

## Conditions of Critique: Kant versus Hegel

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### **DRAFT**

#### Abstract

Hegel repeatedly complains of the incoherence of Kant's conception of the critique or investigation of our faculties of knowledge. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the basis of Hegel's complaint, and in doing so identify fundamental respects in which he and Kant differ on the conditions of critique and of thinking in general.

One of Hegel's persistent complaints, in commenting on Kantian critique, is that the most it is able to offer us is knowledge that is "subjective": knowledge not of objects, but merely of the subjective conditions we bring to them, knowledge of the laws or forms of cognition. As he writes in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, the "Critical philosophy" urges that before we set out to know God or the essence of things, we should first investigate our faculty of cognition. We should first examine the instrument or means of knowing before undertaking the task of knowing. But this investigation, Hegel says, leads "our cognition from its concern with objects . . . back to itself, back to the formal aspect [das Formelle]" (EL § 10). So the most we can hope to gain from Kantian critique is insight into the subjective forms that condition our knowledge of things; Kantian critique cannot, however, inform us about the nature of things themselves.

In other passages, Hegel's objection to Kantian critique appears even more radical than this. For he sometimes seems to suggest that critique fails to result even in knowledge of the subject. He attributes this failure to the fact that critique is not a viable form of knowledge at all. Traces of this more radical objection are evident, for example, in the section of the *Science of Logic* entitled, "With What Must the Science Begin?"

“[T]o want the nature of cognition clarified prior to the science,” Hegel writes there, “is to demand that it be considered outside the science.” But this, he says, is something that cannot be accomplished (SL 68; WL 67).<sup>i</sup> In his Introduction to the *Logic*, he tells us that it is “inept” to suggest that logic teaches us rules of thought without regard to what is thought. It is inept to claim that, “what logic is can be stated beforehand.”<sup>ii</sup> In remarks in the *Encyclopedia Logic* where Hegel explicitly takes Kant’s “Critical philosophy” to task, he writes that the investigation of cognition, “cannot take place in any other way than cognitively.” It is just as “absurd” to “want to have cognition before we know,” he notes, as was the “resolve of Scholasticus to learn to swim before he ventured into the water.”<sup>iii</sup>

These latter remarks express Hegel’s doubts about the very possibility of a prior investigation of the nature of cognition, an investigation that is supposed to occur, as he says, “outside” science. It is ‘inept’ or ‘absurd’ to assume that this ‘prior’ investigation can be carried out, in his view. Our meta-level investigations into the conditions of cognition, “cannot take place in any other way than cognitively.”

But what is the absurdity, exactly? Is it contained in the suggestion that we can separate out from the actual practice of a science a meta-level examination of the conditions of the possibility of that science? Is Hegel trying to tell us that there is no point in adopting a critical perspective, in trying to make explicit the underlying assumptions of a particular science or domain of inquiry? Is he recommending a wholesale rejection of the practice of critique?

I very much doubt that Hegel is out to convince us of the utter futility or ‘absurdity’ of critical inquiry. After all, even he engages in critique of some kind. Nonetheless, Hegel does call into question a certain conception of critique – a conception he finds paradigmatically executed by Kant. He finds something absurd or incoherent

about a certain understanding of the nature of critical reflection, of what it can achieve, and of who we are as critical thinkers.

My objective today is to clarify the basis of Hegel's objection to Kantian critique. I set out to identify his reasons for charging that Kantian critique denies us knowledge both of objects and of the subjective forms that condition our efforts to think and know them. I begin with a brief review of some principal features Kant associates with critique. From there, I move on to consider Hegel's objection more closely, drawing clues from his own alternative conception of critique. Given that my topic is nothing less than the nature and limits of human cognition, much of course rides on what we determine to be the respective merits of these competing accounts. Hegel boldly claims that his own account of human cognition has the considerable advantage of freeing us of the skeptical implications of Kant's philosophy. I do not address this claim directly here, but some of the points I consider should somewhat demystify his grounds for making it.

## I

Kant uses the term "critique" in both a narrow and a broad sense. In the narrow sense, "critique" refers to his project of identifying the a priori concepts and principles of *theoretical* cognition, concepts and principles that are constitutive of our cognition of nature (1790 Preface to CJ (167)).<sup>iv</sup> Because the constitutive a priori principles of theoretical cognition derive from the faculty of understanding, on Kant's account, critique in the narrow sense confines its examination to that faculty.<sup>v</sup>

But Kant also uses the term "critique" to stand for the "inquiry into the possibility and bounds of a priori cognition" more broadly. Broadly defined, then, critique investigates not just the conditions of theoretical knowledge, but the conditions governing

the practical and aesthetic realms of inquiry as well (CJ (194)). While our cognition of nature rests on a priori concepts of the *understanding*, practical cognition has at its basis an a priori concept of *reason* (the concept of freedom). Mediating theoretical and practical forms of cognition, according to Kant, is an a priori principle of the faculty of *judgment*. So in the broad or general sense, critique investigates the a priori concepts and principles necessary for each of these domains of inquiry. As Kant writes, critique (in the broad sense) is an examination of “the judging powers insofar as these are capable of a priori principles, no matter what their use may be (theoretical or practical)” (CJ 194).

Kant holds that critique is carried out at a high level of abstraction. It is not the business of critique, in his view, to predict the behavior of physical bodies or identify the specific causal laws governing their motion. Nor is it the task of critique, in the realm of the practical, to discover either the concrete effects of the idea of a supreme being on individual lives or the empirical conditions that aid or hinder the practice of morality. Instead, critique specifies the concepts and principles without which the domains of physics, ethics, and aesthetics would not be possible. This is why Kant describes his *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, as a “treatise on method” and not a “system of . . . science.” His objective in that work is to illuminate the “internal structure” of the science of metaphysics (CPR B xxiif.; A xx). In the context of theoretical philosophy, critique is a “preparatory activity necessary for the advancement of metaphysics as a well-grounded science” (B xxxvi; see also B 26/A 12f., A 841/B 869.). More broadly, critique is an examination of all the “judging powers insofar as these are capable of a priori principles.” In this broad sense, then, critique is, in Kant’s words, “propadeutic to all philosophy” (CJ 194).

As just noted, Kant employs critique to identify concepts and principles that are a priori.<sup>vi</sup> He characterizes a priori concepts and principles as “*absolutely*” independent of experience (Intro <B> 2f.). Such concepts and principles are not merely independent of our observations here and now. Nor are they “general rules” resulting from well-confirmed inductive inferences. Rather, they rely for their origin on no experience whatsoever. Moreover, the a priority of these concepts and principles is precisely what guarantees their “necessity and strict universality,” in Kant’s view (Intro <B> 4).<sup>vii</sup> As “absolutely necessary,” a priori cognitions provide what he says is the standard and example of “all apodictic (philosophical) certainty” (A xv).

Kant argues that a priori concepts and principles are brought to experience by a non-empirical or “transcendental” form of self-consciousness.<sup>viii</sup> This view of the origin of our a priori concepts and principles explains why he sometimes characterizes critique as an exercise in “self-knowledge” [*Selbsterkenntnis*] (CPR A 735/B 763; see also A xi). As he writes in the A-Preface of the first *Critique*, his project there has to do “merely with reason itself and its pure thinking.” He does not need to “see far beyond” himself to gain “exhaustive acquaintance” with his cognitive faculties, he says, because he encounters them in himself (A xiv; see also A 13). It is precisely because he has to do “merely with reason itself and its pure thinking,” that that he can expect that the results of his critical enterprise will enjoy “completeness” as well as “certainty” (A xiv; see also Proleg (366)<sup>ix</sup>). “Nothing here can escape us,” Kant writes, “because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden” (A xx; see also B 26/A 13).

We know so far, then, that the concepts and principles Kantian critique seeks to identify are the framework concepts and principles of a given realm of inquiry, necessary for the possibility of that realm of inquiry. We also know that these framework concepts

and principles are a priori and as such universally and necessarily valid. But by what procedure does Kant believe he is able to identify these a priori concepts and principles? What, in other words, is the *method* of critique, on his account? We just noted that he describes critique as an exercise in “self-knowledge,” but we now want to understand how he thinks this self-knowledge is attained.

The topic of Kant’s critical method is enormously complex and deserves far more attention than I will give it here. My aim in these paragraphs is simply to highlight features of Kant’s method that most obviously provoke Hegel’s objections. In considering examples of Kant’s method, I restrict my attention to his theoretical and practical philosophy. Ultimately, I hope to make the case that Kant and Hegel defend strikingly different accounts both of the conditions of critique and of what critique can achieve.

We can prepare the way for our discussion of Kant’s method with the help of an example. In his Prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant announces his intention to “save” metaphysics. It is clear that metaphysics needs saving, he says, because human reason is unable to extricate itself from self-contradictions that threaten its employment. These self-contradictions or “antinomies” arise when reason claims knowledge of the ultimate nature of experience -- when it pronounces on such topics as whether matter is simple or infinitely divisible, or whether the causal sequence of events does or does not have a first beginning or cause. When reason flatters itself that it can settle such questions, it lands in irresolvable conflicts. This is the “battlefield” that in Kant’s view has destroyed the authority of metaphysics.<sup>x</sup>

Kant indicates that he will save metaphysics by demonstrating that it can be put on the secure path of a science. He notes that his demonstration derives inspiration from

the fields of mathematics and physics. Mathematics and physics already enjoy scientific status, he asserts, precisely because each rests on principles that are a priori. Moreover, the a priori principles at the basis of each of these sciences are of a special nature. As a priori, the principles are universally and necessarily valid. On Kant's understanding, however, neither mathematics nor physics dogmatically awards these principles unconditional validity. The universal and necessary validity of these principles, that is, is restricted to forms of cognition such as ours that depend on objects being given in space and time. Expressed in a different way, Kant discovers at the basis of the sciences of mathematics and physics principles that, while a priori, are not conceptual or logical truths. They are a priori, but also synthetic.<sup>xi</sup>

Since these sciences are "actually given," Kant says, we are of course warranted in concluding that they "must be possible" (Intro <B> 20). Mathematics and physics can therefore provide us clues to how metaphysics can also be secured as a science. The key is to establish that, in common with mathematics and physics, metaphysics rests on principles that are both synthetic and a priori. Metaphysics can be saved as a science, provided that it follows mathematics and physics in restricting the validity of its principles to objects of experience or "appearances" (B xviii).<sup>xii</sup>

Note that in this example Kant begins by isolating some fact or set of facts he takes to be beyond doubt, facts with which any rational (or finite rational) nature could agree. There is no need to doubt that metaphysics is in a state of crisis and is so far unable to steer clear of antinomies whenever it tries to decide questions concerning ultimate reality. Nor is there any reason to doubt the possibility of pure mathematics or pure physics since, as Kant says, each is already actual. We can moreover rest assured

that both fields of inquiry already enjoy scientific status and that their fundamental principles are synthetic a priori.

When Kant focuses his attention on saving particular laws of experience, he employs this same methodological strategy. In the case of the law of the permanence of substance (the “First Analogy”), for example, he once again begins with some fact or set of facts he believes he is warranted in taking for granted. In this case, he begins with assumptions not even his opponent David Hume can doubt, namely, that we perceive alteration, and that the perception of alteration is not possible without the accompanying perception of an underlying permanent (B 231/A 188a). Kant then proceeds to argue that this uncontroversial fact can only be adequately explained if we grant, in opposition to Hume, that we bring to our perception of alteration an a priori rule, the rule of the permanence of substance.

We discover these argumentative moves again at work in Kant’s practical philosophy. This time his starting place is what he takes to be a universally accepted conception of moral obligation. As he writes in the Preface to the *Groundwork*,

Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command, ‘thou shalt not lie,’ does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it.

As the passage indicates, Kant judges it to be uncontroversial that all rational natures agree that a law holds morally only if it carries with it “absolute necessity.”<sup>xiii</sup> He then informs us that if we regress to the conditions of the possibility of this fact, we discover

that the “ground of obligation” cannot be nature or experience, but must rather be sought “a priori . . . in concepts of pure reason” (389).

What features do these three examples of Kant’s critical method share in common? In each case, Kant’s objective is to establish that at the basis of a particular realm of inquiry or form of experience are synthetic a priori principles. To that end, he engages the method of critique, and thus undertakes an investigation of the nature and laws of our various cognitive faculties. He begins by isolating some fact or set of facts that may be assumed to be beyond doubt, facts with which any rational nature (any “common understanding”) could agree. He starts with these facts and then proceeds, by means of the method of analysis, to make explicit the conditions upon which they rest. By analyzing the concept of moral obligation that “everyone must grant,” he determines that a priori concepts of reason must lie at its basis. By analyzing what even Hume acknowledges to be the fact of our perception of alteration, he is able to discover the a priori rule that is a condition of its possibility. By analyzing the concepts of the four antinomies, he reveals that each thesis and antithesis rests on a mistaken assumption about the extent of our knowledge.<sup>xiv</sup>

With the clarificatory work of analysis behind him, Kant can then move on to the third and final step of his critical procedure. He can proceed to *justify* the universally agreed upon concepts and principles with which his investigation began. This justificatory (or “synthetic”) step of his critical method aims to establish, for example, that we are warranted in thinking of ourselves as beings bound by a priori practical laws. In the realm of the theoretical, its objective is to demonstrate, among other things, that the perception of alteration would not be possible did our faculty of understanding not supply the a priori rule of permanence to objects of experience. It seeks to demonstrate, in

addition, that metaphysics can indeed be saved as a science provided that it abandons its claim to know things in themselves.<sup>xv</sup>

## II

Turning our attention, now, back to Hegel, what exactly is his objection to this critical program? The precise nature of his objection turns out to be quite difficult to make out. For if we say that he means to challenge the first step of Kant's critical procedure, then we have the challenge of explaining the fact that, in his own major works, he appears to begin in much the same way. That is, Hegel seems to begin his critical investigations just as Kant does – by first singling out some commonly agreed upon or uncontroversial assumption, some fact he believes he is warranted in taking for granted. In the *Phenomenology*, for instance, he starts with the assumption that our “truest” cognition of nature relies on the passive reception of sense impressions alone, unmediated by concepts. He presents this assumption as one with which every finite rational nature would agree. In the *Science of Logic*, his starting point is meant to be equally uncontroversial. The *Logic* begins with concept of pure being, a concept that, precisely because of its emptiness or abstract indeterminacy, can reasonably be thought to serve as the unconditioned or absolute ground of the science.

But if it is not Kant's starting point that Hegel rejects, then perhaps he means to call into question Kant's reliance on the method of analysis. This suggestion seems unconvincing as well, because once again Hegel appears to follow Kant in availing himself of this same tool. The various progressions in the *Phenomenology* would not be possible without Hegel's analysis of key concepts. Each step forward -- for example, from the standpoint of Sense Certainty, to that of Perception, to that of Force and

Understanding -- results from his making explicit, by means of conceptual analysis, the condition or conditions of the concept or set of concepts with which he began. This is likewise the case regarding the dialectical progressions in the *Logic*. The advance from the concepts “pure being” and “nothing” to that of “becoming,” and so forth, requires as a necessary condition Hegel’s own employment of the analytic method.

Finally, it seems we fare no better if we propose that the feature of Kant’s critical method to which Hegel takes exception is the third and “synthetic” step. This is the step in which Kant sets out to rationally justify the commonly agreed upon assumptions with which his critical investigations began. Once again, this proposal leaves us the difficulty of explaining Hegel’s apparent commitment to this same aim. At least, Hegel seems just as committed as Kant is to the project of grounding the conditions of theoretical as well as practical cognition. Like Kant, he seeks a rational justification of the conditions of human experience, and he does not urge us to accept his conclusions on the basis of immediate self-evidence or faith.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, we discover that the similarities just identified in the critical methods of Kant and Hegel are far more apparent than real. In my next section I will argue that one of the grounds of Hegel’s more radical objection to Kantian critique – one of his reasons for doubting that critique can even result in knowledge of the subject – has to do with the degree of trust Kant places in his own powers of abstraction. We just saw that, for Kant, critique begins with some commonly agreed upon assumption, some assumption (or set of assumptions) with which all rational natures can agree. Kant holds that we can be confident in our starting point because we have the ability to separate out those claims that are valid universally and necessarily – claims “everyone must grant” – from those that are conditional or contingent. We can furthermore be

confident that once our initial assumptions are in place, our analysis will make fully explicit the conditions upon which they rest. We can rest assured that the conclusions we draw from analysis will likewise be acceptable to all rational agents. Finally, we can be confident in the results of our final justificatory project. For we know we have the ability to ultimately ground the a priori conditions of the possibility of a given realm of inquiry. We can establish that these conditions are “absolutely necessary” because, as a priori, they enjoy strict versus merely “empirical” or “comparative” universality (Intro <B> 3f.). We can base our confidence on the fact that, as Kant says, what “reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden.”

When Hegel charges that there can be no ‘knowing before we know,’ no critique of cognition that is not itself an act of cognition, his point is not to deny the possibility of critical reflection altogether. He instead means to call into question the assumption that we can *absolutely* separate out our meta-level reflections on the conditions of the possibility of some science or realm of inquiry from the norms that govern the actual practice of that science or realm of inquiry. He doubts that we can perform this kind of abstraction.

### III

To develop and defend this line of interpretation, I am going to turn my attention, now, to Hegel’s alternative account of the nature and conditions of critique. I rely on a few clues from texts in which he gives us fairly focused discussions of his own critical method. The discussions I have in mind appear in the opening pages of both his *Phenomenology* and his 1812 *Science of Logic*. As we move on to consider Hegel’s alternative account in these texts, it is important that we bear in mind the following point:

In complaining that there can be ‘no knowing before we know,’ Hegel’s charge is that Kantian critique can give us knowledge neither of objects nor of the subjective conditions we put into them. In proposing an alternative conception of critique, he thinks he is somehow able to overcome these limitations.

In remarks that recall Kant’s Prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel announces in the opening paragraph of the 1812 Preface to his *Logic* that metaphysics is in a state of crisis; it has “vanished from the ranks of the sciences.”<sup>xvi</sup> What is required, he says, is a “completely fresh start,” an “altogether new concept of scientific procedure.”<sup>xvii</sup> Although the rhetoric of these remarks might tempt us to infer that Hegel’s intention here is to pay tribute to Kant, it soon becomes obvious that he casts Kant in the role of principal offender. The crisis into which metaphysics has fallen, Hegel goes on to inform us, is a consequence of the “renunciation of speculative thinking.” No one is anymore interested in topics treated by rational psychology or cosmology, and Kant is largely to blame for this situation.<sup>xviii</sup> Kant is to blame, because a central tenet of his Critical philosophy is that objects of speculative metaphysics are inaccessible to our knowledge.<sup>xix</sup>

If we read further, we discover that these passages express more than Hegel’s frustration with the skeptical implications he takes to follow from Kant’s philosophy. The passages are also of interest because of the clues they contain to Hegel’s diagnosis of the ultimate cause of the crisis. For he goes on to tell us that the crisis of metaphysics is a consequence of the fact that philosophers – including Kant – have been insufficiently self-critical. It is the “business of logical thinking,” Hegel writes, to inquire into our most basic assumptions.<sup>xx</sup> “[T]horoughness [*Gründlichkeit*] seems to require that the beginning, as the foundation on which everything is built, should be examined before

anything else.”<sup>xxi</sup> But philosophers typically fall short when it comes to examining their own “presuppositions and prejudices.” They simply presuppose, for example, that “infinity is different from finitude, that content is other than form, that the inner is other than the outer, . . . that mediation is not immediacy.”<sup>xxii</sup> Or they borrow their methods and fundamental concepts uncritically from, “a subordinate science such as mathematics.”<sup>xxiii</sup> They presuppose that these subordinate sciences are already in perfect order.

At first glance, it appears that Hegel’s message is simply that philosophers -- including Kant -- are at fault for not bringing their dogmatic proclivities under tighter control. They need to insure that, at the start of their critical inquiries, they make their basic assumptions fully explicit and are warranted in supposing that these are assumptions with which all rational natures could agree. But Hegel’s objection is more interesting than this. He is not simply suggesting that philosophers need to exercise more care in observing the high standards of critique; he instead means to call into question the standards themselves. The real target of his remarks, I think, is a certain understanding of what critical inquiry can be.

In the early pages of the *Logic*, Hegel reminds us of the long history of efforts on the part of philosophers to begin with “definitions” “imagined” to express the “accepted and familiar” object and aims of a science (SL 49/WL 42). Some thinkers have taken as their first principle a “particular content,” such as “water, the one, nous, idea, substance, the monad.” Others have set out, he says, from a claim about the nature of cognition itself.<sup>xxiv</sup> Either way, philosophers typically begin with some assumption or set of assumptions they believe they are warranted in taking for granted. They credit themselves with the ability to identify the “commonest” categories and methods, the

categories and methods that can be affirmed by every rational nature.<sup>xxv</sup> They in other words assume they can separate out the categories and methods valid for all rational natures from those that have at best a merely conditional worth. They can make this separation, presumably, because they have the capacity to leave the realm of shadows or appearances behind.

But a chief objective of each of Hegel's major works is to *challenge* this portrayal of the nature of critical inquiry. In his *Logic*, for example, he contrasts his own understanding of the science of thinking with what he tells us is the standard account. The standard account assumes that, "thinking constitutes the mere form of a cognition, that logic abstracts from all content" (SL 43; WL 36). The standard account in other words assumes that,

thinking on its own is empty and comes as an external form to the said material, fills itself with it and only thus acquires a content . . . (SL 44; WL 36f.).

In *opposition* to this account, Hegel insists that thought is *not* an "empty" or "external" form that "abstracts from all content." At *no* point in the articulation or development of the *Science of Logic*, in his view, are its concepts or laws empty of content – not even at the foundation of the science. Hegel's claim here is not that, at every stage in the development and articulation of the science, the laws and concepts of logic are empty until they are actually *applied* in our thinking about objects. His claim is rather that, at no point in the science are the laws and concepts of logic products of a special act of reflection whereby all that is contingent and of merely conditional validity is abstracted away.<sup>xxvi</sup> On the interpretation I am proposing, then, one of the mistakes Hegel associates with critique is that of attributing to the critical thinker extraordinary abstractive powers -

- powers to separate out, at the start of inquiry, the concepts and methods that can be affirmed by all rational natures.

These early pages of the *Logic* contain evidence, however, that Hegel associates a further mistake with critique. For he also calls into question the assumption that, when engaging in critical inquiry, we can achieve a *perfect grasp* of our presuppositions, that we can make them fully transparent to ourselves. We make the mistake of thinking that, at the start of inquiry, we have perfect knowledge of where we are. We over-estimate our self-knowledge.

I noted earlier that, in each of his principal works, Hegel's starting point appears to share much in common with Kant's. He characterizes the concepts and methods with which he begins much as Kant does – as the concepts and methods that are the most familiar and commonly accepted, as those he is therefore most warranted in taking for granted. And like Kant, Hegel enlists the method of analysis to make the conditions of those concepts and methods explicit. He follows Kant, furthermore, in defending his conclusions about the conditions of human experience by means of rational argument versus appeals to self-evidence or faith. But it should not escape our notice that in Hegel's case the advance from the initial “common” and “familiar” assumptions, through the procedure of analysis, to the point of rational justification, unfolds quite differently than it does for Kant. For both philosophers, analysis identifies the conditions necessary for the common concepts and methods with which we begin. But while in Kant's case analysis serves the objective of finally justifying or grounding those common concepts and methods, analysis as Hegel employs it reveals that the assumptions with which we started are not what we initially took them to be. Analysis in other words reveals that we were mistaken in our initial self-understanding. And not only that: In making explicit

what we failed to initially grasp about our original assumptions, analysis awakens in us the need to revise them. So instead of aiding the ultimate justification of the assumptions with which we started, analysis as Hegel employs it has the effect of undercutting or sublating them.

This message is conveyed again and again in Hegel's works. The *Science of Logic* begins with a concept that is initially posited as well qualified to serve as the absolute ground of the science, the concept of pure being. We take the concept of pure being to qualify as the absolute ground because we assume that it expresses abstract indeterminacy and that, as such, it rests on no prior ground or condition. But once we subject the concept of pure being to analysis, we discover that we were *wrong* to suppose that we meant by "pure being" something wholly indeterminate. For upon reflection, we discover that we in fact take the concept "pure being" to mean something other than the concept "nothing." As Hegel puts it, analysis reveals that, the concept "pure being" is "itself an expression of reflection" (SL 69; WL 68). So looking back, we learn that we were mistaken in our original understanding of our starting point; we did not have the self-understanding we thought we did. We thought that "pure being" could serve as the ground of our science because of its abstract indeterminacy. We learn, however, that "pure being" is not absolutely indeterminate after all. We thus have to give up the expectation that we can ground our science on an abstract indeterminacy and move on in search of a more adequate ground.

The *Phenomenology* teaches us this kind of lesson as well. Consciousness begins its search for the conditions of knowledge with an assumption it believes it is entitled to take for granted, namely, that our most reliable cognitive access to nature is achieved by means of what Hegel refers to as "sense certainty," by the passive reception of sense

impressions, unmediated by concepts. Consciousness assumes that this direct or immediate access to things is the “truest,” the best means of getting at the things themselves. But upon reflection, consciousness discovers that its starting point – which at first seemed self-evident and secure – is not what it initially took it to be. For upon reflection, consciousness comes to acknowledge that we cannot say what it is we know – or even pick out the object of our knowledge by ostension -- without the aid of concepts. Consciousness discovers by means of analysis, then, that sense certainty is not a form of knowledge at all. In discovering its mistake, consciousness moves on in search of more adequate ground.

So as it turns out, the methodological similarities I highlighted earlier in the critical methods of Kant and Hegel are superficial at best. For as Hegel employs it, analysis does not serve the purpose of finally grounding the supposedly universally and necessarily valid assumptions with which we begin; it instead makes their contingency explicit. It thereby sets reason in motion in search of a new ground. In exposing our ignorance, analysis in addition awakens in us a new self-understanding. We initially thought we knew our starting point; we thought we could make all of our presuppositions fully transparent. We thought that since we were relying on nothing more than what reason brings forth “entirely out of itself,” nothing could “escape” us (CPR A xx; see also B 26/A 13). But we discover that this self-conception was also mistaken, and that we were not entitled to the self-confidence we had at the start.

I have specified two respects in which Hegel's conception of critique differs from Kant's. First, critique as Hegel employs it does not result in the ultimate justification of the common, familiar assumptions with which we begin. Critique instead undercuts them. Second, critique for Hegel deflates our claims to know ourselves at the start of inquiry. We thought that in beginning our logic with the concept of pure being, we were beginning with an abstract indeterminacy. Upon reflection, however, we discover that we in fact mean by "pure being" something determinate, something other than "nothing." We thought that in beginning with sense certainty, we were describing the truest means of knowing things. But we eventually learn that we are in fact committed to the view that knowledge requires the employment of concepts, and that sense certainty is not a form of knowledge at all.

In illustrating Hegel's critical method, I have drawn my examples from the *literal* beginnings of his discussions in the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology*. But each of these texts tells the story of a *series* of beginnings. Each records a history of false starts in the efforts of philosophers to ground their sciences. The message Hegel seems to want to convey, then -- the lesson he thinks we learn from a careful study of the history of philosophy -- is that every effort on the part of philosophers to begin with what is common and familiar, with assumptions every rational nature must grant, has so far suffered the same fate. The assumptions we thought we could take for granted at the start of inquiry, the assumptions we took to accurately capture the universal and necessary conditions of our science, turn out to be unstable. Critique exposes the necessity of revising them. This is equally the case regarding our claims to self-knowledge. The history of philosophy records a series of self-conceptions, each initially presuming to capture the truth about who we are as thinking or knowing or willing subjects. But again

and again, history instructs us that the self-knowledge we took ourselves to have at the start was in some way deficient, and that we did not know ourselves as well as we thought we did.

So Hegel's discussions of history of the science of logic, and of consciousness in its search for the ground of knowledge, contain a message not just about the failure of reason at some particular moment in its journey. These histories tell the story of a chronic condition. One general message of Hegel's histories is that human reason is unable to carry out the Cartesian experiment of identifying, at the start of inquiry, the universal and necessary concepts and methods of a science, the concepts and methods that ground that science once and for all. Human reason cannot succeed in this endeavor, because the task of identifying the truly universal and necessary ground of a science requires powers of abstraction we do not possess. A general message of Hegel's histories, then, is that human reason is incapable of total detachment; it cannot free itself of the presuppositions that tie it to a particular historical reality. It is in this sense not an "empty" or "external" form that "abstracts from all content."<sup>xxvii</sup>

A second general lesson of Hegel's histories concerns our claims to self-knowledge. Since it is not possible for us to transport ourselves in thought to a wholly external vantage point, we also cannot, at the start of inquiry, be fully aware of our presuppositions. In an illuminating passage in the *Logic* in which Hegel characterizes his own starting point in that text, he writes that the beginning, "is not truly known at the beginning" (SL 72; WL 71).<sup>xxviii</sup> This remark is not a confession of the limits of his own knowledge in particular, or of his own grasp of the fundamental laws and concepts of his science. Rather, he directs this remark at *any* claim to make fully transparent the assumptions with which we begin our critique. Hegel reminds us in these early pages of

the *Logic* of a point he stressed in the Preface to his *Phenomenology*, namely, that the “commonly known or familiar, precisely because it is familiar, is not well-known.”<sup>xxix</sup>

On Hegel’s account, then, we learn from the history of philosophy that our efforts to undertake critique are invariably accompanied by a certain blindness. The blindness results not merely from the fact that, at the start of inquiry, we have not yet subjected our common and familiar assumptions to analysis. As I noted earlier, Hegel follows Kant in acknowledging the need to take the commonly agreed upon facts with which we begin and make explicit the conditions upon which they rest. But in drawing our attention to the partial blindness that accompanies critique, Hegel has more than the need for analysis in mind. The blindness or ignorance with which he is chiefly concerned, I think, results from our limited powers of abstraction. Precisely because critique proceeds, as he says, from “within” some “shape of consciousness,” we cannot at the start of inquiry make our presuppositions fully transparent to ourselves (PH, Intro. ¶ 89).

As I suggested earlier, Hegel never urges us to abandon our efforts to think critically or to identify the internal structure and necessary conditions of our sciences. This is not the message he intends to convey when he insists that there can be no ‘knowing before we know,’ no critique of cognition that is not itself a cognition. Nor does Hegel recommend that, in undertaking critique, we begin with something *other* than the common and familiar assumptions that seem to us universally and necessarily valid. As just noted, he portrays the history of philosophy as a series of efforts to begin with “accepted” and “familiar” assumptions, and he nowhere suggests that we could begin in any other way. Indeed, he writes in the *Logic* that,

the definition with which any science makes an absolute beginning *cannot contain anything other* than the precise and correct expression of what is *imagined* to be

the *accepted* and *familiar* object and aim of the science (SL 49; WL 42; first emphasis added).

So the lesson we are to learn from the fact that we cannot ‘know before we know,’ is neither that we should abandon critique nor that we should begin with assumptions other than those we believe ourselves warranted in taking for granted. The lesson instead is that we need to adjust our understanding of what critique can achieve. If critical reflection occurs always “within” some “shape of consciousness,” as Hegel says, and if critique is for that reason invariably carried out in partial darkness, then we need to modify our expectation that critique can fulfill Kant’s promise of providing us “completeness” as well as “certainty” (A xiv). We need to reconsider the assumption that in performing critique, “nothing can escape us” (A xx).

In Hegel’s view, critique has not yet discovered a stable ground for our sciences; it has not yet succeeded in identifying fixed subjective forms that are absolutely external to matter. Instead, critique has so far revealed that human reason has a history, and that our thought forms or categories exhibit what he calls “immanent plasticity” (SL 39f.; WL 30f.). The evidence so far, then, is that our thought forms are not absolutely fixed, but evolve in response to historical reality. To put this point differently, the evidence so far is that thinking is not an act of unfettered spontaneity; it is conditioned by and thus owes a debt to history. In the vocabulary of Hegel’s early Jena writings, the human intellect is an “absolute middle”: it is that for which the a priori is at the same time a posteriori.<sup>xxx</sup>

#### *Epilogue: On the Faculties of Thought and Feeling*

I conclude by noting an intriguing passage in the 1831 Preface to the *Logic* in which Hegel suggests that it is a mistake to overlook a feature our faculty of thought

shares with our faculties of feeling, interest and passion (SL 35-37; WL 24f.). We commonly assume that our thought forms or categories are wholly under our control, and that when we apply them in thinking about things, we “stand above” as well as dominate them; we manipulate them to serve our purposes. Our mistake, Hegel suggests here, is to treat our faculty of thought as in this respect wholly different from the faculties of feeling. In the case of our feelings and passions, we correctly assume that although we can guide and control them to some extent, we also have to accommodate ourselves to them (SL 35; WL 25). We correctly recognize, in other words, that these faculties are not entirely at our disposal. Feelings, interests and passions do not merely serve us; we also have to serve them. We are to some extent “caught up” in them, as Hegel says; they “have us in their possession.” As “independent forces and powers,” they set constraints we can neither thoroughly control nor completely grasp.

In these remarks, Hegel once again expresses his thesis that thinking is not an act of unfettered freedom or pure spontaneity. There is no application of our forms of thought that is not at the same time conditioned by and thus responsive to historical forces, forces that elude our control. And this means that the activity of critique, as well as its outcome, is not entirely up to us.<sup>xxxix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *Science of Logic* (“SL”), Miller transl.; *Wissenschaft der Logik* (“WL”), Suhrkamp.

<sup>ii</sup> SL, 43f.; WL, 35f.

<sup>iii</sup> EL § 10. See also EL § 41A1 where Hegel refers to “mistaken project of wanting to have cognition before having any cognition.”

<sup>iv</sup> A principle is constitutive, in the context of theoretical inquiry, if it has appearances as its object and if it is a condition of the possibility of our experience of appearances. Although our concepts (“ideas”) of things in themselves are at best merely regulative in the context of theoretical inquiry, they may have a constitutive use, according to Kant, in the realm of the practical or aesthetic. See Kant’s discussion of this topic in CJ (168).

<sup>v</sup> It is curious that Kant names the *Critique* that is concerned with identifying the a priori concepts and principles constitutive of theoretical cognition the *Critique of Pure Reason*, given that, on his own account, the faculty responsible for those concepts and principles is the faculty of understanding. Although Kant calls the work the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he describes his task in passages there as a critique of “pure understanding” (B 345/A 289). He tells us that, on the one hand, he seeks to determine the objective validity of a priori concepts (categories) for objects of pure understanding. On the other, he aims to “investigate the pure understanding itself, its possibility and the cognitive faculty upon which it rests.” His “chief question,” he tells us, is: “What and how much can the understanding and reason cognize free of all experience” (A xvii). He explains his title for the work in his Preface to the 1790 edition of CJ (168). Although the understanding is the faculty proper to a critique of theoretical cognition, the work is a critique of pure reason. This reflects his concern to “make the secure and sole possessor [of that domain] against all other competitors.” Idea? Reason needs critique because it tends to encroach upon the proper domain of the understanding. A primary task of the text is, then, to expose the natural and persistent tendency of pure reason to compete with the role of pure understanding. Reason tries to present its concepts (“ideas”), which are at best “regulative” of theoretical inquiry, as “constitutive” (See, e.g., CPR A xii, A 735/B 763). Kant thus describes his task, in the first *Critique*, as that of an investigation of the nature and limits, of *both* faculties of understanding and reason.

<sup>vi</sup> At CPR A 13/B 27 Kant ties critique to a priori cognition that is *synthetic*, but this point need not concern us right here.

<sup>vii</sup> “Necessity and strict universality,” Kant writes, “are . . . secure indications of a priori cognition” (Intro <B> 4).

<sup>viii</sup> (B 132). In the context of Kant’s practical philosophy, the proper designation here would be the “intelligible” or “noumenal” subject.

<sup>ix</sup> Kant writes that metaphysics “can be brought to such completion and fixity as to require no further change or be capable of any augmentation by new discoveries, because here reason has the sources of its knowledge in itself.”

<sup>x</sup> A viii, B xiv; see also Intro <B> 24.

<sup>xi</sup> For evidence that Kant draws this lesson from the history of mathematics, see CPR B xi f. (quote?)

<sup>xii</sup> In his B-Preface to the CPR, Kant identifies “two parts” of metaphysics: The first part is concerned with showing that we have a priori laws that ground nature; the second part has as its object the unconditioned or supersensible (B xviii f).

<sup>xiii</sup> Kant tells us in the *Groundwork* that he is involved in the project of explicating the “generally received concept of morality” (445). Moral concepts, he says, have their origin in common reason (411; see also 394, 397). See for similar points, CprR (27, 36, 155); CPR A 807/B 835.

<sup>xiv</sup> Both in the *Prolegomena* and in § 117 of his 1800 *Jäsche Logic*, Kant describes this form of inquiry as “analytical” or “regressive”: we “regress” from a concept back to the principles or assumptions that must be presupposed in order to explain as well as ground or condition it. Kant

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writes in the *Prolegomena* that he will begin with “something already known to be dependable, from which we can go forward with confidence and ascend to the sources which are not yet known, and whose discovery not only will explain what is known already, but will also exhibit an area with many cognitions that all arise from these same sources” § 4 (275). A few paragraphs later, he describes the analytic procedure in this way: “one proceeds from that which is sought as if it were given, and ascends to the conditions under which alone it is possible” § 5 (276n).

<sup>xv</sup> Kant describes the “synthetic” part of his investigation as “progressive” or forward moving rather than “regressive” (*Proleg* § 5 (276n)). A clear example of the difference between these two methods is provided in the *Groundwork*. Kant tells us there that the first two sections of the work are “analytic” and the third section “synthetic.” The work begins with the concept of a “good will,” a concept Kant says is available to the common understanding. As a result of the work he does in the first two sections explicating that concept, we eventually learn, in the final pages of Section II, that the concept of a good will depends on that of autonomy. The “synthetic” work of the third section involves justifying our belief in ourselves as beings that possess this autonomy.

Kant describes his method the *Prolegomena* (276) as “analytic” in contrast to the “synthetic” method of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He says that the *Prolegomena* starts from the fact that synthetic rational cognition actually exists, and moves on to inquire into the ground of this possibility. Odd that he distinguishes the two texts in this way, given that same thing seems to be happening in CPR. It is not clear to me how he could be using these terms just as he does in the *Groundwork*. The *Critique of Pure Reason* supplies many examples of “regressive” argumentation, as my above examples show. My task here, in any case, is not to try to provide comprehensive account of Kant’s method in all its complexity, but just to isolate the elements of his method that provoke a response from Hegel.

<sup>xvi</sup> ist aus der Reihe der Wissenschaften verschwunden. um einen neuen Begriff wissenschaftlicher Behandlung. SL 25; WL 13.

<sup>xvii</sup> wieder einmal von vorne anzufangen. SL 27; WL 16.

<sup>xviii</sup> speculative Denken zu entsagen. SL first Pref, 25; WL 13.

<sup>xix</sup> Further evidence? In Preface to First Ed of SL written in 1812 he writes of a “complete transformation” under which philosophical thought has “suffered” [erlitten] in the “last twenty-five years.” SL 25; WL 13. I said he thinks of Kant as “largely” responsible because Hegel also holds the practical mindedness of the time responsible. Also responsible are those Hegel refers to as the “modern educationists” with their focus on practical training, SL 25.

<sup>xx</sup> Geschäft des logischen Denkens . . . SL 2nd Pref, 42; WL 33.

<sup>xxi</sup> Gründlichkeit scheint zu erfordern, den Anfang als den Grund, worauf alles gebaut sei, allem voran zu untersuchen . . . SL 41, 2nd Pref; WL 32.

<sup>xxii</sup> Voraussetzungen und Vorurteile . Example: “dass die Unendlichkeit verschieden von der Endlichkeit, der Inhalt etwas anderes als die Form, das Innere ein anderes als das Äussere, die Vermittlung ebenso nicht die Unmittelbarkeit sei . . .” SL 41 Second Pref; WL 33 Hegel mentions in this context the fact that Kant simply borrows his logic from Aristotle. He assumes that, since Aristotle, logic (general) has neither lost nor gained ground. It is “finished and complete.” SL Intro 51; WL 46. Also in EL ¶ 42. Kant just borrowed his categories from the “gewöhnliche Logik.”

<sup>xxiii</sup> Die Philosophie, indem sie Wissenschaft sein soll, kann . . . ihre Methode nicht von einer untergeordneten Wissenschaft, wie die Mathematik ist, borgen . . . “ SL 27 (1st Pref); WL 16. See also SL 53 (Intro); WL 48. He notes (SL 27) that he already argued this in Pref to 1st ed of PhG.

<sup>xxiv</sup> SL 67; WL 65, “With What Must the Science Begin.”

<sup>xxv</sup> “commonest cats” SL 32; WL 21.

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Logic on his account is not an empty formalism; rather, it “constitutes metaphysics proper” (SL 27; WL 16).

<sup>xxvii</sup> For more on this point that thought is not “external” and that its forms are not “ready made,” see, e.g., EL § 28 A.

<sup>xxviii</sup> This is in the section “With What Must the Science Begin?” In his EL, Hegel explains why, in his *Logic*, he did not begin with the “Begriff” (which is the “truth” of “being” and “essence”). Writes: “we cannot begin with the truth, because truth, when it forms the beginning, rests on bald assurance, whereas the truth that is thought has to prove itself to be the truth at the bar of thinking.” Instead of beginning with the “Begriff,” he has “considered being and essence in their own dialectical development and have recognized how they sublate themselves into the unity of the Concept.” EL § 159A.

<sup>xxix</sup> ¶ 31 (my trans). The reminder is at SL 33; WL 22: “while logical objects and their expressions may be thoroughly familiar to educated people, it does not follow . . . that they are intelligently apprehended.”

<sup>xxx</sup> *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Cerf and Harris, p. 79f.; *Glauben und Wissen*, Suhrkamp p. 316).

<sup>xxxi</sup> The progress of consciousness occurs *behind back of consciousness*. PH ¶ 87 (Cunning of reason). Hegel thinks a careful study of history confirms this hypothesis. (See his Intro to Phil of Hist.)