

German Idealism: The Thought of Modernity

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German idealism developed as the prelude to the French Revolution, as the expression of the Revolution as it was unfolding, as the end of the Revolution with its Napoleonic coda, and finally as the summation of the restoration European world after the Congress of Vienna. Almost all the practitioners and almost all the critical commentators saw this connection to the events of the time, and it formed the unofficial backdrop to its development.

The philosophical revolution predated by a few years the political and social revolution. In 1781 in the Baltic city of Königsberg – in Prussia but beyond even the borders of the Holy Roman Empire – Immanuel Kant finished the *Critique of Pure Reason* and had it published in Riga. It was a dense book full of intricate theories about mathematics, consciousness, logic, the status of natural science, and metaphysics; and yet, despite its density, it almost immediately changed the shape of intellectual life in Europe. Kant provided both a defense of Enlightenment reason and an equally strong case for the impossibility of human reason itself actually satisfying the metaphysical projects it had set itself. It also provided the means for Kant to establish one of the most ringing defenses of freedom and human rights of all time, and it laid the groundwork for a new way of thinking about aesthetic experience. The themes of self-consciousness, spontaneity, freedom, aesthetics, and the possibility of a progressive teleology of historical development formed a combustible mix in Kant's thought. We might say that it was with Kant, and not just the French Revolution, that the long nineteenth century began its march.

Kant's Philosophical Revolution

Pure Reason Turned on Itself

There is no dispute that Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* (with a second, crucially reworded version appearing in 1787) is a demanding book. Since its publication, even mentioning its title has become a bit of a cliché for

difficulty. For that matter, even Kant himself in his preface noted that “this work can never be made suitable for popular consumption.”¹ Nonetheless, after a brief stumbling beginning, the book took off, such that within a matter of just a few years, pro- and anti-Kant factions had sprung up all over the German-speaking lands, and the implications of Kant’s philosophy were even being discussed by some of the leaders of the French Revolution itself, with Napoleon himself coming into the picture at one point to speak on Kant’s relevance (negatively, so it turned out).²

The book’s immediate impact had to do with what people saw as its implications for the growing anxiety about the relation between religion and science. Already by the late 1780s, a renowned protestant theologian at Tübingen, Gottlob Storr, had begun using it (or rather misusing it) to buttress his arguments for a kind of biblical literalism based on divine revelation, whereas in 1788 a renowned Jesuit theologian, Benedikt Sattler, published his own work, *Anti-Kant*, which had as one of its goals the demonstration of the incompatibility of Kantianism with Christianity. Others argued that Kant had in fact settled the debate about science and religion since he had shown that both had equal claims in distinct regions of thought and life.

Kant’s book begins with a famous assertion, noted for its sad and even tragic tone: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.”³ As Kant saw it, for most of our history, we had been living in a kind of illusion where we thought, even when we had not quite put it that way, that human reason, once unencumbered by tradition, or by the senses, or by all of the other “conditional” factors of human life, was nonetheless capable on its own part of reaching the deeper, “unconditioned” truths about the world (such as those of God, freedom, and immortality). The employment of such “pure” reason, Kant sadly noted, had ended up merely in the production of mutually contradictory metaphysical systems. This suggested, in Kant’s rather pungent example, that the history of metaphysics presented only “the ludicrous spectacle of one man milking a he-goat and the other holding a sieve

1 Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 13 (Axix).

2 See the summary in Ferenc Fehér, “Practical Reason in the Revolution: Kant’s Dialogue with the French Revolution,” in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, ed. Ferenc Fehér (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 201–214. See also Jean Quillien (ed.), *La réception de la philosophie allemande en France aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1994).

3 Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 7 (Avii).

underneath.”⁴ That in itself might have seemed to have one of two obvious conclusions: first, a kind of resigned skepticism about our ability to know anything about the ultimate at all, which Kant adamantly rejected, calling it a “euthanasia of reason”;⁵ or, second, an idea that we could somehow circumvent reason altogether and employ some other non-rational faculty to grasp those truths, which Kant thought amounted to simply another type of illusion.

Kant’s counter-proposal was daring. The history of recent philosophy, he suggested, had been a see-saw struggle between empiricists and rationalists. The empiricists were correct in holding that all knowledge of the world came from the senses, but the rationalists were right in holding that the mind has cognitive powers independent of such empirical knowledge. Our senses provide us, as it were, the raw data of knowledge, but raw data cannot organize itself. The organization of the data has to come from the intellect, which in its pure form is fully spontaneous in organizing the sensible “data” under concepts to form judgments. There were, moreover, certain concepts (which Kant called the pure categories) that were indispensable for such organization and which could not be derived from the “data” itself. Two of these were the concept of individual existing, enduring substances possessing alterable properties and the concept of causality itself. Kant claimed to show that these categories were not generalizations from experience but rather necessary for there to be self-conscious experience at all, and the unity of self-conscious experience was itself a necessary condition of any cognitive experience of ourselves and the world. If one did not have a concept of oneself as a unity of experience, there would be no cognition at all but only a buzz of unrelated “data.”

Kant’s radical claim was that all consciousness of the world (as awareness of distinct objects of experience) was always, already self-consciousness (as awareness of what we were doing in being so aware). To complicate matters further, Kant rejected the obvious two-stage interpretation of this, as if, first, we have experiential “data” and then, second, we organize it by conceptual categories. Kant’s view was far more radical: Without both intuitions and concepts working together at once, there was no cognitive experience at all. This self-consciousness was not itself, however, as it might seem, a matter of there being separate reflective acts, as if, in seeing a chair, one also had to be separately thinking to oneself that one was seeing a chair. It had to do with the way in which one knows, for example, that one is reading this sentence by

4 Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 97 (A58 = B83).

5 Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 385 (A407 = B434).

consciously reading this sentence and without necessarily having to draw any further inferences to know this (such as: I am reading this sentence, not gardening, not cooking dinner, etc.).

Unlike sense-experience of objects, which is purely receptive, this self-consciousness is a matter of spontaneity on our part. It is what we each bring to the receptivity of experience, and without the full cooperation of “receptivity” and “spontaneity,” there is no real human experience of ourselves and the world at all. Spontaneity without receptivity is empty. Without receptivity, spontaneity is merely a faculty that produces formal logic. When combined with the faculties of sensibility in their spatial and temporal structure, these spontaneously generated logical forms take on substantive meaning as the basic categories of knowledge (such as substance and causality). Kant called this a philosophical version of the Copernican revolution. Rather than thinking that the mind was receptive only to sensible objects and eternal intelligible forms existing far away in Platonic heaven, the mind was itself spontaneous, ordering experience into an intelligible form rather than simply reading it off of experience. Just as the earth was now seen to orbit the sun (and not the other way around), the mind can now be seen to order its experience of objects (rather than objects ordering the mind).

The picture that emerged was that of self-conscious subjects living in a world that necessarily had to appear to them as a realm of interacting physical substances following causally deterministic laws. Now, however, Kant drew another conclusion. This was indeed the way in which the world had to appear to us, but it was not in any way the way the world was “in itself,” that is, apart from the conditions under which we could experience it. We know that the world of things in themselves is not the world as it appears to us because when we try to think of such a world in itself apart from our experience of it (using pure reason), we necessarily fall into contradictions. This had been the fate of all traditional metaphysics. All that we can in fact know of things in themselves is that they do not contradict themselves, and thus we know that we do not know anything at all about what things are in themselves except that they exist and are the grounds of our experience.

Kant realized that this was in one deep sense unsatisfactory, since reason – that is, us – must by its own nature seek to know such things in themselves, but what it (i.e., we) must realize is that this deepest want on our part is unrealizable in principle. Kant called his philosophy “transcendental idealism” since it claimed that we know only a world of appearances that we had in part constructed (hence that world was “ideal” and required our spontaneity), and this appearance had a necessary metaphysical structure to itself

that was limited to itself because we, as it were, constructed it. (Hence, its structure was “transcendental” and not true of the “transcendent” things in themselves.) This appearing world was not the world of things in themselves.

If Kant had left it at that, his picture of things may have seemed very discouraging, even alienating. However, Kant turned the table by showing how his “transcendental idealism” could put to rest the emerging worries about human freedom and about the existence of God. For the latter, Kant argued that the only proper attitude to take in strictly cognitive terms was that of a kind of agnosticism: We could not in the proper sense *know* that God existed, but we could also not *know* that He did not exist. In fact, Kant himself even said of his results, “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for faith.”⁶ Nor was he pushing philosophy itself off into being a mere sideline commentator. Philosophy now had a new method to make itself into a science equally established alongside the others. The watchwords were the receptivity of the senses, the spontaneity of the intellect, and the self-conscious unity of the “I” that was putting this all together in terms of the pure categories, followed by the admission of the logical impossibility of knowledge of things in themselves.

Reason Turned Practically on Itself

Within a few years, Kant established yet another revolution in philosophy. Just as his first *Critique* highlighted spontaneity, his second *Critique* (of practical reason) highlighted autonomy. In the world as it must appear to us, the world is a deterministic whole of individual substances interacting according to strict causal laws. In such a world, there was no place at all for human freedom, yet, in acting, we had to think of ourselves as free. Deliberation from the first-person perspective would be pointless unless we assumed that we had the freedom to carry out those deliberations. For the purposes of practice, we must assume, as odd as it sounds, that we are always capable of starting an entirely new causal series that is not itself caused by any prior events, such that our action is fully up to us in terms of starting the new series. This impasse between determinism and freedom cannot be overcome unless we assume the validity of Kantian transcendental idealism, according to which we cannot prove that this ability to start a new causal series on our own is impossible (since that would require knowledge of things in themselves). Since we must assume we are free, and we cannot in principle show

6 Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 29 (Bxxx).

that we are not, the practical necessity of freedom wins out over the theoretical unintelligibility of freedom.

Understanding that reason could make practical demands on us in terms of the freedom we must practically assume puts us in the position of recognizing that pure practical reason, unlike pure theoretical reason, can demonstrate that there are indeed ultimate, unconditional purposes that play a central role in our lives. From the standpoint of appearance, it looks as if we are simply desiring-machines of a sort who can at best use our practical reason to choose the most efficient means of satisfying our inclinations. Kant, however, argued that a free rational creature would necessarily also have a special purpose limiting all of his or her actions, namely, that of treating all rational nature, in his or her own person or in the person of others, never merely as a means but always as an end in itself. Kant's idea was, roughly formulated, that a rational agent, as self-consciousness in action, necessarily commits itself to the unbounded value of such agency such that the capacity itself to deliberate and act on those deliberations cannot itself be simply one value to be balanced among many others.

To use Kant's own language, morality speaks to us in terms of a set of commands. From the standpoint of appearance, morality's imperatives seem to be limited to "hypothetical imperatives," which have the form, put very, very roughly: If you want X, then you must do Y. Such "hypothetical imperatives" are binding only on people who happen to want X. However, practical reason also provides us with an unconditional command, a "categorical imperative." This imperative at first seems to be only formal and empty – as if it were just saying, "Do what a rational being would do" – but it itself boils down to the demand to value rational agency itself as an end in itself.

The command to treat all rational creatures as ends in themselves, although unconditional, cannot itself be derived as a generalization of experience, and in fact puts strict limits on ordinary means–ends reasoning. Each person must be thought of as authorizing such a final purpose for himself, since the authority of such a command follows from each individual's commitment to the demands of practical reason, yet in authorizing such an individual purpose, each is also submitting himself to the authority of all other such rational beings. (This was Kant's extension into the moral arena of Rousseau's radical political aim of each citizen being both sovereign and subject.)

Although pure practical reason does have unbounded authority, in human agents it nonetheless runs up against another source of motivation that in effect challenges its authority and often refuses to obey pure practical

reason's commands. Especially in matters that deal with ordinary but powerful human inclinations and plans – such as power, money, and sex – the urgency of the drives themselves seems to defy the commands of morality. Nonetheless, in the face of that defiance, reason's authority over other sources of motivation lies in its being the only way in which freedom can be made actual in our lives. To be free is to be able to act according to "laws" (rules or principles) that you author and give to yourself and thus not to be subject to a law given to you from outside of your rational will. Reason in its conditional employment (choosing the most efficient means to an end) is therefore not completely and fully free since it cannot choose the end it is trying to achieve. It is only in giving itself the moral law that the will (as nothing more than reason making itself effective) achieves genuine, unconditional freedom. The basis for morality is therefore the autonomy of the will itself. Such a potentially autonomous will has therefore unconditional value.

This also has, as Kant clearly saw, radical implications for political life. Under the demands of morality, political life itself would have to be organized around the idea of each individual having basic rights to autonomy. Invoking the older language of the society of orders which the French Revolution was in the process of abolishing, Kant argued that everybody was endowed with a certain dignity as an end in itself, and that all political life had to be organized around the idea of implementing this possible kingdom of ends in themselves.

Kant never underestimated how difficult this might be. In the world of appearance (in which we live), people are subject to what can seem to be intractable desires, which can seemingly drive people to use others as means. Fear, anxiety, and even love of one's own kith and kin can lead people to use others merely as means. Nonetheless, in the face of such seemingly obdurate desires, human self-conscious freedom always has the right to assert its authority and proclaim both its normative primacy – nothing has higher authority than the command to treat all individuals as ends in themselves – and it has the practical faith (justified by transcendental idealism) that such a demand is not just a dream or a chimera but something that can be made actual, even if in the world of appearance it often falls by the wayside.

Taste, Teleology, and History's Plan

After the first two legs of Kant's philosophical revolution had been completed (for metaphysics and morals), the world itself changed in a way that oddly seemed to make Kant's philosophy even more important. The original reaction to Kant's thought had to do with its perhaps profound implications for religious thought. However, in 1789, the French Revolution upended what

people thought was politically possible in Europe, and in various circles, people quickly began to make the connection between Kant's philosophy of freedom and the emerging regime in France. In the meantime, Kant had come more clearly to see that what had been driving his whole enterprise, namely the concept of judgment (in both cognitive and practical terms), was broader than a concern of the purely cognitive and practical sort. In judgments of the purely cognitive or practical type, we start with rules and then look to see whether any particular things are to be brought under the rule – for example, when we start with the rule for what counts as “red” and then look to see whether there are indeed any red things in the garden; or when we start with “Treat everybody as an end in themselves” and look to see whether our actions have genuinely exemplified that. However, there seem to be judgments which are not so rule-bound as that, and they are “reflective” judgments in which we encounter a particular thing and then have to look for the rule under which to subsume it. This is the case, so Kant argued, with both aesthetic and teleological judgments. Such judgments raise a crucial question: If one lacks knowledge, then one is ignorant, which is bad; if one lacks moral understanding, then one is bad as a person, perhaps even evil; but if one lacks a taste for the beautiful or cannot find purposes in life itself, what exactly is deficient about oneself?

When we judge that something is beautiful, we are apt to think that it is because we find it pleasing, just as we are apt to think (wrongly) that the morally good has something to do with what we want. However, just as morality is not about what we want but what we *ought* to do, aesthetic judgment is not about what immediately pleases us but about what we *ought* to think is beautiful. However, as Kant notes, we do not have an independent rule for judging something to be beautiful as we have for judging things to be, say, red.

In judgments about what pleases us, we simply report on the way something affects us as, for example, being agreeable. For example, I report on my own reaction to, say, an individual glass of whiskey as “feeling pleasant.” Reports on such subjective states do not bring any “ought” with them in that others who find the same glass of whiskey unpleasant are under no obligation to share my appreciation of it. However, in making a genuine aesthetic judgment, I am saying “This is beautiful, and those (who have taste) *ought* to agree.” What makes this especially problematic is that, unlike in morality, I can state no rule for why they ought to do this since there simply is no rule stating what counts as beautiful.

The pleasure occasioned by the beautiful is the unique pleasure we receive in actually making the aesthetic judgment itself, which is itself the pleasure

we have in experiencing the free and spontaneous harmony between our imagination and intellect, between the world as we actually find it (what “is”) and the world as we might imagine it (as it “ought to be”). In creating the work of art, the artist is as a “genius” thereby not following a rule (a concept) at all but instead creating a work that can then later function as a rule for more craft-oriented artists (at least until another genius overthrows that model in favor of another).

What is the importance of such aesthetic judgments? In a tantalizing aside, Kant said that such judgments perhaps give us an indeterminate sense of the common root of both nature and freedom.⁷ This seemed to suggest that the naturally beautiful (even more so than art) was an intimation of what things in themselves would be, even though it was not an intimation that could be conceptually articulated. The aesthetic judgment, as it were, tells us that the world after all does have a place for us in it even if we cannot conceptually articulate exactly what that place was. In that way, what is disclosed to us in natural beauty and art takes priority even over religion when the latter is conceptualized within the limits of reason alone. Such “rational” religion amounts only to a kind of faith about the actualization of the moral law in the appearing world despite the essential human propensity to what Kant called “radical evil.”⁸ The experience of natural and artistic beauty, however, gives us the indeterminate sense that this actualization of the moral law fits into a larger purpose of the world.

The world of appearance is deterministic, but within it, we encounter living things which seem to require us to judge them purposively. In order even to classify things as organs of a plant or animal, we must employ teleological judgments, since, for example, in saying that something is an eye or that something is a liver, we are speaking of the function of the organs and how they contribute to the whole that is the living organism itself. However, laboring under the strictures of the first *Critique*, we cannot claim that nature itself has any place in it for such purposes at all. We must therefore “subjectively” use the concept of teleology even though we cannot make sense of it in the terms of the objective appearing world.

Kant put all this to work in several essays dealing with history and with what we could reasonably hope for in the future. In history, Kant said, we see progress being made, and that progress is measured by the way in which the

7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §59, 229 (354).

8 See Chapter 3 by David Fergusson for a discussion of Kant’s religious views.

moral demands of the “kingdom of ends” are becoming more obvious and clear. Such demands lead to a clear conclusion: We are called to establish a cosmopolitan world order of free republics so that humanity will finally achieve its inherent goal, that of living in a world without war in which each individual is fully respected and legally entitled to the rights belonging to a member of the “kingdom of ends.” Given our “radical evil” and the appearance of progress, we must therefore think that, as it were, nature has a secret plan for us, such that our “unsocial sociability” – the way in which our sociability in situations of isolation and lack of assurance leads to a Hobbesian war of all against all – requires us to take some arduous detours that behind our backs drive us progressively toward that republican ideal. If so, then we can discern God’s plan for the world, since, although we cannot know whether God exists, we can know what He would require of us if He did exist, namely, to follow the moral law. (Kant’s endorsement of Republican government was one of the things that both made him attractive to the French revolutionaries and made Napoleon suspicious of him.)

At the end of his extraordinarily creative burst of energy, Kant had constructed quite an edifice. Traditional metaphysics was no longer possible, but a new science of the metaphysics of experience (transcendental idealism) was to take its place, with the structure of self-consciousness at its center. All knowledge of “the unconditioned,” that is, things in themselves, was necessarily ruled out, and even space and time were to be regarded as only the forms under which we could intuit the world, not the way in which, for example, God might see the world as a whole. Yet for all those limitations, practical reason, assuming our freedom, delivers an unconditional set of commands that call for treating all rational agents as ends in themselves. In turn, the experience of beauty gave us an indeterminate sense that despite the seeming indifference of the appearing world, the universe has a place for us in it; and the subjective necessity of invoking teleological judgments to make sense of life itself helped to underwrite the practical faith that nature had a secret plan for us that was harnessing our own aggressiveness to move us toward a world order of justice among republican states respecting human rights. To the charge by the Enlightenment’s critics that reason could tear down the existing order but not be able to replace it with something else, Kant’s edifice offered a resounding answer. Nonetheless, by the late 1790s people were beginning to worry about how the whole edifice held together and whether changing one part of it might topple the rest. In the period of the Revolution, it made the intellectual stakes seem very high indeed.

Post-Kantians

Phase One: Fichte's Non-ironic Instigation of Romantic Irony

Even before the Revolution, other cracks in conventional ways of thinking had been opening elsewhere in Germany, and in one place in particular: Jena. The town itself was small, unimportant, with only an undistinguished university to its name. (Actually, its one distinction was the famously lopsided drinking habits of its students.) However, in 1775 the young literary celebrity Johann Wolfgang Goethe became the chief and only minister in Weimar, and, for odd historical reasons, also the chief caretaker of the university in Jena. He in effect created the only real place in Germany where there was complete academic freedom, and free-thinking intellectuals (Friedrich Schiller among them) began to arrive. With Goethe's blessing, the earliest discussion of Kantian philosophy began in earnest in Jena in 1785.

The first post-Kantian celebrity was Karl Leonhard Reinhold, who was brought to Jena on the strength of his 1786 *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, in which he had been the first to argue that Kant had finally settled the debate between science and religion in favor of both. Reinhold began work on a restatement of Kant's whole system, but as he ran into difficulties with that project, his star fell, and he moved to another position in Kiel.

His successor, J. G. Fichte, had risen to prominence overnight when a publisher's error omitted his name from his first book (*Critique of All Revelation*), and people took the book to be an anonymous work by Kant himself. Once in Jena, like Reinhold, Fichte claimed that he too would put the Kantian system on a new and more complete footing. He began by rejecting Kant's insistence on a realm of unknowable things-in-themselves because, as unknowable, they were indeterminate, and, as indeterminate, they were nothing, just pipe dreams. Besides, there was one entity whose nature "in itself" was in fact knowable by us even on orthodox Kantian grounds, and this was the self-conscious subject herself. The subject just *is* the activity of bringing representations into a unity of consciousness. On that basis, Fichte now proposed creating an entirely new philosophical discipline, a "science of science," a *Wissenschaftslehre*, an account of all possible accounts and the ultimate account of making sense of making sense itself.

As Fichte constructed it and altered it over the years, a *Wissenschaftslehre* begins with the subject giving an account of the possibility of any thought at all. In doing so, it arrives at a comprehension of itself as an "I" who is thinking and experiencing things and taking them to be one way in distinction from others. Fichte claimed that this knowledge of the basic spontaneous activity

of the subject came from an “intellectual intuition.” For Kant, an intellectual intuition would be a thought of something so that in the act of thinking it would create the object, and, as Kant argued, although we might imagine God possessing such a capacity, it is completely ruled out for finite humans. Fichte argued that on Kant’s own terms, that has to be exactly what we are doing when we become *self-aware* since it is only in thinking of ourselves that we spontaneously come to be the agents that are thinking of themselves at all. Agents (subjects) are not substances that exist prior to thinking of themselves. Rather, agents bootstrap themselves into existence by spontaneously thinking of themselves. In becoming self-conscious, human animals become human subjects.

Fichte proceeded to argue that such a subject could only think of itself by distinguishing that thought of itself from other items. If the first thought was that of “I,” then that second thought would be of a “not-I,” but if the second thought was required for the first thought to have any content, then there was a contradiction: The “I” would be authorizing itself to authorize something not-itself to give it the authority to do so in the first place. The resolution of this contradiction (what Fichte called a thesis followed by an antithesis) was a more determinate conception of the I–world relationship, which in turn would always generate a new contradiction between the “I” and the “Not-I,” and so on until infinity. The task of such a *Wissenschaftslehre* can thus never be finished, and philosophy thereby sets out to reach a point it knows it cannot reach but which it can infinitely approach. One of the steps along the way is the encounter with another subject, who is also an “I” to herself and who takes you to be a “Not-I,” a contradiction muted only by acts of mutual recognition between the two as authorizing each other to have the status of a “self-positing” I.

Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* attracted the ire of the elderly Kant, who published an open letter denouncing Fichte’s attempts as hopelessly muddled and wrongheaded. From Kant’s point of view, Fichte had misjudged the entire system and tried to spin it all out of concepts alone, which, without the contribution of sensory intuitions, would reduce the system merely to formal logic from which no content at all could follow. We can protect ourselves from our enemies, but heaven protect us from our friends, so Kant said of Fichte.

This did nothing to dampen Fichte’s charisma among the students. The very idea of putting the self-positing “I” at the center of things and calling on people to exercise their radical freedom was catnip to the students attending his lectures. Fichte, even more than Kant, had put self-conscious autonomy in

the opening pole of a philosophical system: For Fichte, it was an act of self-determining freedom itself that established the existence of subjects in the first place, and every step after that was also an act of freedom reasserting itself against a “Not-I” that threatened to negate it. Even the ordinary and banal acceptance of the deliverances of the senses was an implicitly free act involving judgment. The political break with the old feudal world order seemed to crystallize itself in Fichte’s self-described transcendental system of radical freedom and self-positing.

Among the younger people attending his lectures were Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis (the pen name of the poet Friedrich von Hardenberg). Schlegel, himself a gifted essayist, took Fichte’s philosophy in a completely different direction. In Schlegel’s retelling, what Fichte had in fact discovered in the “I” was “irony,” the capacity of an agent to self-consciously stand back from her own utterances and look at them with a more nuanced eye. If the “I” was really self-positing and thereby also positing its other, then it was also, as it were, above the fray, deciding whether it was going this way down the path or another. Its infinite task was in fact the task of creating itself, and a truly free self would realize that it is thereby unencumbered. The paradigm for Schlegel was the figure of Shakespeare, who created radically different characters in his plays but who never tipped his own hand as to where he stood. To describe this new approach to Fichte’s philosophy, Schlegel coined the term “romanticism”: Life was more like a novel (a *Roman* in German) than it was like a rigorous system, and it must therefore be approached “romantically” in the way Schlegel supposed Shakespeare to have approached his plays.

What drives such a Romantic? A self-conscious longing for the absolute, the unconditioned, which he knows he can never fully reach. Novalis, in one of his sayings about this post-Kantian state of affairs, lamented in a pun that although we seek the unconditioned (*Unbedingte*) all we in fact ever find are individual things (*Dinge*). The true Romantic thus writes and lives in fragments with only his ironic self holding the disparate parts together by virtue of his own non-conceptual grasp of the whole.⁹ Oddly, one of the deepest ironies in the development of Romanticism was that of Fichte himself, who may have been one of the most non-ironic figures to have ever walked the planet, giving rise to a movement known for its ironic worldview.

9 See Chapter 2 by Nicholas Halmi in this volume. See also the discussion in Manfred Frank, *“Unendliche Annäherung”: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997); and Fred Rush, *Irony and idealism: Rereading Schlegel, Hegel, and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Another figure not in Jena but intimately connected to the early Romantic circle was Friedrich Schleiermacher, later to become in Berlin the leading Protestant theologian of his day. In his 1799 *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher argued that our grasp of the infinite need not be as limited as Kant had argued. Kant had argued that there were indeed pure intuitions of infinite space and time, even though we could never have the whole of space and time in any given set of human intuitions. All we ever perceived were finite things, and the infinity of space and time was only that of “the infinite extension of a line” and “the infinite expanse of temporal moments.” Schleiermacher’s question was as follows: Why therefore could there not be an even more general pure intuition of the metaphysically infinite and not just of the spatio-temporal infinite? In fact, why not accept that we originally have an intuition of the metaphysically infinite which is the basis for our ways of speaking about the divine or the godhead? Reversing Kant’s picture, Schleiermacher argued that our receptivity to the infinite lay in a pure non-sensible intuition and not in a concept; the differentiation or “finitization” of the infinite came not through sense-experience but through our own spontaneous activities that, as it were, carved up the original unitary experience of the metaphysical infinite into all the details of the individual religions. Each religion involves a particular and different response in terms of rite, ritual, and doctrine to this unitary experience; each is a different and unique expression of the same experience. This kind of “intellectual intuition” disclosed to us our dependence on the divine, the infinite as the “one and all,” out of which the different religions of the world flowed, each with their differing doctrines and practices.¹⁰ For Schleiermacher, the superiority of Christianity over all the other religions was only that it was the “religion of religion” itself and thus not simply one among others. Only in Christianity was the doubt inherent in all religions made into a central element of the religious faith itself, which was expressed in Jesus’s cry of despair on the cross about why God had forsaken him. In Christianity, the object of religious faith is the infinite mystery involved in religious faith itself.

The early Romantics gathered around Fichte, worshipped Goethe, and engaged themselves in a series of literary and sexual scandals that turned Jena from a backwater into a gleaming center of European literary and philosophical life. However, in the midst of this glittering world, Fichte, the great non-ironist of the whole movement, got himself into a heated controversy

¹⁰ In Chapter 3, David Fergusson speaks of Schleiermacher’s use of “feeling,” *Gefühl*. This is a later move on Schleiermacher’s part. In his early work, he speaks instead of “intuition,” *Anschaung*.

over some publications about the relation between religion and reason, and he threw further oil on the fire by holding lectures on Sundays. In 1798, he was confronted with trumped-up charges of atheism and loud public demands for his dismissal. Fichte took a defiant and rather moralistic “take me or leave me” stance in response to the whole affair, which resulted in his finding himself suddenly unemployed in 1799. He departed for Berlin.

Phase Two: Schelling’s Idealist Romanticism

Right around the same time that Fichte was getting himself embroiled in what has come to be known simply as “the atheism controversy,” another figure arrived on the scene, the boy-wonder of German philosophy, F. W. J. Schelling. Only twenty-three, he had already made a name for himself as the leading edge of the post-Kantian, Fichtean philosophical movement. Whereas Fichte was stiff but magisterial, Schelling was all exuberance and creativity, with an inherently experimental cast of mind such that he was forever reinventing his system and refocusing his efforts. At Jena, although he did not invent the term “Romanticism,” he gave it much of the edge it came to have.

Fichte had taken philosophy as *Wissenschaftslehre* to be the infinite task of the “I” (self-consciousness) coming to grips with its own spontaneity and freedom. Schelling drew a decidedly Romantic inference from this. In grasping the infinity of reason itself, we are grasping the absolute itself. In Fichte’s treatment, this was merely the subjective activity of a single subject comprehending his own activity of unifying and authorizing. For Schelling, it is not just an individual “I” but the absolute itself which is actualizing itself in its finite moments within our own activity itself as we think of it. In taking ourselves this way, we are a subject-object, as Schelling put it. Thought, as the divine logos itself, was taking shape in the activities of individual thinkers.¹¹ Metaphysical thinking was not simply the thoughts going on in a particular metaphysician’s head; it was a participation in the way in which the universe was striving to comprehend itself.

Schelling proceeded to develop his philosophy in Jena as a two-track system, one track starting from the intuition of the absolute in subjectivity and leading through a series of steps to a comprehension of nature as a whole, the other starting with the infinity of nature and leading up to subjectivity’s absolute comprehension of itself in the thinking individual subject. For Schelling, we needed both, a conception of nature evolving into higher

¹¹ For the way in which Schelling’s later career both built on that and departed from it, see John E. Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

forms and a conception of us as radically free, self-conscious beings returning to the contemplation of nature. The two were held together in what Schelling, following Fichte, also called an “intellectual intuition,” but which for him was a kind of stereoscopic vision.

In what he called his *Naturphilosophie* in 1797 – a term expressing the rather eccentric idea of “nature-philosophy,” that is, of nature, as it were, thinking of itself – one begins with the intellectual intuition of nature as a whole and then uses that intuition to proceed to nature’s parts. The method was to see how the original infinite oneness of nature would divide itself at first into matter and energy by virtue of combustion taking place in the furnace of the original unity. That produced a new and infinite unity, which, however, as coming out of the original unity was itself unstable and became the basis for a newer, more complex unity of matter in motion, and then, by the same process, produced electricity and magnetism, chemical reactions, all the way to life itself as a yet higher unity. Out of life come animals, plants, and finally self-conscious subjects (leading up to the difference of the sexes, as mirroring the cosmic significance of such divisions and unities). The end of the series was God himself as comprehending his own coming into being with the world.

The other track, the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), went in the opposite direction and was more Fichtean in its presentation, starting with the “I” comprehending itself in an intuition of its own infinity of reasoning and culminating not in an intuition of nature as a whole but in an aesthetic intuition of a work of art as disclosing the whole to us. Schelling radicalized Kant’s claims about aesthetic genius into the Romantic idea that it was indeed the artist, not the scientist, who could disclose the meaning of being to us, a result that itself was to take on resonance in the rest of the nineteenth century and for large parts of the twentieth.

Out of Schelling’s system came a distilled Romantic picture of agency: Agency was creative, reflecting within itself the creative processes of the universe, it was self-directing, and, in the shape of the artist, it did not follow the rules but continually broke them (as Kant had argued), and was thus continually creating new rules. The artist was not a craftsman but an oracle, giving us the comprehension of the whole that the conceptually obliged philosopher had to acknowledge and to which he was freely to subordinate himself.

Phase Three: Hegel

When they were students together at the Seminary in Tübingen, Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, and G. W. F. Hegel had been roommates and the best of

friends. They had taken classes from Gottlob Storr together and together had revolted against both Storr's use of Kant and his insistence on biblical literalism. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was in this time in the 1780s that they together put together the outlines of what was to become German idealism.¹²

By the 1790s, Hölderlin had already begun making a name for himself as a poet, and Schelling had staged his unprecedented and meteoric rise in the German philosophical world. Hegel, on the other hand, had little to his credit. At first more inclined to pursue a form of applied philosophy, Hegel changed his mind in the 1790s while living in Frankfurt in close proximity to Hölderlin, and he managed to wrangle an invitation from Schelling to come to Jena, where he finally started his philosophical career while living on a very small inheritance that followed on his father's death. Hegel arrived in 1801, and he began his philosophical trajectory there as a Schellingian. Between that point and his departure from Jena to take over the editorship of a newspaper in Bamberg in 1807, he completed one of the most astonishing developments and transformations in the history of philosophy. His first real book in 1807, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, made a name for him in the German intellectual world, even though it was not until 1817 that he was finally able to get a university appointment in philosophy, first in Heidelberg and then in 1818 in Berlin, where he stayed until his death in 1831. At his death, the unknown of 1801 had become a European phenomenon and an intellectual celebrity of the first order.

Kant had shifted discussion of the nature of human agency by refraining from asking of what "stuff" agents are composed (for example, whether they had immaterial souls) and instead focusing on what agents did – which for Kant was unifying experience through acts of judgment. Following some leads from Schelling, Hegel thought that the concept of life was best looked at from that perspective. A living thing is intrinsically self-organizing. It consumes nutrients and seeks to reproduce itself, and there is no need to look for some extra animating force for this. Also following Schelling's lead, he came to the conclusion that although an animal may act in light of purposes internal to its species, the animal could not regard its purposes as

12 See Terry P. Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Terry P. Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

purposes. Between the two – acting on a reason and acting on a reason *as* a reason – there is nothing, but there is also an infinity which, imagistically conceived, is like that of a circle, in which one returns to the same point in a full revolution.

Part of the revolutionary character of Kant's 1781 *Critique* had been its insistence that all consciousness was also self-consciousness and that this self-consciousness was a unity of experience, not an intuition of an underlying soul-substance of any type. Following up on that, in the 1807 *Phenomenology*, Hegel began with an account of what it would be for us to have any putative direct consciousness of things without any self-consciousness to itself, and he argued that such a consciousness eschewing all relations to self-consciousness necessarily becomes deeply self-contradictory in any account it gives of itself. Our being was that of self-conscious form of a living entity, and Hegel called this self-conscious life *Geist* (spirit, or mind in English).

Like Kant, Hegel thought that all action is self-conscious action in that the agent knows what she is doing without having to have a separate reflective act accompanying each act. Unlike Kant, Hegel thought that this self-conscious unity requires recognition by another self-conscious agent, a kind of actual second-person address from another self-conscious being as a kind of bestowal of status by another originally entitled to bestow such status. The self-knowledge involved in self-consciousness is originally knowledge of the other agent's knowledge of himself involved in his being aware of the other's awareness of him (and vice versa), with this kind of reciprocity piling up into layers on itself. At first, there is nothing to mediate that reciprocity, since the whole series of such recognition seems to involve an infinite regress over who originally has the authority to rule in and rule out claims to recognition. The initially reciprocal awareness of each thus turns instead into a struggle over which one has the authority to bestow such recognition in the first place. Since there is no obvious answer to the regress, this encounter develops into a life and death struggle, with one of them finally risking death for the sake of dominance and the other choosing instead life and therefore subordination. One becomes the master, the other the slave. That very basic form of human domination itself, however, turns out to be contradictory on its own terms. The master demands recognition as master from somebody whom the master recognizes as fully lacking in the authority to bestow such recognition in the first place. Such ensembles of brute power, Hegel suggests, cannot forever survive critical reflection on themselves, however necessary they may have been at the outset of human history.

Although Hegel had originally intended his *Phenomenology* to provide a short introduction to his (not yet written) main system, he changed his mind as he was writing it and gave an account of the deeper sociality and historicity of reason itself.¹³ Hegel concluded the *Phenomenology* with two very long chapters on the history of spirit and the history of religion as it developed itself out of the progressively unfolding experiential logics of the ways in which self-conscious agents are embedded in the self-consciousness of each other. The movement effectively began with the rise of the democratic Greek state and its undoing by its own hands when it came to understand that the freedom and equality enjoyed by the men of the polis rested on an unjustifiable (but, to the Greeks, necessary) subjugation of women and slaves. As the senselessness of that world rose into a more full self-awareness of its own senselessness, Greek life moved itself away from the tragic view of the world evidenced in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – of a world in which beauty functioned as the basic truth – into the philosophical view evidenced in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, in which concepts, not the religion of beauty, played the dominant role.

The beautiful Greek world was swamped and replaced by the rise and then consequent self-destruction of the Roman Empire, after which European life developed into a world in which relations among agents were no longer “ethical” but more like moves in an elaborate game, and the new issues on the table had to do with the rules of the game, how to accommodate oneself to the game, and despairing over whether playing the game made any sense at all. The breakdowns of the European attempts at collectively living out that kind of alienated life had, Hegel argued, led in his own revolutionary times to an “absolute” knowledge of what it means to be a self-conscious human (i.e., to be “spirit”) in which philosophy was enabled to establish a more detailed conceptual articulation of the intricacies involved in such self-consciousness. In fashioning its own self-conception, “spirit,” self-conscious life has thus shown itself historically to be a product of itself. It is what it is by virtue of being required to take itself in a certain way, and those requirements for how it thinks of itself followed from the various historical and social constraints of its past, and how those constraints had generated ineliminable tensions within themselves such that their own failures had led gradually to the modern world. The “absolute” itself was the general intelligibility or “thinkability” of the world as a whole, the *logos* of being itself, and it

13 On Hegel’s change of mind, see Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*.

appeared to us in the various forms of life in which we collectively tried to take it up.

In his next book, *The Science of Logic*, Hegel developed what he conceived to be the logic of this kind of idealism itself. The end of the book has thought thinking of how it thinks of being and of itself under the conditions of intelligibility that emerge only in this kind of radical self-examination of itself. Thought reaches this end by coming to terms with the various conundrums and contradictions that develop in its attempts to think what must be the case if the world is to be comprehended as an intelligible whole.

After his arrival in Berlin, Hegel worked out what he took to be the implications of this new form of idealism, which he mostly carried out in a series of lectures that were collected, edited, and published by his friends and students after his death. His *Phenomenology* in 1807 had theorized what things had to be in the wake of the Revolution. The outcome of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which claimed to “restore” the old world but which actually more or less kept much of the European order established by Napoleon in place, confirmed for him that in fact now the clocks could not be turned back and that progress was the watchword of the new era. This prompted him to work out a political philosophy in full, which he published in 1820 as the *Philosophy of Right*. Between 1818 and 1831, in his series of lectures on the different fields of philosophy, he tried to offer in more detail what the philosophical shape of this new experience of post-Revolutionary Europe was to be and what it meant for world history. (As Chapter 4 by Warren Breckman details in its discussion of the Left Hegelians, one of the debates about Hegel’s philosophy was – in his own time and in our day too – whether his later thought was a support for the reformers in political life or the philosophical underpinning for the conservatives longing for restoration.)

In the lecture series, he went through what he thought a genuine *Naturphilosophie* would be once it was more firmly linked to the progress of the sciences and delinked from any appeal to intellectual intuition or the intuitive intellect. He also lectured on the philosophy of history, in which he reworked his general views first articulated in the *Phenomenology* into a more nuanced and factual approach to world history. (Famously and infuriatingly, he also got almost all the facts wrong about Africa, China, India, Persia, and Egypt, thereby setting in motion the tempers and the debates behind what has come to be called the dangers of Eurocentrism.) In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel argued that history had a kind of necessary progression from the ancient position that only one person by nature had the authority to rule over all others to the Greco-Roman–European idea that

some (male aristocrats) had that authority to rule over others, and finally to the modern period where the guiding idea was that nobody had any natural authority to rule others and thus that “all are free.” (In that way, he at least seemed to be arguing that history itself was on the reformer’s side.) From the idea of a cosmic order in which some naturally dominated others, we had moved to an order where nobody naturally had the authority to dominate others. Nonetheless, this progress in history only shows up in a retrospective examination of history. The future, Hegel argued, remains open (despite the often-made assertion that Hegel argued for the “end of history”).

He also argued that art was a specifically sensory and only mediately conceptual manner of spirit’s coming to terms with itself – that it embodied “reflective judgments” in Kant’s sense – and in his path-breaking lectures on the concept of art and its historical development, he provided an account of how art fills in the gaps in concrete human self-understanding that philosophy necessarily leaves open. Nonetheless, and unlike in Schelling’s system, Hegel argued that art has to end up standing in third place (behind religion in second place) to the kind of rational, conceptual activity of philosophy and the sciences in European modernity. Modernity could not be comprehended purely aesthetically, and in his own time, he argued, art had itself become self-conscious about its necessary failure to fully comprehend the whole of life.

He also argued the same thing for religion, concluding that modern Protestant Christianity had sufficiently secularized itself and made itself thereby the appropriate, even if a bit spiritually defanged, accompaniment to modern life, but it stood in second place to philosophy and had to defer to secularized rationality to be genuinely appropriate to modern life. Hegel’s Christianity was not a “religion of humanity” (as Ludwig Feuerbach later argued on his own part) but a religion of reason itself: In the beginning, as the Gospel of John states, was the Logos, and Hegel’s Christianity was Johannine, with a strong emphasis on “kenosis,” on the Logos “emptying” itself to become human.¹⁴

Likewise, the shape of political and social life itself, so he argued, had emerged in its appropriately modern form – although still a bit hazy – as a system built out of the familiar triumvirate of general rights to life, liberty,

¹⁴ See the discussion of kenoticism by David Fergusson in Chapter 3. Hegel also adopted Luther’s translation of “kenosis” as *Entäußerung* to describe how self-conscious life empties itself in history, a usage interestingly picked up by the young Marx in 1844 to describe how capitalism empties human life of its true content. See the discussion of Marx’s relation to the Hegelian school by Warren Breckman in Chapter 4.

and property. That was tied together with the modern conception of the moral world, which (with all its appeals to rules and sanctions for breaking them) resembled something like a game (with maybe even a divine referee calling the fouls and issuing red cards) that nonetheless also incorporated an un-gamelike and ineradicable appeal to personal conscience. General rights and moral appeals were to be made intelligible by giving them a home in the modern world of citizens ethically linked with each other in a (vaguely British-style) constitutional monarchical state subordinated to the rule of law, secure in the bourgeois family, living in a market economy tempered by the associations of civil society. This was the concrete shape of agents confronting each other as free and equal, not as dominating and dominated.

In all these areas, Hegel argued that we are in fact articulating the absolute, taken in its modified Aristotelian sense as the rational intelligibility of the world. Idealist philosophy is just its “own time grasped in thoughts” as Hegel described it, one of the stages in the historical development of self-conscious humanity’s thinking about what it is to be such a self-conscious creature which by its nature is forever a problem to itself. As a reviewer noted of Hegel in 1810, if Schelling had been the Plato of Germany, Hegel had become its Aristotle.¹⁵ In Hegel’s retelling of the Kantian story, Greek philosophy, Kantian critique, and modern life had all dovetailed into a coherent although dense and arduous modernity that could be confident of itself.

Hegel’s edifice was even grander than Kant’s. The traditional metaphysics of Aristotelian “substances” which Kant had claimed made up the deterministic structure of appearance was joined with Kantian self-consciousness as an account of how things really were. Hegel combined a logic with a metaphysics – *to be* was *to be intelligible* – that also resulted in a philosophy of nature as igniting within itself the development of self-conscious life, and that self-conscious life, in an attempt to understand what it meant to be a self-conscious life, developed itself historically and generated a history that was progressive and followed an internal logic of sorts of its own that reached one of its summits in the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” in the French Revolution and shaped itself into a political order involving families, markets, and civil associations, and constitutional monarchies founded on the rule of law. Likewise, the coordinated efforts of art, religion, and philosophy (absolute

15 This was a review published by Christian Friedrich Bachmann, reprinted in Oscar Fambach (ed.), *Ein Jahrhundert deutscher Literaturkritik (1750–1850). Band V. Der romantische Rückfall in der Kritik der Zeit: Die wesentlichen und die umstrittenen Rezensionen aus der periodischen Literatur von 1806 bis 1815, begleitet von den Stimmen der Umwelt* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1963), 428–452.

spirit, self-conscious life thinking about what it is to be self-conscious life) exhibited their own internal logical development, all of which was comprehended in one system. However, just as had happened with Kant, Hegel's successors immediately began to worry about how cohesive the system really was and debated whether it had to be partially shored up or completely rebuilt with other means. (The chapters by Breckman, Fergusson, and Halmi in this volume speak to this.)

Phase Four: Dissolution and Transformation

Although the political revolution in France had made German idealism attractive, the industrial revolution that accompanied it quickly made it seem obsolete. Absolute longing had been the watchword for the Romantic generation, but by the mid 1850s, after the bitter failure of the 1848 revolutions and the so-called springtime of the European peoples, the watchword for the post-1850 generation was realism. As the century progressed, the rising intellectual and economic importance of the natural sciences in the rapidly developing industrial revolution turned philosophy away from "idealism" to "materialism." By the twentieth century, German idealism had become for the most part simply one more chapter in the history of philosophy.

In 1900, the last important figure to be somehow connected to the idealist movement, but who made his name in part by furiously disowning any and all forms of idealism, Friedrich Nietzsche, died. In the same year, Edmund Husserl published his *Logical Investigations* and laid the ground for a rebirth of the spirit of idealism in the new philosophy called "phenomenology." In the United States, around the same time, John Dewey (born in 1859) began articulating his version of a naturalized Hegelian idealism, for which he adopted the label of "pragmatism." Overshadowed by its phenomenological and pragmatic offspring in the twentieth century, German idealism mostly vanished from public view. It has recently resurfaced, but how long it will stay around this time is another question, not to be answered here. After all, the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk.¹⁶

¹⁶ Actually, the real owl of Minerva does not. It flies in the day, an oddity for owls in general. See Dudley Knowles and Michael Carpenter, "Hegel as Ornithologist: The Owl of Minerva," *The Owl of Minerva*, 42(1/2) (2010/2011), 225–227.