G. W. F. Hegel

Key Concepts

Edited by
Michael Baur

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Abbreviations

Works by Hegel

EnLogic	*The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with Zusätze* (Hegel 1991b)
EnMind	*Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, 1830* (Hegel 1971)
EnNature	*Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Being Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, 1830* (Hegel 1970a)
FPS	*First Philosophy of Spirit* (in Hegel 1979)
LFA	*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Hegel 1975a)
LHP	*Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Hegel 1983)
LPR	*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Hegel 1984–87)
LPWH	*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History – Introduction: Reason in History* (Hegel 1975b)
PCR	"The Positivity of the Christian Religion" (in Hegel 1970b)
PH	*The Philosophy of History* (Hegel 1991c)
PR	*Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1991a)
PS	*Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977)
SCF	"The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" (in Hegel 1970b)
SEL	*System of Ethical Life* (in Hegel 1979)
SL	*Science of Logic* (Hegel 1969)
TE	"The Tübingen Essay" (in Hegel 1984b)
W	*Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Hegel 1970–71)

Works by authors other than Hegel

CPR	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998); intertextual references are to the page numbers of this edition and also to the page numbers of the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions
MER	*The Marx–Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker (Marx & Engels 1978)

Introduction

Michael Baur

The thought of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) is generally acknowledged to have had a deep and lasting influence on a wide range of philosophical, political, religious, aesthetic, cultural and scientific movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These movements include, but are not limited to, Marxism, Romanticism, existentialism, pragmatism, structuralism and post-structuralism, hermeneutics, and even intellectual trends associated with evolutionary biology (because of Hegel's emphasis on process and conflict in natural processes) and relativity physics (because of Hegel's view that space and time are not externally related).

In spite of the widely acknowledged importance of Hegel's thought, however, there is a great deal of confusion about what Hegel actually said or believed. It is well known that Hegel's philosophy is difficult to understand; indeed, his writings can seem even impenetrable to those who are not familiar with the broad outlines of his thought. There are at least three reasons for the difficulty. First, Hegel was an exceedingly innovative and original thinker. In order to avoid what he regarded as the shortcomings of the philosophers who preceded him, Hegel found it necessary to challenge the unacknowledged presuppositions of his predecessors and thus to develop a unique terminology that would give adequate expression to his equally unique way of thinking. Second, Hegel was a very comprehensive and systematic thinker. In order to grasp the full meaning of any particular part within Hegel's system, it is necessary to appreciate the context of the whole; and yet because the whole of his thought is so complex and comprehensive, it is often difficult to understand the full meaning of any particular part. Third and finally, Hegel developed his innovative and systematic philosophy in continuous dialogue with his own contemporaries, who also developed their own unique vocabularies and styles of philosophizing. Thus, in order to understand Hegel, it is necessary also to understand the historical

context within which, and in response to which, Hegel was developing his own philosophical views.

Much has already been written about Hegel's life, his philosophy, his intellectual predecessors, his influence on other thinkers and the relevance of his thought to a wide variety of contemporary concerns. The present book does not aim to re-trace the vast territory that has already been covered in Hegel scholarship, nor does it aim to re-try the many cases that have been put forward in defence or in condemnation of Hegel's work as a philosopher. The aim of this book, rather, is to provide a generally accessible – and yet historically sensitive and philosophically rigorous – introduction to Hegel's thought and legacy. What is distinctive about this book is that it introduces Hegel's philosophy by focusing specifically on a set of "key concepts" at work in Hegelian and post-Hegelian thought.

In accordance with its focus on "key concepts" in Hegelian and post-Hegelian thought, this book is divided into two main parts. Part I (on "Hegel's thought") covers the principal philosophical topics addressed in Hegel's system. Admittedly, no limited set of topics can fully exhaust the richness of Hegel's philosophy, and no two topics within such a set are entirely disconnected or separable from one another. Nevertheless, the main topics addressed in Hegel's philosophy can be understood as corresponding to a set of issues discussed in contemporary philosophy (and corresponding to ten chapters in this book): epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, ethical theory, political philosophy, philosophy of nature, philosophy of art, philosophy of religion, philosophy of history and theory of the history of philosophy. Part II (on "Hegel's legacy") covers key post-Hegelian trends in philosophy that emerged as developments upon (or as critical reactions to) Hegel's philosophy over the past two hundred years. Once again, no limited list of trends or of post-Hegelian developments can do full justice to the complicated and extensive influence that Hegel's thought has exercised over the past two centuries. Still, a genuine appreciation of some of the breadth and depth of Hegel's legacy can be gained if one considers just the most important post-Hegelian philosophical developments in North America and continental Europe. These developments (corresponding to six separate chapters in this book) include: Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, hermeneutics and French post-structuralism.

Context and overview of Hegel's life

Hegel was born on 27 August 1770, in the city of Stuttgart within the duchy of Württemberg, in what today is southwest Germany. He was

the first of seven children born to Maria Magdalena Louisa (née Fromm) Hegel and Georg Ludwig Hegel, who served as a secretary in the revenue office within the court of Karl Eugen ("Charles Eugene"), Duke of Württemberg from 1737 to 1793. Four of Hegel's younger siblings died in their infancy. The two siblings who survived their infancy were his sister Christiane (born 1773) and his brother Georg Ludwig (born 1776). Christiane committed suicide in 1832, and Georg Ludwig died in 1812 while serving as an officer in Napoleon's military campaign in Russia. Hegel's mother died in 1783, shortly after Hegel turned thirteen years old, while Hegel's father died in 1799. The house in which Hegel was born (at Eberhardstraβe 53, Stuttgart) stands to this day and serves as a museum ("Museum Hegelhaus") commemorating and honouring the life and work of one of Stuttgart's most famous native sons.[1]

When Hegel was a small boy, at the age of three, he entered the local German school. At home he received basic Latin lessons from his mother, and so by the time he was five and enrolled at the Latin school, he had already learned the first declension in Latin. In 1776 or 1777, when he was six or seven years old (there is conflicting evidence on the precise date), Hegel entered the Stuttgart *Gymnasium*, where he was to remain until 1788. Hegel's first biographer, Karl Rosenkranz, has observed that Hegel's early education at the *Gymnasium* "belonged entirely to the Enlightenment with respect to principle and entirely to classical antiquity with respect to curriculum" (1963: 10). One should be careful not to draw too many sweeping conclusions from Rosenkranz's now-famous observation. Nevertheless, it is fair to say – in line with Rosenkranz's observation – that even during the earliest stages of his intellectual formation, Hegel was given the occasion to begin broaching a question that would later become a central concern of his: how, if at all, might the ideals of classical antiquity (which emphasized the priority and importance of unity, wholeness and harmony) be reconciled with the seemingly contrary tendencies at work in modern Enlightenment thought (which tends to emphasize a set of separations: between mind and nature, between reason and feeling, and between fellow-feeling and self-interest)?

After completing his studies at the *Gymnasium* in 1788, Hegel moved to Tübingen at the age of eighteen in order to enter what was called the Tübinger Stift, a seminary whose primary purpose was to educate and train clergy for the Duchy of Württemberg. Shortly after his arrival in Tübingen (in the fall of 1788), Hegel became friends with Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), who was later to gain fame as a poet. Two years thereafter (in 1790), Hegel became friends with Friedrich

Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), who – like Hegel – was later to gain fame as a professional philosopher. For a period of time, Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling (along with several other students) were roommates, sharing accommodations at the Tübinger Stift. Although the Stift was a seminary whose purpose was to train young men for the clergy, there is good reason to think that Hegel (as well as Hölderlin and Schelling) had no intention of becoming clerics themselves. In all likelihood, they enrolled at the Stift with little or no clerical aspirations, but simply with the intention of obtaining an education at the state's expense (Harris 1972: 64).[2] In the summer of 1789, during his second year at the Stift, there occurred two events which we in retrospect can recognize as rather important events for the young Hegel. First, Hegel took J. F. Flatt's course on "Empirical Psychology and Kant's Critique", which in all likelihood gave him his first opportunity to undertake the serious study of Kant's critical philosophy (*ibid.*: 83). Second, on 14 July in Paris, crowds stormed the Bastille (a fortress used as a prison for holding political prisoners and enemies of the state), thereby giving birth to the French Revolution. Even though Hegel was later troubled by the bloody Terror made possible by the Revolution, he spoke in favour of the Revolution while a student at the Stift and remained a supporter of the Revolution's ideals throughout the rest of his life.

In 1793, Hegel completed his studies at the Stift and moved from Tübingen to Berne (Switzerland) in order to take up a job as *Hofmeister* (house tutor) for the family of Captain Karl Friedrich von Steiger. In Berne, Hegel had free time to study some of the great works of history (including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and philosophy (including Kant's three *Critiques*); however, he also felt very isolated in Berne, and longed to move to a place closer in proximity to friends like Hölderlin and Schelling, and to cities such as Weimar and Jena, where so much cultural and philosophical excitement was then being generated (by famous contemporaries including Goethe, Schiller and Fichte). In 1797, thanks in large part to Hölderlin's efforts and connections, Hegel was able to move to Frankfurt am Main and begin work as *Hofmeister* for the family of Johann Noë Gogel, a wealthy wine merchant. While in Frankfurt, Hegel read works by Plato, Sextus Empiricus and his own friend Schelling, and began immersing himself in the serious study of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. Also and perhaps just as importantly, he was able to re-establish regular contact with his friend Hölderlin, whose epistolary novel, *Hyperion (or, The Hermit in Greece)*, appeared in 1797.

The death of Hegel's father in 1799 left him with an inheritance which, though modest, finally freed him from constantly depending for

his livelihood on the earnings he could generate as a house tutor. In early 1801, he moved to Jena, where he joined his friend Schelling (already a professor of philosophy) at the university. Hegel's initial appointment at the University of Jena was an appointment as a *Privatdozent*, or unsalaried lecturer; this meant that the level of his income depended on the level of interest he could generate among students who had the option of attending (and paying for) his lectures. Also while in Jena, in 1801, Hegel successfully defended his *Habilitationsschrift* (dissertation) under the Latin title "De Orbitis Planetarum" ("On the Orbits of the Planets"). Starting in 1802, Hegel and Schelling together co-founded and co-edited the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*. Although the life-span of this journal was a rather short one (the journal ceased publication in 1803, when Schelling moved from the University of Jena to the University of Würzburg), it provided an important publication-venue for some of Hegel's early work, including: *Faith and Knowledge*, *The Relation of Scepticism to Philosophy* and *On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law*. It was during his time in Jena that Hegel also wrote and published what, according to many scholars, was to become his most famous and most influential work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Given the historical and philosophical importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* (Hegel described the work as a "ladder" designed to lead ordinary consciousness naturally and non-violently from its own standpoint to the standpoint of philosophical science; see *PS* 14–15), the circumstances leading up to and following the *Phenomenology*'s publication may seem rather surprising. First of all, Hegel wrote much of the book under great pressure. He was in a rush to finish the manuscript quickly since arrangements to publish the book were made on the basis of a personal guarantee from his friend, Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer. Niethammer had promised the publisher (Goebhardt in the city of Bamberg) that he would cover the book's publication costs (he pledged to buy the book's entire print-run), if Hegel failed to submit the completed manuscript by the agreed-upon deadline of 18 October 1806. Furthermore, Hegel was writing the book at a time when fighting was taking place in surrounding areas between Napoleon's French soldiers and the defending Prussian armies. At times, Hegel was obliged to send instalments of the *Phenomenology*'s manuscript through French lines by means of courier. And in a famous letter (dated 1 May 1807, to Schelling), Hegel reports that he finished writing the main text of the *Phenomenology* "in the middle of the night before the Battle of Jena" which commenced early on 14 October 1806 (see Hegel 1984a: 80). The manuscript of the *Phenomenology*'s

"Preface" was not completed and sent to the publisher until January of 1807. In April of 1807, the work was finally published in its entirety.

In spite of the successful publication of the work for which he was later to gain great fame, Hegel's financial circumstances and professional outlook were not encouraging. His lecturing at the University of Jena did not give him much financial security. Furthermore, he now found himself to be the new father of an illegitimate son. In the late spring of 1806, Hegel impregnated his landlady and housekeeper in Jena (Christiana Charlotte Johanna Burkhardt, née Fischer). On 5 February 1807, just two weeks after Hegel finished writing the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology*, she gave birth to Hegel's son (Ludwig Fischer). Having recently been abandoned by her husband, Johanna Burkhardt now depended upon Hegel for financial support. In the midst of worries about his finances, his professional career and his obligations to Johanna and Ludwig, Hegel moved to Bamberg in March of 1807, becoming editor of the local newspaper, the *Bamberger Zeitung*.

Hegel's work as newspaper editor in Bamberg gave him some degree of financial stability and social clout, but he never relinquished the desire to obtain a regular and well-paying position within an academic institution. After roughly one and a half years as newspaper editor, a modest academic opportunity presented itself. Hegel's friend Niethammer, serving as the Commissioner of Education in Bavaria, wrote to Hegel in October of 1808 in order to offer the position of rector at the Ägidiengymnasium in Nuremberg. The rectorship in Nuremberg was not exactly the university position that Hegel truly wanted, but it was nevertheless something better than the editorship he currently had in Bamberg. Within a month (in November) he took up his new post as *Gymnasium*-rector in Nuremberg, where he remained for eight years (until 1816). Even while occupied with his administrative duties at the *Gymnasium*, Hegel was both socially and intellectually active in Nuremberg. In September of 1811, he married Marie von Tucher, the daughter of a well-to-do Nuremberg patrician; he continued to work out his thinking on logic and metaphysics; he gave lectures on logic and metaphysics (with mixed success, even in his own estimation) to students at the *Gymnasium*; and he finished writing his *Wissenschaft der Logik* (*Science of Logic*), a major project which had occupied him since his days in Jena. The first volume of the *Science of Logic* (the Logic of Being) was published in 1812; the second volume (the Logic of Essence) appeared in 1813; and the third volume (the Logic of the Concept) was published in 1816. In Nuremberg, Hegel and his wife Marie also started a family. Their first child, a girl

named Susanna Maria Louisa Wilhelmine, was born on 27 June 1812, but died only six weeks later, on 8 August 1812. Two other children came along soon thereafter: their first son Karl Friedrich Wilhelm was born on 7 June 1813 (he lived until 1901) and their second son Immanuel Thomas Christian was born on 24 September 1814 (he later edited the second, 1840 edition of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of world history and lived until 1891).

After eight years in Nuremberg, Hegel finally achieved what had been a long-standing dream of his: he secured a regular, salaried, university-level academic appointment, taking the position of University Professor at the University of Heidelberg in October of 1816. At Heidelberg, Hegel delivered lectures on logic and metaphysics, the history of philosophy, political philosophy and aesthetics. In 1817, Hegel published the first edition of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, a comprehensive presentation of his philosophical system as a whole, composed of three parts: on Logic, on the Philosophy of Nature and on the Philosophy of Mind (or Spirit). Also in 1817, Hegel and his wife Marie took into their household Hegel's illegitimate son, Ludwig Fischer, who was now ten years old and had been living in an orphanage in Jena.

Hegel's stay in Heidelberg was relatively short-lived, since his philosophical reputation was growing and giving rise to newer and greater professional opportunities for him. In 1818, he accepted an appointment at the University of Berlin, filling the chair in philosophy that had once been occupied by Johann Gottlieb Fichte. It was in Berlin that Hegel reached the height of his fame and influence as a philosopher, attracting the large numbers of students and followers who would later be identified (positively by themselves and pejoratively by others) as "Hegelians". While a professor in Berlin, Hegel published his *Philosophy of Right* (1820); he founded the *Yearbooks for Scientific Critique* (1826) and published several reviews in that journal; he published two updated editions of his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* (1827, 1830); and he was elected to the position of rector at the University of Berlin (1830). Hegel was 61 years old when death came to him, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, on the evening of 14 November 1831. Hegel's death occurred in the midst of a cholera outbreak in the region and since the outbreak had taken the lives of other well-known intellectuals (e.g. the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, who died on 16 November 1831), the doctors initially ruled that Hegel had died as a result of cholera also. However, Hegel did not have any of the usual outward symptoms of cholera, so it is more likely that his death was caused by an especially severe bout with an upper gastrointestinal disease (something from which he might have suffered as early as 1827, when he had

taken ill on a visit to Paris). In accordance with his wishes, Hegel was buried in Berlin's Dorotheenstadt Cemetery, near the gravesites of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780–1819).

Context and overview of Hegel's thought

According to standard accounts of the history of philosophy, Hegel's philosophy (along with the philosophy of Fichte and Schelling) belongs to the school and period of thought generally identified under the label of "German Idealism". Also according to the standard accounts, the key task which the German Idealists set for themselves was the task of bringing to successful completion the revolutionary philosophical and cultural project initiated by Immanuel Kant with his three critiques (the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*). For the German Idealists, the successful completion of Kant's critical project would require, at the very least, the development of a theory of knowledge which recognized (along with Kant) the active role that the knowing subject plays in bringing it about that there are objects of experience in the first place. Kant insisted on the active role played by the knowing subject when he famously argued, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that "the *a priori* conditions of a possible experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience" (*CPR* 234 = A111). More specifically, Kant argued that there is a "synthetic unity of appearances" within experience and that this unity is made possible by our own conceptual activity. If there were no such "synthetic unity of appearances", then "all relation of cognition to objects would also disappear, since the appearances would lack connection in accordance with universal and necessary laws", in which case such "appearances" could not be experienced but "would be as good as nothing for us" (*CPR* 234 = A110–11). In other words, if our own conceptual activity did not somehow bring about a "synthetic unity of appearances", then such appearances could not even count as appearances for us, in which case there would be no such things as objects of experience for us. Unfortunately, Kant's insistence on the active role played by the knowing subject gave rise to a set of serious philosophical difficulties. After all, if the knowing subject's own conceptual activity somehow plays a crucial role in bringing it about that there are objects of experience for us in the first place, then on what basis (if at all) can one affirm that the knowing subject – in spite of its activity – is nevertheless also passive or receptive in relation to what is known?

On the standard account, Kant's attempt to explain how human knowing is somehow passive and receptive, and thus not fully active and not fully creative of what is known, led him to some untenable conclusions. This is because Kant was led to conclude that the knower's activity in knowing, if it is to be receptive and not fully creative, must depend on something that remains what it is, independent of and apart from the knower's own activity in knowing. This independent "something" must make a difference to the knower's act of knowing, which is to say that it must contribute some kind of content or determinacy to what is known by the knower. For if this independent "something" did not make any difference or did not contribute anything whatsoever to the known, then the knower's activity in knowing could not be said to be dependent on it (and thus could not be said to be receptive in relation to it). By holding that an independent "something" makes a difference and thus contributes something to the knower's knowing, however, Kant ended up violating the strictures imposed by his own philosophy. Kant had argued, after all, that we can have no knowledge of what is the case independent of and apart from our own activity in knowing (that is, we can have no knowledge of what is the case beyond the bounds of our own possible experience). In seeking to explain the passivity or receptivity of human knowing by reference to an independent "something" apart from and outside of the knower's own knowing, Kant was (implicitly) claiming to know more than he was epistemically licensed to claim, given the conclusions drawn out in his own critical philosophy.

The standard picture regarding the problematic character of Kant's critical philosophy is helpfully represented in the work of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who anticipated at least some aspects of the German Idealists' thinking on Kant. In the "Appendix" to his 1787 work, *David Hume on Faith*, Jacobi complained that Kant's appeal to an independent something (or – what amounts to the same thing for Jacobi – his appeal to a "transcendental object" or a "thing-in-itself") was a necessary feature of the Kantian system, but ultimately also incompatible with the system itself. For Jacobi, it was necessary for Kant to rely on some notion of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself, since Kant began his philosophizing by assuming that human knowing is finite, passive and receptive in relation to what is known. As a necessary correlate to this assumption, Kant had to posit the existence of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself which somehow acted upon the knower and rendered the knower's act of knowing finite and receptive. As part of his system, however, Kant also argued that we finite human knowers cannot obtain knowledge of anything lying beyond our representations

or beyond the bounds of possible experience. It followed for Kant that we cannot, in fact, have knowledge about the existence or activity of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself that allegedly renders our knowing finite and receptive. Thus the idea of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself is both required by and yet prohibited by the Kantian system. As Jacobi famously complained: "*without* that presupposition [of a transcendental object or thing-in-itself], I could not enter into the [Kantian] system, but *with* that presupposition, I could not stay within it" (Jacobi 1994: 336).

Now the standard picture regarding the internal tensions at work in the Kantian system – at least as this system was understood by Jacobi and the German Idealists – is not an inaccurate picture. However, the standard picture can easily mislead one into thinking that the German Idealists' worries about Kant were focused primarily on the untenable epistemological or metaphysical doctrines that they found in his work (including, for example, the doctrine of the "transcendental object" or "thing-in-itself"). To be sure, the German Idealists (including Hegel) thought that Kant's philosophy was ultimately inadequate as a philosophy of knowledge (or epistemology) and inadequate as a philosophy of being (or metaphysics). And it was inadequate, in their view, for some of the reasons given by Jacobi. But it does not follow from this that their worries about Kant's epistemology and about Kant's metaphysics were strictly *epistemological* or *metaphysical* in nature. It would be just as accurate to say that Hegel and the German Idealists were worried about the unresolved epistemological and metaphysical problems in Kant's thought since these (supposedly theoretical or doctrinal) problems were directly connected to practical problems at the heart of modern culture and life in general. To understand further how this is the case, it will help if we consider some observations from Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Fichte was especially critical of the idea that the passive or receptive character of human knowing could be adequately explained by appeal to the notion of an independent "something" which somehow grounds our knowing or causes it to have the determinacy that it has. In a 1793 letter which he wrote to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, Fichte provides an especially clear and poignant articulation of the problem:

> Kant demonstrates that the causal principle is applicable merely to appearances and nevertheless he assumes that there is a substrate underlying all appearances – an assumption undoubtedly based on the law of causality (at least this is the way Kant's followers argue). Whoever shows us how Kant arrived at this substrate

> without extending the causal law beyond its limits will have understood Kant.
>
> (Fichte 1988: 369)

For Fichte, the task of the philosopher is to give an account of the finite or limited character of human knowing – that is, its character as passive or receptive – yet without appealing to the pre-critical or dogmatic notion of an independent "something" or substrate that allegedly grounds this knowledge or causes it to be the way that it is. A philosopher who is able to give such an account will have truly understood Kant, since Kant – after all – was trying (even if he was not entirely successful) to give just such an account.

Fichte believed that one who has truly understood Kant (and Fichte maintained that he *did* truly understand Kant) will also have understood the truly liberating and revolutionary character of Kant's thought – not just in the realm of theory but in the realm of practice as well. This is because, for Fichte, the pre-critical, dogmatic belief in a "transcendental object", "thing-in-itself" or "underlying substrate" (that is, belief in an independent "something" that allegedly lies beyond our knowledge yet also makes our knowledge possible) was intimately connected to pre-critical, regressive thought in morals and politics. Fichte helpfully explains this connection in the draft of an unfinished letter intended for his friend, Jens Baggeson:

> My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France has freed man from external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of things in themselves, which is to say, from those external influences with which all previous systems – including the Kantian – have more or less fettered man. Indeed, the first principle of my system presents man as an independent being.
>
> (Fichte 1988: 385)

Fichte's main point (and it is a point that he makes consistently though less directly throughout his philosophical works) is sufficiently clear: just as it should be possible to give an account of the receptive and finite character of human knowing yet without reliance on the (dogmatic, pre-critical) idea of an independent "something" outside of our knowing, so too it should be possible to give an account of what is morally and politically right, yet without reliance on the (dogmatic, regressive) idea of an independent, antecedently given order of things.

Like Fichte, Hegel was keenly aware of the epistemological and metaphysical difficulties attendant upon the notion that an independent

"something" or "transcendental object" or "thing-in-itself" allegedly grounds or makes possible our finite knowing. And like Fichte, Hegel was also convinced that a true understanding of Kant's thought – an understanding that got beyond Kant's own limited thinking about the "thing-in-itself" – would unlock the truly revolutionary potential of Kant's thought, in practice as well as in theory. Writing to his friend Niethammer in October of 1808, Hegel observed: "Once the realm of representation [*Vorstellung*] is revolutionized, actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] will not hold out" (Hegel 1984a: 179).

For Hegel, a revolutionized understanding of how we know the world and represent the world to ourselves would at the same time entail a revolutionized way of being in the world. This is itself a direct implication of the Hegelian view about knowing. On the Hegelian view, it is not the case that our knowing depends on content or input from some altogether independent "transcendental object" or "thing-in-itself" which allegedly is what it is entirely apart from our activity in knowing it. On the contrary, any determinate, knowable thing is what it is for us, only because of our own activity in knowing it. But precisely because no determinate, knowable thing simply is what it is "in itself" (no determinate, knowable thing is what it is apart from our activity in knowing it), it follows that our actual being in the world *is what it is* only insofar as it *is what it is for us*. Our actual being in the world is never something we can come to know as if it were a set of facts existing prior to or independent of our activity in knowing; rather, our actual being in the world always *is what it is as informed* by our own activity in knowing.

Now in turn, because our very own knowing is not a "thing-in-itself" but rather is always *what it is as informed* by our activity in knowing, a transformation in our knowing of knowing (a transformation in our understanding of what knowing is) entails a transformation in the *very way that we do* the knowing. And a transformation in the way that we do the knowing entails a transformation in anything that is known through such knowing, since (as we have seen on Hegel's account) what we know is never some independent "transcendental object" or "thing-in-itself" which allegedly is what it is entirely apart from our activity in knowing. In short: a transformation in our *knowing of knowing* entails a transformation in the *doing* of our knowing and this in turn entails a transformation of the *being* of anything known through such transformed knowing (and such being includes our actual being in the world).[3]

The preceding paragraph essentially makes the point that, for Hegel, the Kantian problem of the "thing-in-itself" is not merely a theoretical

problem arising within the academic disciplines of epistemology and metaphysics, it is in fact a problem that cuts to the heart of our actual, concrete being in the world. For Hegel, as long as our concrete activities are informed by the (inadequate) epistemological view that our knowing is finite because it is passive or receptive with respect to an independent "something" beyond it, we will continue to believe (through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy) that our very being in the world is not truly ours but is instead determined by an independent "something" beyond ourselves. Hegel believed that a genuine and radical transformation of the world is not to be achieved simply through intensified practical activity if such activity remains informed by an inadequate account of human finitude. It is imperative as a practical as well as a theoretical matter to account for the finitude of human knowing, yet without reliance on the untenable notion of a thing-in-itself or independent "something" beyond.

Indeed, the entirety of Hegel's philosophy might be understood as a systematically ordered set of reflections on what just such an account of human finitude would mean in the various areas of human knowledge and human endeavour. For Hegel, the untenable notion of a thing-in-itself or an independent "something" makes its appearance – often in disguised form – in every branch of philosophy and knowledge. We have already seen, briefly, how this notion plays a role in matters of epistemology and metaphysics. But the doctrine also makes its appearance in the philosophy of mind (in the form of mind–body dualisms); ethical and political philosophy (in the dualisms of freedom and nature); the philosophy of nature (in the separation of teleology and mechanism); the philosophy of art (in the separation of reason and feeling); the philosophy of religion (in the separation of humans from God); and the philosophy of history (in the separation of what is living from what is simply over and done with).

Notes

1 For more on the life and times of Hegel, see the extensive biography by Terry Pinkard (2000).
2 For more on Hegel's intellectual development, see the extremely well-researched, two-volume account by H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Development* (1972, 1983).
3 This paragraph can be understood as an extended comment on Hegel's claim (in the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) that "consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself" (*PS* 53); "in the alteration of the knowledge, the object itself alters", for "as the knowledge changes, so too does the object … " (*PS* 54).