

# HEGEL

## A Guide for the Perplexed

David James

**HEGEL: A GUIDE FOR  
THE PERPLEXED**

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# HEGEL: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

DAVID JAMES



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## INTRODUCTION

A distinctive feature of the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) is the way in which it forms a system. For Hegel, philosophy, as knowledge of the truth, can in fact only be expounded ‘as Science or as *system*’.<sup>1</sup> The science of the Idea or the Absolute, that is, Hegel’s own philosophy, is therefore ‘essentially a *system*, since what is *concretely* true is so only in its inward self-unfolding and in taking and holding itself together in unity, i.e., as *totality*’.<sup>2</sup> Hegel even claims that the history of philosophy is to be understood as a series of systems, each of which is grounded on a particular principle.<sup>3</sup> This historical process, in the course of which one philosophical system replaces another, culminates in Hegel’s own philosophical system, as outlined in his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, because it combines all earlier principles within itself, thus overcoming the limited standpoint adopted by previous philosophical systems, each of which is grounded on one principle to the exclusion of others.

Hegel’s understanding of his own philosophy as the most comprehensive of all philosophical systems implies that his philosophy forms a totality of interconnected moments, whose truth depends on their being comprehended as moments of this totality. This understanding of philosophy as a system gives rise to a problem for anyone seeking to offer a short introduction to Hegel’s thought, since the necessity of focusing on certain aspects of his philosophical system at the expense of others appears to run counter to his conception of philosophy, together with its object, truth, as a totality of interconnected moments. In other words, given the systematic nature of Hegel’s philosophy, a short introduction to his thought can at best provide only a partial account of his philosophical project. It would therefore help if we could identify a single theme that runs

throughout Hegel's philosophical system, which consists of a logic, a philosophy of nature, and a philosophy of spirit; for this theme might provide the key to understanding both the internal dynamic governing the development of this system and the principle which serves to unify its various moments. Fortunately, it is possible to identify such a theme, namely freedom.

There are historical reasons as to why the concept of freedom became central to Hegel's thought. To begin with, in 1789, the French Revolution broke out, an event which Hegel, together with his fellow seminarians at the University of Tübingen, the philosopher F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) and the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), clearly welcomed.<sup>4</sup> Hegel also appears to have retained his view of the Revolution as a necessary and thus highly significant historical event later in life. There is, for example, a story relating how, on a trip to Dresden in 1820, a time of deep political reaction in Germany, he unexpectedly ordered a bottle of the finest champagne so as to toast the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the event which marked the beginning of the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of the French Revolution, Hegel seems to think that there is in fact an especially close relation between historical event and philosophical theory; for, in a letter from 1814, he suggests, with reference to his own 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that the French Republic was based on an inadequate conception of freedom that originated in the Enlightenment and therefore had to pass out of 'its own destructive actuality' over and into another land, the land of 'self-conscious spirit'.<sup>6</sup> Hegel is here referring to the way in which the account of the phase of the Revolution known as the Terror that he gives in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is followed by an account of the moral world-view as exemplified by the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose critical philosophy provided the main impetus for the development of German Idealism, which culminated in Hegel's philosophical system. Since, as we shall see, Kant's idea of moral autonomy constitutes for Hegel another highly important stage in human history in so far as it involves the progressive realization of freedom, we must assume that German philosophy is meant to complete the world historical process of which the French Revolution is also an essential stage.

By taking the concept of freedom as my guiding thread, I intend to show that Hegel attempts to complete the process that takes on a new impetus with the events of the French Revolution, and is then

## INTRODUCTION

realized in German philosophy, by fully incorporating the idea of moral autonomy into his philosophical system. As we shall see, Hegel thinks that the significance of the concept of freedom should not therefore be limited to the domain of ethics but must instead be extended to include religion and even logic. Moreover, as Hegel's claim that the French Revolution's conception of freedom is inadequate already suggests, his philosophy represents an attempt to offer an adequate theory of freedom which identifies what the latter essentially is.

The approach that I adopt will, however, lead me to concentrate on certain areas of Hegel's thought, such as his social and political philosophy, at the expense of others, most notably his philosophy of nature. My neglect of Hegel's philosophy of nature can nevertheless to some extent be justified on the grounds that, in relation to the issue of freedom, nature is subordinate to spirit for Hegel, who makes a distinction between laws of nature and laws of freedom that derives from modern natural law theory.<sup>7</sup> While the concept of freedom will be seen to provide the key to understanding the internal dynamic governing Hegel's system as a whole, together with many details of the areas of his thought that I do cover, I also hope to show that his theory of subjective spirit, objective spirit, and, to a lesser extent, his theory of absolute spirit can be understood in isolation from his speculative logic, even though Hegel suggests that the latter underpins the other parts of his philosophical system. In this respect, we can to a certain degree avoid thinking of Hegel's philosophy as forming a system in the strong sense that one part of it cannot be understood in isolation from its other parts.

## CHAPTER 1

# HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF SUBJECTIVE SPIRIT

### 1. KANT AND FICHTE ON SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

In his philosophy of spirit, Hegel employs two key concepts, consciousness and self-consciousness, both of which are of great importance in relation to his account of freedom. They also have an essential role to play in the transition from one form of spirit to another. This is because Hegel's account of freedom and his account of the transition mentioned above both involve the idea of overcoming the opposition between the subject and object of knowledge, an opposition which is typical of consciousness, but is, to some extent, already overcome at the level of self-consciousness. In order to understand Hegel's theory of consciousness and self-consciousness, we first need to look at the conception of self-consciousness that is present in the thought of Kant and J. G. Fichte (1762–1814), together with the distinction that they make between it and consciousness.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant seeks to identify the conditions of the possibility of experience in general, amongst which he includes self-consciousness, or the transcendental unity of apperception, as he calls it. When he speaks of experience, Kant means the general experience to which all our particular experiences belong; and he identifies these particular experiences with our various perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Kant defines a perception as an appearance combined with consciousness.<sup>2</sup> He also describes perceptions as a type of representation, namely a representation with consciousness.<sup>3</sup> In other words, a perception is a representation which we are conscious of perceiving. The fact that Kant understands the perceptions that constitute our particular conscious experiences to be

representations relates to his claim that the unity of apperception must be considered to be a necessary condition of experience, that is, something that must be presupposed in order to explain the possibility of experience; for this claim is based on the idea that, in order to be conscious of the appearances or representations that make up experience in general, the subject of the latter must be capable of ascribing these representations to itself. In other words, the subject of experience must be in the position to think of these representations as being *its* representations, because otherwise the representations in question would have no meaning for it; and there would not, therefore, be any grounds for identifying them as its representations. However, in addition to the requirement that the subject of experience must be in the position to ascribe representations to itself, Kant introduces another requirement because he is trying to explain the possibility of the general experience to which all our particular experiences belong, and not just our consciousness of particular isolated representations.

This second requirement is that the whole manifold of representations, not just single ones, must be grasped as belonging to one single consciousness. This requirement derives from the fact that the general experience whose possibility Kant is attempting to explain is a single organized experience of which each particular experience forms a distinct moment. The subject of such a general experience must therefore be understood as a self-identical one that remains the same throughout all the different experiences which occur as moments of this general experience. Consequently, the subject in question cannot be thought of as the mere by-product of the unification of the single representations of which it is conscious; it must instead be thought to make the unity of consciousness itself possible by remaining identical throughout all its particular experiences.

The need to introduce such a self-identical subject in order to explain the possibility of a single organized experience also provides the main impetus for Fichte's attempt to explain the essential nature of self-consciousness. Just as Kant argues that both the possibility of identifying various representations as being my representations and the possibility of a single organized experience presuppose the unity of self-consciousness, Fichte claims, in the following passage from his *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, that the unity of self-consciousness must be presupposed if I am to recognize various actions as being my actions:

I cannot take a step, move hand or foot, without an intellectual intuition of my self-consciousness in these acts; only so do I know that *I* do it, only so do I distinguish my action, and myself therein, from the object of action before me. Whosoever ascribes an activity to himself, appeals to this intuition. The source of life is contained therein, and without it there is death.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, self-consciousness is for Fichte, as it is for Kant, a presupposition of any form of empirical consciousness, since it must be thought to accompany each and every representation which the subject, as the ground of a single organized experience, ascribes to itself.

The impossibility of recognizing any representation as my own without presupposing the unity of the subject implies another more fundamental act than that of consciousness, an act which Fichte describes as ‘the most primordial act of the subject’, since it precedes and conditions all other acts of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> This act, in which the self or ‘I’ (*das Ich*) makes itself into its own object, is identified by Fichte with the concept of the self:<sup>6</sup> for through thinking itself, the self first comes to exist for itself.

The way in which the self is identical with the act through which it constitutes itself leads Fichte to claim that the self posits itself, by which he means that its existence is immediately given through the act of thinking itself, so that: ‘*To posit oneself* and *to be* are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the thought of myself and the fact of my existence are inextricably linked, since the former implies the latter, even though I may, by contrast, exist without thinking of myself. I therefore become certain of the fact that I exist as soon as I make myself into the object of my thought.

The identity of the subject and object of thought which Fichte attempts to explain by means of the idea of an act in which the self posits itself means that the act in question is not directed towards an object which remains external to the subject and must therefore be thought to exist independently of the latter. The subject of the act and its object are instead identical; and in this respect Fichte’s idea of the self’s positing itself can be seen as an attempt to maintain a firm distinction between self-consciousness, in which subject and object are identical, and the consciousness of objects that are other than the subject which is conscious of them. We shall shortly see that

Hegel views the identity of subject and object, which for Fichte distinguishes self-consciousness from other forms of consciousness, as a necessary stage in the overcoming of the opposition between subject and object to which consciousness gives rise.

Fichte's understanding of self-consciousness as an act of self-positing implies, moreover, that the object of which one is conscious is a product of the subject's own activity; and this in turn suggests a link between self-consciousness and the idea of freedom as self-determination. In other words, self-consciousness involves an awareness on the part of the subject of its own unconditioned activity; and in this respect it must again be thought to differ from forms of consciousness in which the object of consciousness is not identical with the subject that is conscious of it, so that the independence of the object limits the subject's activity.

The idea that there is an essential link between self-consciousness and freedom is, as we shall see, one that Hegel is keen to develop. Kant also suggests a link between self-consciousness and the idea of self-determination when he associates the activity of the thinking subject with an unconditioned form of activity by making a firm distinction between the receptivity of intuition and the spontaneity of the understanding. I shall now say something more about this distinction, since it helps to explain the unifying function that Hegel attributes to the self and the opposition between self-consciousness and consciousness of which he speaks.

For Kant there are two basic forms of intuition, space and time, through which a manifold of sensory representations are given us. These discrete representations (e.g. the representation of  $x$  existing at a certain point in space and time) can be brought together to form a single unified representation only through an act of synthesis. This act of synthesis is performed by the understanding, which employs certain pure (i.e. non-empirical) concepts or categories, as Kant calls them. The categories constitute the rules according to which a manifold of discrete representations are to be unified into a single organized whole. For Kant, they are in fact laws, because, unlike rules in general, they provide not only the conditions according to which 'a certain manifold can be posited in uniform fashion', but also the conditions according to which the manifold '*must* be so posited'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the categories constitute conditions which make experience in general possible, in the sense that experience in general, as well as any particular experiences occurring

within it, must be organized in accordance with them so as to constitute a unified experience, as opposed to a confused manifold of discrete representations that do not appear to stand in a law-governed relation to each other.

While the manifold of representations is given through intuition, which, as purely sensory, may amount to nothing more than the way in which the subject is affected by these representations, thus making the subject's relation to them into a purely receptive one, Kant thinks that the combination of the manifold performed by the categories must be viewed as an act of spontaneity, which as 'an act of the self-activity of the subject . . . cannot be executed save by the subject itself'.<sup>9</sup> This claim turns on the idea that since the categories first make experience possible, they cannot themselves be derived from the latter: they are instead laws that the understanding gives to the manifold of representations given through the pure forms of intuition (i.e. space and time).

The role that Kant assigns the categories has important implications with respect to his account of the unity of apperception: for he holds the categories to be in an important sense conditions of self-consciousness itself, even though the subject, through its employment of the categories, brings about the single organized experience to which each of its particular experiences belongs. In so doing, the subject brings about itself, since it is only by uniting a given manifold of representations within a single consciousness that it becomes possible for the subject to think of itself as remaining identical throughout the series of representations of which it is conscious; whereas in the case of the subject's act of ascribing single representations to itself, it could conceivably have as diverse a self as it has representations of which it is conscious. The fact that the subject must employ the categories in order to unite the given manifold of representations in a single consciousness, and to be able to think of itself as that which remains identical throughout its various experiences, means that the categories are just as much conditions of self-consciousness as they are conditions of experience in general. Kant therefore claims that the analytic unity of apperception (i.e. the self-identity of the 'I') is possible only under the presupposition of a certain synthetic unity (i.e. the unity achieved by means of the categories).<sup>10</sup>

Although, like Kant, Fichte thinks that self-consciousness is a condition of experience in general, we have seen that he tends to

view the self's act of thinking itself as providing the conditions of unity upon which the possibility of consciousness depends, whereas for Kant the categories of the understanding are also required. Hegel appears to follow Fichte rather than Kant when he claims that the 'I' is 'pure being-for-itself, in which everything particular is negated and sublated – consciousness as ultimate, simple, and pure'.<sup>11</sup> For this suggests that the 'I' alone functions as the universal within which all its particular determinations are unified; determinations which may be taken to include the subject's sensations, desires and inclinations, as well as its representations of external objects. Hegel implies, moreover, that all such particular determinations are not merely contained but also unified within the 'I' when he states that I know everything as being mine in such a way that 'I grasp every object as a member in the system of what I myself am'.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Hegel takes the 'I' to perform the unifying function that Kant assigns the categories is also suggested by his description of the 'I' as 'the simple *category*'.<sup>13</sup>

Hegel's adoption of the model of self-consciousness found in the works of Kant and Fichte is evident from the following definition of subjectivity that he gives: '*pure form, the absolute unity of the self-consciousness with itself, in which the self-consciousness, as "I" = "I", is totally inward and abstractly dependent upon itself – i.e. the pure certainty of itself, as distinct from truth*'.<sup>14</sup> For this definition of subjectivity captures some of the essential features of the model of self-consciousness developed by Kant and Fichte. To begin with, subjectivity, as pure form, is here considered in abstraction from any of the determinate features that serve to distinguish one particular 'I' from another particular 'I'. This is a reflection of the way in which Kant and Fichte discuss self-consciousness in terms of its unifying function and, in the case of Fichte, also in terms of the act through which the self posits itself, since this unifying function and act of self-positing must be understood as common to each and every self-consciousness. Second, the term 'I' = 'I' captures the way in which the subject remains self-identical throughout the various experiences that make up the more general experience of which it is the condition. Third, when Hegel speaks of the 'I' as being certain of itself, he can be seen to have in mind the way in which the 'I' posits itself, in the sense that its act of thinking itself necessarily involves the thought of its own existence, so that the 'I's certainty of itself does not appear to depend on anything other than its own activity (i.e. its

act of thinking itself). This self-certainty is, however, a one-sided, and thus inadequate, form of knowledge for Hegel because, as we shall see, the 'I', as merely self-identical, lacks the moment of consciousness. We have already touched upon the reason why Hegel thinks that the type of self-certainty that the self-conscious subject has of itself must be supplemented by the moment of consciousness; for while both Kant and Fichte understand self-consciousness as being a condition of all conscious experience, experience for them involves another element in addition to the subject's self-activity, namely intuition.

In Kant's case, this is because sensible intuition is the medium through which objects are given us. Consequently, the act of ascribing various representations to myself and unifying them into a single organized experience by means of the categories requires that such representations are first given at least in inner sense, which is subject to the determinations of time, while other types of representation, such as the representations of objects external to myself, must also be given in outer sense, which is structured according to the three dimensions of space.

Self-consciousness likewise forms only part of a more general experience for Fichte, even though he understands the proposition which expresses it (i.e.  $I = I$  or  $I \text{ am } I$ ) to form the basic principle of all knowledge. Although Fichte claims that all experience can be deduced from the possibility of self-consciousness,<sup>15</sup> the fact that experience is also made up of intuitions leads him to introduce another principle in addition to the  $I = I$ . This second principle expresses that which stands opposed to, and is other than, the 'I': the not-'I'. This means that although self-consciousness is a necessary condition of experience, it is not a sufficient one, since experience also involves representations, the existence of which cannot be explained in terms of the self-identity and self-activity of the 'I'. Consequently, the 'I' appears to be conditioned by that which serves as the source of its representations, namely the not-'I'. The way in which each individual self-consciousness is conditioned by the not-'I', as the ultimate source of the various representations that the subject ascribes to itself and unifies within itself, means that the not-'I' must be constantly presupposed in order to explain the possibility of experience, even though we may define it in purely negative terms, as Fichte does when he describes the not-'I' as an external prime mover having no other attribute than that of being an opposing force.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the not-‘I’ forms a condition of experience raises a problem for Fichte; a problem that is due to his understanding of the relation of different types of philosophy to the question of freedom. Fichte opposes critical philosophy, by which he means his own philosophy and Kant’s philosophy as he interprets it, to dogmatic philosophy. While the essence of the critical philosophy is that it postulates an absolute ‘I’ that is wholly unconditioned and incapable of determination by any higher thing, dogmatic philosophy appeals to what it takes to be the higher essence of the thing (*ens*), thus postulating the existence of a thing-in-itself that is independent of the ‘I’ and stands opposed to the latter.<sup>17</sup> According to Fichte, dogmatism thereby takes everything that appears in our consciousness, together with acts that we consider to be products of free will and even the very belief that we are free, to be the product of the thing-in-itself. In other words, all our thoughts and actions are held to be determined by something that remains independent of us, rather than their being the products of our own spontaneous activity; so that every consistent dogmatist must be a fatalist and materialist who denies the freedom and independence of the self.<sup>18</sup> Since the idealist, by contrast, asserts the freedom and independence of the self, dogmatism and idealism, that is, critical philosophy, must be viewed as totally incompatible with each other. Yet Fichte’s acceptance of the necessity of presupposing the not-‘I’, which appears to have the character of a thing-in-itself, in order to explain the possibility of experience, suggests that his own philosophy fails to fully overcome the dogmatic standpoint that he criticizes and to realize the idealist project.

We shall see in Chapter 4 that Hegel criticizes Fichte for failing to eliminate the not-‘I’ and makes his own attempt to complete the idealist project by doing away with the idea of a thing-in-itself. Hegel nevertheless accepts that the relation to something other than itself is an ineluctable feature of experience for any finite self-consciousness. Hegel’s account of self-consciousness differs significantly from Kant’s and Fichte’s accounts of it, however, because he seeks to show that self-consciousness can be seen as the result of a dialectical process, whereas for Kant and Fichte it must simply be presupposed in order to explain the possibility of experience. I now intend to outline the different accounts that Hegel gives of the way in which self-consciousness shows itself to be the result of a dialectical process so as to introduce his philosophical method, which will