

The Kantian Legacy: Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and Hegel's Logic
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Abstract: This paper is essentially about Fichte. Yet Hegel will figure prominently in it. Indeed, I intend to define the meaning of Hegelian 'logical dialectic', for the nature of Fichte's 'ideal constructs' is best understood by contrast with precisely that 'dialectic'. Kant's critical move consisted essentially in the request that one explain the genesis of experience without however stepping dogmatically outside its limits. I shall argue that Fichte's constructionism and Hegel's type of dialect were both possible developments of this critical legacy—indeed, corrections of it, for Kant did not in fact abide by his own stipulated request. Common wisdom has it that, of the two (Fichte and Hegel), Fichte was the one who remained the closest to Kant. And Kant's legacy was broad enough, and in places even ambiguous, that a case can be made to this effect, especially if one concentrates on the legacy's moral side. But I want to argue that, in what counted most, it is Hegel who was Kant's true inheritor. As it happened, Fichte and Hegel had to work out their relation to Kant while at the same time confronting Spinoza's Absolute. This was a historical accident, but, as I explain, there was a conceptual appropriateness to it.

Prologue: The Kantian Legacy

This paper is essentially about Fichte. If I bring Hegel conspicuously into the picture, this is only for the sake of contrast, in order to define all the more sharply Fichte's position with respect to Kant. Common wisdom has it that Fichte was the one who, in the reception of the Critique of Reason,¹

¹ *Kritik der Vernunft* was how Kant's contemporaries referred to his work critical work in general.

remained the closest to the master. Indeed, Kant's legacy is broad enough, and in places even ambiguous, that a case can be made to that effect, especially if one concentrates on the legacy's moral side. But I want to say that, in what counted most in the legacy, it is Hegel who was Kant's true inheritor. I shall presently say what I consider as "counting most." I must first make clear that the Fichte I have in mind is post-Jena—notably the Fichte of 1804 onward, the time when Fichte had dropped from his *Science*² the idiom of the "I"; when Hegel, for his part, had finally made it to the philosophical stage, and a conversation between the two, albeit always at a distance and perhaps not even ever deliberately intended, was in fact taking shape. The Fichte Hegel had in mind in his criticisms was always the author of the early versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. As for Fichte, his primary confrontation was with Schelling³—not Hegel, to whom he occasionally only alluded. A conversation was nonetheless taking shape between the two, for, whoever their immediate philosophical interlocutor (and Schelling was as much in Hegel's mind as in Fichte's), it was with the metaphysics of Spinoza that both, in their contrasting ways, were taking position, and, in so doing, were also staking their respective claims to the Kantian legacy. That Spinoza should have been the catalyst for sorting out, so to speak, their differences with respect to Kant might seem strange. But the fact is that, because of historical events connected with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi,⁴ the figure of Spinoza came to dominate the intellectual scene of the late Enlightenment, and continued to dominate it in the subsequent early Romanticism. The net result was that the issue of how to interpret this venerable metaphysician coopted the reception of Kant. Post-Kant idealism was born under the large shadow of Spinoza. How one interpreted Spinoza reflected how one intended to build on Kant's legacy.

² This is how I shall refer to the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

³ This is true, but not totally so. Fichte's concern was also to prove himself before Jacobi.

⁴ Events which I have documented elsewhere. Cf. Section II of *The Unfinished Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, the introduction to *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, tr., ed., George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston, 1994; paper back, 2009) [henceforth: *The Main Philosophical Writings*]. Also: G. di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774-1880* (Cambridge, 2005), Chapter 1. [Henceforth, *Freedom and Religion*.]

This was, of course, a historical accident. But there was conceptual appropriateness to it. To turn to what I said “counted most” in the Kantian legacy, Kant’s critical move consisted essentially in defining the possibility of objective experience (i.e., of experiential truth) from the standpoint of one who is himself immersed in experience and is *ex hypothesi* unable to step outside it. The error of all prior metaphysics (the metaphysics that Kant dubbed “dogmatic”) lay precisely in the presumption that one can perform this step, and explain what things are “in themselves” rather than limit oneself to their presence in experience—that is to say, without abiding by the limits that experience imposes on this presence. Fichte posed the problem of experience in precisely these terms in the 1797 new Introduction to his Science. As he said, “A finite rational being possesses nothing whatsoever beyond experience. [. . .] These same conditions necessarily apply to the philosopher, and thus it appears incomprehensible how he could ever succeed in elevating himself above experience.”⁵ How can one establish the genesis of objective experience while remaining within it? On the assumption that experience is necessarily directed at a transcendent “thing in itself,” Kant had dealt with the problem simply by defining the conditions under which that supposed “thing in itself” is, on the one hand, *given* to experience, and, on the other, *recognized* in judgement *as so given*. “Sensibility” defined the conditions of “being given”; “conceptual reflection,” of its recognition. What counted most in Kant’s critical project, and also defined his critical legacy, was precisely the requirement that one abide by these conditions alone: that one do not step outside experience.

But unfortunately Kant himself did not necessarily abide by these self-imposed limits. At issue was the robustness of the claim of “being given” as applied to any object. On Kant’s assumption that the “thing in itself” was no more than an empty formal intention, and objectivity, therefore, purely phenomenal, how could one tell whether the intelligible structures, the coherence of determination, by which one recognized objects as validly given was indeed truly *given*? that it was more than just a product of the imagination, and science, therefore, not just a fiction that only hid the fact that in experience events *de facto* occur at random, just as Hume had

⁵ J. G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhart Lauth, et al. 42 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1962—), Series I, Vol. 4, § 3. [Henceforth GA, followed by series and volume number.]

claimed? The phenomenal objectivity of experience was the issue that precipitated the critical scepticism of Solomon Maimon.⁶ Kant was making stronger claims about the objectivity of experience than he was entitled to on his very assumptions about the nature of experience.⁷ In this, he was stepping outside experience, thus contravening his own critical demand.⁸

One can understand, therefore, why Fichte and Hegel staked out their positions by criticizing Kant's "thing in itself," as well as his *a priori/a posteriori* dichotomy; why this criticism, moreover, was motivated by Kant's own critical requirement. One can equally understand why this critical preoccupation could blend in their mind with the further Romantic problem of how to speak of the Absolute if, *ex hypothesi*, there is no space outside it from which to objectify it and thus speak of it.. The two concerns seemed antithetical: the one, not to step outside experience; the other, how to allow for experience at all in the face of the Absolute. But they coincided in that for both the issue was one of saving the objectivity of experience, of explaining the *givenness* of it. As Fichte asked in 1797, "But what is the basis of the system of representations accompanied by a feeling of necessity [I gloss, the feeling of being bound to, and by, an "other"], and what is the basis of this feeling of necessity itself?"⁹ Fichte and Hegel came up with radically different answers to this question.

⁶ I have documented Maimon's critique elsewhere. Cf. *Freedom and Religion*, pp. 97-104. Also: G. di Giovanni, "The Facts of Consciousness," introduction to *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, tr., G. di Giovanni, H. S. Harris; revised edition, G. di Giovanni (Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2000), pp. 20-27; 32-36.

⁷ And Kant had certainly not clarified the issue by schematizing the connection between "thing in itself" and content of experience in physical terms, psychologically, as the product of one thing standing opposite another and physically reacting with it. This was a common interpretation of the critical method, even though it led to a dogmatism that flew in the face of all that the *Critique of Reason* in fact stood for.

⁸ This is an oversimplification, and very likely a misinterpretation of Kant. But this is how Kant was understood in his days, and, when historical influence is at issue, how a philosopher is understood is more important than what the philosopher might actually have meant. For a more sophisticated reading of Kant, see John McDowell's criticism of Wilfrid Sellars' criticism of Kant. *Having the World in View* (Harvard, 2009), chapter 2.

⁹ GA I/4 §3.

Fichte and the Wissenschaftslehre: The Issue

At least from 1804 on, that they were “schemata” was Fichte’s favourite description of his ideal constructions.¹⁰ The term immediately calls to mind Kant’s “schematism of the imagination,” the part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* for which the Romantics felt special affinity. And there were indeed Romantic strains behind it, because of the new starting point that Fichte now gave to his Science. No science was possible, so Fichte claimed, apart from the assumption that truth is One. It followed that the principle of his Science, for which he claimed absolute truth, could be no other than “the All-One Absolute” (*das all-eine Absolute*), the only possible source of such a truth.¹¹ This was, of course, a deliberate Spinozistic standpoint, and Fichte well knew the objection that could be raised against it, and which he also raised.¹² In conceiving the Absolute¹³ as a self-contained and all-encompassing substance in the manner of Spinoza, one begged the question of how one can say anything determinate about it: exactly the criticism that Kant had levelled against all dogmatic metaphysics. To be sure, Spinoza himself, in attributing to his Absolute such determinations as thought and extension, had only *attributed* them to it. “To attribute” something to anything is only “to say this something of it” without necessarily claiming that it belongs to it *in itself*. The Absolute’s determinations were quite explicitly only *said of it* from the standpoint of a finite intelligence: they were subjective determinations with no strict objective value. But here lay the difficulty. For one cannot use the language of attribution, and respect its logic, without thereby assuming a space outside the target of attribution from

¹⁰ See, for instance, the schema $A / xyz \cdot B-T$, which summarizes Lecture II, and governs the rest of the exposition of the W-L. GA II/8, 19.

¹¹ See Lecture I of the second version of the 1804 W-L (Fichte gave three versions of it in that year; we are only referring to the second). GA II/8, 9. But see also, as another among many instances, “Vom Verhältniß der Logik zur wirklichen Philosophie – Nachschrift Itzt” (1812): “. . . also auch: *kein mannigfaltiges Seyn*; wohl aber *Ein Seyn: Gott!* der nur aber in seinem Bilde im Wissen vorkömmt” IV/5, 57 (lines 8-9).

¹² W-L 1804, Lecture XIV.

¹³ Spinoza speaks of “substance,” not “Absolute.” In the present context, I am simply adapting his language to that of the Idealists.

which the attribution is made—the space, in other words, for a subjective standpoint. In Spinoza’s case, however, to assume such a space would have been to posit something outside the Absolute; hence, to limit it externally; hence, to contradict the original assumption of an all-encompassing unity.

This might not have been a problem for Spinoza because, as Fichte put it, he simply let the subject doing the attribution submerge in the Absolute. For this reason he described Spinozism as a state of “absolute obscurity.” After Kant, however, it had to be a problem. Fichte could not even state the first principle of his Science without already falsifying it by stating it. And Fichte was aware of the contradiction he was incurring. The task that thus presented itself to him, and which his Science had to resolve, was one of developing the language of attribution in such a way that, though directed at the Absolute as its object, it would be subjectively true to it only by negating itself before it; he had to develop it, in other words, as a language that constituted itself by at the same time annulling itself. To revert to the spatial imagery which Fichte (unlike Hegel) favoured, this was a way of granting a space outside the Absolute while at the same time abolishing it as anything “outside” it; hence of reducing it to a mere *Schein*, something illusionary. Of course, to accomplish this task did not mean that the original contradiction was thereby resolved. On the contrary, *staying with* the contradiction was part of Fichte’s strategy. His brilliant move was to make the contradiction the immediate object of his Science, and the Science’s goal, not indeed to remove it, for that would have necessitated relapsing into Spinoza’s dogmatism (or, alternatively, ceasing to speak altogether), but to contain it conceptually. One had to demonstrate that to live with it *was* to manifest the Absolute’s presence, and, in this sense, to attain objectivity. The Science’s logic was to be one of “appearance and illusion”—an “appearance and illusion” which, however, was as such nonetheless true.¹⁴

The imagery of “schemata” and “schematism” corresponded to Spinoza’s language of

¹⁴ “On a particular occasion I divided the science of knowledge into two main parts; one, which is the doctrine of reason and truth; the second, which is a doctrine of appearance and illusion, but one which is *indeed true* and is grounded in truth..” W-L 1804, Lecture 15, GA II/8, pp.228–229..

“attribution.” A “schema” is an imaginative construction by virtue of which something is represented, but according to norms and conditions specific to the construction’s medium.¹⁵ Like a metaphor, the schema retains a content of its own which renders it non-transparent with respect to the object it represents—however idealizing and abstractive its production might have been. In this sense, the schema remains as much a free work of the imagination as a conceptual product of reason. Fichte also says that a schema represents its object only at a distance, vicariously, or, to use his favourite term, by deputizing for it, as *Stellvertreter*. Like the language of attribution, its inner logic is not necessarily that of the intended object *in itself*. Of course, in normal cases, one can stand outside both schema and schematized object, and is in a position, therefore, to measure their correspondence by comparing them externally. *Ex hypothesi*, however, this was not possible for Fichte’s schema of the Absolute’s relation to experience, since the one doing the comparison was *in the schema*. And this was not just a matter of a lack of space outside the Absolute from which to do the comparison. How to say coherently, from within the schema, that there was no such space; or in what the comparing would mean—that was the truly troubling problem.

Fichte faced it by construing his “schemas” of experience relying exclusively on their form as schemas, that is to say, on each being itself by virtue of being *other than itself*; or again, by each being a *nothing*, yet in its nothingness achieving its own reality precisely as “schema.” Methodically developed, the schemas formed an overall schematism of experience which represented the latter as itself a schema of the Absolute, that is to say, as constituting with respect to it only an illusory reality (*Schein*). The success of the Science depended, accordingly, on reaching a point at which, as science, it naturally rejoined actual experience, thus demonstrating that its own nothingness was simply a more reflective form of the nothingness that was experience.

Fichte and the Wissenschaftslehre: The original schema

How did Fichte absolve this task? His Science, in all its various presentations, always began with

¹⁵ Just as in the blueprint of an edifice.

a demand made on his auditors. In 1804,¹⁶ the demand was that they creatively (*energetisch*) imagine themselves at a point between simple unity, which is the Absolute's domain, and the domain of multiple finite experiences. Fichte indicated the first by a capital A; the second, by a capital X; and the point between the two where they become significantly related, by a dot; thus:

(1) A, X

(2) A · X (X = x, y, z)

The content of X were the particular x, y, z, which had been for Kant the objects, respectively, of his three Critiques. Fichte further asked his auditors to imagine themselves at the limit-point between the two domains, oscillating between the two without letting themselves be submerged into either. To give themselves over to the Absolute, the A, would have amounted to renouncing the possibility of conceptualization and, consequently, falling into unconsciousness. The alternative, giving in to the finite, would have been to dogmatically assume the objects of experience (and by implication the transcendent Absolute) as ready-made things for which one can establish only external relations. Of course, one cannot stay in this state of oscillation. One must speak; thereby revert to conceptual discourse and the determinate objects which it brings in train. But for Fichte's auditors this return to finite experience had to be with a difference, for they now knew that, to conceive the Absolute critically, one had to conceive it precisely as inconceivable, that even this predicate, "inconceivable," did not really belong to it but was rather a function of their own thinking, a statement about this thinking of the Absolute rather than the Absolute itself.

Fichte's Science was about this statement: about the conditions that it had to satisfy as a language which, in speaking about things, *in fact* always intended the presence of a transcendent "other." This presence was necessarily left unspoken *per se*, yet, although unspoken, it was not any the less effective (*wirklich*) for that, since it imparted a completely new meaning to the spoken things. To revert to the spatial imagery of Fichte's overall schema, the Science's

¹⁶ The first presentation of the following schema is in Lecture II (second version of the W=L 1804), but variations of it continue in the rest of the text. The schema is more clearly apparent in W-L 1807. For the latter, cf. Helmut Girndt, "Die Wissenschaftslehre 1807: Eine Zusammenfassung ihres Gedankengangs," *Fichte-Studien*, Vol. 26, ed. Marco Ivalso (Amsterdam/New York, 2006), pp. 11-36.

preoccupation was to hold its ground at the point of oscillation (the \cdot) between A and X. This was a space which Fichte describes as *der Lage des Todes*, or *der Tod im Wurzel*,¹⁷ that is, as the source of spiritual death, for it is there that one, unable to withstand its oscillation, runs the risk of falling into the x, y, z, that are the particular content of X. Not that such a fall can be avoided. It cannot indeed, for it is the event that gives rise to actual and determinate experience. But in the fall one also forgets that the x, y, z, are only the illusionary “precipitates” of that oscillation. The German for “precipitate,” *Absatz*, which Fichte used in this context, was a term that traditionally also translated the alchemists’s *corpus mortuum*, the dead residue of chemical reactions.¹⁸ To forget the x, y, z’s illusionary character was to forget that the truth of experience lies in its being only a disappearing schema of the Absolute. This is what makes the x, y, z, spiritually dead. The task of Fichte’s Science was to revive them by reconstructing them as explicitly carrying the form of mere *Schein*.

To the two moments of the original schema, Fichte proceeded to add, therefore, three more that directly relate to the x, y, z. These x, y, z are to be conceived as identical with the Absolute (=); yet also as different from it (\neq); finally, as at once identical with, yet different from, it ($= \cdot \neq$). Fichte’s resulting full schema thus consisted of five moments:

- (1) A, X
- (2) A \cdot X
- (3) A = X
- (4) A \neq X
- (5) (A = X) \cdot (A \neq X)¹⁹

Fichte insisted on this five-part structure of the schema—its “quintuplicity,” as he called it, obviously contrasting it with what he took to be the triadic structure of Kant’s table of categories,

¹⁷ C f. Lecture VIII, GA II.8, 121 (line 7)–123 (line 10). Also, Lecture XIV, GA II.8, 217 (line 26)–220 (line 32); pp. 219–224 *in toto* are relevant.

¹⁸ *Præcipitare* (the Latin root of “precipitate” which is the translation of *Absatz*.) means “to be cast down,” “to fall headlong.”

¹⁹ This is the schema so far as I can see it. Despite insisting on the “quintuplicity” of his Science, Fichte never clearly spells out these five moments.

and the systems of Schelling and Hegel. This was, however, only a *first* schema, abstract and even dogmatic in nature, for it still represented the relation of experience to the Absolute as if standing outside it. The Science's further task was to develop it to the point that it would internalize the relation it represented: transform it, in other words, as a relation lived in actual experience. This was a matter of developing *in extenso* moment (2) of the schema, so that it would assume the form of moment (5); or, to say the same from the standpoint of moment (5), of demonstrating that the x, y, z of X were but precipitates of moment (2), mere *Schein*.

Fichte and the Wissenschaftslehre: The unfolding of experience

Not indeed to sum up, for that would be impossible, but to convey at least an idea of how Fichte's Science unfolded, one can say that it follows a pattern of methodically constructing the schemata of possible forms which the relation of "thought" to "being" assumes in consciousness—each schema constituting a particular shape of actual experience—and of just as methodically striking down the schemata, one by one, by revealing their internal inconsistency. The image of "striking down" (*erschlagen*) is Fichte's. The source of the instability lies in the failure on the part of each shape to absorb the terms of the relation defining it (that is to say, its content) into the relating movement itself (that is, its form), thereby letting the terms precipitate (fall out) as presupposed entities. Hence a new schema must be brought into the picture to absorb the precipitate, and in each case the schema must be progressively more reflective, since the terms to be absorbed are, for their part, progressively ever more determinate and, therefore, apparently more independent.. In the 1804 Science, the schemata of idealism and realism are thus struck down, and so, too, the new forms of idealism and realism that emerge in Fichte's presentation over their demise.²⁰ Consciousness itself is struck down, as well as the subject/object division which is essential to it.²¹ The very process of thus constructing *a priori*

²⁰ Lecture XII, XIII and XIV deal with this reduction. Both idealism and realism must be struck down because, in their different ways, they both presuppose an "in itself" as absolute which, in point of fact, cannot be such, for it implies an opposition and must be, therefore, a relative, the product of consciousness.

²¹ Lecture XIV is relevant. Cf. "[Here is the] chief result: Consciousness has been rejected in its intrinsic validity, despite the fact that we have admitted we cannot escape it. [...] If

otherwise mere facts of consciousness, thus presuming to genetically enact within *oneself* a passage to the Absolute; indeed this “oneself” itself, the “we” who believes *it* is doing the constructing, whereas, in truth, the construction does itself spontaneously²²—all this is struck down.

This process of repeated construction and deconstruction is how Fichte displays extensively, at moment (5) of his original schema, the oscillation at moment (2). In the process, the otherwise purely formal schema of the oscillation at (2) acquires content: it is displayed as the movement of actual experience. By the same token, however, any semblance that the x, y, z of the X at (5) might have of being things existing on their own is dissolved. Content is reduced to form; the x, y, z to mere *Schein*, illusionary being. The process is continuous. One can nonetheless identify nodes in it²³—points at which experience turns upon itself; gains new *prises de conscience*; and thereby reflectively incorporates within its present form the previous ones, reducing them to content. The schema of the “through” (*das Durch*) is one such node.²⁴ It is the schema of “being-oneself-through-another” which sums up in itself the forms of intentional existence. The schema of the “should” (*das Soll*), or the “being-oneself-only-at-a-distance-from oneself” is another node.²⁵ It sums up the conative modes of existence. It is, however the schema of “life” that marks an especially significant turning point, for it explicitly includes the moments of “reflectivity” and “phenomenality” which are the very essence of schematism. “Life,” for Fichte, is by definition a mode of existence that retains unity across a possibly infinite multitude

we have once seen into this fact, although *factically* we could never negate consciousness, we will not really believe it when judging truth; instead, when judging, we will abstract from it; indeed, on the condition that we want to get to truth, we must do this, but not unconsciously, since it is not necessary that we see into the truth.” GA II/8: 217 (lines 25-33).

²² Fichte held that any ratiocinative process, including his own, proceeded mechanically: once a first step was made, the rest followed without any subjective input into it.

²³ These turns are especially well identifiable in the W-L 1807, in many ways more accessible than the 1804. Rametta comments on it extensively.

²⁴ W-L 1804, Lectures 11 and 12. The image of “node” is mine.

²⁵ W-L 1804, Lecture 17.

of otherwise disparate life-events.²⁶ Life is reflection. Its existence is itself a process of schematization, for nowhere is it to be found except in the life-episodes that manifest it; yet these same life-episodes are nothing apart from this life which they manifest: they manifest it as an “other” that adds nothing to their content, yet makes them what they truly are.

It is in the schema of “life” that Fichte’s Science achieves the first concrete realization of the shifting space (·) posited between A and X. With that schema in place, Fichte is therefore in a position of reintroducing within the new expositions of the Science the detailed phenomenological content of the earlier ones.²⁷ All the dimensions of consciousness are reintroduced, those at the basis of theoretical as well as practical experience. They are reintroduced, however, as schematic developments of the more fundamental schema of “life”: places where life achieves ever greater reflective interiority and unity, but where it also ever more explicitly appears as under the pull of the unspoken transcendent Other that gives meaning to it.

Fichte and the Wissenschaftslehre: The conclusion

Fichte’s Science, as *Wissenschaftslehre*, or the Science of Science, is itself a dimension of this life—indeed the place where life attains its highest form of reflective unity. The science cannot conclude, therefore, without a reflection upon itself as occupying this position in life. This, the conclusion, is the most delicate point in its whole development. The science is a construction, a work of conceptual art. Fichte repeatedly referred to it as *Kunst*, “art.” It must be art because of its Spinozistic premise. As a system of representations, it remains irreducibly non-transparent with respect to its object: it remains metaphorical, the product of art. Fichte’s Science is *only* a schema. Short, therefore, of purging itself of its metaphorical content, something impossible *ex hypothesi*, it can consistently bring itself to conclusion only by doing to itself what it has done to all the schemata it has hereto brought on the scene, namely, striking itself down. The truth of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that its truth rests on a contradiction. Ultimately, this truth is inexpressible. But, if it escapes words, it must then be lived. “Away with all words and signs!” Fichte tells his

²⁶ W-L 1804, Lectures 11 and 12.

²⁷ He does it differently in the various expositions.

auditors. And he continues, “Nothing remains except our living thinking and insight which can’t be shown on a blackboard nor be represented in any way but can only be surrendered to nature.”²⁸ This is the meaning of Fichte’s claim that his Science must rejoin lived experience.²⁹ The scientist has no choice, after his agonizing reflection to which he has been as if fated by nature, but to go on living.³⁰ Materially, nothing in experience has changed for him in the meantime. Things still are what they always were. It’s their meaning, however, which for him has irrevocably been altered. Henceforth, to exist is for him not unlike living according to the Gospel’s injunction that one must be in this world while knowing that he belongs to another. Fichte’s Science naturally runs into religious rhetoric. The 1806 *Anweisung zum seligen Leben* is there to prove the point.

There are two factors in the development of the Science that pervade it throughout, but to which we can advert only now. They are *Einsehen* (immediate seeing or insight)³¹ and *Weisheit* (wisdom).³² The two are the terms of a schema which, like the rest, has to be deconstructed, for the terms fall apart as independent, and the oscillation between them, which makes for the evidence animating lived experience, is lost. This is an evidence that rests, on the one hand, on the immediate awareness (the *Einsehen*)³³ of a transcendent presence that defies verbalization

²⁸Lecture VI, GA II/8, 95 (lines 30-33).

²⁹ I owe this insight to Gaetano Rametta, “Einleitende Bemerkungen über die Wissenschaftslehre von 1807,” *Fichte-Studien*, ed. Marco Ivalso (Amsterdam/NewYork, 2006), pp. 33-61

³⁰ This should be connected with Fichte’s earlier appeal to Jacobi, in which he claimed that, whereas Jacobi lived the truth naturally, Fichte (and those like him fated to philosophy) were condemned to the agony of reflection. Letter of 30 August 1795. GA III/2, # 307 (see the last two paragraphs, pp. 392-393).

³¹ I do not believe that it is equivalent to the earlier “intellectual intuition,” which is more akin to Kant’s “I think” and Schelling’s immediate objective vision, both of which Fichte strikes down in the course of his Science.

³² The 1804 Science is especially based on these two factors.

³³ Another term would be “intimation” (*Ahnung*), which Fichte also occasionally uses. This is a term that Jacobi used, and so did (even more extensively) Jakob Fries. One must keep in

(like Spinoza's Absolute, it defies determination); and, on the hand, on a type of knowledge (*Weisheit*) which, while meaning to put words to this awareness, knows that it must fail. This was the *Wissenschaftslehre*'s kind of knowledge. It is wisdom, since it ends in silence. In 1804, Fichte also used the metaphor of "light" to express figuratively the nature of this evidence. It is like a light which, while illuminating and thus making knowledge possible, at the same time hides from view: hence puts the knowledge it otherwise enables into question. Hegel, as he came to confront Spinoza at the end of the Second Part of his Logic, also used the image of light with reference to the Absolute of past metaphysics. He describes this Absolute as a dense totality of being from which light cannot escape but in which must remain hidden. The connection with Fichte, though perhaps unintended, is nonetheless obvious.

Hegel's Logic

Hegel did not have a high opinion of Fichte's method of constructions which Schelling also shared, and for which there were precedents in Kant as well. The method was inspired by Euclidian geometry, in which theorems are proved with the help of constructions imaginatively introduced *ad hoc*, but dropped as merely accidental as soon as the nerve of the proof comes to light. So far as Hegel's was concerned, in philosophy constructions were just as accidental as they were to geometry's; when, dropped, however, revealed nothing. Of course, from Fichte's point of view, the criticism missed the target. His constructions were indeed intended to be *only* constructions, for their object was *per se* ineffable. They reflected the phenomenality of experience. Here lay Fichte's difference with Hegel. Whereas his Science concluded in silence, for Hegel, on the contrary, nothing could be relevantly said to exist unless it were put into words. Or again, whereas Fichte, in one of his very late series of lectures dedicated to logic (1812), dismissed it as mere formal technique of thought, for Hegel, on the contrary, first science necessarily assumed the form of a logic.³⁴ It had to, for knowledge is essentially discursive. The

mind that Fichte was implicitly in dialogue with Jacobi, much more so than reacting to Schelling.

³⁴ My text is the so called Greater Logic, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, published in 1812, 1813, 1816. The first Book of 1812 was substantially revised in the new complete edition of 1832. I shall be referring to *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg,

attitude of each to the Absolute (to Spinoza's "substance") had to differ accordingly. Fichte began with the Absolute. Hegel came to the idea of it only at the transition point from objective to subjective Logic.³⁵ This transition is our text of interest. But first a word about the Logic.

The problem of experience for Kant was, as we have seen, one of *recognizing* an object *as given* in case it was given *de facto*. The norms of recognition, that is to say, the norms for recognizing what counted as a valid object, were the categories. Kant arrived at a table of them by a deduction which he called "metaphysical" (as contrasted with "transcendental")—an exercise which he also significantly characterized as the "determination of the concept of an object in general."³⁶ Hegel's move away from Kant was to develop this table of categories—which, as Hegel thought, Kant had established only *ad hoc*, and left incomplete—in order to demonstrate that the categories, although often used in common discourse as descriptive terms, are in fact products of conceptual reflection. *They express, arranged into meaning-related groups, degrees of objective presence achieved in experience in the medium of language.* In contemporary terminology, Hegel's Logic was a case of "descriptive metaphysics." Like Kant's metaphysical deduction, its concern is not with things supposedly independent of experience, but with the presence such things achieve in experience: with the validity of their objectivity, in other words. Unlike Kant's deduction, however, there is no presupposition of a "thing in itself"; even less so, unlike Fichte's Science, any presupposition of an Absolute governing it. It is not that, for Hegel, there is no direct access from experience to these presuppositions (whether "thing in itself" or Absolute), and this lack constitutes a defect, as if something were therefore missing to experience. The point, rather, is that the presuppositions are misplaced, and, consequently, the issue of a lack of direct access to them a pseudo-problem. The only presupposition which the Logic requires is Nature. Experience is where this Nature is made to re-exist according to norms

1962—), Vols. 11, 12, 21. [Henceforth, GW followed by volume and page number.]

³⁵At the end of Book Two of Volume One of Hegel's text: the Objective part, as transition to the Subjective part in Volume Two.

³⁶ B128: "Sie [die Kategorien] sind Begriffe von einem Gegenstande überhaupt" (the rest of the paragraph is also very important).

of intelligibility as established in the context of rational actions; that is, according to the meaning it acquires because of such actions, first and foremost in the medium of language.

I need not, if it even were possible, give an account of Hegel's Logic. Suffice it to say, that the degrees of objective presence that it analytically documents are not equally rationally satisfying: the objective presence achieved in each case not equally, if at all, self-justifying. The Logic develops according as this presence becomes progressively more determined with the introduction of ever more reflective categories: as a result, it internally displays with progressively greater explicitness

the grounds justifying it. In the Logic of Being,³⁷ for instance, the defined presence is that of things as objectified in common language, and in the language of mathematics and classical science. It is a surface presence, the kind which is expressed in the determinations of qualities and quantities. In the Logic of Essence,³⁸ this otherwise merely surface presence acquires depth, in the sense that its form includes a distinction between "itself" and its "determinations," and these two terms, for their part, become progressively more determined as each incorporates in its determination that of the other, and, therefore, also incorporates the determination of the whole presence. Essence is the domain of the objects of classical metaphysics. Its peculiar language is that of totality of presence. Finally, the categories of Subjective Logic³⁹ makes explicit the thesis that underlies the whole development of the Logic—namely, that only in the medium of language, that is, only by being re-born as products of Spirit, can things—in effect, Nature—acquire self-justifying presence.

This last point is the crucial one. It is made at the transition from the Objective to the Subjective parts of the Logic, where, as we have said, the idea of the Absolute comes into play. It does so as the result of Hegel's analysis of the modal categories—as one would expect indeed, for the Absolute denotes absolute presence, and the modal categories define objective presence

³⁷ Book One of Volume One, Objective Logic (1812; much revised edition, 1832).

³⁸ Book Two of Volume One, Objective Logic (1813).

³⁹ Volume Two, Subjective Logic (1816).

ex professo.⁴⁰ Characteristic of these categories is that their meanings spontaneously shift into one another. As Aristotle already noted, the “actual” is by that very fact “possible”; the “possible,” all the more so to the extent that it is already actual. The identity of the two yields either “necessity” or “contingency,” depending on context—more precisely, depending on whether, in saying that “something is,” one means that it “*is* because it *is*,” where the stress is on the “is” and “contingency,” therefore, best defines the existence at issue; or one means that it “*is because it is*,” where the stress is on the “because,” and “necessity” best applies. Hegel subjects to analysis this reciprocal entailment of the modal categories, first at a purely formal level of abstraction, as categories in general; second, as relativized, i.e., in the form in which they would govern ordinary language in the particular contexts of immediate experience, where only relative necessity and relative contingency are at issue. In ordinary contexts, one has no difficulty assuming a thing, simply because it *is there*, as the starting point for the explanation of the presence of something else; yet, when context requires it, reversing the process and taking the presence of the original thing as requiring other things as conditions for its presence—i.e., as providing the *because* of its being *there* in the first place.

There is no difficulty in this. The difficulty arises at a third step, where one tries to comprehend a totality of these otherwise only particular objects, and thus to attain, not just formal or relative modal determination (as at steps one and two), but absolute determination: whether this determination amounts to absolute necessity, and any issue of justification is therefore moot, since not required; or to absolute contingency, when the issue is just as moot, but because impossible. The two converge. The result is the idea of a universe (reminiscent of Leibniz’s, or, better still, Adam Weishaupt’s) made up of particularized worlds, each self-contained and independent of the rest from its point of view—in fact, however, each reflecting and made possible by all the rest. There is no space available in this universe for any counter-factual, for any “might have been, yet is not,” since any “might have been” at one place

⁴⁰ In a passage of the 1832 revised first book, Hegel objected to both Spinoza and Kant for having given the modal categories merely subjective meaning. This was an important objection, the significance of which I have treated at length elsewhere. Cf. The introductory study to my translation of *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge, 2010).

is *ex hypothesi* already actual somewhere else. Nor is there any extra space outside it, from which one might position oneself at a distance from it and raise issues of justification. Before this universe, one finds oneself in exactly the same position as Fichte did before the Absolute at the beginning of his Science. Here is where Hegel brings up the already mentioned image of reality as “dense,” and also plays on the imagery of light. In the universe as just defined, the connection between “possibility” and “actuality” might indeed be one of strict identity, hence the resulting necessity “absolute.” But the point is that such a necessity might just as well be absolute contingency. The modal distinctions have been subverted; the language of justification, therefore, disrupted. Absolute necessity is “blind,” averse to light:⁴¹ not allowing any space outside it, it renders any possibility of discursive disclosure a contradiction *in terminis*.

In Hegel’s Logic we are here at a turning point; historically speaking, at Kant’s critical juncture. One has a choice. Either one abides by the classical metaphysics of an Absolute that defies expression, and, like Fichte, therefore engage in a language, the whole point of which is to negate itself as language. Or, alternatively, one overcomes that metaphysics: one lets the light shine, to use Hegel’s expression.⁴² But, for that, one needs to recognize that the absolute unity, the totality of experience, which classical metaphysics sought in a transcendent entity, is to be found rather within experience as the product of the works of Spirit. It is to be found in Nature, as recreated in the form of art, religion, and, first and foremost, in the medium of discourse. In Hegel’s Logic, as the objective categories of classical metaphysics are absorbed into the subjective ones of discourse, it is Spirit that replaces the Absolute of the past.

Conclusion: The Kantian Legacy

We said that Kant’s self-appointed critical task was to define the possibility of experience without stepping outside its limits, and that the problem of how to save a robust sense of the “given” in experience while absolving this task was the legacy he left to his successors. For Kant, the Absolute of dogmatic metaphysics was like an abyss of reason (*Abgrund der Vernunft*), a

⁴¹ GW 11, 391 (line 38)-392 (line 3).

⁴² GW 11, 392 (lines 3-4).

place where reason comes to grief (*scheitert*) the moment it dares to reach it by transgressing the limits of experience. Also Hegel used the image with reference to the Absolute.⁴³ So did Fichte, in somewhat modified form, in his case to describe the place at which the projection of the One into the many of experience originates. The projection, he said, extends across a gap which is irrational (*per hiatus irrationalem*).⁴⁴ This is the gap which Fichte also called, as we saw earlier, *das Lage des Todes*;⁴⁵ the spot where he asked his auditors to place themselves in imagination, oscillating between the One and the Many. Ultimately, however, they had to recognize that the projection defied rational explanation. At the origin of experience there lies the irrational, the *Abgrund der Vernunft*. Reason, therefore, must give place in silence to the art of living. The ineluctable “givenness” of the objects of experience, with which this art deals, is due precisely to the illusionary character of their presence that defies explanation: their truth lies in an unutterable One. This is how Fichte saved the sense of that “givenness.” Hegel, for his part, took a different route. He simply bypassed Kant’s *Abgrund*; he turned to Spirit, asserting the absolute supremacy of discursiveness over any kind of would-be immediate “seeing.” For him, there was nothing irrational, nothing ineffable, about the irreducibility of the “given” in experience. The point, rather, was that, when measured against the “might have been” that discursiveness ever injects into experience, there is no presence in it which cannot not be re-created, made anew as a work of spirit. The “given” is nothing illusionary: no *Anstoß* to be overcome by being recognized as illusionary existence. It is the positive starting point, rather, of ever new processes of spiritual creation.

Fichte had retained the presuppositions of classical metaphysics. Indeed, he had been truer to them than anyone else before (except perhaps Parmenides) by spelling out their

⁴³ The image of the “abyss” (*der Abgrund*) is in Kant, possibly inspired by Haller, and it reappears in Hegel. For Kant, cf. KrV A613/B641. For Hegel, GW 21, 380; 11, 372 (lines 28-37).

⁴⁴ Cf. Lecture XIV: There is gap, hiatus, between the Oneness and the disjunction; inasmuch as the oneness projects itself into the latter, this happens *per hiatus irrationalem*. WL 1804, GA II/8, 225 (lines 6-11). For another text, GA, II/8, 293 (line 34)–295 (line 2)

⁴⁵ See Note 17 above.

consequences for experience. Kant, by at least allowing the conceptual possibility of intellectual intuition as the limit of rationality, had done the same. In this respect, Fichte continued Kant. But Hegel was the one who, by dismissing as mere *Schein*, not indeed the content of experience, but the presuppositions of classical metaphysics that created that *Schein*, succeeded in realizing the critical project of not overstepping experience. He was Kant's true inheritor.