of thought and object "objective thinking" (*ibid.*).<sup>31</sup> Objective thinking evaluates the agreement, or lack thereof, of any of the categorial entities in the Logic with the Concept, from the initial being to the categories within the Concept itself. So if one likes, one could call this the epistemological aspect of Hegel's ontological thought. But one should keep in mind that objective thought analyzes categories, i.e., concepts that stand for ontological structures, and does not concern the relationship of subjective representations to objects of experience.

Subjectivity and objectivity are both ontological structures in Hegel's Logic, but there is an important difference between the two. While objectivity has a fixed place in the ontological hierarchy of the Logic, subjectivity, although it is also identified with the so-called subjective Concept (cf. HW VI 272; SL 599), is an operative concept that characterizes the aspect of self-referentiality and self-enclosedness of all ontological structures. Usually, this aspect is dominant in the first and the third stage of any dialectical triad. We can further differentiate between these two cases, if we characterize the first stage as the universality aspect of subjectivity (or as subjectivity in-itself) and the third stage the individuality aspect of subjectivity (or as subjectivity in and for itself). Hegel describes the latter in abstract logical terms as a structure of negation of negation or "absolute negativity". In it, the opposite of a given category has been re-integrated into it and remains contained within this 'negative', i.e. self-referential unity. Given this use of the terminology, we will not be surprised to find Hegel referring to the 'something' that appears very early on in the Logic already as a subject, i.e., as a "negative unity with itself":

Something is the *first negation of negation*, as simple self-relation in the form of being. ... The negative of the negative is, as *something*, only the beginning of the subject, being-within-itself ... It determines itself further on, first, as a *being-for-self*

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<sup>31</sup> See also EL §§ 21-25 and in particular §§ 24-25.

and so on, until in the Concept it first attains the concrete intensity of the subject. At the base of all these determinations lies the negative unity with itself. ... [T]he latter is concrete, *absolute* negativity (HW V 123f; SL 115f).

It is fair to say that subjectivity in this sense, as the structure of self-referentiality, represents the universal character of self, world, thought and spirit in Hegel's philosophy. Looked at in this way, Hegel's is a philosophy of subjectivity taken as the objective character of the real. Reality as a whole, as nature and as spirit, exhibits this structure, and so does the highest category of the Logic, the Idea, which is the unity or synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity:

The idea can be grasped as *subject-object*, as the *unity of the ideal and the real, of the finite and the infinite, of the soul and the body*, as the *possibility that has its actuality in itself*, as that the *nature* of which *can only be conceived as existing*, and so forth, because in it [the idea] all relationships of the understanding are contained, but in their *infinite* return and identity in themselves (EL § 214).<sup>32</sup>

The logical structure of subjectivity (or of what it means to be a subject) is most fully developed in the first part of the Logic of the Concept entitled Subjectivity or the Subjective Concept.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Hegel identifies the structure of subjectivity with the traditional forms of logical reasoning, namely, the concept, the judgment and the syllogism. The logical structure of thought is the core of subjectivity. The syllogism in particular captures subjectivity in its most developed form and serves as an operative category with which to elucidate the logical structure of subsequent aspects of reality such as those of objectivity.<sup>34</sup> Objectivity or the Object, as Hegel calls this category in the *Encyclopedia Logic*<sup>35</sup>, follows subjectivity as the immediate "realization" (EL § 193) of the subjective Concept. Objectivity or the Object can be taken as the equivalent of what Schelling called Nature or the real (as opposed to the ideal). Hegel characterizes it as "the objective world in general" (EL § 193 Remark), but it is the inward logical structure of nature that he has in mind.<sup>36</sup> It is important to remember that we are still within the sphere of 'abstract' *logical* determinations for which the externality of objects in space and time is as yet irrelevant. So when Hegel likens objectivity to 'the objective world in general', he is referring not to the world in space and time but to its inner ideal structure.<sup>37</sup>

In the Object, the logical structures of the Concept translate into the three aspects of what one might call a self-referential, self-regulating system. These are mechanism, chemism and teleology (which are the ideal structures underlying the real structures of mechanics, physics and organics in the Philosophy of Nature). If we look at the larger architectonic of the system, we can see that the subjective Concept corresponds to the Logic, Objectivity or the Object to Nature, and the Idea to Spirit.

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<sup>32</sup> Note that the 'subject-object' is itself a subject, namely, one that includes its own other within itself. Thus, my body as my other(ness) is equally who I am as a living spiritual being.

<sup>33</sup> Hegel uses the latter title in the *Encyclopedia* version of the Logic.

<sup>34</sup> See the interesting reconstruction of the state with the help of a triadic syllogism at EL § 198 Remark. The triadic syllogism is also used to analyze the relationships between the three parts of the system as a whole, viz. Logic, Nature and Spirit (cf. ES §§ 575-577).

<sup>35</sup> See HW VI 402; SL 705 and EL § 194.

<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, objectivity or the Object need to be distinguished from nature properly speaking, which is the topic of the Philosophy of Nature.

<sup>37</sup> It becomes a challenge, then, to differentiate between the ideal logical structure of the ideal and that of the real. Objectivity as the real is nonetheless still the *ideal* structure of the real (hence Hegel's reference to Leibniz' monad as an appropriate illustration of the Object at EL § 194 Remark). By contrast, the subjective Concept would then represent the ideal structure of the ideal.

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