six

Hegel: systematic philosophy without foundations

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) came of age as a person and an author at the same time that the triumphant proclamations of the arrival of the age of reason promised revolutionary transformations of human thought and action. In 1787, when Hegel was seventeen years old, Kant declared his own philosophy to be the epistemological equivalent of the Copernican revolution: arguing that the possibility of metaphysical knowledge cannot be explained if one assumes that the cognizing subject must conform to the object of cognition, Kant inverted this assumption. The result was transcendental idealism, with which Kant claimed to have determined the means, extent and limits of truly rational cognition. Only two years later, in 1789, when Hegel was a student in Tübingen, the practical equivalent of this theoretical development manifested itself in France: arguing that freedom is impossible if one assumes that political subjects must conform to the will of the ruling authority, the revolutionaries inverted this assumption and promised to establish a truly rational system of government.

Hegel celebrated both the Kantian and the French revolutions, but not uncritically. Hegel's enthusiasm stemmed from his agreement with the revolutionary insistence on the right of reason: modern theoretical claims and practical arrangements must be, above all and by definition, rational. Hegel's criticism, however, stemmed from his view that the age of reason failed to live up to its name: neither Kantian philosophy nor the French Revolution was truly rational, because both rested on a misconception of rationality itself. Hegel's own concern, from his first publication to his last, thus became the development of a truly rational

philosophy, one that could determine and thereby help to sustain the conditions of a truly rational life.

Hegel's emergence as a significant thinker, however, was not nearly as rapid as that of Schelling. Hegel completed his studies in Tübingen in 1793, but it would be another twenty-three years before he finally became a salaried professor of philosophy, joining the faculty in Heidelberg in 1816. Upon leaving Tübingen, Hegel found employment as a private tutor, and he worked in this capacity in Bern and Frankfurt for the next seven years. During this period Hegel wrote a number of essays, most of which concerned religious and political themes, but his writing went unpublished and he had no prospects of an academic career. In 1800, at the age of thirty, Hegel resolved to write to Schelling, with whom he had had no contact for several years, to state his intention to pursue systematic philosophy, and to seek advice from his already successful and celebrated friend. Schelling encouraged Hegel to move to Jena, and even offered temporary lodging, which Hegel quickly and gratefully accepted.

For the next six years, from 1801 to 1807, Hegel scratched out a living in Jena as an unsalaried lecturer, dependent upon the fees that students paid to attend his lectures. Although this position offered Hegel neither professional nor financial security, the intellectual community in Jena – which included not only Schelling, but also some of the most important early Romantics – proved invaluable to his philosophical development. In 1801 Hegel published his first book, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. The book aided Schelling, who at that time was commonly regarded as a disciple of the recently departed and still revered Fichte, by making it clear that he had in fact developed his own distinctive philosophical position. At the same time, however, the book also gave Hegel a reputation as Schelling's follower, despite the fact that it contains important hints of Hegel's own emerging views.

In 1802 Schelling founded the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, and invited Hegel to join him as a co-editor. Schelling intended the journal to be a vehicle for the dissemination of his philosophical programme, and Hegel's participation further cemented his reputation as a mere labourer working in the service of his brilliant friend. During the brief existence of the journal, however, Hegel contributed a number of pieces in which his own philosophical position became, to Schelling's displeasure, increasingly evident. The most important of these essays are: "On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy", "Faith and Knowledge" and "On the Scientific Treatment of Natural Law". The

collaboration came to a quick end when Schelling, following in the footsteps of the most interesting members of the Romantic circle, moved away from Jena in 1803, leaving Hegel with no journal, no real job, and a greatly diminished intellectual community. Hegel remained in Jena for another four years, where he eventually earned the "distinction" of being the oldest unsalaried lecturer in town.

In 1807, with his financial situation increasingly precarious, Hegel gave up lecturing and took a position in Bamberg as a newspaper editor. This move, which could easily have put an end to Hegel's philosophical aspirations, coincided ironically with the publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, his first fully mature work, which serves as the introduction to his systematic philosophy.

Hegel's career as a journalist was short-lived, however, and in 1808 he became the rector of a *Gymnasium*, or high school, in Nuremberg. For the next seven years Hegel ran the school, bravely tried to teach his developing ideas to teenage boys, and worked feverishly on his next great work, the *Science of Logic*. The *Logic*, which constitutes the first part of Hegel's system, appeared in three volumes, published in 1812, 1813 and 1816, and the last of these coincided with Hegel finally being offered, at the age of forty-six, a salaried academic position at the University of Heidelberg.

In the final fifteen years of his life, Hegel enjoyed the public success and recognition that had eluded him over the preceding two decades. Shortly after arriving in Heidelberg, in 1817, he published the first edition of his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* (revised editions of which would appear in 1827 and 1830). The *Encyclopedia* provides a comprehensive overview of the entirety of Hegel's system, the three main parts of which are logic, the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of spirit. In 1818 Hegel accepted a prestigious professorship in Berlin, and in 1820 he published *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which elaborates on the social and political aspects of the philosophy of spirit. For the next eleven years Hegel lectured on various elements of his system, including the philosophy of history, aesthetics and religion. His sudden death in 1831, exactly fifty years after Kant's publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, brought to a close the great era of German Idealism.

The systematic significance of the pre-systematic writings

Hegel's early writings, including those he published in Schelling's *Critical Journal*, are pre-systematic in the sense that they are largely polemical

analyses of contemporary positions that make no pretence to establish or develop Hegel's own philosophical system. *The Difference* offers critical expositions of Fichte, Schelling and Reinhold. "On the Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy" is a withering treatment of Gottlob Schulze (the author of *Aenesidemus*) and of modern scepticism in general, which Hegel regards as dogmatic in comparison with the ancient variety. "Faith and Knowledge" devotes its three sections to Kant, Jacobi and Fichte. And the "Natural Law" essay aims to explain why neither empiricism nor critical idealism can provide an adequate political philosophy.

These pre-systematic works have systematic significance, however, because they contribute to Hegel's attempt to fulfil the promise of German Idealism by developing a truly rational philosophy. This attempt consists of three steps: first, an identification of the not-fully-rational in Hegel's most important philosophical contemporaries and predecessors, in the service of a positive specification of the criteria of a fully rational philosophy; second, a critique of philosophical approaches falsely claiming to have met those criteria; and third, the development of a philosophy that does in fact meet the criteria of rationality.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and three-part *Encyclopedia* represent, respectively, his attempts to carry out the second and third steps of his task. The *Phenomenology* exposes philosophical approaches that claim, falsely in Hegel's view, to have delivered truly rational cognition but attends to these philosophical failures in a way designed to reveal that and how truly rational cognition can be delivered. The *Encyclopedia* then claims to deliver truly rational cognition by developing a complete system of knowledge in accordance with the only philosophical approach left open by the *Phenomenology*. Both of these steps, however, employ the conception of rational cognition developed in the pre-systematic writings. Beginning with *The Difference*, his very first publication, Hegel undertook a relentless critical examination of the age of reason and its pre-eminent philosophical representatives, which ultimately led him to the project of the *Phenomenology* and the concept of rationality that informs it. It is therefore the Jena writings that accomplish the first step of Hegel's task and prepare the way for the systematic philosophy he later developed.

The leitmotif of Hegel's early critique of the so-called age of reason, or the Enlightenment, is that it in fact defaults on the modern promise of rationality and freedom, because, as he puts it in the opening pages of *Faith and Knowledge*, "Enlightened reason . . . is no longer reason . . . [It is] mere understanding, [which] acknowledges its own nothingness

by placing that which is better than it in a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond*. This is what has happened in the *philosophies of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte*. Philosophy has made itself the handmaid of faith once more" (*FK*: 55–6). Making sense of Hegel's critique thus requires making sense of the distinction he draws between reason and understanding.

In the Preface to *The Difference*, Hegel characterizes "reason" as "the identity of subject and object" (*D*: 80). What Hegel means by the "identity of subject and object" becomes evident when one attends to the fact that his use of this formulation occurs in the course of a direct engagement with Kant, and in particular with Kant's transcendental deduction. The deduction aims to show that the categories necessarily used by the thinking subject must also apply to the objects of thinking, which in Hegel's terms amounts to showing that there is an "identity of subject and object". If Kant's deduction is successful, then the thinking subject and the object of thought are identical in the sense that they share the same constitutive features or "determinations": the categories, or necessary conceptual determinations, that the subject uses to think its object are also the determinations of the object that it thinks.

Although the signification of the "identity of subject and object" of which Hegel speaks derives from Kant, the identity Kant claims to have established with the transcendental deduction is not itself what Hegel refers to as "reason". For if Kant is right, the deduction demonstrates an identity between the subject and its object *qua* phenomenon, or as it appears, but is powerless to demonstrate an identity between the subject and the object-in-itself. According to Kant, that is, we can know that all objects of experience must have the categorial determinations that make it possible for them to be experienced as objects by thinking subjects, but about the determinations of beings themselves we can know nothing at all. Hegel thus joins Schelling in characterizing the identity established by Kant (and seconded by Fichte) as a merely "subjective subject–object" (*D*: 81) that is tantamount to being no true identity at all. Indeed, Kant not only fails to demonstrate the identity of subject and object, but actually claims to have demonstrated the necessity of an unbridgeable gap between them: according to Kant the conceptual determinations of the thinking subject can never be known to be those of beings themselves.

The "identity of subject and object" that Hegel calls "reason" therefore refers to precisely the state of affairs denied by Kant: the determinations constitutive of thinking are the determinations constitutive of beings themselves. Hegel makes this explicit in *The Difference*: "the true

identity of subject and object" means "the ideal determinations nature receives in [philosophical] science are also immanent in it" (*D*: 160).

Hegel refers to the identity of subject and object as "reason" because it is the necessary condition of actuality – that which truly is – being amenable to rational cognition or comprehension; actuality can be comprehended only if the determinations of being can be revealed and grasped by the determinations of thought. Were the opposite state of affairs to obtain, actuality would be "irrational" in the sense that it could not be known or grasped by rational cognition, and so would have to be regarded as "a fixed realm of the incomprehensible, and of a faith which is in itself non-rational" (*FK*: 61). In this case, actuality would be "an absolutely unthought, unrecognized, and incomprehensible beyond" (*ibid.*: 94) inaccessible to human experience, which is precisely the conclusion reached by the critical philosophy of Kant and Fichte.

Hegel credits Descartes, the empiricists and Kant with raising the modern demand for a justification of the claim that the determinations of thinking and being are identical. This demand makes these thinkers representatives of what Hegel refers to as the standpoint of "understanding", which separates the thinking subject from the objects of its experience and refuses to concede the identity of their determinations unless and until it has been demonstrated.

The standpoint of understanding is thus defined by the rejection of traditional metaphysics and the consequent granting of priority to epistemology. Hegel makes this point with respect to Kant in *Faith and Knowledge*, where he writes, echoing Schelling, that "the whole task and content of this philosophy is not the cognition of the absolute, but the cognition of . . . subjectivity. In other words, it is a critique of the cognitive faculties" (*FK*: 68).

Hegel grants that Hume and Kant successfully deduce the epistemological consequences of the dualism they take for granted, but emphasizes that the assumption of this dualism fails to meet the standards of rational justification established by Kant himself. From the assumption of an essential difference in kind between subject and object, between the pure universality of concepts and the brute particularity of beings, the impossibility of rational cognition does in fact follow. Given this assumption, in other words, the belief in the incomprehensibility of actuality is justified. But, Hegel contends, this assumption is expressly undermined by Kant's own philosophy, which rightly insists that rational justification demands the complete abnegation of conditional presuppositions. By presupposing a dualism of subject and object, the standpoint of understanding fails to meet its own critical test.

Kant's self-undermining of the standpoint of understanding reopens the possibility that the standpoint of reason might be attained. For if the dualism upon which empiricism and transcendental idealism rest constitutes a conditional presupposition, then the impossibility of rational cognition that they announce constitutes an unjustified conclusion.

Hegel is fully aware, however, that empiricists and Kantians will not be quick to abandon their presuppositions and embrace the standpoint of reason. Bringing such dualists to the standpoint of reason is the project of the *Phenomenology*, which aims to justify the claim that the determinations constitutive of thinking are in fact the determinations constitutive of being by demonstrating that the distinction between constitutive determinations of thinking and being cannot justifiably be sustained. This demonstration culminates in what the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* refers to as "absolute knowing", which is another name for the standpoint of reason, the standpoint at which it is known that to work out the determinations constitutive of thinking would at the same time be to work out the determinations constitutive of being, and thus to provide rational cognition of the constitution of actuality.

The *Phenomenology* claims to demonstrate that rational cognition is possible, but such cognition can be achieved only if the determinations constitutive of thinking and being can be articulated. The chief task of philosophy is therefore the articulation of these determinations, to which Hegel devotes his entire system, beginning with the *Science of Logic* and continuing throughout the *Encyclopedia*.

Hegel's claim that his philosophical system articulates the constitution of actuality makes him post-Kantian in the sense that he rejects and moves beyond Kant's conclusion that philosophy is incapable of rational cognition; Hegel joins Schelling in restoring metaphysics to its pre-Kantian place as the queen of the philosophical sciences. But Hegel remains at the same time firmly post-Kantian in the sense that his encyclopedic system does not constitute a reversion to pre-critical metaphysics; Hegel's philosophical enterprise is a thoroughly critical one, governed by the insistence that rationality demands the avoidance of all conditional presuppositions. The lesson Hegel learns from Kant's critical inspiration is that philosophy must be more thoroughly critical than Kant's own transcendental idealism managed to be.

Hegel argues that a radically critical philosophy must return to metaphysics because it cannot accept the Kantian presuppositions that lead to the conclusion that thinking cannot determine the truth of being. The particular metaphysical project to which Hegel returns, and

the way in which he attempts to execute it, are also governed by his resolutely critical stance.

Because a truly critical philosophy cannot presume the existence of any particular thing as the object of its concern, Hegel's project is an ontology – an account of what it is to be – rather than an investigation of any supposedly supersensible entity. Hegel thus breaks with Schelling in not regarding philosophy as the science of a transcendent absolute. Hegel makes this point explicitly in the "Skepticism" essay, where he accuses Schulze of falsely understanding speculative philosophy to be "the science of the *highest and most unconditioned causes of all conditioned things*" ("S": 317). Hegel uses "the absolute" not in reference to a special entity, but rather as a synonym for the set of determinations that are the basis of the identity of subjectivity and objectivity in virtue of being constitutive of both the thinking of subjects and the being of objects. It is the articulation of the determinate constitution of actuality, rather than the proof of any supersensible existence, that Hegel considers the task of philosophy.

Hegel's execution of this ontological task is also guided by his critical insistence that rationality demands the strict avoidance of all presuppositions. He argues, first, that philosophy must not ground itself upon, by taking for granted, any particular conceptual determination. Second, philosophy must subsequently incorporate only those conceptual determinations that prove to unfold with immanent necessity from its unconditional beginning. The introduction of an extraneous or contingent conceptual determination at any point would undermine philosophy's claim to articulate the absolute truth of being by making the articulation conditional upon, or relative to, the validity of the introduced concept. Together, these two conditions entail that philosophy must form a single, self-contained set of conceptual determinations, all of which amount to the explication of the truth implicit in the initial, non-arbitrary determination. Only if philosophy can be made systematic in this sense, Hegel concluded in Jena before he sat down to write the *Phenomenology*, can it also be the science of rational cognition.

Introduction to systematic philosophy: the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is Hegel's most famous and influential book, although not necessarily for the right reasons. The *Phenomenology*

is best known for particular sections that have intrigued and inspired readers both within and beyond philosophy over the last two hundred years. These include the discussions of desire, recognition, the master and slave, unhappy consciousness, Antigone, absolute freedom and terror, conscience, and the beautiful soul. As fascinating and fruitful as these individual sections have proved to be, however, their philosophical significance lies in the larger project to which they contribute.

"The goal" of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes in the Preface, is "spirit's insight into what knowing is" (*PhenS*: 17). Bringing about such insight requires "the *education* of consciousness itself to the standpoint of science" (*ibid*.: 50). "Consciousness" is another name for the standpoint of understanding, defined by the dualistic assumption that knowledge requires a thinking subject to represent truthfully the realm of objectivity with which it is confronted, and from which it distinguishes itself: "*consciousness* contains the two moments of knowing and the objectivity negative to knowing" (*ibid*.: 21). The "standpoint of science" is another name for the standpoint of reason, defined by the suspension of epistemological dualism and the awareness that in philosophy the thinking subject achieves "absolute knowing" by revealing the actual truth of being, to which it has access in its own thought. Consequently, "the standpoint of consciousness which knows objects in their antithesis to itself, and itself in antithesis to them, is for science the antithesis of its own standpoint" (*ibid*.: 15). The philosopher at the standpoint of reason, however, cannot simply dismiss the individual at the standpoint of consciousness, for this "individual has the right to demand that science should at least provide him with a ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within himself " (*ibid*.: 14–15). The *Phenomenology* responds to this demand by attempting to show the individual at the standpoint of consciousness that his own assumptions, considered carefully on their own terms, undermine themselves and lead to the standpoint of reason or absolute knowing, from which systematic philosophy can then commence with the *Science of Logic*.

The *Phenomenology* thus cannot be regarded as Hegel's version of Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* or Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Despite the fact that all three books are concerned with consciousness, each has a quite distinctive aim and procedure. Fichte aims to provide a transcendental account of the conditions of the possibility of consciousness; he takes selfhood as a given fact, and argues it is possible only in virtue of the experience of an external world

and various forms of interaction with other self-conscious agents. Schelling also begins with the immediate fact of selfhood, and then aims to provide an account of the historical epochs through which he claims that self-conscious beings must pass in order to achieve fully adequate self-understanding. Hegel's *Phenomenology*, however, offers neither a transcendental nor a historical account of consciousness. In fact, the *Phenomenology* does not present Hegel's own account of consciousness at all; that account is to be found in the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the part of his *Encyclopedia* devoted to articulating what it is to be a thinking being.

The *Phenomenology*, as its title suggests, is an account of how consciousness *appears* or seems to be from its own standpoint, rather than an account of what consciousness truly *is* (which Hegel contends can only be determined from the standpoint of reason or philosophical science). Hegel claims that the phenomenological examination forces consciousness to revise its initial assumptions about itself and its object, so that it gradually comes to understand itself as being also self-conscious, rational, spiritual, religious and, finally, philosophical: capable of determining from within its own thinking the necessary or constitutive features of actuality. This sequence of progressively revised assumptions, which Hegel characterizes as a series of "shapes of consciousness", thus presents the coming-to-be or *appearance*, for consciousness itself, of the standpoint of reason: "It is this coming-to-be of *science as such* or of *knowledge* that is described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*" (*PhenS*: 15).

The "shapes of consciousness" that emerge in the course of the *Phenomenology* are related to each other logically, not transcendentally or historically. Hegel is not arguing, transcendentally, that the later shapes of consciousness are necessary conditions of the possibility of their predecessors. He does not hold, for example, that religious experience is a necessary condition of the possibility of self-consciousness. Nor is he arguing, historically, that human beings must have passed through each of the stages of consciousness in order finally to arrive at the standpoint of reason. Hegel's claim is that the succession is logically necessary, in the sense that each shape of consciousness proves to be internally contradictory and each particular contradiction that emerges can be resolved only by the new shape of consciousness that follows it. The *Phenomenology* thus constitutes an extremely long argument for the claim that if consciousness is to understand itself in a non-contradictory way, then it must adopt the standpoint of reason.

But Hegel is well aware that people are entirely capable of developing and retaining contradictory self-understandings, and thus of never achieving the standpoint from which the philosophical science of actuality is possible. Indeed, in the course of the *Phenomenology* he sometimes remarks that certain historical individuals and cultures have understood themselves in ways that correspond to the logical stages he describes.

The *Phenomenology* is written to show readers who inhabit any of these self-contradictory perspectives that the implications of their own assumptions about themselves and the world require them to adopt the standpoint of reason. The book is not necessary reading, therefore, for those who already feel the full force of the modern demand for rationality, and are consequently willing to suspend their assumptions about subjectivity and objectivity in order to engage in a presuppositionless examination of the actual truth of being. Hegel believes that radical self-criticism is by itself sufficient to attain the standpoint of reason, and that those already at this standpoint may skip the *Phenomenology* and proceed directly to systematic philosophy, propelled simply by "the resolve . . . to consider thought as such" (*SL*: 70). "To enter into philosophy," Hegel continues, "calls for no other preparations, no further reflections or points of connection" (*ibid.*: 72). The *Phenomenology* is intended for those who remain at the standpoint of consciousness, and therefore fail to recognize either the need for, or the possibility of, systematic philosophy.

The most basic assumption of the standpoint of consciousness, which is common to all of the shapes of consciousness explored in the *Phenomenology*, is that knowing is a relationship between a conscious subject and an object other than itself. Hegel believes this assumption to be mistaken, but he does not confront it with alternative assumptions about knowing. Hegel recognizes, like Socrates before him, that such a confrontation would require a third party, armed with a neutral criterion of adjudication, to settle the dispute. Instead of developing such an external critique, therefore, Hegel inhabits the standpoint of consciousness at the outset of the *Phenomenology*, and then attempts to show that, and precisely how, it fails to meet its *own* criterion of knowing, and is thus *self*-undermining. In virtue of this method of immanent critique, Hegel reasons, "we do not need to import criteria, or to make use of our own bright ideas and thoughts during the course of the inquiry; it is precisely when we leave these aside that we succeed in contemplating the matter in hand as it is *in and for itself*" (*PhenS*: 54). This enables the *Phenomenology* to qualify as the "Science of the

Experience of Consciousness", rather than being merely Hegel's particular reflections upon the subject.

The phenomenological examination of consciousness is driven forward, at each stage, by comparing what consciousness claims to be true of its object with the way in which the object appears to consciousness. The achievement of knowledge requires these two characterizations of the object to coincide, for if they do not then the object-as-experienced by consciousness does not represent the truth of the object-itself. The revelation of a gap between the two characterizations thus contradicts the claim of consciousness to have attained knowledge, and the resolution of this contradiction requires a revision of the assumptions consciousness holds about itself and its object. In Hegel's terminology, these revisions amount to a "negation" of the shape of consciousness under consideration, which is shown *not* to be the truth of knowing after all. This negation is "determinate" because it results in a new shape of consciousness that resolves the specific contradictions implicit in the assumptions of its predecessor.

The examination continues in the same fashion for the duration of the *Phenomenology*: a shape of consciousness is defined; its experience of the object is compared to its conception of the object; if there is a discrepancy between the two, then the prevailing assumptions are revised accordingly, giving rise to a new shape of consciousness. The process is then repeated, until there is no longer any contradiction: "The goal . . . is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself, where concept corresponds to object and object to concept" (*PhenS*: 51). When consciousness reaches this goal, as Hegel claims it does at the end of the *Phenomenology*, it finally understands itself properly, and in so doing it attains the standpoint of reason, from which philosophy proper can finally begin. Hegel anticipates this development in the closing lines of the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*:

> In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of 'other', at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic science of spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself.
>
> (*Ibid*.: 56–7)

The initial shape of consciousness, which Hegel refers to as "sense-certainty", is defined in the first paragraph of the body of the *Phenomenology*:

> The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply *is*. Our approach to the object must also be *immediate* or *receptive*; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself. In *ap*prehending it, we must refrain from trying to *com*prehend it. (*Ibid*.: 58)

Consciousness initially conceives of its knowing as immediate, and of itself as purely passive, because it assumes that any activity or mediation would inevitably compromise knowledge by distorting the appearance of the object.

Hegel then raises the question that propels the entire phenomenological investigation: "The question . . . [is] whether in sense-certainty itself the object is in fact the kind of essence that sense-certainty proclaims it to be" (*ibid*.: 59). Continuing, he reiterates that the properly scientific approach to this question is "not to reflect on [the object] and ponder what it might be in truth, but only to consider the way in which it is present in sense-certainty" (*ibid*.).

Sense-certainty claims to know its object immediately. According to Hegel, however, the immediacy with which it claims to know is incompatible with its claim to know a particular object; there is a contradiction between *what* consciousness claims to experience, and *how* it claims to experience it. All that consciousness can experience immediately is "This", which is "Here" "Now". To experience anything more complex as a single object, the complexity would have to be unified, but such unification would require a process of mediation. Universal terms such as "This", "Here" and "Now", which apply equally to every experience consciousness could have, are insufficient, however, to enable consciousness to experience any particular object as distinct from any other. Sense-certainty cannot, therefore, know particular objects immediately.

The certainties of this initial form of consciousness, Hegel concludes, prove to be false. Neither consciousness nor its object is in truth as sense-certainty initially assumed them to be. The particular object experienced by consciousness cannot be an irreducibly simple "This",

because all irreducible simples are indistinguishable from each other, and thus lack particularity. The object of consciousness must therefore be a complex unity or, in Hegel's terms, a mediated universal; the object is a single entity or "Thing" with a plurality of particular properties, in virtue of which consciousness can distinguish it from other objects. Consciousness cannot experience such a mediated universal immediately, however, because it must take in the variety of properties and recognize them as belonging to a single entity. Consciousness must therefore play a more active role in the experience of its object than sense-certainty assumed, by correctly picking out the features that belong to this object, in distinction from other objects. The active identification of a thing that manifests a multiplicity of properties Hegel refers to as "Perception", which is therefore the second shape of consciousness.

"Perception" begins, as "sense-certainty" began before it, by defining the assumptions that this shape of consciousness holds regarding itself and its object. The object of knowledge is now assumed to be a "*thing with many properties*" (*PhenS*: 67). For example, "salt is a simple 'Here', and at the same time manifold; it is white and *also* tart, *also* cubical in shape, of a specific gravity, etc. All these many properties are in a single simple 'Here', in which, therefore, they interpenetrate; none has a different 'Here' from the others, but each is everywhere, in the same 'Here' in which the others are" (*ibid.*: 68). Consciousness is now assumed to be "percipient in so far as this 'Thing' is its object. It has only to *take* it, to confine itself to a pure apprehension of it, and what is thus yielded is the true. If consciousness itself did anything in taking what is given, it would by such adding or subtraction alter the truth" (*ibid.*: 70). Perception thus involves an active taking of the object into consciousness, whereas sense-certainty claimed to be purely passive in the reception of its object, but the perceiving consciousness must ensure that its activity does not distort the object and thereby result in deception rather than knowledge.

The subsequent examination of "perception" proceeds just as the examination of "sense-certainty" did. "Let us see now", Hegel suggests, "what consciousness experiences in its actual perceiving . . . It is only a matter of developing the contradictions that are present therein" (*ibid.*).

Consciousness claims to perceive the thing that is its object. But again, according to Hegel, there proves to be a contradiction between what consciousness claims to know and how it claims to know it. The thing is a single entity with a multiplicity of properties; in Hegel's

terms, it is both a "One" and an "Also". Consciousness can perceive both the oneness of the object and the multiplicity of properties, but it cannot perceive whatever it is that unites them, whatever it is that accounts for the fact that these particular properties belong to this singular object. Since the thing is the unity of the oneness and the multiplicity, however, this means that the thing cannot be fully known through perception. Essential to the thing is an imperceptible source of the unity of the perceived oneness and multiplicity. Consciousness cannot, therefore, perceive the whole truth of the thing.

The certainties of consciousness have proven false, Hegel concludes, once more. Neither consciousness nor its object is in truth as perception initially assumed them to be. The thing is not merely a perceptibly unified set of perceptible properties, but is also constituted in part by imperceptible forces that account for the unification of this particular multiplicity. Consciousness cannot perceive such imperceptible forces, and therefore must contribute more to its experience of things than the act of perception. Knowledge requires not only perception, but also understanding the imperceptible forces that express themselves in the perceptible qualities of things. The third shape of consciousness identified by Hegel is therefore discussed in a section entitled "Force and Understanding".

"Force and Understanding" unfolds in precisely the same way as "Sense-Certainty" and "Perception": the constitutive assumptions of the shape of consciousness under consideration are identified; examination of those assumptions makes explicit their implicit contradictions; and these contradictions are then resolved by the transition to yet another shape of consciousness.

At this stage, consciousness claims to know its objects in virtue of understanding the imperceptible forces that explain appearances. The central contradiction that emerges is that the positing of imperceptible forces serves only to redescribe, rather than truly to explain, that which appears in perception. Positing "the force of gravity", for example, does not help consciousness understand *why* massive bodies are attracted to each other, but simply gives a name to this observable fact. Yet again, Hegel concludes, consciousness proves not to know that which it claims to know in the way that it claims to know it.

The move from "Force and Understanding" to the next shape of consciousness marks an important transition from the first major section of the *Phenomenology*, entitled "Consciousness", to the second, which is called "Self-Consciousness". "Consciousness" includes the first three shapes of consciousness: "Sense-Certainty", "Perception" and

"Force and Understanding". These three shapes of consciousness fall under the same general heading because, despite their differences, they all share the same basic assumption that knowing depends upon the subject accurately representing the object as it truly is in-itself. In the course of "Force and Understanding", however, it becomes evident that the object in-itself cannot be meaningfully distinguished from what the subject understands the object to be. With this realization, consciousness comes to regard its object as a reflection of itself, and thus experiences itself in and through its experience of its object. This reflexive form of experience is examined in "Self-Consciousness".

"Self-Consciousness" contains well-known analyses of desire, recognition, the master and slave, Stoicism, scepticism, and unhappy consciousness. All of these are "shapes of consciousness" in the sense that they retain the fundamental assumption, which is operative throughout the *Phenomenology* until the standpoint of reason is attained in the final chapter, that knowing is a relation of a conscious subject to an object other than itself. They belong to "Self-Consciousness" rather than to "Consciousness", however, because they all assume that the subject does not depend upon objects to determine the contents of its thinking, but rather determines independently its own thoughts and what objects are to be for it.

At the outset of "Self-Consciousness", the subject tries to demonstrate its independence from objects, and its capacity to determine what they are, by literally destroying them; consciousness consumes things in order to satisfy its own desires. By eating a piece of cake, for example, it reveals that the confection is not merely a perceptible thing with properties governed by imperceptible forces, but also a means to satisfy the hunger of consciousness itself. In consuming objects, however, desiring consciousness ultimately demonstrates that it is in fact dependent upon them, because without an object to consume the subject cannot experience its own independence, which is what it claims to know to be the truth. Desiring consciousness thus literally needs to have its cake and eat it too, because it can see its independence reflected only in the presence of the object, but as long as the object remains present, consciousness has failed to demonstrate that it is truly independent. The result is a consumptive frenzy in which consciousness repeatedly destroys one object only to replace it with another, and thus succeeds only in reiterating and reinforcing its dependence upon things other than itself. Relief from this performative contradiction requires consciousness to experience an object that confirms, rather than threatens, its own independence, and which

therefore need not be destroyed. Such an object must itself manifest the independence that consciousness attributes to itself, and therefore "Desire" gives way to "Recognition", in which the self-conscious subject receives acknowledgement of its independence from another self-conscious subject.

"Self-Consciousness" proceeds – via the same sort of logical necessitation that drives the developments within "Consciousness" – from "Desire" and "Recognition" through a series of stages that culminates in "Unhappy Consciousness", which then gives way to "Reason", the third and final major section of the *Phenomenology*. Throughout "Consciousness", the prevailing assumption is that the subject seeks knowledge by conforming its thinking to the truth of an independent object. In "Self-Consciousness", this assumption is overturned and replaced by the assumption that the object is what the independent subject determines it to be. "Reason" is defined by the replacement of this assumption with the certainty that what the subject determines the object to be is also what the object itself truly is.

"Reason" begins with a shape of consciousness that is recognizably Kantian, described in terms of its claim that thinking and objectivity are both structured by the same categories. This claim is contradicted, however, by the assumption of consciousness that the objects of its experience must be given to it empirically, which limits the validity of the categories to appearances and precludes any knowledge of objects themselves. The examination of "Reason" therefore continues – it ultimately comprises a full two-thirds of the text of the *Phenomenology* – describing a series of increasingly complex shapes of consciousness that emerge from the attempt to uphold without contradiction the subject's claim to know the rational structure of the object itself. This series of shapes arrives at "Spirit" (a major sub-section within "Reason") when consciousness takes its object to be other self-consciously rational agents like itself. "Spirit" – which contains the famous discussions of Antigone, absolute freedom and terror, conscience, and the beautiful soul – then gives way to "Religion" (another major sub-section within "Reason") when consciousness becomes certain that rationality is embodied not only in self-conscious agents, but also in being itself. Finally, "Religion" becomes "Absolute Knowing" when consciousness no longer imagines being as a transcendent entity, but instead recognizes that the rational structure of being is immanent in, and accessible to, the thinking of the self-consciousness agent.

"Absolute Knowing" does not describe a new shape of consciousness because, for the first time in the *Phenomenology*, the dualistic assumption that defines consciousness is no longer operative. The contradictions implicit in that assumption have, Hegel claims, led with logical necessity to the standpoint of reason. Having achieved this standpoint, the subject finally knows that knowing does not involve the attempt to gain access to an external object, but rather involves articulating the rational structure of its own thought, which is at the same time the rational structure of being. The subject at this standpoint, in other words, is prepared to undertake systematic philosophy, which Hegel commences to do in his next work, *Science of Logic*.

Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an immense and infuriatingly complicated work, and we have only skimmed its barest outline. The success of the work depends entirely, however, on the details, for Hegel's claim that the internal contradictions of consciousness lead inexorably to the standpoint of reason is true only if *all* of the transitions in the *Phenomenology* have the logical necessity that Hegel attributes to them. If even a single one of these transitions is driven by anything other than logical necessity (and cannot be made good by appropriate revisions), then the *Phenomenology* fails to demonstrate that consciousness can avoid self-contradiction only by adopting the standpoint of reason. Although many readers have found the *Phenomenology* to be a rich and rewarding text, relatively few have been convinced that the project succeeds on its own terms at every moment.

Even if it should prove, however, that the *Phenomenology* is not sufficient to bring consciousness to reason, it is important to remember that Hegel himself does not regard the *Phenomenology* as a prerequisite for this achievement. The standpoint of reason, he holds, can be reached by anyone who is willing to suspend his own assumptions about the relation of thinking to objectivity. And the *Phenomenology* may, even if it fails to be completely convincing, prove useful in encouraging this willingness: "For it brings about a state of despair about all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions, regardless of whether they are called one's own or someone else's, ideas with which the consciousness that sets about the examination [of truth] *straight away* is still filled and hampered, so that it is, in fact, incapable of carrying out what it wants to undertake" (*PhenS*: 50). By subjecting the assumptions of ordinary consciousness to rigorous sceptical scrutiny, that is, the *Phenomenology* aims to weaken the reader's confidence in them, and in so doing make him increasingly open

to joining Hegel in the attempt to determine the truth by means of systematic philosophy.

Systematic philosophy

In the very first sentence of the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel writes: "Philosophy lacks the advantage, which the other sciences enjoy, of being able to *presuppose* its *objects* as given immediately by representation. And, with regard to its beginning and advance, it cannot *presuppose* the *method* of cognition as one that is already accepted" (*EL*: 24). The requirement that philosophy not presuppose a particular subject matter, conceptual scheme or method follows from the dual awareness that the truth claims philosophy advances are only as secure as the assumptions from which they follow, and that any foundational assumption is always subject to challenge. The attempt to justify such an assumption necessarily leads to either an infinite regress, a vicious circle, or an exhausted admission that no further justification is available (this is the Agrippan trilemma, posed by the ancient sceptics for whom Hegel has such deep respect). Since these alternatives can provide at best conditional assurance that the conclusions advanced are indeed true, they are inadequate bases for philosophy, which is a distinctive discipline or science in virtue of its quest for the unconditional or necessary truth that defines rational cognition.

A truly modern, rational, self-critical philosophy must begin, then, without any foundational presuppositions. At the outset it is impossible to say what philosophy will prove to be about, or how it will proceed. Hegel insists, in quasi-Cartesian fashion, that philosophy can begin only with the immediate and incorrigible fact of thinking itself. Unlike Descartes, however, Hegel neither infers his own existence from the fact of thinking, nor asserts that his mind is innately furnished with any particular ideas. Instead, as he puts in the *Encyclopedia Logic*: "When thinking is to begin, we have nothing but thought in its pure lack of determination" (*EL*: 137).

Philosophy is thus, Hegel contends, an examination of the indeterminate immediacy – or "being" – of thought. In order for this examination to be strictly rational, philosophers conducting it must set aside their own particular interests and opinions in order to let the objective nature of thought emerge. Hegel therefore understands philosophy to be thought's *self*-determination, a determination necessarily free from the influence of objects external to thought, and from

the influence of subjective thinkers. As such, philosophy must be the self-development of a self-contained totality of thoughts, for if it failed to be self-developing and self-contained, philosophy would be externally influenced and so would fail to be self-determining. A self-developing and self-contained totality is what Hegel calls a system, and thus he concludes that "systematic derivation . . . [is] the very thing that is indispensable for a scientific philosophy" (*EL*: 1).

For Hegel, then, philosophy is systematic philosophy, and systematic philosophy is the self-development of thought. It begins with completely indeterminate thought, and then follows this thought as it develops into other, more determinate thoughts. As he writes in *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: "This process involves making distinctions, and by looking more closely at the character of the distinctions which arise – and in a process something different necessarily arises – we can visualize the movement as development" (*ILHP*: 70–71). As long as the philosophers who record the self-development of thought successfully abstain from incorporating any extraneous distinctions of their own devising, the process results in the articulation of the determinations necessary to thought itself, those constitutive of its own being, which Hegel refers to, collectively, as "the concept".

Following Aristotle and Kant, Hegel calls the necessary determinations of thought that systematic philosophy articulates *categories*; as the form of thought itself, they are the concepts that make possible all conceptual activity whatsoever. The categories are assumed and used in everything we think and do, but typically without our being aware of them. Hegel describes the totality of categories as

> the net which holds together all the concrete material which occupies us in our action and endeavor. But this net and its knots are sunk in our ordinary consciousness beneath numerous layers of stuff. This stuff comprises our known interests and the objects that are before our minds, while the universal threads of the net remain out of sight and are not explicitly made the subject of our reflection. (*ILHP*: 28)

He also gives several examples of the categories and their everyday, implicit use: "Everyone possesses and uses the wholly abstract category of *being*. The sun *is* in the sky; these grapes *are* ripe, and so on *ad infinitum*. Or, in a higher sphere of education, we proceed to the relation of cause and effect, force and its manifestation, etc. All our knowledge and ideas are

entwined with metaphysics like this" (*ibid.*: 27). Hegel concludes that "the task and business of philosophy [is] . . . to display . . . the thought-out and known necessity of the specific categories" (*ibid.*: 21–2).

Hegel's own philosophical system is the result of his efforts to complete this task that he understands to define philosophy. The *Logic* begins with the simplest thought – that of indeterminate immediacy, or "being" – and attempts to develop all, and only, those determinations that it implicitly contains. The course of this development generates an increasingly refined understanding of what it is to be, and Hegel claims that it ultimately leads to the knowledge that to be is to exist in a form other than that of thought, which is to be a spatiotemporal or natural being. The *Philosophy of Nature* then begins with the simplest conception of spatiotemporal being, and attempts to develop all, and only, those determinations that it implicitly contains. The course of this development generates an increasingly refined understanding of what it is to be natural, and Hegel claims that it ultimately leads to the knowledge that to actualize all of the capacities inherent in nature is to be capable of thinking, which is to be what Hegel refers to as a "spiritual" being. The *Philosophy of Spirit* then begins with the simplest conception of thinking being, and attempts to develop all, and only, those determinations that it implicitly contains. The course of this development generates an increasingly refined understanding of what spiritual being involves, and Hegel claims that it ultimately leads to the knowledge that to be fully spiritual is to be a cognitive, moral, social, political, aesthetic, religious and philosophical being.

Hegel's insistence that scientific philosophy cannot tolerate the introduction of extra-systematic elements of any kind applies not only to the *Logic*, but also to the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*. Indeed, Hegel emphasizes that although it might seem that "the title *Encyclopedia* could leave room for a lesser degree of rigor in the scientific method, and for the compilation of external parts . . . the nature of the matter entails that logical coherence must remain fundamental" (*EL*: 4). The preservation of strict systematicity is precisely what distinguishes the *philosophical* consideration of nature and spirit from the treatment they receive in other disciplines. Consequently, "the whole of philosophy genuinely forms *one* science" (*ibid.*: 39), and this single "science is the self-development of the concept", which requires one "to take up the development of the concept, and submit one's thinking, indeed, one's whole heart and mind, to the logical necessity of the concept" (*ibid.*: 16–17).

Figure 6.1 provides a map of Hegel's philosophical system.

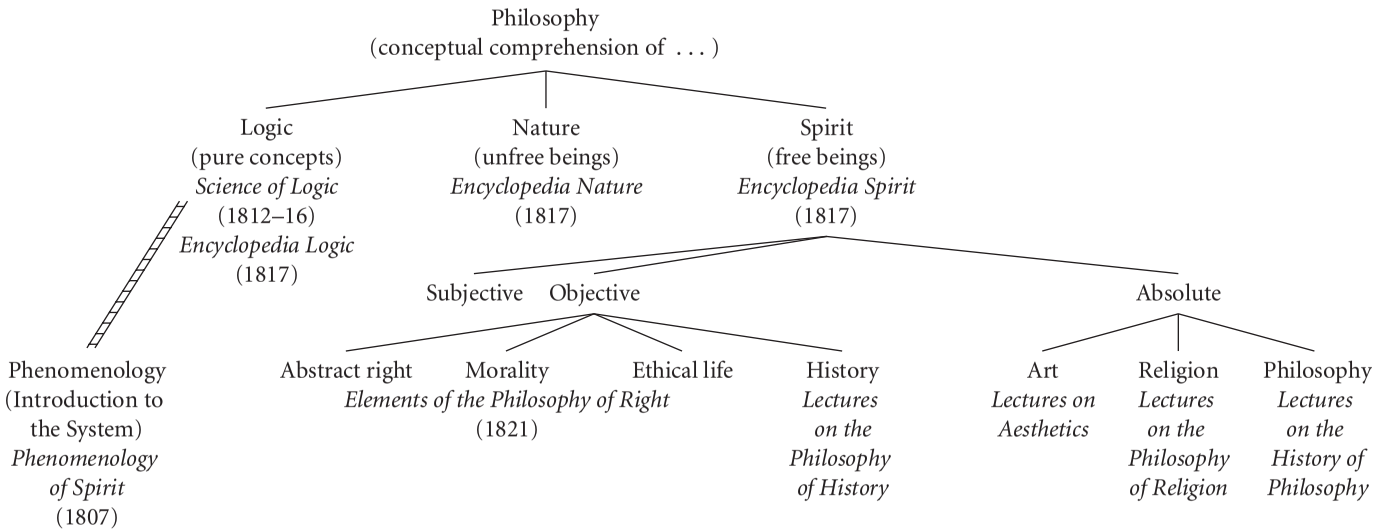

Figure 6.1 Hegel's philosophical system

The structure of being: the Science of Logic

Hegel's *Science of Logic* is an entirely different enterprise from the formal analysis of arguments with which most philosophy students are familiar. Hegel calls the first part of his system "logic" because it articulates the being of *thought*. At the same time, he conceives of it as ontology because it articulates the *being* of thought. The *Science of Logic* claims to articulate, at one and the same time, the necessary determinations that are constitutive of both thought and actuality. Hegel thus unabashedly shares Spinoza's view that "the order and coherence of ideas (the subjective) is the same as the coherence and order of things (the objective)" (*D*: 166). "*Logic*", he writes, "coincides with *metaphysics*, with the science of *things* grasped in *thoughts*" (*EL*: 56).

Hegel is unabashed about holding this view because he regards it as more fully critical, and therefore rational, than the alternative position that sceptically distinguishes between our representations of being and being itself. Although this sceptical position, referred to by Hegel as the standpoint of the understanding, prides itself on its critical restraint, Hegel insists that it uncritically assumes more than does his own presuppositionless philosophy. The standpoint of the understanding presupposes that there is a gap between the thinking subject and the object of his thoughts, and thus that being might in truth be other than the subject thinks it to be. Presuppositionless philosophy, however, assumes nothing whatsoever about subjectivity or objectivity, and thus assumes neither that there is a gap between them that must be bridged, nor that being might be other than the being of which thought is immediately aware. Presuppositionless philosophy begins with the indeterminate being of thought, and nothing else, and its unfolding of the determinations implicit in this thought is therefore necessarily logical (an account of how being must be thought) and ontological (an account of what being must be).

Although Hegel regards Spinozistic ontology as more genuinely critical than Kantian epistemology, he breaks with Spinoza by refusing to presuppose a determinate conception of being or substance as the foundation of philosophy: "No philosophical beginning could look worse than to begin with a definition as Spinoza does" (*D*: 105). Kant was right, Hegel believes, to demand that philosophy determine the categories of thinking scientifically, by means of an investigation of the nature of thinking itself, rather than "rhapsodically" (after the fashion of Aristotle) or by stipulation (after the fashion of Spinoza). Hegel also believes, however, that Kant himself uncritically assumed not only the

existence of a gap between thinking and being, but also that the categories of thought can be derived from a consideration of the forms of judgement. Presuppositionless philosophy cannot assume that thinking is equivalent to judging, but rather must allow the nature of thought to emerge from the consideration of nothing but the indeterminate immediacy of thinking itself.

When philosophy does allow thought to determine itself without presuppositions, Hegel argues, it reveals the falsity of yet another uncritical assumption made by Kant and the other representatives of the standpoint of the understanding. This standpoint is characterized, according to Hegel, by the drawing of sharp and fixed distinctions between not only subjectivity and objectivity but also many particular conceptual pairs. Understanding assumes, for example, that to be infinite is not to be finite. Hegel believes, however, that the development of thought within presuppositionless philosophy reveals that this conceptual distinction (and many others) should not be regarded as absolute: the infinite proves to be inseparable from, and manifested only within, the finite.

Hegel's point is not that philosophy cannot make distinctions (indeed, he regards the task of philosophy as nothing but the making of distinctions), but rather that careful examination reveals the distinctions that are necessarily implicit in the being of thought to be self-overcoming, or dialectical, in nature: "Dialectic . . . is the *immanent* transcending, in which the one-sidedness and restrictedness of the determinations of the understanding displays itself as what it is, i.e., as their negation" (*EL*: 128). It is only in virtue of this dialectical character that thought can be *self*-determining, developing of its own accord from one determination to the subsequent determinations that are implicit in it, rather than being dependent upon the thinking subject to define, distinguish, and relate particular concepts. "Hence", Hegel concludes, "the dialectical constitutes the moving soul of scientific progression, and it is the principle through which alone *immanent coherence and necessity* enter into the content of science" (*ibid.*).

Hegel does not presuppose that thought and being are dialectical. But he refuses to join the standpoint of the understanding in presupposing that they are not. He begins his *Science of Logic*, and with it his philosophical system, with only the indeterminate immediacy of thought and an open mind. Hegel resolves to consider only being itself, in order to determine what, if anything, it necessarily is to be.

The *Science of Logic* opens with a sentence fragment that reflects the paucity of the only beginning available to presuppositionless philosophy:

"Being, pure being, without any further determination" (*SL*: 82). Hegel then elaborates: "If any determination or content were posited, which could be distinguished within being or distinguish it from an other, being would not be held fast in its purity. It is pure indeterminacy and emptiness" (*ibid.*). Immediate being must be indeterminate because any determination would violate its immediacy. As indeterminate, however, "being . . . is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than *nothing*" (*ibid.*). The pure indeterminacy of nothing itself immediately *is*, however, otherwise it would not *be* indeterminate: "Nothing is, therefore, the same determination, or rather absence of determination, and thus altogether the same as, pure *being*" (*ibid.*).

In the span of one short paragraph, Hegel concludes that pure immediacy and pure indeterminacy, being and nothing, are logically inseparable: neither can be what it is without the other. The attempt to think *only* immediate being is a failure, because to think immediate being is also, necessarily, to think the indeterminacy that is nothing. But the attempt to think *only* indeterminate nothingness is equally hopeless, because to think indeterminate nothingness is also, necessarily, to think the immediacy that is being. The first result of systematic philosophy is thus the realization that neither being nor nothing is self-sufficient: each is what it is only in virtue of vanishing into the other. Being is the movement from immediacy to indeterminate nothingness, and nothing is the movement from indeterminacy to immediate being: "Their truth is", Hegel concludes, "this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other: *becoming*" (*SL*: 83).

The failure to think immediate being, because being necessarily involves nothing and becoming, can also be construed as a success, however, for it provides the first instance of the dialectical self-determination of thought. Immediate, indeterminate being has proven itself to be mediated and determinate.

Although this initial result might seem underwhelming, it has significant implications. First, it demonstrates that presuppositionless, philosophical science is possible, because starting with immediate being and refraining from the incorporation of extraneous determinations does not consign philosophy to repetition of the same empty term. Second, it shows that scientific philosophy does not proceed by means of a formulaic positing of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. This method, which was practised by Fichte, is often falsely attributed to Hegel, but in fact it has nothing to do with the development of his philosophical system. Third, it repudiates Schelling's insistence that the absolute, by definition, excludes all mediation and determination, and therefore

lies beyond the reach of articulate thought. The opening of Hegel's *Logic* constitutes an argument that a purely immediate and indeterminate absolute is logically impossible, because being itself is necessarily determinate. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel chastises Schelling (without mentioning him by name) for failing to grasp this point, writing that "it is just this that is rejected [by Schelling] with horror, as if absolute cognition were being surrendered when more is made of mediation than in simply saying [as Schelling does] that it is nothing absolute, and is completely absent in the absolute" (*PhenS*: 11). The initial moves in the self-development of thought thus establish, according to Hegel, both the impossibility of an absolute that transcends all determination, and the actuality of absolute cognition that delivers a determinate conception of being.

It is nonetheless true, however, that saying only that to be is necessarily to be determinate is not to say very much. Hegel's *Science of Logic* goes on, not surprisingly, to say quite a bit more. From the initial determinations of "being", "nothing" and "becoming", the *Logic* follows the immanent dialectic of thought to demonstrate, according to Hegel, that to be is necessarily to be (among other things) qualitative and quantitative, to have an essence that manifests itself in a variety of appearances, and to have a conceptual or rational structure. The *Logic* finally concludes that rationally structured being necessarily exists in a form other than that of pure thought, and is therefore spatiotemporal or natural being. With this result the *Logic* gives way to the *Philosophy of Nature*.

The structure of spatiotemporal being: the Philosophy of Nature

The *Philosophy of Nature* is the second of the three main parts of Hegel's system. Because the entire system forms a single science, defined by a strictly immanent conceptual development that permits no recourse to any extra-systematic elements, the *Philosophy of Nature* is not absolutely distinct from the *Logic*, but rather necessarily an outgrowth of it: the *Philosophy of Nature* simply picks up the dialectic of being where the *Logic* leaves off, and goes on to determine what it is to be natural.

The transition from the *Logic* to the *Philosophy of Nature* reveals that Hegel is a realist about the natural world. The *Logic* culminates by claiming that being has a rational conceptual structure, and that rationally structured being must exist in extra-conceptual form. Hegel believes, in other words, "that the so-called mere concept is no such thing, but rather essentially its own actualization" (note appended to

the first paragraph of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* in 1822). Hegel holds that the determinate content of the concept is actualized in the extra-conceptual realm of space and time; he is thus committed to the realistic position that the natural world exists in a form other than thought and independently of thinking subjects.

Hegel is also, however, an absolute idealist, because he believes that nature has a conceptual structure that thinking can comprehend. He refers to the actualized concept as the "absolute idea" because the determinations it includes are ab-solved from the distinction between pure thought and actuality in virtue of being constitutive of them both. He therefore takes the transition from the *Logic* to the *Philosophy of Nature* to demonstrate not only that the rational is actual, but also that the actual is rational. The *Philosophy of Nature* provides absolute knowledge of the natural world, Hegel claims, because the necessary determinations implicit in the concept of nature are also the necessary determinations of nature itself.

Hegel's position – which might be called "realistic absolute idealism" – must be sharply distinguished from those of Kant and Fichte. Kant, like Hegel, acknowledges the existence of an extra-conceptual realm of objectivity, but denies that the concepts we necessarily employ in our experience of this realm can be known to structure nature itself. Transcendental idealism holds, for example, that space and time are forms through which *we* intuit the world, and that cause and effect are concepts by means of which *we* understand the world. Hegel, by contrast, holds that nature itself is spatiotemporal, and that spatiotemporal beings themselves interact causally. Fichte is even more remote from Hegel, since he regards objectivity as having been posited by the conscious subject, and therefore denies the existence of a realm independent of thought.

Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* must also be sharply distinguished from empirical natural science. As a part of the presuppositionless articulation of the truth of being, the *Philosophy of Nature* is a strictly *a priori* enterprise. It cannot proceed by means of observing and reflecting upon the natural world, nor can it incorporate the results of the observations and reflections carried out by empirical scientists. The *Philosophy of Nature* must, if it is to meet the standard of rational cognition, restrict itself to articulating all and only those determinations that are implicit in the concept of natural being.

Hegel acknowledges that attention to empirical phenomena, and a desire to understand them, are what lead us to philosophy in the first place. He also emphasizes that "in the progress of philosophical

knowledge, we must not only give an account of the object *as determined by its concept*, but we must also name the *empirical* appearance corresponding to it, and we must show that the appearance does, in fact, correspond to its concept" (*PN*: 6–7). So it is not surprising, and even to be expected, that Hegel introduces numerous empirical terms and examples throughout the *Philosophy of Nature*, as he seeks to ascertain the extent of the correspondence between various observed phenomena and the necessary determinations of natural being. What Hegel cannot do, and claims he does not do, is allow the introduction of such empirical terms and examples to affect the further conceptual unfolding of the system.

Hegel's *a priori* account of nature is not intended to be a substitute for the work of empirical natural science. Indeed, Hegel's systematic philosophy leads to the conclusion that empirical science is irreplaceable, because natural beings are necessarily subject to contingency. This means that no empirical phenomenon can be purely rational. All empirical phenomena have contingent features that are opaque to systematic philosophy and can only be determined by the careful observation and reflection that characterize the best empirical science.

Hegel is thus quite clear about the fact that there is a limit to what systematic philosophy can tell us about the natural world. Systematic philosophy provides rational cognition, or knowledge of the determinations that are constitutive of nature. Because one of these determinations is contingency, however, every natural phenomenon necessarily exceeds philosophy's grasp to some degree. Hegel writes, "nature in its manifestations does not hold fast to the concept. Its wealth of forms is an absence of definiteness and the play of contingency" (*PN*: 299), and this "sets limits to philosophy and [makes it] quite improper to expect the concept to comprehend – or as it is said, construe or deduce – these contingent products of nature" (*ibid.*: 23).

For example, Hegel believes that systematic philosophy can determine that natural being is necessarily material, but cannot predict the particular forms matter will take. Matter contingently takes all kinds of forms, the determination of which lies entirely outside the scope of systematic philosophy. Hegel makes this particular point explicitly in an early response to the criticism of one of his contemporaries, Wilhelm Krug, who challenged Hegel to deduce his pen, and thereby demonstrated a complete misunderstanding of the limited aspirations of *a priori* reason: "He cannot help understanding [philosophy] like the most vulgar man in the street, and demanding that every dog and cat shall be deduced – yes and why not his own pen too . . . If Mr. Krug had

even the vaguest notion of the [task of reason], how could it occur to him to demand from philosophy the deduction of his pen?" ("How the Ordinary Human Understanding Takes Philosophy", 298–9).

Hegel's philosophy is thus not "totalizing" in any of the ways that it is sometimes taken to be. His system is complete in the sense that it claims to fully articulate the determinations inherent to the initial thought of indeterminacy. Being complete in this sense does not imply, however, that there is no extra-conceptual form of existence, or even that the system includes all conceptual determinations. The system includes only those determinations that are necessary to the comprehension of being, and explicitly excludes those contingencies that exceed the determinacy of the concept. The system claims to comprehend the rational aspects of empirical phenomena, but remains resolutely and necessarily mute about their contingent features.

Hegel's philosophical aspirations are therefore significantly more limited than those of Fichte and Schelling, both of whom thought that a perfected philosophy should, at least in principle, be able to provide an exhaustive account of every feature of our experience. Hegel rejects this view on the ground that rational cognition is intrinsically limited to necessary truths and the natural world is intrinsically full of contingent matters of fact.

The limitations of systematic philosophy and the irreplaceability of empirical science do not mean, however, that there is no place for an *a priori* account of nature. Hegel's position is that such a philosophical approach is indispensable to providing rational cognition of the natural world, by determining the characteristics that are constitutive of its very being. This is something that empirical science cannot do, because observation and induction can reveal only what happens to be the case, but not what necessarily must be the case. Hegel therefore regards the philosophy of nature and empirical natural science as complementary. Systematic philosophy determines, for example, that nature is necessarily material, mechanical, chemical and organic, and empirical science studies the particular entities, mechanisms, chemical reactions and organisms that happen to exist.

The *a priori* investigation of the natural world conducted in the *Philosophy of Nature* ultimately leads, Hegel argues, to the conclusion that being that actualizes all of the capacities inherent in nature is not only mechanical, chemical and organic, but also thinking and free. Such being remains natural, but it is not *merely* natural, because the merely natural is that which "exhibits no freedom in its existence, but only *necessity* and *contingency*" (*PN*: 17). Natural beings that are also

free, in virtue of their capacity to think, Hegel refers to as "spiritual", and thus the third and final part of his system is the *Philosophy of Spirit*.

The structure of free being: the Philosophy of Spirit

The *Philosophy of Spirit* takes up where the *Philosophy of Nature* leaves off, and proceeds to determine what it means to be spiritual or free. It begins by conceiving of spiritual beings as those that are not merely natural. This should not be taken to mean that spiritual beings are supernatural, for on Hegel's account everything spiritual is also natural. For example, human beings (which are spiritual in Hegel's sense) are also animals (which are natural). But our animality cannot account for our freedom. On the contrary, in Hegel's view it is the fact that humans are not merely natural, but also spiritual, or capable of thinking, that gives us a freedom that animals lack.

Hegel finds a conceptual contradiction in this initial understanding of the spiritual, however: spiritual beings are conceived as free in virtue of being not merely natural, but as long as spiritual beings are conceived as merely not-natural they cannot be free, because to be not-natural is to relate to nature as something external, alien and restrictive. Hegel thus rejects Kant's belief that freedom involves the transcendence of nature. Even if such transcendence were possible, Hegel argues, it would not in fact be truly liberating. True freedom, he concludes, depends upon thinking beings achieving a reconciliation with the merely natural world from which they differ.

The entire *Philosophy of Spirit* is devoted to revising the conception of spiritual beings until they are understood to be reconciled with, or at home in, the natural world while preserving their difference from it. At each stage in this process, spiritual beings are conceived in a way that is thought to be adequate to their freedom. But, Hegel argues, each of these conceptions, except for the last, proves to be self-contradictory: spiritual beings are thought both to be free, and to be subject to external limitations on their freedom. Such contradictions force further revisions that overcome the specific externalities to which spiritual beings have been shown to be subject. This process, and with it the *Philosophy of Spirit*, ends only when a conception of spiritual beings has been developed in which they are truly self-determining and free.

The conceptual development that comprises the *Philosophy of Spirit* takes place in three parts, which Hegel calls subjective, objective and absolute spirit. All three are presented in condensed form in the final third of the *Encyclopedia*. More detailed expositions of the last two are

also available. Objective spirit is presented in the *Philosophy of Right* and the lectures on the philosophy of history. Absolute spirit is presented in the lectures on aesthetics, religion and the history of philosophy. "Subjective spirit", "objective spirit" and "absolute spirit" do not refer to mysterious entities, but rather to a sequence of progressively adequate conceptions of the freedom of thinking beings.

In subjective spirit, thinking beings are conceived as seeking to overcome their alienation from nature by coming to know the objective world. Through knowing, Hegel claims, the subject is able to "liberate the intrinsically rational object from the form of contingency, singleness, and externality which at first clings to it, and thereby free *itself* from the connection with something which is for it an other" (*PhilS*: 182). This is accomplished, for example, when it is demonstrated that certain natural phenomena behave in such a way that they can be subsumed under scientific laws. In this accomplishment, rational subjects recognize that the objects of their cognition – the law-like natural phenomena – are rational too, and thereby achieve a degree of reconciliation with them.

But the reconciliation with the natural world that the activity of knowing provides is only partial, Hegel argues, so in this activity the subject remains incompletely free. The reconciliation is partial because the natural phenomena that the subject experiences are fundamentally independent of the mental activity for which they supply the content. Consequently, nature remains alien to the subject, even when thinking successfully represents the objective world with which it is confronted.

Since freedom is compromised by the dependence of knowing on an externally given content, spiritual beings must be reconceived as the source of the contents of their own activities. The subject that is understood to set "only itself for its goal, becomes *will* which . . . does not begin with an isolated object externally given, but with something it knows to be its own" (*PhilS*: 28). This transition from knowing to willing initiates the transition from subjective to objective spirit.

The *Philosophy of Right* is an account of the freedom available through willing. It develops a series of four main conceptions of the will, which are presented in the four main sections of the book: the introduction, abstract right, morality and ethical life. Each conception is initially thought to be adequate to the freedom of the willing subject, but upon examination is shown to suffer from limitations built into the very features that define it. This forces the will to be reconceived in a way that preserves the freedom established in the prior conception while overcoming its limitations.

In the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, the will is conceived as the faculty of choice. As such, it is understood to have three basic moments or aspects. First, there is the moment of abstraction, or indeterminacy: the will is free because it can abstract from any particular choice, because it is not bound to pursue any particular interest. Second, there is the moment of determination: the will is free because it can determine itself to a particular choice, because it can choose to pursue a particular interest. Third, there is the moment of remaining abstract in determination: the will is free because even when it has determined itself to a particular choice, it can again abstract from it. This last moment means that even though every determination or choice the will makes belongs to it, the will is never defined by any particular choice it makes; an important part of this freedom is the realization that the will has an identity that persists through an ongoing temporal process of determining itself to, and abstracting itself from, particular choices and interests. Thus freedom of the will, understood as freedom of choice, is essentially freedom as possibility: the will is free because it is possible for it to pursue or not to pursue any of its chosen interests.

But the willing subject, as initially conceived, suffers from two significant limitations. First, even though the subject is free to pursue its chosen interests, it is not responsible for what those interests are. Its interests are merely "the *drives, desires, and inclinations* by which the will finds itself naturally determined" (*PR*: 45). Freedom of choice consists in the will's ability to resolve itself to satisfy a particular drive in a particular way, but does not entail that it satisfy one drive rather than another. As a result, the "free" choices of the will are actually determined by the relative strengths of natural inclinations, over which the will has no control. Second, the willing subject is still confronted by nature as by an independent, external world that may or may not conform to its drives, desires and inclinations. This remains the case as long as "that which is willed . . . is still only a content belonging to self-consciousness, an unaccomplished end" (*ibid*.: 55). To become free, the subject must overcome both of these limitations: it must take responsibility for the purposes it chooses to adopt, and it must accomplish those purposes in the natural world.

In abstract right, therefore, the willing subject is conceived as being committed to willing not simply whatever it happens naturally to desire, but its own freedom. The first step in willing its own freedom is overcoming its alienation from the natural world, which the subject seeks to do by claiming some aspect of the world as its own. The first

stage of its effort is the acquisition of property, in which the subject identifies itself not only with its ability to choose, but with an object of its choice as well. Property objectifies the will by subordinating a concrete thing in the world to the purposes of the willing subject.

Hegel thus holds that property ownership is a necessary condition of freedom and, as such, must be established and secured as a universal right. But property remains an inadequate form of freedom because the choice to own *this* piece of property is still not a product of the will. It is essential to the free will that it own property, but it is not essential that it own any particular piece of property, so the preference for one piece of property over another cannot come from the will itself, and therefore no piece of property with which the will happens to identify can be a truly sufficient objectification of its freedom. Freedom therefore requires that the willing subject sometimes alienate and exchange its property. Failing to do so, it would become permanently identified with decisions that did not stem from its will, and would not be fully free.

The establishment of the universal right to own and exchange property depends upon willing subjects reciprocally recognizing each other as free beings entitled to all the rights that freedom entails. Hegel thus concludes that, paradoxically, increased freedom requires increased interdependence. The freedom of a person is now understood to reside not only in the property he owns, but also in the contracts he enters into, and in his respect for and performance of the obligations contained in those contracts.

The great significance of this development is that it is now possible for an individual's pursuit of his chosen interests to conflict with the requirements of his freedom. For example, a person might get the property he wants by violating the mutual respect of rights that contracts require (perhaps by defrauding his counterpart). Freedom thus depends upon willing subjects placing the upholding of universal rights above the satisfaction of their own particular interests. Such subjects display what Hegel refers to as a moral will, which is considered in the next main section of the *Philosophy of Right*, entitled "Morality".

Morality examines the conception of the will that emerges logically from the contradictions implicit in abstract right, but Hegel regards this conception as having been represented in the history of philosophy by Kant and Fichte. According to this conception, freedom requires the willing subject to abstract from all its particular interests, in order to strive to fulfil its universal duties for their own sake. The subject must therefore be able to determine the specific duties that

have an unconditional claim on all free beings, which it tries to do on the basis of the principle that intentional maxims are permissible only if they can be universally adopted without self-contradiction. Hegel argues, however, that this Kantian criterion is insufficient to determine the particular duties that are in fact required by freedom; he concludes that the moral will ultimately has recourse only to its own conscience to distinguish between right and wrong. This is Fichte's position, which Hegel regards as reducible to "the assertion that what [the particular moral will] knows and wills is *truly* right and duty" (*PR*: 164). This self-righteous certainty that it knows the good makes the moral will capable of evil, Hegel contends, because it entails an absolute commitment to acting upon the dictates of conscience while lacking an objective standard by means of which to evaluate them. The moral will is therefore not the objectification of freedom, but rather a perversion of it in which the universal content of the good is subjectively determined via the judgements of an individual.

Ethical life, the final main section of the *Philosophy of Right*, attempts to resolve the contradictions of morality by uniting the dispositions of the individual subject with that which is objectively right. In ethical life, freedom is objectified in communal customs and institutions "that are not something *alien* to the subject. On the contrary, the subject bears *spiritual witness* to them as to *its own essence*, in which it has its *self-awareness* and lives as in its element which is not distinct from itself" (*PR*: 191).

Hegel's point is not that all customs and institutions are automatically liberating. He is well aware that the conditions that happen to prevail in a particular time and place can be irrational, unjustified and oppressive. Precisely for this reason, his account of ethical life, which comprises fully half of the *Philosophy of Right*, is devoted to a determination of the specific customs and institutions that are essential to freedom.

Hegel attempts to discriminate between those customs and institutions that are necessary to liberation, those that are inessential yet harmless, and those that are positively unjust. Such discrimination depends upon the ability to specify the determinate content of freedom in order to be able to make competent evaluations of current conditions. And such determinate specification of the content of freedom depends, Hegel argues, upon a systematic exposition that takes nothing for granted, which is precisely his philosophical project. It is therefore that project, and only that project, Hegel contends, that enables philosophy to be "*its own time comprehended in thoughts*" (*PR*: 21), which it

is in virtue of grasping both the extent to which contemporary institutions are rational, and the particular contemporary conditions that are intolerable. Presuppositionless systematic philosophy thus does not serve the uncritical rationalization of the status quo, but is rather the necessary presupposition of a genuinely rational critical theory of historical and contemporary institutions.

The three main sections of ethical life treat the family, civil society and the state, providing analyses of the social, economic and political conditions of liberation. Hegel claims to establish, among other things, universal rights to marry, to work, and to be represented by a government that is concerned with the common good.

The ultimate conclusion of the *Philosophy of Right* is that willing subjects are free to the extent that they live in societies that succeed in establishing and securing truly rational laws, customs and institutions. Such societies result from the efforts of thinking beings to transform the initially independent objectivity of nature into a world that reflects the demands of freedom, and in which they are therefore at home. As Hegel puts it: "in the *ethical realm* . . . the principle of freedom has penetrated into the worldly realm itself, and . . . the worldly, because it has been thus conformed to the concept, reason, and eternal truth, is freedom that has become concrete and will that is rational" (*LPR*: III, 341–2). He therefore concludes that ethical life is "the perfection of objective spirit" (*PhilS*: 253).

But Hegel does not regard the perfection of objective spirit as the perfection or truth of spirit *simpliciter*. He argues that spiritual beings remain burdened, even as they are conceived in ethical life, with two limitations that prevent them from being fully free.

The first limitation of spiritual beings at the end of objective spirit stems from what Hegel calls the contradiction of willing. On the one hand, the willing subject is certain that it has the ability to transform the immediate and insignificant shape of the natural world through the realization of its purposes; but on the other hand, the willing subject also presupposes that natural world as fundamentally independent of itself, and therefore understands its purpose of realizing its freedom to be only *its* purpose, to be merely subjective. The willing subject does not regard nature itself as aiming at the construction of a rational state, but rather as having this form imposed upon it. This means that even at the culmination of objective spirit spiritual beings remain alienated from the natural world, and therefore incompletely free.

The second limitation of willing subjects stems from the fact that their conception of freedom may not accord with the objective requirements

of freedom itself. Willing therefore can and does manifest itself in a wide variety of social and political arrangements. As long as these arrangements fairly reflect the willing subject's self-understanding, it will feel at home and free in them; ethical life becomes literally second nature for the willing subject. But a particular shape of ethical life can become natural to its citizens without being in accordance with all the conceptual requirements of freedom. And this means that the feeling of a people that they are free, which manifests itself in their patriotic obedience to the state, cannot in fact guarantee that they are.

Consequently, willing is unable to forge a fully satisfying reconciliation with the natural world. The ultimate reconciliation and satisfaction must be sought, Hegel argues, not through willing, but through the activities presented in absolute spirit, those of art, religion and philosophy.

Hegel thinks all three activities considered in absolute spirit overcome the first limitation of willing: all of them overcome the presupposition (common to both subjective and objective spirit) that spiritual beings and the natural world, subject and object, are fundamentally alien to each other. In the theoretical activity of knowing, the contents of the natural world are understood to be imposed on a receptive spiritual subject. And in the practical activity of willing, spiritual contents are understood to be imposed on an indifferent natural world. The activities of absolute spirit, however, are precisely those in which spiritual subjects come to understand that the theoretical and practical presumption of the mutual alienation of the spiritual and the natural must be false, for only if the spiritual subject and the natural world are already reconciled is it possible for successful knowing and willing to take place. Art, religion and philosophy, that is, show that the very condition of the possibility of the theoretical and practical activities that strive to unify the determinations of thought and being is that the determinations of thought and being must always already have been unified. In all three activities, then, spiritual beings know themselves to be truly free, for they know that they have no absolute other. The activities of absolute spirit thus finally overcome the alienation of the spiritual subject from the natural world.

Hegel locates the principal difference among the three activities of absolute spirit in the form in which each grasps and manifests the truth of human freedom. Art creates beautiful objects that present the truth to our senses. In the best Greek sculpture, for example, we can actually see human freedom: the harmony of mind and body, the satisfied repose in the present, and the potential for purposive action

are all immediately apparent in the stone figures. Religion develops symbolic myths and rituals that represent and enable us to feel the truth. Hegel regards "God", for example, as "a representation of the philosophical idea that we make for ourselves" (*LPR*: I, 122), a powerful pictorial symbol that helps us to feel at home in the natural world. Philosophy generates conceptual comprehension of the truth. The *Philosophy of Spirit*, for example, systematically articulates the constitutive determinations of our freedom.

This difference is important, because it means that only philosophy is able to overcome the second limitation of willing by developing a justified account of the specific conditions of freedom. Philosophy is thus, according to Hegel, "the highest, the freest, and the wisest configuration" of spirit (*IPH*: 52). In art and religion, as in philosophy, spiritual beings achieve an adequate understanding of themselves as thinking beings who comprehend and thus complete the unity of thinking and being. Only in philosophy, however, is this self-understanding raised to self-knowledge, through being demonstrated by thinking beings to themselves in the form of systematic thought.

With this philosophical comprehension of philosophy, Hegel's system comes to an end. The systematic philosopher finally comprehends his philosophical practice as the activity of coming to comprehend himself as a free spiritual being, and he comprehends that it is through this philosophical self-comprehension that he becomes a fully free spiritual being by completing his reconciliation with the natural world. He thus realizes in retrospect that ever since he adopted the standpoint of systematic philosophy at the beginning of the *Logic* he has not only been thinking about the meaning of freedom, but has been participating in his own liberation.

Hegel's claim that art, religion and philosophy are necessary conditions of freedom does not imply that he thinks they are sufficient. In Hegel's view, freedom involves all the essential determinations developed in subjective, objective and absolute spirit: to be a free being is to be an aesthetic, religious and philosophical being, but it is also to be a cognitive, legal, moral, familial, economic and political being. The degree to which one is free is determined by the degree to which one enjoys the various types of reconciliation that contribute to liberation. A person at home in his social and political situation (one who enjoys ethical life) is more free than one who is not. Given two people who enjoy ethical life, one is more free than the other if his social and political situation more closely accords with the concept of objective freedom. Given two people with roughly equal degrees of objective freedom,

one is more free than the other if he also has the kind of awareness of himself as a free being that Hegel thinks is developed in art, religion and philosophy. And, finally, given two people who have such an awareness, one is more free than the other to the extent that his self-understanding is more explicit and complete, which is why Hegel claims that philosophy offers a degree of freedom not available through other activities.

So the most complete freedom requires both the theoretical comprehension of the world, and its practical transformation. Moreover, Hegel believes that art, religion and philosophy sustain and direct our striving for social and political freedom by providing the self-understanding of ourselves as free beings that guides our efforts to transform the world. He insists that "the way in which the subject determines its goals in worldly life depends on the consciousness of its own essential truth . . . Morality and the political constitution are governed wholly by whether a people grasps only a limited representation of the freedom of spirit, or has the true consciousness of freedom" (*LPR*, one-volume edition: 69–70).

Hegel's point is that the social and political conditions we strive to bring about, and in which we are able to feel at home, depend upon the details of our self-understanding: we strive to realize the social and political conditions that we take to be most appropriate for beings like us, and thus our theoretical understanding of the sort of beings we are plays a crucial role in determining the direction of our practical undertakings. Of course, what we are, most basically, is free. But to say that is not to say very much, and thus, as Hegel emphasizes in the passage just cited, everything depends on exactly how we understand our freedom: people with different understandings of freedom develop very different social and political arrangements.

This insight regarding the relationship between theoretical comprehension of ourselves and practical transformation of the world is, Hegel believes, nothing less than the key to understanding human history, in which he finds a development toward an increasingly adequate consciousness and realization of freedom. Hegel's discussion of history also makes clear, however, that he does not claim that the practical realization of freedom depends upon distinctly *philosophical* self-knowledge spreading far and wide. All human beings must come to know that all human beings are free, but certainly not all, nor even very many, need be philosophers. Hegel considers religion, rather than philosophy, to be the primary means by which the self-consciousness of human freedom is disseminated broadly enough that it can become an increasingly powerful practical force.

But Hegel also believes that religion is ultimately incapable of discharging the very demand to which its consciousness of freedom gives rise, the modern demand that all knowledge claims, as well as all social and political institutions, dispense with reliance on authority and be justified to free thinking. The inability of religion to satisfy its own demand results from the fundamental contradiction at its core: on the one hand, the truth that religion presents (its content), according to Hegel, is the fact of human freedom, the fact that we are self-determining and therefore should reject all unjustified authority; but on the other hand, religion asks us to accept this truth on faith (its form), and so it asks us to accept an unjustified authority as the basis for our belief that no unjustified authority should be accepted.

The modern response to this situation must be an attempt to produce a non-arbitrary justification of the truth, one that appeals to reason alone and is therefore justifiable to all rational beings. Failing this, there will be no choice but to acknowledge that theoretical and practical commitments are relative to whichever presuppositions or authorities one happens to take as a starting point. As Hegel puts it in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*:

> The *truth* concerning *right, ethics, and the state* is at any rate *as old* as its *exposition and promulgation* in *public laws and in public morality and religion* . . . [But] it needs to be *comprehended* as well, so that the content which is already rational in itself may also gain a rational form and thereby appear justified to free thinking. For such thinking does not stop at what is *given*, whether the latter is supported by the external positive authority of the state or of mutual agreement among human beings, or by the authority of inner feeling and the heart and by the testimony of the spirit which immediately concurs with this, but starts out from itself and thereby demands to know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth. (*PR*: 11)

In other words, although religion can give people an awareness of, and a desire to live in accordance with, the truth that humans are free, only systematic philosophy can provide a non-arbitrary justification of the truth that the religious person deeply feels.

Hegel's conclusion is that philosophy has an indispensable role to play in guiding the realization of freedom in the social and political world by striving to educate people about the conditions of their

liberation. The philosopher cannot force people to be free, nor does he have any expertise in designing or implementing plans for social and political change, nor will the intricate details of his arguments motivate people to pursue freedom. But for those who already desire to be free, the dissemination of the philosophical knowledge of the conditions of freedom can help to ensure that they are in fact aiming at the right target. If philosophers can teach people, for example, that freedom demands the establishment of a truly universal right to marry, then all people can make use of this knowledge in their pursuit of social and political liberation. Consequently, philosophical knowledge, when coupled with education, harbours transformative and even revolutionary potential:

> Philosophy in general has, as philosophy, other categories than those of ordinary consciousness: all education reduces to the distinction of categories. All revolutions, in the scientific disciplines no less than in world history, arise only on account of the fact that spirit, to understand and comprehend itself, in order to possess itself, has changed its categories, and so has grasped itself more truly, more deeply, more intimately, and more in unity with itself. (*PN*: 11)

Hegel thus identifies philosophy as the capstone of the most comprehensive freedom. Freedom certainly requires the practical transformation of the world, such that we come to be increasingly at home in our social and political situation. But freedom also requires the theoretical consciousness that we are free, and once people develop this consciousness they cannot be fully at home in their social and political situation unless they know that it is in accordance with the concept of freedom. Although people attain self-consciousness of their freedom through art, religion and philosophy, only philosophy can determine the content of the conception of freedom that all three of these activities present. Modern practical freedom therefore depends upon philosophy to comprehend the conditions of freedom against which the existing social and political situation must be measured, and towards the realization of which all people must work if they are to enjoy the fullest liberation. In the absence of such a worldly realization people's freedom will be incomplete, but in the absence of philosophy such a worldly realization will be not only less likely to occur, but also impossible to recognize if it does, and therefore harder to sustain.

Conclusion

Hegel's conception of philosophy, and the projects of the *Phenomenology* and the *Encyclopedia* that aim to realize that conception, follow from his conception of rational cognition as unconditionally justified true belief regarding the constitution of actuality. Many either do or would object, however, that this conception sets the standard of rationality absurdly high. If this is the case, then rather than attempting to pursue Hegel's projects, philosophers would be better off working to develop a more suitable conception of rational cognition. From this perspective, Hegel demonstrates not the need for a *Phenomenology* or a *Science of Logic*, but rather the need for a retreat from metaphysical ambition to the epistemological drawing board. Hegel may well have defined the standpoint of reason, in other words, in a way that makes evident the superior sensibility of the standpoint of understanding.

Hegel must admit, or else violate his own standard of rationality, that his standard of rationality itself cannot be presupposed but rather must be justified. And this justification cannot be accomplished simply by noting that Kant too associated reason with the refusal to be contented with conditional justifications, for such a justification would itself be conditional, in virtue of presupposing that Kant had a proper appreciation of rationality. Instead, Hegel's standard of rationality must be justified on the basis of an argument that it is only if we meet this standard that we do in fact have knowledge of the constitution of actuality.

Such an argument for Hegel's standard of rationality can be reconstructed, although only one of its two essential parts is provided by Hegel. The first half of the argument is provided by the ancient sceptics, whom Hegel regards as having developed the most devastating critique of the possibility of knowledge. The ancient sceptics successfully undermine, Hegel believes, all knowledge claims that rest on conditional presuppositions. Because the ancient sceptics did not recognize the possibility of a knowledge claim that did not rest on conditional presuppositions, they concluded that knowledge, and therefore philosophy *qua* science of knowledge, are impossible. Hegel, however, refuses to presuppose even the impossibility of a presuppositionless knowledge claim, and thus turns the sceptics' negative critique into a positive standard: if and only if philosophy can proceed without incorporating any conditional presuppositions can it resist the force of the ancient sceptical attack and justifiably claim to have knowledge of the constitution of actuality, or rational cognition.

Hegel thus responds to those who object that his standard of rationality is too high by objecting that their appreciation of ancient scepticism is too low. Hegel raised this objection against a variety of his contemporaries, including those who engaged in dogmatic metaphysics, and those who dogmatically asserted that metaphysics is impossible. His objection to the metaphysicians and epistemologists of today would be precisely the same: an appreciation of the force of ancient scepticism requires us to suspend the subject–object dualism of modern philosophy, or at least to subject it to sceptical examination by undertaking the project of the *Phenomenology*. If that project is successful, then it is known that the constitutive determinations of thought and being are identical, but an appreciation of the force of ancient scepticism requires us not to presuppose that any particular determinations are members of the constitutive set, and hence to undertake the project of the *Encyclopedia*.

Of course, even if one does appreciate the force of ancient scepticism, the projects of the *Phenomenology* and the *Encyclopedia* are not apodictically necessary. It is possible to grant that one has no answer to the ancient sceptics, and yet to pursue a variety of theoretical projects, including empirical science and philosophy in all its contemporary diversity. We do not need an answer to the ancient sceptics to carry on with our careful observation of the world and our enquiries into what it is reasonable to believe on the basis of our observations. Moreover, even if one has no answer to the ancient sceptics, there is no choice but to pursue the practical project of living one's life. We do not need an answer to the ancient sceptics to get on with the business of making our way in the world as best we can.

Because we can pursue almost all our theoretical and practical projects, and often with tremendous success, without an answer to the worries of the ancient sceptics, it is tempting to conclude that ancient scepticism is not something about which we need to be worried. Hegel would concede this to be true, if he did not believe that we need knowledge regarding the constitution of actuality. Such metaphysical knowledge cannot be had in the absence of a response to the ancient sceptics, and Hegel insists that in the absence of such metaphysical knowledge we cannot know what it is to be rational and to live accordingly. In other words, without an answer to the ancient sceptics it is possible to be premodern, or postmodern, and to live happily and perhaps even well. But without an answer to the ancient sceptics it is impossible to be modern and free. The project and promise of modernity therefore depend, Hegel concludes, upon the project and promise of rational

cognition, and thus upon the project and promise of systematic philosophy without foundations.

Summary of key points

- Hegel accuses Kant's critical philosophy of not being critical enough, because it dogmatically assumes a subject–object dualism that limits knowledge to appearances.
- The *Phenomenology of Spirit* attempts to overcome subject–object dualism by exposing its internal contradictions. It examines a series of "shapes of consciousness", or ways of understanding the relationship between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. It culminates in "absolute knowing", the standpoint at which, Hegel claims, it is known that the distinction between necessary determinations of thinking and being cannot justifiably be sustained.
- Hegel's system attempts to specify the necessary determinations of thinking and being. The *Logic* begins with the immediate being of thought, and then claims to articulate all and only those determinations that are immanent to it.
- The *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Spirit* are continuations of the *Logic*, *a priori* examinations of what it is to be a spatiotemporal being and a free being, respectively.
- Hegel understands freedom as our reconciliation with the natural world and with each other. He argues that the pinnacle of such reconciliation is achieved through art, religion and philosophy, which enable us to overcome alienation by developing an adequate understanding of ourselves and the world.