

Hegel in the Light of Fichte's Metacritical Project: The Absolute Idea and the Worldly Embodiment of Thought*

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ABSTRACT: Fichte, as is well known, was a self-declared Kantian; but, at the same time, he paved the way for a renewed and truly original project. If Kant sought for the conditions of the possibility of objectivity, Fichte went even further, asking for the conditions of possibility of this very Kantian program. This is what we may call Fichte's 'metacritical' project. Whereas Kant thought of subjectivity as a mere object of our knowledge, and thereby, as divorced from the real, worldly subjects who carry out this inquiry itself, Fichte's metacriticism raised the demand for the unity of both pure and embodied thinking. If the subject is to be 'self'-thinking, it cannot be 'our' object only, but rather the 'subject-object' unity. Hegel's philosophy is to be thought of in this very metacritical framework. His absolute Idea, indeed, as the completion of his own System, is intended to be the 'self'-thinking Idea, and in this way to comprise within itself both the purely logical and the real, empirical subject.

KEYWORDS: Kant, Subjectivity, Fichte, Metacriticism, Hegel, Absolute Idea.

1. Introduction

Whereas the enlightened age of criticism, magnificently initiated by Descartes, demanded a thoroughgoing critique of everything we know by means of the tribunal of reason or simply subjectivity, it was this very demand which led many philosophers to ask reason itself, the very criticizing organ, for its own judging credentials: the 'tribunal of reason' should be submitted itself to further criticism. Modern philosophy, accordingly, made subjectivity the primary object and standpoint of its inquiries. Nonetheless, this subjectivity was approached only as an 'object' of knowledge, as something 'we' know; but this 'we' itself, the subject who knows that object, the empirical, natural and historical subject, remained beyond the range of this modern enterprise. As thus disengaged from the worldly and real subject, modern subjectivity had

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become some kind of disembodied and heavenly subject. As Lewis Hinchman observes, the Enlightenment should be broadly understood “as the isolation of self-conscious individuality.”¹

This estrangement of subjectivity, its alienation from the world, was the key to the *Aufklärung*'s main project. Reason was viewed as universal, ahistorical, and somehow beyond nature and the world itself, and this was so chiefly for two reasons. The first reason was to safeguard the absolute, uninterested, objective, and unconditional ground of all our acquaintance with the world, both in its theoretical and moral dimensions. If everything should be submitted to reason's judgment and tribunal, reason itself should not have any ground at all: it must be entirely freed from external influences, dogmas, traditional legacies, and inherited superstitions. Objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality mean in this context the complete disappearance of the inquiring subject right before the inquired object. In the second place, this subjectivity thus alienated from the world was the way in which the enlightened representatives pretended to save reason's autonomy and freedom from the mechanical nature.

In criticizing the Enlightenment's main beliefs, nonetheless, the post-Kantian metacritical thinkers² were not rejecting the autonomy of reason at all -quite the opposite. They were indeed just demanding for a 'naturalized' reason: not the enlightened reason hovering over nature as if it were its other, but a reason immanently and essentially rooted in nature, in the finite, historical existence of the empirical realm. In this sense, their project comes to be like a neo-Aristotelian program: to bring the Platonic ideal forms, the enlightened heavenly subjectivity, back into this world. Subjectivity must be known not by an external act of an external subject (the embodied subjectivity) as if it were a mere object, but rather by itself, and sure enough, by itself within and through us ourselves. After all, subjectivity, because it is 'self'-conscious, 'self'-reflecting, and thereby free, should no doubt be capable of 'self'-explanation and 'self'-knowledge.³

¹ HINCHMANN, L. P. **Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment**. Tampa/Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984. p. 2. See also Frederick Beiser's **The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte**. Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1987, and Isaiah Berlin's 1973 famous article *Counter-Enlightenment*.

² Though it would be hard to tell which of the German post-Kantians belong, or not, to this general metacritical project, and though this is not my aim here, I would say that not only Fichte and Hegel, the subjects of this work, but also Hamann, the Historicist and the Romantic schools, plus Schelling himself, at the very least, could be counted among the metacritical thinkers.

³ We could take here into account Lewis White Beck's definition of metacritique. It consists, he says, in “an investigation of the nature and justification (if there can be one) of the knowledge claims used in the Critique of Pure Reason,” (BECK, L. **Essays on Kant and Hume**, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978,

It is from this general framework that I will try to read and reconstruct what I take to be the main aspect of the philosophies of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel.⁴ I will hence divide this work into three main parts. In the first part I will try to sketch some issues of the Kantian philosophy which could have led some of the post-Kantians to face the new philosophical challenge in metacritical terms. In the second part I will try to show how this new metacritical project was philosophically shaped by Fichte, and, furthermore, to indicate why, in Hegel's view, he has fallen short of his own pretensions. Finally, the last part of this work is intended to present the absolute Idea as Hegel's own answer, not only to the general metacritical problem, but also as a way to overcome the shortcomings of Fichte's own attempt to solve it.

2. Kant: The Problem of Subjectivity and the Rise of the Metacritical Problem

The former metaphysics presupposed the subject-object unity, that is, that the *Logos* is objective, the common ground of both thinking and being or reality. Because of this presupposition, the subject-object distinction, and thereby the nature of subjectivity itself, was not known and therefore neither disclosed nor dealt with by the ancients. As a result of this naively admitted notion not only of subjectivity, but also of objectivity and their mutual relation, the former metaphysicians were entangled in a field of "infinite and endless battles," as Kant says. In an attempt to avoid this awkward and too familiar scenario, modern philosophy began by the recognition of the necessity of submitting to criticism precisely that

p. 25). Following now Frederick Beiser, metacritique could be thought of as "the criticism of criticism itself (...) for the practice of criticism too has its presuppositions." (BEISER, F. *Berlin and the German Counter-Enlightenment*. In: J. Mali, and R. Wokler (eds.), **Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment**, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003. p. 112.) A different approach could be taken from Markus Gabriel, and it says: "Given that the subject exists and that it refers to the world and intramundane states of affairs from within the world, how is it possible that the world refers to itself through our reference to it? How does the world manage to become self-referential in reflection?" (GABRIEL, M. **Transcendental Ontology. Essays on German Idealism**. London: Continuum, 2011. p. xii). In relation to the metacritical nature of Hegel's *Logic* see Franco Cirulli's **Hegel's Critique of Essence**. London: Routledge, 2006. p. 1.

⁴ Despite the fact that this metacritical nature of either part or the whole of the post-kantian idealism has been already stressed by authors like Harris (HARRIS, E. **An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel**, 1983: 315), Richard Dean Winfield (WINFIELD, R.D. **Hegel's Science of Logic. A Critical Rethinking in Thirty Lectures**. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012, p. 345), Markus Gabriel (GABRIEL. **Transcendental Ontology**, pp. ix, xii), Lewis Hinchmann (HINCHMANN. **Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment**, pp. 3-4, 71), and Frederick Beiser (BEISER. **The Fate of Reason**, p. 1), among others, none of them has seen Hegel's absolute Idea in the terms I will use in this work, namely, as Hegel's ultimate word and answer to the metacritical problem raised by his own contemporaries. Hinchman, for example, even describes Hegel's entire philosophical project in almost the same terms as I will (see HINCHMANN. **Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment**, pp. 3, 34-5). Nonetheless, when it comes to the *Science of Logic*, he remains stuck in the one-sided view thereof as a mere beginning, as pure thought 'only,' which, as such, is in need of further, external completion (see HINCHMANN. **Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment**, p. 62).

which was presupposed by the former metaphysicians. Naturally, its major concern was this: is there any ‘objective *Logos*?’ Is our thinking able to go beyond the bounds of the thinking subject? Modern philosophy began thus by reflecting on subjectivity or thinking itself looking for the possibility of a knowledge of the world as such. This is of course the terrain where Kant’s critical philosophy itself took root and grew up. In fact, its main question, namely, how synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, amounts precisely to this: how is it possible to find reason in the world? Or, what is the meaning of that subject-object identity that dogmatic metaphysics was entirely based upon?

Now, if we reshape this modern project in more Kantian terms, it could be put as follows: transcendental subjectivity, thought as such, must be submitted to criticism by the real and empirical subject. By means of this reflection we are supposed to come to know the nature of the transcendental subject, as to what extent it is possible for it to know whether the given objects are mere phenomena, ‘our’ representations, or, by contrast, real mind-independent things, noumenal things-in-themselves. This said, the ‘meta’critical question could be posed in these terms: is transcendental subjectivity, pure thought, something merely known, an object of an external subject, or rather does it really know ‘itself?’ Of course Kant certainly admits that this knowledge is possible, that ‘we,’ these empirical subjects, know the transcendental subjectivity. But the point is not whether ‘we’ are able to know this subjectivity, but rather whether ‘our’ knowledge thereof is this subjectivity’s ‘self’-knowledge.

If transcendental subjectivity indeed does not know ‘itself’ through us, but is known by us ‘only,’ it follows that that which is supposed to be the subject, or a self-knowing being, does not know anything, but is only something externally known, and thus not a subject at all, but an object. As Markus Gabriel states:

Transcendental idealism indeed destroys the subject by reducing it to an empty logical form, which can never become the content of a thought on pain of giving up its proper position as the subject. Hence, the subject ultimately vanishes, it dissolves into its judgments and cannot judge itself.⁵

As long as the transcendental, universal subject is not able to prove to be one with the empirically embodied subject –and this means that the transcendental structure of knowledge must be one with its own empirical side– Kant’s project is a failure, for he has only

⁵ GABRIEL. *Transcendental Ontology*, p. xi. See also CIRULLI. *Hegel’s Critique of Essence*, p. 4.

presupposed, but not proven how self-reflectivity, or simply subjectivity, is possible in the first place.

I will provide three arguments to support my present claim. The first comes from the hands of the aforementioned Markus Gabriel. According to him, Kant's philosophy is subjected to what he calls a "dialectical contradiction."⁶ As we all know, there are three kinds of judgments for Kant, i.e., analytic, synthetic, and synthetic *a priori*. The question Gabriel raises is this: what kind of judgments are those which populate Kant's own critical discourse? It seems to be obvious that such knowledge could not be analytic, for we do not see Kant deducing concepts or determinations from one previously given concept or representation. Furthermore, that they are not analytic is made perfectly clear once we consider just one of Kant's most important claims, namely, that concepts without intuitions are empty, and intuitions without concepts, blind. In fact, their non-analytic nature is the very core of Kant's whole critical enterprise: concepts are *a priori*, whereas intuitions are *a posteriori*; moreover, they belong to two different faculties, the former to the understanding's spontaneity, and the latter to perception's receptivity. Their relation, therefore, is only external, i.e. synthetic.

Nonetheless, transcendental knowledge entirely lacks empirical content, since it is occupied not with objects, but with their pure, *a priori* conditions of possibility.⁷ Furthermore, Kant himself claims that no synthesis is possible outside intuition, either pure or empirical, for the synthesized manifold could only be either empirically or *a priori* given.⁸ Yet, critical knowledge is neither natural science, grounded upon empirical intuitions, nor mathematics, based on the *a priori* intuitions of space and time. It follows from this that the transcendental discourse could not be synthetic nor synthetic *a priori* either. The question is thus: how do we come to know something about the relation between intuitions and concepts when this relation is neither analytic nor can be given *in concreto*, in experience? It is in this sense that Kant's *Critique* seems to be unable to explain what kind of knowledge this very *Critique* is, how is it possible at all, or, what amounts to the same, how we, this worldly subjectivity, come to know the transcendental subjectivity object of our inquiry.

In this regard, nevertheless, it is always possible to appeal to Kant's well known distinction between what is merely thinkable and what is actually knowable. In order to know, he says, we need to refer a concept to an object by means of a sensible intuition, either

⁶ See GABRIEL. *Transcendental Ontology*, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁷ See KrV, A11-12.

⁸ See KrV, B103.

empirical or pure. Yet there is no such sensible matter in critical knowledge, for its object is neither experience nor anything within experience, but the conditions of the possibility of experience itself. To merely think, by contrast, independently of whether the object of our thought is cognizable or not, only means that this something is not contradictory.⁹ True enough, the critical object would not be an object of knowledge proper, but it could perfectly be conceived of as an object of thought. However, this resort is not enough to save Kant from this criticism.

Needless to say, indeed, Kant's *Critique* seems to be more than a mere set of non-contradictory assertions; dogmatic metaphysical knowledge, to be sure, also pretends to be a non-contradictory knowledge. This is why, if Kant's philosophy intends to distinguish itself from metaphysics, widely understood as the attempt to know, and certainly in a non-contradictory way, beyond the limits of possible experience, it should be able not only to provide a non-contradictory set of assertions, but also to provide an object to its concepts, that is, to show them *in concreto*, in sensible intuition. Nonetheless, the subject matter of the whole *Critique* is, again, neither any actual nor any possible object, but the conditions of possibility of objectivity in general. Furthermore, even granted that the critical discourse is not knowledge proper but only thinking, these thoughts themselves, insofar as they are judgments, subject-predicate relations, should be either analytic or synthetic in general. However, as we have seen, it could be neither of the two.

My second argument is concerned with Kant's ahistorical notion of reason. In the preface to *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* he says: "before the coming of the critical philosophy there was as yet no philosophy at all." The reason is that "considered objectively, there can be only one human reason, [therefore] there cannot be many philosophies."¹⁰ Differently put: the history of philosophy presents to our view edifices, "but only in ruins."¹¹ This distinction between the 'one' human reason and the many 'ruined' philosophies makes clear that philosophies, the always historically-situated attempts to get to know reason itself, are extrinsic to its object, namely reason. Reason itself is not affected in any way by our different attempts to come to grips with it. Our knowledge of reason, which is always and necessarily this or that knowledge, a naturally, historically situated knowledge, is not an essential element

⁹ See KrV, Bxxvi, n.; Bxxviii.

¹⁰ In: **Practical Philosophy**. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 366-7 [AK 6: 206-7].

¹¹ KrV, B880.

of reason, but rather something accidental or contingent to it. Briefly stated: reason is not only outside space, but also outside time.

This claim of the ahistorical nature of Kant's subjectivity could be further reinforced once we take a brief look at the relation between thinking and both time and space in Kant's own first *Critique*. Inasmuch as time and space are only the *a priori* forms of perception, they both lie outside of the realm of thinking as such, that is, both understanding and reason, or the sphere of judgments and syllogisms respectively. Thinking is hence affected neither by time nor by space, precisely because it is not phenomenal, for it is rather the condition of the possibility of phenomena themselves.

My last argument focuses on Kant's noumenal view of reason. As he states in the introduction to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹² the noumenality of reason *überhaupt*, being this latter spontaneity, and thereby freedom, is intended to save this very freedom from the mechanical world of phenomena, where there is accordingly no possible room for freely and spontaneously performed acts. "Why do we have need -Kant wonders- of a doctrine of the soul grounded merely on pure rational principles?" His answer was: "without doubt chiefly with the intent of securing our thinking Self from the danger of materialism."¹³ Kant, as the good *Aufklärer* he was, was embedded in the naturalist claim that everything must be explained and grounded in natural, that is, mechanistic and causal terms. However, he did recognize that subjectivity and freedom could not be explained in such a natural way, which led him to the conclusion that, provided that there is something like freedom and subjectivity –and Kant never doubted it– it could not belong to the phenomenal realm, ruled as it is by mechanical laws, including his own system of categories, but rather to a beyond: the noumenal realm. This leads us directly into Kant's famous statement that it is not possible for us to know what the Self is in itself, but only its phenomena.¹⁴ As a result, knowledge is not only sundered from the world as such, but, as we can see, from the very thinking subject as well.

Actually, the whole of modern philosophy has thought of knowledge, from the very outset, as a means or an instrument, a medium between the known object and the knowing subject. Kant himself, indeed, has defined reason or knowledge as a 'faculty' or 'capacity,'¹⁵

¹² See B xxvi-xxvii.

¹³ KrV, A383; see also Bxxvii.

¹⁴ See KrV, B404, A350, 355.

¹⁵ See KrV, Bxxxv.

a cognitive ‘organ,’¹⁶ and even a ‘vehicle,’¹⁷ which, unlike the naive procedure of the dogmatic metaphysicians, should be first and foremost submitted to criticism in order to shed light upon its cognitive reaches and limits. But if an instrument, on the one side, is severed from that upon which it may be applied, i.e. the object, it is likewise severed from the subject who makes use of the instrument itself.¹⁸ Furthermore, it seems to be obvious that reason, once conceived of as a means, does not know anything, not even itself, that it is ‘us’ rather who know, not only the world, but this very instrument as well.

What we have in Kant hence is not a subjectivity proper, a ‘self’-knowing being, but rather an instrument ‘we’ make use in order to know. But this ‘we’ is altogether absent from Kant’s Critique; we do not find it within the Critique itself, for it is rather that who performs the Critique, lying thus outside of it. Kant’s pure thought, therefore, fails to be thought, or more precisely, subject, since it is only ‘pure’ thought, and not empirical, or more precisely, concrete thought, that is to say, a subjectivity essentially rooted in nature and history. And this is what makes Kant a true *Aufklärer*: if the whole world is to be submitted to reason, reason itself should be outside the world, including both nature as such and the empirical subjects as well.¹⁹

3. Fichte’s Grundlage as the Philosophical Ground of the New Metacritical Demand

Kant’s philosophy has fallen short from its own, and certainly modern, fundamental aim: to give an account of subjectivity, freedom and self-consciousness. But Fichte, perhaps the most Kantian among those very self-declared Kantians, has been perfectly aware of this failure.²⁰ His philosophical project, in fact, is nothing but an attempt to overcome Kant’s

¹⁶ See KrV, Bxxxvi-xxxvii.

¹⁷ See KrV, B 399, 406.

¹⁸ See WdL, 6/552; PhG, 3/68-70.

¹⁹ For a different approach to the criticisms levelled against Kant see my Hegel’s Sublation of Kant’s Transcendental Philosophy. Absolute Idealism as a Non-Metaphysical or Rational Metaphysics. In: **Revista Eletrônica Estudos Hegelianos**, n. 12: 19, pp. 115-141.

²⁰ See GGW, I, 477-8. I cannot fail to draw attention to one of the first, and certainly most influential attacks on Kant’s philosophy. In his 1784 brief essay called “Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft”, Johann Georg Hamann complained about the highly abstract, because only pure, Kant’s notion of reason, and raised, accordingly, the demand for a historical and empirical grounding of reason (see Hamann’s *Sämtliche Werke*, 3/281-9).

shortcomings, but nonetheless, pushing that very spirit that animated transcendental philosophy beyond its own letter.²¹

More precisely, however, Fichte's project could be defined according to two different, though intrinsically related tasks; in the first place, to show how thought-determinations, or categories, follow from the nature of thought itself,²² and, in the second place, to show that nature, empirical reality *überhaupt*, is not an alien element for thought, but rather thought's own self-manifestation.²³ Briefly stated, thought's otherness *überhaupt* is to be posited as one with thought itself, or the subject must be thought of not as an object, as it was for Kant, as something externally known by us, but as a 'self'-thinking, and thereby truly subjective being. This is what Dieter Henrich calls "Fichte's original insight,"²⁴ which grounds what I would like to call "Fichte's metacritical problem," namely, how Kant's transcendental philosophy is possible at all?²⁵ More precisely, how could subjectivity know itself without becoming itself a mere object in this very process of self-cognition?²⁶

If thought is to be self-knowing, and not a mere object of our thought, then it must be the unity between the subject and the object. Now, and this is Fichte's first great insight, it cannot be such unity in a merely thing-like fashion, that is, if the extremes of the relation are posited as self-subsisting beings, or simply as things. Otherwise, the subject-object identity would be only external, known by a third, but not by itself, ceasing thereby to be the self-knowing being it pretends to be. Therefore, the subject must be conceived of neither as a thing nor as a fact, but as an act, and more precisely, as a self-reverting, self-objectifying act.²⁷

²¹ See GGW, I, 420.

²² See GGW, I, 442.

²³ See Peter Heath's and John Lachs' preface (p. xvi) to their translation of the *Grundlage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁴ HENRICH, D. Fichte's Original Insight. In: Christensen, D. **Contemporary German Philosophy**. Vol. 1, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982 p. 16: "Fichte made a discovery," he says. "He saw that 'self-consciousness,' which philosophy long before him had claimed to be the basis of knowledge, can only be conceived under conditions that had not been considered previously."

²⁵ Fichte's philosophy has been already defined in similar terms by Friedrich Schlegel: "Fichte's theory of knowledge is a philosophy about the subject matter of Kant's philosophy (...) he [viz. Fichte] is a Kant raised to the second power (...) The theory of knowledge is always simultaneously philosophy and philosophy of philosophy." (Ath. Fr., 281)

²⁶ According to Andrew Bowie, the problem Fichte is trying to face is this: "how is one to grasp the 'I' in philosophy without turning it into an object?" (BOWIE, A. **German Philosophy**. Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 40). See also Daniel Breazeale's *The Divided Self and the Tasks of Philosophy*. In: Breazeale, D. **Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre**. Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 124 ff.

²⁷ See GGW, I, 428, n., 440, 461.

However, inasmuch as this principle, this self-reverting act, is only a beginning, it is only an ‘object,’ ‘our’ object, and not yet ‘its own’ object. Fichte’s project, indeed, is an attempt to reach what he calls ‘Idea,’²⁸ namely, the unity between that pure thought of the beginning and the empirical consciousness for which pure thought was the object, so that it comes to be, at the end, subjectivity proper, a self-knowing being. “In the *Wissenschaftslehre* –he says– there are *two very different sequences of mental acts: that of the self, which the philosopher observes, and that of the philosopher’s observations,*”²⁹ that is, those of the very philosopher who performs the necessary abstraction from which the pure Self emerges,³⁰ and those of this Self itself, the known subject, or the subject as object. Immediately after he adds this suggestive observation: in previous philosophies, “there is only *one* sequence of thought: that of the philosopher’s meditations; *for the content thereof is not itself introduced as thinking.*”³¹ True subjectivity, true thinking, and even true freedom, could only be thought of as the unity of the objectified subjectivity and the embodied subject who carries out this act of self-knowing.

Up to this point, Hegel entirely agrees with Fichte’s project, which is why he has once and again recognized its value. Fichte’s first principle, the I, as the self-positing activity of thought, as the activity of negating itself and, nonetheless, finding itself in its own negation, is for Hegel a truly speculative principle,³² since it expresses the dialectical movement which constitutes the life of subjectivity itself, and even more, of being as such. Yet, such coincidences of thought do not go further. Closely following Hölderlin and Schelling,³³ Hegel will also contend that Fichte has not succeeded in achieving his goals, and that, in fact, he has failed as soon as he started. The reason is that, after foreseeing the domain of the speculative,³⁴ he relapsed again into reflection, and more precisely, into an absolute which is only a ‘finite’ subjectivity. This is the criticism Hegel will direct against Fichte once and again throughout his entire work.³⁵

²⁸ See GGW, I, 515: “Das Ich ist in dieser Gestalt nur *für den Philosophen*” but “das Ich, als Idee, ist *für das Ich selbst*, welches der Philosoph betrachtet, vorhanden.”

²⁹ GGW, I, 454 (italics mine).

³⁰ See GGW, I, 457.

³¹ GGW, I, 454 (italics mine).

³² See DS, 2/11, 115.

³³ See below notes 54-5.

³⁴ See VGPh, 20/414: “Diese Philosophie enthält nichts Spekulative, aber sie fordert das Spekulative.”

³⁵ See DS, 2/12: “Diese zwei Seiten des Fichteschen Systems - die eine, nach welcher es den Begriff der Vernunft und der Spekulation rein aufgestellt, also Philosophie möglich machte, die andere, nach welcher es Vernunft und reines Bewußtsein als eines gesetzt und die in einer endlichen Gestalt aufgefaßte Vernunft zum

The main target of Hegel's criticism is but the very beginning of Fichte's *Grundlage*, and more precisely, its three famous principles. They are, in the first place, the pure I, or as Fichte says, the I = I; the second one is precisely the negative of the first, namely, the Not-I or the realm of objectivity as such; the third, finally, consists in the unity of the other two, the ground where the extremes are contained in their unity, in their reciprocal relation. The problem, in Hegel's view, is that they are thought of by Fichte as three independent principles, the one as much absolute and self-subsistent as the other,³⁶ so that their relations are simply 'external,' posited by a 'third.'³⁷ Each of them is what it is in itself, finds in itself the totality of its determination. In this way the I, posited at the beginning as the self-determining absolute, as the subject-object unity, has been posited now, because of its unbridgeable opposition to the Not-I, as a finite I, as the I of empirical consciousness, as the I which is what it is as opposed to the world, which is but the negative of the I.³⁸

The reason for this double nature of Fichte's subject, for his abandonment of the speculative standpoint, should be found in Hegel's notion of *Reflexion*. It is enough to recall that, at least since the appearance of the *Differenzschrift* in 1801, Fichte, just as Kant himself, is seen by Hegel as a representative of what he calls "philosophies of reflection."³⁹ Naturally, the notion of reflection is to be seen as the key for a sound understanding of Hegel's criticism not only of the philosophy of reflection in general, but also -and this is my central aim- of Fichte's philosophy.

In order to illuminate this point I will briefly sketch some of the main features of Hegel's notion of reflection, just as it can be found in his *Science of Logic* (SL), and more precisely, in its second book: *The Doctrine of Essence*.⁴⁰ Essence's determinacies are all 'reflected,'⁴¹ i.e., referred to an other in which they find their subsistence, just as a reflection

Prinzip erhob." See also DS, 2/11, 50, 56, 60-1, 66-7, 69, 74, 75, 94; GW, 2/394; WdL, 5/77: "Die Bestimmung des reinen Wissens als Ich führt die fortdauernde Rückerinnerung an das subjektive Ich mit sich, dessen Schranken vergessen werden sollen;" VGPh, 20/388, 391, 403, 408.

³⁶ See DS, 2/58.

³⁷ As to the external introduction of Fichte's second principle see GGW, I, 459: "Weil durch diesen bloßen Akt kein Bewußtseyn zu Stande kommt, wird ja fortgeschlossen auf einen anderen Akt, wodurch ein Nicht-Ich für uns entsteht."

³⁸ See DS, 2/57: "Ich = Ich hat in dieser Stellung, worin es anderen absoluten Akten entgegengesetzt wird, nur die Bedeutung des reinen Selbstbewußtseins, insofern dieses dem empirischen entgegengesetzt ist." See also 2/58.

³⁹ In fact, the complete title of Hegel's *Glauben und Wissen* is "Glauben und Wissen oder die Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjectivität in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen als Kantische, Jacobische und Fichtesche Philosophie." See GW, 2/298.

⁴⁰ On Hegel's general notion of 'Reflexion' see WdL, 6/24 ff.

⁴¹ See EL, §112 A, Z; see also WdL, 6/24.

in a mirror.⁴² That which, at the beginning, in the *Doctrine of Being*, was a first, has been posited now, because of Being's own immanent dialectic, as mediated, as a result, so that mediation is now the ground of immediacy itself. This mediation is what Hegel calls 'essence.'

It is important to note that this mediation, as the negation of immediacy, is itself already thought.⁴³ If pre-modern philosophy, in fact, had drawn its attention to being, to the given realm of objects, but without realizing that, in this very act of directing its thought towards being, thought itself was already implied, modern philosophy, by contrast, has interrupted this spontaneous movement of thought towards being and redirected it this time towards the very subject who thinks of the world. This latter should not be something given anymore, but rather a construct of subjectivity. Furthermore, because thinking gives in this way an object to itself, a world that is 'its' world, and hence thought itself, thought becomes thereby free and self-conscious, since it has found itself in its other. In logico-speculative terms, modern philosophy is but the transition from Being to Essence, since thought, mediation, has been posited as the genetic past of Being, as its transcendental condition of possibility.

Nonetheless, thought was posited, from the very outset of the modern philosophical era, as a merely 'reflective' thought. It was this very reflective standpoint indeed that prevented modern philosophers from achieving what they pretended to achieve in the first place: subjectivity's self-knowledge. The entire movement of reflection, just as it is thought of by Hegel, could be summarized as follows: first, essence idealizes, 'posits' its negation, immediacy, as a non-independent being, as an appearance of essence or mediation itself. In the second place, this positing reflection becomes itself, because of its own dialectic, presupposing or external reflection. In positing its other, in fact, it negates the self-subsistence of this other, in such a way that mediation does not relate to an 'other' anymore, but only to 'itself,' becoming thus self-identical, immediate. However, in doing so, in becoming thus self-identical, mediation necessarily excludes otherness from itself, becoming once again opposed to that first immediacy it pretended to posit.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, and insofar as immediacy has been already shown to be grounded in mediation, this their relation could only be, since they both have become self-identical beings, an 'external' relation, a relation

⁴² See EL, §112 A.

⁴³ See WdL, 6/30, note; EL, §12 A: "In der Tat ist das Denken wesentlich die Negation eines unmittelbar Vorhandenen."

⁴⁴ See WdL, 6/26-7.

produced by a third and equally self-enclosed sphere. In this way, the positing reflection has become ‘presupposing,’ ‘external’ reflection.⁴⁵ Now, insofar as this third sphere contains both sides within itself, and therefore contains them as mutually mediated sides, these sides themselves become determined precisely due to the presence of their own negation within themselves. Thus, external reflection becomes ‘determining’ reflection. In this way, essence, ‘as merely one side of the relation,’ is still indifferent, independent from its other, and reflection is thus ‘external’ reflection; but, ‘as mediated,’ it contains this very other within itself, or this determining reflection is ‘also positing’ reflection. Essence is thereby just one side, finite, but at the same time, the entire relation itself, and thereby, infinite, absolute.⁴⁶ The outcome of this ‘circle of reflection,’ as I would like to call it, is an absolute reduced to one of its sides only, and more precisely, to that side posited as ground in the very beginning of the reflective movement, i.e. mediation, thinking, essence.

It is not hard to see, in view of the foregoing, that the general structure of reflection is nothing but the logical soil of modernity, and thereby of Fichte’s philosophy itself.⁴⁷ On the one hand, thought is a positing, idealizing thought, and therefore an absolute ground, identical to its other or object. On the other hand, this positing thought is presupposing as well, insofar as it rejects this very otherness from itself. Thought, or the I, as Fichte calls it, is thus both infinite, absolute, and finite, a true subject and at the same time a mere object.⁴⁸ In more Schellingian terms, Fichte’s I is not a true subject-object, as it pretends to be, but a one-sided, ‘subjective’ subject-object.⁴⁹ Thought indeed, certainly contains, produces its other from itself; but, on the other side, this object is not the object as such, but only an appearance, a phenomenon, which, ultimately, is nothing but the subject itself. The object as such, not the phenomenon, remains always beyond thought, though always somehow presupposed by it as the ‘cause’ of the Ego’s negativity, as is the case of Fichte’s *Anstoß*.⁵⁰ Thereby, as Hegel says, Kant’s dualism is, despite Fichte himself, still present in this latter’s reconstruction of transcendental philosophy.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See WdL, 6/29.

⁴⁶ See WdL, 6/35.

⁴⁷ See CIRULLI. **Hegel’s Critique of Essence**, pp. 5, 27.

⁴⁸ See DS, 2/56 (italics mine): “Ich = Ich ist absolutes Prinzip der Spekulation, aber diese Identität wird vom System nicht aufgezeigt; *das objektive Ich wird nicht gleich dem subjektiven Ich*, beide bleiben sich absolut entgegengesetzt.” See also 2/60-1.

⁴⁹ See DS, 2/11: “Das Prinzip, das Subjekt-Objekt erweist sich als ein subjektives Subjekt-Objekt;” 2/94.

⁵⁰ Cf. VGPh, 20/403-4.

⁵¹ Cf. VGPh, 20/397, 405.

Essence certainly seeks itself, wants its realization, its truth, i.e. its own determinacy, its unity with its negation, but it never finds it, never realizes itself, and it does not because it posits its negation, which constitutes its own determinacy, always outside and beyond itself. Thus, in what Hegel calls a “monstrously arrogant act,”⁵² the I, this finite subject, pretends to take over the world, to master its laws, and rise itself thus as lord and master of the Earth, of its otherness in general, since only in this way will it be able to satisfy its innermost thirst for itself. This is why, in Hegel’s view, both philosophies, that of Kant and that of Fichte as well, necessarily result in “systems of tyranny.”⁵³ The world, the Ego’s otherness *überhaupt*, is, and always will be, nonetheless, beyond the limits of such a finite I. This is why thought’s activity, namely, to become I = Not-I, could only be a failure, for the Not-I itself always remains beyond the sphere of the I. Precisely because of this, it is infinitely stuck in his own eternal *Trieb*, so that the ‘I = I’ of the beginning of Fichte’s philosophy becomes, at the end, the “I *must* be = I,”⁵⁴ or, what comes to the same, the I ‘not’ = I.

Thought’s reconciliation with the world, its consummation as the subjectivity it is, as this subject-object unity, remains always a *Sollen*, a ‘must-be’ that nonetheless will never be;⁵⁵ or, what amounts to the same, the subject remains non-subjective, an object, a subject broken into two pieces: pure thought on the one side, and the real, embodied thought, on the other. Subjectivity, thus reified, was only consciousness, knowledge of an object, but not yet ‘self’-consciousness, or knowledge that is identical to its object. This is the ground of the reproach that both Hölderlin⁵⁶ and Schelling,⁵⁷ just as Hegel himself shortly after,⁵⁸ directed against Fichte: his absolute, pure Ego, is not really absolute, but only finite subjectivity, i.e. an Ego opposed to and beyond the world. In terms of Hegel’s telling expression: ‘Fichte’s I has no body.’⁵⁹

This helps to shed some light upon another one of Schelling’s criticisms of Fichte, later taken up, though in his own way, by Hegel: transcendental idealism, both in its Kantian and

⁵² Cf. GW, 2/418.

⁵³ See DS, 2/383, 425.

⁵⁴ See DS, 2/68, 75: “So wird das Ende des Systems seinem Anfang, das Resultat seinem Prinzip ungetreu. Das Prinzip war Ich = Ich; das Resultat ist Ich nicht = Ich.” See also WdL, 5/269-70, 6/407.

⁵⁵ See VGPh, 20/407.

⁵⁶ See his brief 1875 essay *Urteil und Sein* and his January 26, 1795 letter to Hegel.

⁵⁷ See GnPh, I, 10, 90: “Fichte faßt nicht etwa das Ich als allgemeines oder absolutes, sondern nur als *menschliches* Ich auf.”

⁵⁸ See VGPh, 20/409: “Die Fichtesche Philosophie erkennt nur den endlichen Geist, nicht den unendlichen, nicht als allgemeines Denken.”

⁵⁹ See GW, 2/416.

Fichteian form, is just one side or aspect of the truth.⁶⁰ If thinking is to be a subject-object, just as it was intended by Fichte himself, then it is necessary to show that the object itself is subjective-objective ‘as well.’⁶¹ However, since Fichte has not taken this complementary, though absolutely necessary path, the transition from nature to thought as such -called by Schelling *Naturphilosophie*, and by Hegel, more broadly, *Realphilosophie*- Fichte’s I necessarily becomes ‘only subjectivity,’ a subjectivity that does not know nor is able to reach the object as such, but only an appearance thereof, a mere reflex of the object ‘within’ subjectivity itself, precisely because the object has not been posited yet as being also subjective.

Fichte certainly saw the need to begin by the subject-object unity, just as he saw as well the need to give an account of that very subject who thinks of this subject-objectivity, to reach, from this pure I, the empirical subject for which this pure thought is an object. Nevertheless, in having remained tied to reflection, he immediately betrayed his own starting point, making it what it should not be: a finite subjectivity.⁶² Due to this finitude, and more precisely, because of the extrinsic reflexivity of this subjectivity, not only was Fichte unable to show -except in an external, and therefore contingent way- how negativity and difference get into this abstract thought, how thought-determinations emerge from thought itself,⁶³ but, moreover, nature as such, the empirical realm, remained equally external to the pure I.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ See DS, 2/48 (italics mine): “*Diese Entgegensetzung kann nicht transzendental aufgehoben werden, d. h. nicht so, daß es an sich keine Entgegensetzung gebe; hiermit ist die Erscheinung nur vernichtet, und die Erscheinung soll doch gleichfalls sein;*” Schelling, StI, I, 3, 331: “*der Parallelismus der Natur mit dem Intelligenten (...) vollständig darzustellen weder der Transscendental- noch der Natur-Philosophie allein, sondern nur beiden Wissenschaften möglich ist.*”

⁶¹ See DS, 2/63, 97 (italics mine): “*Nur indem das Objekt selbst ein Subjekt-Objekt ist, ist Ich = Ich das Absolute.*”

⁶² Schelling himself also opposed his own *Identitätssystem* to the standpoint of reflection. See DSPH, I, 4, 113: “*Das absolute Identitätssystem [ist] vom Standpunkt der Reflexion völlig entfernt, weil diese nur von Gegensätzen ausgeht und auf Gegensätzen beruht.*”

⁶³ See VGPh, 20/395 (italics mine): “*In diesem Grundsatz [viz. the I, as first principle] nun ist erstens noch kein Unterschied ausgedrückt; es ist wohl Subjekt und Prädikat, aber für uns, die wir darüber reflektieren und es unterscheiden, - an ihm selbst ist kein Unterschied.*” And then he adds: “*Schon diese erste Aufstellung dreier Grundsätze hebt die wissenschaftliche Immanenz auf.*” (20/397)

⁶⁴ See GW, 2/395, 2/412: “*Die empirische Seite ist im Theoretischen überhaupt die Abstraktion des Mannigfaltigen, ein Nicht-Ich.*” This is why, Hegel adds, “*sein eigener Inhalt sind die relativen Identitäten zwischen dem leeren Denken und der Abstraktion der Mannigfaltigkeit.*” See also Schelling, GnPh, I, 10, 90-1: “*Die Natur ist ihm [viz. Fichte] in dem abstrakten, eine bloße Schranke bezeichnenden Begriff des Nicht-Ich, des völlig leeren Objekts, an dem gar nichts wahrzunehmen ist, als daß es eben dem Subjekt entgegengesetzt ist, - die ganze Natur ist ihm in diesem Begriff so zusammengeschwunden, daß er eine Deduktion, die weiter als dieser Begriff sich erstreckte, nicht für nöthig hielt. Am Ende war in Kants Kritik mehr Objektivität als in Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre.*”

Philosophy's task will be, from now on, to go beyond reflection, that is to say, to find a way to reintroduce negativity, both in its logical and empirical form, within thinking in a thoroughly immanent way. To unify them both, namely, pure thought and empirical consciousness, to sublimate this split, is the need of philosophy, insofar as it has become 'metacritical' philosophy. In Hegel's terms, philosophy's task is "to suspend the apparent opposition of transcendental and empirical consciousness."⁶⁵ This same point has been made by Hegel, though in different terms, almost thirty years later:

The supreme and ultimate purpose of science [is] to bring about the reconciliation of the self-conscious reason with the reason that is [*seiende Vernunft*], or actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], through the cognition of this accord.⁶⁶

4. Hegel's Absolute Idea or the Completion of Fichte's Metacritical Program

Insofar as I take Hegel's absolute Idea as his most important, because all-encompassing notion, it will be the lens through which I will read not only the general outlines of his philosophical program, but also his own particular proposal, and more precisely, his solution to the aforementioned shortcomings of Fichte's metacritical project. The aim of this section is to prove this thesis.

I will approach Hegel's absolute Idea especially from the brief account thereof given by the philosopher in paragraph 236 of the *Enzyklopädie*. Here it is defined as "the Idea that *thinks itself*, and at this stage, moreover, it is [present] *as thinking*, i.e., as logical Idea."⁶⁷ The most striking feature of this sentence lies in the fact that Hegel seems to bear in mind here Fichte's aforementioned passage according to which, in the previous philosophies, the content, i.e. subjectivity made into an object of cognition, "was not still introduced *as*

⁶⁵ DS, 2/53; see also 2/55: "Dies Identischsein alles empirischen Bewußtseins mit dem reinen ist *Wissen*, und die Philosophie, die dies Identischsein weiß, ist die Wissenschaft des Wissens." The need of philosophy, he says, is this: "die Natur für die Mißhandlungen, die sie in dem Kantischen und Fichteschen Systeme leidet, [versöhnen] und die Vernunft selbst in eine Übereinstimmung mit der Natur [setzen]" (DS, 2/13).

⁶⁶ EL, §6. See also VPhG, 12/41; VG, 87; VPhR I, 243; VGPh, 20/458 (italics mine): "Das Werk der modernen Zeit ist diese Idee zu fassen als Geist, als die *sich wissende Idee*;" EL §17 (italics mine): "Der Begriff der Wissenschaft und somit der erste - und *weil er der erste ist, enthält er die Trennung, daß das Denken Gegenstand für ein (gleichsam äußerliches) philosophierendes Subjekt ist* - muß von der Wissenschaft selbst erfaßt werden. Dies ist sogar ihr einziger Zweck, Tun und Ziel, zum Begriffe ihres Begriffes und so zu ihrer Rückkehr und Befriedigung zu gelangen;" VGPh, 20/389: "Das Bedürfnis der Philosophie ist dahin gesteigert, das absolute Wesen nicht mehr als die unmittelbare Substanz zu denken, welche den Unterschied, die Realität, Wirklichkeit nicht an ihr selbst hat. Gegen diese Substanz hat sich immer teils das Selbstbewußtsein gesträubt, das sein Fürsichsein darin nicht findet und das also seine Freiheit vermißte."

⁶⁷ Italics mine.

thinking.”⁶⁸ If Fichte’s project was, as I tried to show, to reach the point at which the content is no more something externally thought, but itself the thinking subject thinking itself, or the content posited ‘as thinking,’ then Hegel’s passage seems to strongly suggest that he sees in his absolute Idea but the very consummation of Fichte’s metacritical project.⁶⁹

This idea comes to be further strengthened by Hegel’s observation in the *Zusatz* to the cited passage. “Up this point –he argues– the Idea in its development through its various stages has been *our* object; but from now on, the Idea is *its own object*.”⁷⁰ This ‘up to this point’ refers of course to what immediately precedes the actual standpoint of the logical development, namely, the absolute Idea, but it designates more widely the first great part of the SL: *The Objective Logic*. In effect, in the introduction to *The Subjective Logic* or *The Doctrine of the Concept*, Hegel claims that “the foregoing [viz. the objective logic] is to be regarded as *the concept of the concept*,”⁷¹ that is to say, as the Concept or the Idea only ‘in itself’ but not yet posited in and ‘for itself.’ The meaning of this seemingly hard expression is really simple; it only states that in the framework of the objective logic, the Idea is just ‘implicitly’ present, ‘in itself’ or only ‘for us,’ the philosopher or the external observer, working from the darkness, so to say, but not yet brought to light, posited, ‘for’ the Idea itself. In other words, it does not know itself yet, for it is only known by us. The self-knowledge of the Concept does not belong then to the first, but to the last part of Hegel’s SL: *The Doctrine of the Concept*.

At the beginning, indeed, it is the real, worldly subject -you, me, Hegel himself- who, by means of an absolute abstraction, opens up the realm of pure thought.⁷² This abstractive activity, along with its historical conditions of possibility, is the *Logic*’s presupposition.

⁶⁸ Fichte, GGW, I, 454 (italics mine).

⁶⁹ William Maker has already suggested that the subject matter of Hegel’s entire SL is nothing but freedom. See MAKER, W. *Hegel’s Logic of Freedom*. In: Gray Carlson, D. **Hegel’s Theory of the Subject**. MacMillan, 2005.

⁷⁰ Italics mine. See also EL §243, WdL, 6/552: “Wie der Begriff für sich betrachtet wurde, erschien er in seiner Unmittelbarkeit; die *Reflexion* oder *der ihn betrachtende Begriff* fiel in *unser* Wissen. Die Methode ist dies Wissen selbst, für das er nicht nur als Gegenstand, sondern als dessen eigenes, subjektives Tun ist;” WdL, 6/572: “Bei dem *Sein*, dem Anfange ihres *Inhalts* erscheint ihr Begriff als ein demselben äußerliches Wissen in subjektiver Reflexion. In der Idee des absoluten Erkennens aber ist er zu ihrem eigenen Inhalte geworden;” PhdG, §381.

⁷¹ WdL, 6/252.

⁷² See WdL, 6/13-4, 124: “Das Sein ist die absolute Abstraktion;” EL, §78 A (italics mine): “Die Forderung eines solchen vollbrachten Skeptizismus ist dieselbe mit der, daß der Wissenschaft das Zweifeln an allem, d. i. die gänzliche Voraussetzungslosigkeit an allem vorangehe solle. Sie ist eigentlich in dem Entschluß, rein denken zu wollen, durch die Freiheit vollbracht, welche *von aller abstrahiert* und ihre reine Abstraktion, die Einfachheit des Denkens, erfaßt.” See also EL, §§12, 20 A, 44 A; PhdG, §§385, 381 Z [10/21-2], 382, 382 Z; VPhR I, 104-5; VPhR III, 140; VGPh, 18/401; LPhS, 66; WdL, 5/68-9, 6/253.

However, as the outcome of this abstraction, the own abstracting subject has been necessarily thrown out of the logical domain. Indeed, that pure being which opens the *Logic*, rejects from itself all determination and mediation, and thereby, that very subject who, by means of its abstracting activity, has given rise to the *Logic* itself. Pure being, as the first product of this absolute abstraction, hence ‘must be’ the beginning of science. In fact, the only way to make a true beginning is by rejecting every possible presupposition and determination, since every determination is essentially mediation, reference to something else, and thereby, not a first, as science demands, but a second.⁷³ The real, individual subject, determinate and concrete as it is, has thus become only an external observer who passively sees and follows the self-disclosure of the logical concept.

Thinking, in radically thinking itself, necessarily dissociates itself between its pure, universal, and thereby ahistorical side, pure being-thought or mere Idea, and its non-logical presupposition, the external observer or the Idea’s *Dasein*. What we have here, with this self-dissociation, is nothing but the Hegelian form of Fichte’s aforementioned twofold series of thoughts, those of the philosopher or observer, and those of the Self itself, taking this latter in Hegel the form of the logical concept as such. The task is for Hegel just what it was for Fichte, i.e. to overcome this distinction and to reunify the extremes into one absolute and concrete unity, where the embodied and inquiring subject comes to be one with the so far disembodied pure thought or subject object of our inquiry. Whereas the final outcome of this process was called by Fichte the Idea, it is for Hegel the ‘absolute’ Idea.

Throughout the objective logic, hence, we have traversed the pre-Hegelian standpoint, the logical past of the Concept, so to say, going through the different stances it has traversed until the moment when it finally comes to know itself as what it is in itself, i.e. the logical ‘present’ of the subjective logic, whose most accomplished expression is but the absolute Idea, the self-knowing concept. It is no wonder that Hegel recovers the Platonic theory of knowledge: to know is to remember (*erinnern*). Yet this reminiscence (*Erinnerung*) is also an *Er-innerung*;⁷⁴ the past is not only remembered, but this remembering itself is, at the same time, a deepening-into-itself of the content, that is, of *das Logische* itself. That is why the whole *Logic* could be conceived of, as Hegel claims, as being’s going-into-itself,⁷⁵ or more precisely, as pure being-thought logically recovering and grounding the originally non-logical

⁷³ See WdL, 5/72, 75; EL, §86 A.

⁷⁴ See VGPh, 19/43-5.

⁷⁵ See EL, §84; WdL 6/570.

or only historical presupposition. The Concept, by means of the dialectical self-sublation of the finite logical determinacies, will be increasingly posited as the Concept as such, until at the end, once we have reached the absolute Idea, it finally becomes for itself what it thus far was only in itself, implicitly, or for us. In other words, the formerly only ‘external’ reflection comes to be posited as ‘immanent,’ as the reflection of the Concept itself.⁷⁶

Nonetheless, we have traversed thus far the path only half-way, namely, the logical path, the movement and transition from the pure and abstract Concept to the real, thinking subject. With the absolute Idea, ‘external’ reflection has come to be posited as internal or immanent reflection, as the movement of the object itself. In this way, the excluded subjectivity that passively observed the self-judgment and self-determination of the Idea knows itself to be this very judgmental movement of the Idea, or it knows its thinking to be objective as well, for its thought is the object’s own thought. However, this subject is still an abstract subject, for the excluded subjectivity has certainly identified itself with the Concept, but only with the ‘logical’ Concept. Subjectivity is thus only a ‘logical’ subjectivity, a purely conceptual and universal subject, which, as such, is still devoid of all empirical determinateness.

At this point, when we have not gone yet beyond the *Logic*, Hegel has certainly managed to overcome Fichte’s ‘first’ problem -namely, to explain how negativity gets into the first, positive principle- by means of the dialectic immanent to the logical thought-determinations. Thus, pure being, for instance, indeterminateness itself, determines, and thereby sublates itself due to its own inner negativity. Such indeterminateness indeed, is nothing but being’s determinateness, and thereby, its very opposite, nothing: negativity as such, or in Fichte’s terms, the Not-I. The rest of the *Logic*, of course, will follow this same dialectical pattern, producing thereby the entire series of thought-determinations we found in this logico-dialectical path, until at the end that pure being of the beginning becomes the absolute, self-thinking Idea. But a crucial question here is whether this theoretical dialectic is

⁷⁶ See WdL, 5/58: “So ist es der ganze Begriff, der das eine Mal als *seiender Begriff*, das andere Mal als *Begriff* zu betrachten ist; dort *ist* er nur Begriff *an sich*, der Realität oder des Seins, hierist er Begriff als solcher, *für sich seiender* Begriff (wie er es um konkrete Formen zu nennen, im denkenden Menschen, aber auch schon, freilich nicht als *bewußter*, noch wenige als *gewußter* Begriff, im empfindenden Tier und in der organischen Individualität überhaupt ist; Begriff *an sich* ist er aber nur in der unorganischen Natur). Die Logik wäre hiernach zunächst in die Logik des *Begriffs als Seins* und da *Begriffs als Begriffs* (...) in die *objektive* und *subjektive* Logik einzuteilen.” See also WdL, 5/456.

really enough to reach the empirical world, and thereby, the demanded unity between pure and embodied thought.

It is precisely here where we are faced with one of the most well-known challenges addressed to Hegel's philosophy in general. In his *Lectures on Modern Philosophy* Schelling harshly criticizes the final movement of the 'Logic,' the transition from this latter to nature, a criticism that ultimately amounts to this: how is it possible for the 'Logic' to incorporate empirical content? Or, differently put, how is it possible for it to go beyond the Kantian-Fichtean standpoint of finite subjectivity? Schelling's main complaints are as follows. Insofar as the Idea, he argues, is at the end of the 'Logic' already the 'consummated' Idea, there is no apparent reason for any further movement, for a transition from the merely logical realm to nature.⁷⁷ It is just the philosopher's desire to advance into nature that which actually moves the 'Logic' outside itself. "Hegel *must*—Schelling says— come to reality [*Wirklichkeit*]."⁷⁸ Finally, he adds, regarding Hegel's certainly strange claim that the Idea 'resolves' to release itself into nature,⁷⁹ that "that which is supposed freely to decide must be something which really exists, *something that is just a concept cannot decide*."⁸⁰

Let's now briefly consider these objections. True enough, once we have reached the end of the logical path, there is no further movement available; the 'Logic' is here complete,⁸¹ it is the 'end,' the truth and "*the whole truth*."⁸² Mister Krug, just as Schelling as well, is thus entirely right: no one in this world, not even Hegel, is able to deduce a pen, nor anything else, from a mere concept. At this point, and insofar as we remain within the purely logical domain, Hegel's Concept is just like Fichte's I: it has no body, its identity with this body, with the real world as such, could only be a *Sollen*. Yet Hegel himself was in fact never unaware of this problem. As he says, indeed, "the empirical side in *the theoretical* as such is the abstract

⁷⁷ See GnPh, I, 10, 152: "In der Idee liegt *überhaupt* keine Nothwendigkeit zu irgend einer Bewegung, mit der sie ja nicht etwa noch in sich selbst fortschreiten könnte (denn das ist unmöglich, weil sie ihre Vollendung schon hat)." This same criticism has been very recently revisited by Stanley Rosen in his ROSEN, S. **The Idea of Hegel's Science of Logic**. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2014. pp. 486-7. See also BURBIDGE, J. **On Hegel's Logic. Fragments of a Commentary**. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1981. p. 204, and BENCIVENGA, E. **Hegel's Dialectical Logic**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. pp. 33-4.

⁷⁸ GnPh, I, 10, 153.

⁷⁹ Of course, Schelling has in mind WdL 6/572-3. See also EL, §244, and VPhR, III, 217.

⁸⁰ GnPh, I, 10, 154 (italics mine).

⁸¹ See WdL, 6/573 (italics mine): "In dieser Freiheit findet daher *kein Übergang* statt; das einfache Sein, zu dem sich die Idee bestimmt, bleibt ihr vollkommen durchsichtig und ist der in seiner Bestimmung bei sich selbst bleibende Begriff."

⁸² WdL, 6/549. See EL, §19 A; VPhR, III, 17.

manifold, a Not-I.”⁸³ It is absolutely true that, at the end of the *Logic*, there remains no further purely ‘logical’ movement. The ‘Logic, as pure thought alone,’ is certainly unable to proceed any further into nature.

Schelling’s claim, nonetheless, is only partially right. “In the theoretical idealism the empirical is an abstraction; but in the ‘practical’ idealism –Hegel adds– it comes forth as true, empirical reality, visible and tangible.”⁸⁴ A shift into practical philosophy, therefore, is to be given in order to fulfill Fichte’s metacritical demand, to overcome that schism between thought and world, pure and empirical consciousness. The following passage could help to shed some light upon the meaning of this practical shift: “the latter [viz. the abstract, logical manifold] only achieves authentic reality, the true plus, through the *pure act of the will* [*Willensakt*].”⁸⁵ As an act of the will, this movement is certainly external, for it is not the product of a mere logical sublation, though, at the same time, this external act is an act ‘of the Idea itself.’⁸⁶ Yet how is it possible to bring such a pure, external *Willensakt* into the logical realm?

The empirical concreteness of the subject, its body, its surrounding world, i.e. nature in general, was not yet ‘posited’ in the Concept, but only ‘presupposed’ by means of its identification with external reflection, or it was posited just ‘in itself,’ ‘for us,’ but not yet ‘for the Concept’ itself.⁸⁷ This latter has certainly come to be, at the end of the *Logic*, the identity between itself and the real subject. It thus has two sides: the logical, and the real one. According to the former, there is nothing but logical determinacy, so that from this viewpoint, otherness, the real side, is only ‘logical’ negation, or Fichte’s Not-I. This side, however, is

⁸³ GW, 2/412, translation slightly modified. See WdL, 6/572-3: “Diese Idee [ist] noch logisch, sie ist in den reinen Gedanken eingeschlossen, die Wissenschaft nur des göttlichen Begriffs (...) Weil die reine Idee des Erkennens insofern in die Subjektivität eingeschlossen ist, ist sie Trieb, diese aufzuheben, und die reine Wahrheit wird als letztes Resultat auch der Anfang einer anderen Sphäre und Wissenschaft.” See also WdL, 6/496-7; NPh, §246 A.

⁸⁴ GW, 2/413, translation slightly modified.

⁸⁵ GW, 2/403 (italics mine). See GW, 2/397: “Durch den absoluten Willensakt die ganze vernichtete Sinnenwelt überhaupt Realität erhält.” Let’s just recall that Hegel defines his absolute Idea as the unity of the theoretical ‘and the practical’ Idea. See also WdL, 6/548; EL, §235 (italics mine): “Die Wahrheit des Guten ist damit gesetzt, als die Einheit der theoretischen und praktischen Idee, daß das Gute an und für sich erreicht, -die objektive Welt so an und für sich die Idee ist, wie *sie* zugleich *ewig als Zweck sich setzt und durch Tätigkeit ihre Wirklichkeit hervorbringt*.” VGPh, 20/460.

⁸⁶ See EL, §244 (italics mine): “Die Idee, welche für sich ist, nach dieser ihrer Einheit mit sich betrachtet, ist sie Anschauen; und die anschauende Idee Natur. Als Anschauen aber ist die Idee in einseitiger Bestimmung der Unmittelbarkeit oder Negation durch *äußerliche Reflexion* gesetzt. Die absolute Freiheit *der Idee* aber ist (...) *sich als Natur frei aus sich zu entlassen*.”

⁸⁷ See PhdG, §381 Z [10/18] (italics mine): “Das schon in der einfachenlogischen Idee enthaltene Erkennen ist nur der *von uns gedachte* Begriff des Erkennens, *nicht das für sich selbst vorhandene* Erkennen, nicht der *wirkliche Geist*.” See also PhdG, §383 Z.

‘not’ the whole Concept; its other side, the real subject, is in fact much more than logical negativity, since it is a worldly, empirical consciousness.

A mere concept, as Schelling says, cannot decide, and this is right. Yet Hegel’s absolute Idea is ‘not only’ pure thought, it is not a mere concept, as Schelling supposes, but ‘also’ that very ‘we,’ that embodied subjectivity who thinks of the logical object. Now, precisely because the Idea is also such a real subject, it can indeed carry out that demanded act of the will and leave behind its previous passive, theoretical attitude, becoming itself active, practical.⁸⁸ However, this free act by means of which the Idea releases itself into nature is not to be thought of as an arbitrary act. There is a need, a reason for this act, and this reason is to be found ‘within’ the ‘Logic’ itself.

Insofar as, at the end of the *Logic*, ‘we’ has come to be one with the logical Idea itself, and insofar as, on the other side, we have a world, an empirically concrete world, the Concept, ‘as this real subject,’ knows itself, ‘as merely logical Idea,’ as not yet fully accomplished. We, the Concept ‘as real subject,’ know that we are empirically concrete, that we have an empirical world, feelings, passions, and so on; but all this still lies, from the standpoint of the Concept ‘as logical Idea,’ beyond the merely logical realm, since the logical concept only knows of logical determinacies, but nothing of empirical reality. Hence, it is not the Concept ‘as logical concept,’ but ‘as real subject’ who, because it recognizes the lack of reality of its own logical side, ‘resolves’ to release itself into nature, to open its eyes, so to say, with the sole aim of finding itself in this now real, given otherness, in nature, and then in finite spirit.⁸⁹ As Hegel famously stated, the Idea, ‘as logical Idea,’ is by itself powerless, impotent, and the only way it finds to realize itself in the world is by means of the individual’s passions, desires, and will.⁹⁰

In this way, we see that Schelling has failed to recognize the possibility for the absolute Idea to release itself into the real world, to perform a ‘free’ act of the will which is not anymore compelled ‘only’ by a mere logical necessity. The reason for his failure lies in having thought of Hegel’s absolute Idea ‘only and one-sidedly’ as pure thought, and not as

⁸⁸ On the distinction between theoretical and practical see WdL, 6/542; EL, §225; NPh, 246 Z [9/18].

⁸⁹ On the aim of the *Naturphilosophie* see NPh, §246 Z (9/23); on that of the *Philosophie des Geistes* see PhdG, §379 Z (10/15).

⁹⁰ See VG, 81 (italics mine): “Was wir Prinzip, Endzweck, Bestimmung, oder was an sich der Geist [ist], seine Natur, seinen Begriff genannt haben, nur ein *Allgemeines, Abstraktes* ist (...) [es ist] *noch nicht in der Wirklichkeit* (...) noch nicht aus seinem Innern zur Existenz gekommen. *Es muß ein zweites Moment für ihre Wirklichkeit hinzukommen, und dies ist die Betätigung, Verwirklichung, und deren Prinzip ist der Wille, die Tätigkeit der Menschen in der Welt überhaupt.*” See also LPhS, 258.

embodied subjectivity ‘as well.’ However, this ‘awakening’ of pure thought, this free release of itself into the world, is not the whole story. What still remains to be seen is precisely that this newly discovered world is not really such a beyond, an absolute other, but already the Concept itself.

Regarding the philosophy of history Hegel explicitly states that the philosopher’s task is to approach history empirically,⁹¹ just as it is given, but with full trust and confidence that reason governs history,⁹² not as a mere presumption, but as already proven by reason’s self-knowledge or speculative logic.⁹³ However, this procedure holds equally good for all the real philosophical disciplines, and not only for the philosophy of history. The philosopher must indeed approach the world, be it natural or spiritual, in all its radical givenness, immediacy, and contingency, but always confident that there is reason there, and that he will be able to find it.⁹⁴ This is why, in Hegel’s eyes, both the philosophy of nature and that of spirit, are nothing but thought looking for itself in its otherness, or as he says elsewhere, the *Realphilosophie überhaupt* is nothing but “applied logic.”⁹⁵ This must be so since we, and therefore the Concept itself, already know that we are nothing but freedom or Method, i.e. the all-embracing force to which no otherness, nothing determinate or finite, is able to escape from.⁹⁶

If we have traversed thus far the path which led us from pure thought to the world, we still need to show that this very world is not an other, but that it itself already contains thought within itself. As Schelling demanded, the idealistic, transcendental philosophy must be completed by the real side of the equation, by a *Naturphilosophie*, or, in more Hegelian terms, by a *Realphilosophie*. The ‘Logic,’ which was certainly the beginning of the System, must be shown to be its last result as well, the product of both nature and finite spirit.⁹⁷ Differently

⁹¹ See VG, 30.

⁹² See VG, 32.

⁹³ See VG, 29.

⁹⁴ See WdL, 6/260, 549 (italics mine): “Sie [viz. die absolute Idee] ist der einzige Gegenstand und Inhalt der Philosophie. Indem sie alle Bestimmtheit in sich enthält und ihr Wesen dies ist, durch ihre Selbstbestimmung oder Besonderung zu sich zurückzukehren, so hat sie verschiedene Gestaltungen, und *das Geschäft der Philosophie ist, sie in diesen zu erkennen.*”

⁹⁵ See EL, §24 Z1; WdL, 6/265.

⁹⁶ See WdL, 6/551.

⁹⁷ See WdL, 6/496: “Sie [sc. die Wissenschaft der Logik] hat diesen Gang bereits hinter sich oder, was dasselbe ist, vielmehr vor sich, - jenes, insofern die Logik als die *letzte* Wissenschaft, dieses, insofern sie als die *erstegenommen* wird, aus welcher die Idee erst in die Natur übergeht.” See also WdL, 6/573; EL, §17: “Ferner muß der Standpunkt, welcher so als *unmittelbarer* erscheint, innerhalb der Wissenschaft sich zum *Resultate*, und zwar zu ihrem *letzten* machen, in welchem sie ihren Anfang wieder erreicht und in sich zurückkehrt;” PhdG, §379 Z; LPhWH, 154: “The idea in the form of the idea is not something prior from which customs, religion, arts

stated, in order to prove the subject-objectivity of the subject, and thereby its freedom and self-consciousness, its ability to grasp itself in the other of itself, in the world or the object in general, it must be shown the object's subject-objectivity as well, namely, that it is itself already permeated by thought.

At the beginning, the 'Logic' was only subjective, thought, and certainly our thought, turned in upon itself, for the simple reason that the world was still opposed to it.⁹⁸ But at the end, once *das Logische* has found itself in the world, once it has emerged from nature and finite spirit, it loses the subjective appearance it had at the beginning, and, precisely because thought is not anymore confronted to the world, this beginning takes the form of the 'in-itself' of nature, of the inner, implicit *Logos* which has not yet given to itself its own appropriate manifestation, or a petrified intelligence, as Schelling said:⁹⁹ nature's animating, but still unconscious soul. It is only in and through mankind that this *Logos* first comes to consciousness, becoming thus what it is not only implicitly, as slumbering in nature, but also for itself, insofar as it has given to itself an object which is nothing but itself, its own identical manifestation. Because concept and reality, the in-itself and the for-itself, have finally come to be in agreement with each other, the absolute reaches this way its own truth, and, even more, the truth itself.

This world has ceased thus to be an other, it is itself already fraught with thought, precisely because this thought, the thinking subjects we are, has emerged from the world, from nature itself. Because of the same reason, because thought has not come to the world from some otherworldly realm, it is not merely 'our' thought, for it is also objective, namely, the 'world's' reason. This reason, this *Logos*, is thus the true subject-object, the common bound of both our thinking and the world. This is then the result of Hegel's metacritical program: if thought is to be free and self-conscious, if it is but this finding itself in its other, this subject-object identity, it cannot be anything but the world's self-consciousness.¹⁰⁰ Otherwise, the world would be an absolute other, an other in which thought is, and always

proceed; rather it is only the final labor of spirit. The known, speculative idea cannot have been anterior; rather it is the fruit of the highest and most abstract exertion of spirit;" VPhR, I, 84 (italics mine): "*Der Begriff ist wohl in sich selbst wahrhaft; aber zu seiner Wahrheit gehört auch, daß er sich realisiere (...)* Diese Realisierung ist zunächst Bestimmung des Begriffs; *die absolute Realisierung aber ist, daß diese Bestimmung dem Begriff adäquat ist. Diese adäquate Begriffsbestimmung ist die absolute Idee, der wahrhafte Begriff.*"

⁹⁸ See WdL, 6/572.

⁹⁹ See Schelling's poem in his *Zeitschrift für spekulative Physik*. 1800 (SW, 1, 4, 546-8). See also Hegel, EL, §24 Z1; NPh, §247 Z; VGPh, 20/425, 444.

¹⁰⁰ This same idea has been expressed by Hegel, in more religious terms though, as follows: "Der Mensch weiß nur von Gott, insofern Gott im Menschen von sich selbst weiß." (VBDG, 17/480).

will be, unable to find itself. It would thereby become not a subject, but an object; not a bodily, historical thought, but a disembodied and ahistorical ego, which, as such, is simply unable to think itself, just as the Kantian-Fichteian ego was.

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