

Chapter Two

Absolute Identity: Hegel's Critique of Reflection

The following chapter examines the early Hegel's confrontation with Kant, Fichte, and Schelling in light of the problem of "absolute identity". Indeed, the roots of Hegel's speculative project—to construct the Absolute as an "identity of identity and non-identity"—can be found in the so-called *Differenzschrift* and *Glauben und Wissen*, published in 1801 and 1802 respectively. Central to both these texts is the problem of *formal* or *relative identity* (the causal relationship between subject and object) versus *absolute identity* (the "reciprocal determination" between subject and object in which both are preserved in their difference and unity). Hegel develops the thesis that the formal identity between subject and object must be suspended according to the principle of absolute identity, which reconciles identity and difference within a comprehensively articulated unity. At the same time, Hegel criticised the modern enlightenment culture of reflection for its potential reduction of subjects to a mass of atomised individuals subjected to instrumental relations of domination. By confronting the theoretical and practical limitations of the paradigm of reflection, the young Hegel outlined a critique of subject-metaphysics that was also a critique of modernity.

We should note that both the *Differenzschrift* and *Glauben und Wissen* were "early" works in the sense that they evince Hegel's definite identification with the Schellingian philosophy of Identity. The latter strove to articulate, in a unified manner, the mutual coincidence and supplementation of the subjective and the objective, the sciences of transcendental philosophy and of nature. Hegel's adherence to Schelling is evident in his endorsement of intellectual intuition, which Hegel dubs "transcendental intuition," as the speculative "instrument of reflection". It is also apparent in Hegel's account of the "substantiality relation" between the Absolute and the finite, which is no longer a simply causal relation but rather an anticipatory version of the speculative identity-in-difference of subject and object.^[1] Hegel's initially "Schellingian" stance, most evident in the *Differenzschrift*, gradually becomes more critical until it is abandoned around 1803 in the course of the development of Hegel's own independent speculative system.^[2]

Drawing on Schelling, Hegel's critical thesis is that the reflection philosophy of subjectivity displaces the *absolute identity* of subjectivity and objectivity in speculative reason in favour of the *formal identity* of subject and object governed by the analytic understanding. Reflection philosophy fails to overcome the dichotomies of subject and object, freedom and nature, and thus limits reason to a finite

and oppositional form. Hegel's critique of reflection thus has both theoretical and practical motivations: to suspend the rigid antithesis between subject and object within absolute identity, and thus to overcome, in thought, the diremption characteristic of Enlightenment culture. As we shall see, Hegel will come to reject the conception of an "absolute identity" or "indifference point" between freedom and nature. In what follows, I shall first deal with Hegel's discussion of the connection between reflective philosophy and the culture of reflection before turning to Hegel's specific criticisms of Kantian and Fichtean idealism.

The Self-Destruction of Reflection

Let us begin with Hegel's account of the way the philosophy of reflection articulates the historical "need" of philosophy within Enlightenment culture.^[3] In the *Differenzschrift*, Hegel describes the exhaustion and alienation within enlightenment culture in the following terms:

The urge toward totality continues to express itself, but only as an urge toward completeness of information. Individuality becomes fossilised and no longer ventures out into life. Through the variety of what he has, the individual tries to procure the illusion of being what he is not. He refuses the living participation demanded by science [*Wissenschaft*], transforming it into mere information, keeping it at a distance and in a purely objective shape. Deaf to all demands to that he should raise himself to universality, he maintains himself imperturbably in his self-willed particularity (D 9/85).

The modern philosophy of reflection has entered a state of crisis. Speculative philosophy has lost its living unity and become an empty erudition. This merely historical reception of philosophy, which remains "neutral" towards philosophical truth, is endemic to modern culture, as is the tendency to romantic enthusiasm, intuition, or religious faith. This opposition between faith and knowledge within Enlightenment culture is symptomatic of the need of philosophy in modernity and provides the basis for Hegel's critique of Kantian and Fichtean idealism. Indeed, philosophy, as a work of reason and spirit, arises from the dissolution of the immediate, pre-given form of social and cultural unity, the cultural condition that Hegel describes as *diremption* [*Entzweiung*].^[4] Hegel remarks:

When the might of union vanishes from the life of men and the antitheses lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence, the need of philosophy arises. From this point of view the need is contingent. But with respect to the given dichotomy the need is the necessary attempt to suspend the rigidified opposition between subjectivity and objectivity; to comprehend the achieved *existence* [*das Gewordensein*] of the intellectual and real world as a becoming (D 14/91).

Philosophy attempts to overcome in thought the alienation generated by cultural diremption. Every culture, Hegel argues, generates oppositions—between spirit and matter, soul and body, faith and intellect—in which the Absolute becomes separated from its limited appearances (D 13/90). These antitheses have been historically and culturally transformed into the more familiar modern dichotomies of reason and sensibility, intelligence and nature, “absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity” (D 13/90). The dissolution of immediate unity in modern culture arises from the predominance of the analytic understanding [*Verstand*], the cultural effects of Protestant inwardness, and the modern principles of subjective freedom and atomised individuality. This context of “dirempted” Enlightenment culture—marked by the dichotomy of subjective and objective—provides the primary motivation for Hegel’s critique of Kantian and post-Kantian idealism.

The sole speculative interest of philosophy, moreover, is to suspend these rigid antitheses, generated by the analytic understanding, through speculative Reason^[5] (D 13-14/90-91). Hegel alludes here to the dual problems facing post-Kantian philosophers, namely the problem of comprehending organic nature and the problem of the formalism of self-consciousness. To overcome these difficulties the sundered unity of reason must be reconstituted through speculative knowledge. From the standpoint of the latter, the products of modern culture come to be conceived as a process of production, what Hegel will later describe as the self-production of Reason in history. In this historical process, “Reason has united what was sundered and it has reduced the absolute dichotomy to a relative one, one that is conditioned by the original identity” (D 14/91). In the modern context, however, Reason has fixed the absolute opposition between subjectivity and objectivity such that it remains abstracted from, and thus conditioned by, the Absolute. Both aesthetic religious perfection (romanticism) and the analytic understanding (enlightenment utility) have become mutually independent and consequently failed to achieve the overcoming of dichotomy. For this reason, the cultural need of philosophy in Enlightenment modernity is to overcome the divisions of a consciousness—split into being and not-being, concept and being, finitude and infinity—that has become alienated from the social and cultural totality (D 14-15/92-93). Philosophy attempts to unify these oppositions of reflection, preserving difference and dichotomy within speculative unity, and thereby strives to recreate the unity of reason with the Whole.

Central to this experience of diremption in modern culture is the opposition between the *finite* and the *infinite*, an opposition characterising what Hegel calls, in *Glauben und Wissen*, the “reflection philosophies of subjectivity”. From the viewpoint of the latter, the finite and singular becomes the sole reality; the manifoldness of experience is now taken to stand opposed to the empty and abstract forms of the infinite (GW 319/60). Indeed, the fundamental principle of reflective philosophy is

... the absoluteness of finitude and, resulting from it, the absolute antithesis of finitude and infinity, reality and ideality, the sensuous and the supersensuous, and the beyondness of what is truly real and absolute (GW 321/62).

Reflection philosophy and the modern culture of reflection are both defined by the absoluteness of the finite and the insurmountability of dichotomy. As with Kantian idealism on the one hand and romantic intuitionism on the other, the religious, the ethical, and the beautiful are subsumed by the understanding within the finite and singular, and are thus opposed to a supersensible and unattainable 'beyond'. What emerges is an empty "concept of happiness" (GW 319/60), which is in fact a 'degenerate' conception of the reconciliation of the finite and infinite. This culture of reflection thereby generates a thoroughgoing "subjectivisation" of the Absolute, a reduction to the subjective realm of what is most significant in communal "ethical life". Religion, ethics and aesthetics are thus confined to a subjective interiority and opposed to the infinite as an unknowable and unattainable 'beyond'.

This is not merely a matter of theoretical interest but also has significant practical-moral consequences. As a result of this subjectivisation of the Absolute, the finite and the infinite come to be articulated through a relation of *domination*: either the finite and empirical simply dominates and obliterates the infinite (as in utilitarian positivism), or else an empty and unattainable infinite is set up against the insurmountable finite (as in romanticism). Within the modern culture of diremption, the eternal remains beyond the bounds of reason (GW 319/60), thus turning the Absolute, as "an emptiness of Reason," into an object of non-rational faith, a move that remains contradictory with the demands of Enlightenment reason and autonomy of thought (GW 320/61).

This cultural condition of dichotomy is perfectly articulated, for Hegel, in the reflective philosophy of subjectivity exemplified by Kant, Jacobi and Fichte. Far from criticising modern alienation, these reflection philosophies of subjectivity are rather its most perfect expression. They restrict speculative reason to the sphere of the finite understanding, and assert the absoluteness of the finite subject in all rational cognition, thus abolishing the possibility of overcoming the dichotomies afflicting the sundered unity of reason. Indeed, this movement of thought is a manifestation of the diremption prevalent in modern culture more generally. As Hegel remarks:

There is nothing to be seen in these philosophies, therefore, but the raising of the culture of reflection into a system: a culture of the common human understanding that raises itself to the level of the thought of the absolute (GW 322/64).

Within this cultural-historical context, Hegel observes, we witness the elevation of the principle of finite subjectivity, manifested in Lockean empiricism and modern Protestantism. The reflection philosophies, moreover, particularly with Locke, raised the “standpoint of the subject, the standpoint of an absolutely existing finitude, to the first and highest place,” thereby constructing an entire world-view from the perspective of calculating, finite subjectivity (GW 322/63). This prevailing philosophy of *finite subjectivity* construes reason as “immersed in finitude,” and therefore as incapable of cognising the supersensible (GW 322/63). Modern reason remains impotent in the face of diremption and regresses to a one-sided, calculating instrumentalism. The diremptions of modern culture find their systematic exposition in the reflection philosophies of subjectivity. In this respect, Hegel presents a critique of the ‘ideological’ aspects of atomisation and alienation prevalent within the modern culture of reflection. Neither modern philosophy nor modern culture meet the demands of reason, since they remain caught within the dichotomies of the historical condition of reflection. Hegel thus contrasts this “reflective reason,” dominated by the understanding, with *speculative reason*, whose principle remains “the identity of subject and object,” the overcoming of dichotomy that finally gives both identity and difference their due (D 6/80).

Reflection and Speculation

A remark about the meaning of “absolute” identity and “relative” or “abstract” identity is pertinent at this point. In what Hegel calls “reflective philosophy,” the abstract or relative identity of subject and object is conceived from the standpoint of the finite understanding. This identity is abstract because the terms of the relation, subject and object, are abstracted from the rational whole—the Absolute—and thus remain opposed to this whole; this identity is termed “relative” because each term is negatively defined in relation to its other and remains within an oppositional relation that presupposes this more originary unity. Moreover, the relation between subject and object, as we shall see, is conceived as a *causal* relationship in which one term serves as the “ground” of the other: subject as the ground of object in the case of idealism, and object as the ground of subject in the case of realism. These two opposing conceptions of the subject-object identity, however, must themselves be unified; the opposition of idealism and realism must be suspended within the comprehensive unity of speculative reason. Within this absolute identity of “subjective” subject-object (intelligence) and “objective” subject-object (nature), both terms—subjectivity and objectivity, or freedom and nature—are both posited in their identity and suspended in their difference, while also being posited in their difference and suspended in their identity.

It is worth noting that Hegel is attempting to confront two decisive problems bequeathed to the post-Kantians: the problem of *organic nature*, which can be understood according to the teleological conception of the organism taken in a regulative (rather than constitutive) sense; and the “*formalism*” problem, in which the formal identity of the transcendental unity of apperception is opposed to the concrete content of the empirical ego, but also remains obscurely united with it in a manner that remains largely unexplained. The “principle” of the system of transcendental idealism, namely pure self-consciousness, cannot be reconciled with its further development (in respect of nature and freedom), hence pure self-consciousness does not “return” to itself, as Hegel says, in a self-grounding fashion. Both these post-Kantian problems—the problem of organic nature and the formalism problem—are united in the decisive issue for the post-Kantians, namely the *intuitive intellect* problem. As earlier discussed, Kant famously argued that human cognition depends upon the functioning of two distinct cognitive faculties, sensibility and the understanding, which together provided for the synthesis of intuitions under concepts in definite cognitive judgments. The “root” or source of these faculties, however, remained obscure; the original unifying principle of sensibility and understanding, or intuitions and concepts, remained a mystery for finite rational beings such as ourselves. Moreover, Kant explicitly ruled out the possibility of an “intellectual intuition,” which would overcome the dichotomy between concept and intuition, spontaneity and receptivity, freedom and nature. Only in aesthetic-reflective judgment, and the experience of beauty as symbolising moral beauty, would this rational intuition of the Whole be achieved. This tantalising clue provided the post-Kantians with their most pressing challenge: to reconstitute the sundered unity of reason and its opposition to nature. From this genuinely speculative standpoint, in the philosophical exercise of intellectual intuition, the overcoming of the dichotomy between formal identity and sensuous difference would be attained. Such a speculative intuition would be tantamount to a rational comprehension of the Whole in which the dichotomies characterising the standpoint of finite understanding would finally be superseded.

It is within this nexus of related problems—those of organic nature, formalism, and the possibility of an intuitive intellect—that we must situate Hegel’s confrontation with Kant and Fichte but also his break with Schelling. For Hegel compares the Fichtean and Schellingian systems of transcendental idealism according to their success in dealing with these post-Kantian problems, their success in constructing a genuinely speculative standpoint for the rational comprehension of the Whole. This confrontation, as we shall see, proceeds by way of what Hegel calls the *self-destruction* of reflection, a process disclosed to us through what he at this point calls *transcendental intuition*.^[6] This notion indicates Hegel’s commitment to a Schellingian approach to the problem of the Absolute, since it is through a version of intellectual intuition, rather than conceptual thought, that we can construct the Absolute in consciousness. Through transcendental intuition, as the synthesis of reflection and

intuition, we can acquire knowledge of the absolute identity of the antitheses posited by reflection; that is, we can reconstitute the sundered unity of reason and nature within speculative knowledge. In other words, the standpoint of reflection posits an *abstract* or *relative identity* between subject and object, a causally construed identity originating through abstraction from the Whole and conditioned by opposition, whereas the standpoint of speculation posits the intuition of *absolute identity* as that which suspends the opposition between intelligence and nature, subjectivity and objectivity, while also preserving them in their difference (D 18-19/97). The conflict between reason and the understanding is suspended through speculative knowledge that brings finite reflection and infinite reason together. In this manner, Hegel hoped that the dichotomies of the Kantian system could be definitively overcome. Speculative knowledge of the Whole, achieved through transcendental intuition, would resolve the problems of comprehending organic nature on the one hand, and the divorce between formalist self-consciousness and concrete sensuous experience, on the other.

To this end, Hegel took issue with the received post-Kantian approaches to comprehending the Whole in a unified, speculative manner, particularly those which posited a single fundamental principle or proposition that grounded the entire system of reason (such as the $I = I$). The Whole or Absolute cannot be adequately presented in the form of a “highest, or absolutely fundamental proposition” (in the manner of Fichte or Reinhold); for such a proposition, as itself something conditioned, requires another proposition as its foundation, and so on in an endless regress (D 23/103). The attempt to articulate the basis of a system of reason within a fundamental proposition—such as the principle of Identity in Fichte or Reinhold—cannot succeed because it lapses into an endless regress of grounding propositions, which by the very nature are articulated with other propositions. The only way to overcome this difficulty is to show how the basic propositions of reflection—principles of identity, difference, and contradiction, for example—are logically interconnected and mutually conditioning. The task, as Hegel saw it, was to show precisely how these fundamental principles of identity, difference, and contradiction are suspended and thus unified in a rationally articulated manner within speculative reason.

Hegel outlines this process in relation to the antinomy between the principles of identity and difference, which I shall briefly recapitulate. From the standpoint of reflection, that which is unified within the absolute synthesis of reason is sundered into two basic propositions: *synthesis* is expressed in *identity*, while *antithesis* is expressed in *dichotomy* (D 24/106). Hegel is interested in showing that the basic proposition of identity, the $A = A$, already contains or articulates the originary rational identity of synthesis and antithesis within its own propositional structure. The principle of identity or $A = A$ expresses the *connection* or *relation of identity* between the two terms—subject and predicate in the proposition, which merges with subject and object in knowledge—a relation which preserves and

articulates both identity *and* difference. This difference between subject and predicate, or indeed between subject and object, disappears once the proposition is construed solely from the standpoint of reflection. From this one-sided perspective, the $A = A$ becomes a merely *abstract* unity in which correlative aspect of determinate difference disappears (D 24-25/106). The principle of identity, as conceived by the analytic understanding, articulates a “pure unity”, namely a formal unity in abstraction from all opposition (D 25/106). From the standpoint of reason, however, this “pure unity” or relative identity remains abstract and onesided: it lacks determinate content (difference) and remains in opposition with, since abstracted from, the Whole or Absolute. Reason, Hegel argues, thus postulates the excluded aspect of difference, the opposite of abstract identity, namely non-identity or inequality, in order to overcome the one-sided emphasis on unity that is characteristic of the analytic understanding (D 25/106). To clarify this point, let us turn to a brief analysis of Hegel’s preliminary discussion of the principles of identity and difference and the antinomy that emerges between them from the standpoint of reflection.[\[7\]](#)

The discussion turns on the mutual implication of the propositions of identity and difference: identity can be articulated only with reference to the difference between identified terms; difference can only be established by identifying the terms which are taken to differ from one another. This mutual implication has a logical character, which Hegel attempts to show through a demonstration of the logical movement (or reflection) from identity to difference and from difference to identity. Hegel begins by noting that in the proposition $A = A$, one A is *subject*, while the other is *object*, and as such they are of course different. Hence to express their *difference* (as subject- A and object- A), the $A = A$ must be transformed into the $A \neq A$ or $A = B$, which now directly contradicts the first proposition. This new proposition, $A \neq A$ or $A = B$, abstracts from pure identity and posits the *non-identity* between subject- A and object- A . But this non-identity is itself posited through thought; the proposition of non-identity abstracts from the formal identity between A and A in order to posit their difference as subject *and* object, as A and B . In other words, we must identify in thought the distinctive terms “ A ” and “ B ,” each of which is identical with itself as well as different from the other. The A as *object* (that which is posited as outside thought) is equally posited along with the A as *subject*; hence *thought* also posits *non-thought*, the object- A . The latter is thus *non-identity* in relation to the identity of A with itself: identity is posited along with non-identity or difference. However, difference or non-identity here lacks objectivity and necessity since it is only a “positedness,” a construct that emerges through our positing the distinction in thought; that is to say it is merely the form of difference, its formal expression, rather than a concrete difference in itself, which can emerge only if we abstract from this formal difference (D 25/106). In short, both propositions of identity and difference are mutually conditioning: formal identity abstracts from the inequality of difference or non-identity, while the proposition of difference

requires identity or equality in order to express the subject-predicate relation of the propositional form (D 25/107).

An inverse movement, namely from difference to identity, can be similarly demonstrated in the case of the proposition of difference. The latter, Hegel notes, has traditionally been stated as a function of the principle of sufficient reason, as an effect that follows a given cause, a result that appears once difference is interpreted in terms of the principle of causality (D 25/107). Indeed, this is the way that the analytic understanding or *Verstand* inadequately overcomes the accidentality or contingency of difference, namely by subordinating it to the formal identity or law of sufficient reason. This point will be important, as we shall see, for Hegel's critique of the potential domination effects of the reflection paradigm in which difference is subordinated to an abstract identity. To continue, within the metaphysical tradition, the claim that A has a "ground" or reason means that A depends upon something else, $\sim A$, for its existence; hence this relation to otherness means that $A \neq A$ or $A = B$, since A is dependent upon something else in order to be posited as A in the first place (D 25/107). If we are to arrive at the pure or formal principle of difference, however, we must not take A as being posited by something else, since this still posits a causal relation between them. The independence of A is posited or contained rather in the proposition $A = B$, since A as positing subject is here posited as independent of any concrete B as an object-predicate. In other words, within the principle of sufficient reason, we arrive at an antinomy: A is dependent on B so remains in a relation of identity with B; A is not dependent on B so remains utterly different from B.

This point marks the transition to the antinomy of identity and difference: the principle of identity omits consideration of contradiction, more precisely, it claims that contradiction = O; on the other hand, the principle of difference, as related to identity, states that contradiction and non-contradiction are both equally necessary. Indeed, to connect both principles of identity and difference, Hegel tells us, would be the "highest possible expression of Reason by the intellect" (D 26/107). We find here an adumbration of Hegelian dialectic, in which the antinomy of identity and difference expresses, now from the standpoint of reason, the *absolute identity* of identity and difference. The identity ($A = A$) = the difference ($A \neq B$), where the ($A = A$) articulates the difference between A as subject and A as object as well as their identity, just as ($A = B$) articulates the identity of A and B together with their difference (D 26/107). The understanding, however, does not discern this antinomy because it takes difference as dependent or subordinate to identity; it takes A in the $A = B$ to be the same A as in $A = A$. It does not recognise that $A = B$ posits A as something different, namely B (object compared with subject, or cause versus effect). Instead the analytic understanding holds fast to the abstract identity, abstracting from the production of difference implied in the repetition or positing of A as B. For Hegel this antinomy of identity and difference, as a contradiction that cancels itself, is the

“highest formal expression of knowledge and truth” (D 26/108).

In acknowledging antinomy as the explicit formula of truth, reason thus brings reflection under its dominion. The standpoint of reflection gives priority to the principle of identity over that of difference, thus thinking identity without difference as a merely abstract unity. Reflection is therefore deficient to the extent that it subordinates difference to identity and remains unable to comprehend their mutual interconnection and logical relation according to speculative reason. The consequence, as Hegel will argue, is that identity *dominates* difference: from the standpoint of reflection, the relation between identity and difference becomes either an endless regress (theoretically) or an indefinite progress (practically). The analytic understanding fails to reflect on the form of the antinomy of identity and difference, and is unaware “that the purely formal appearance of the Absolute is contradiction” (D 27/109). Only speculation recognises the contradictory appearance of reason, and hence conceives the $A = A$ as expressing in the *absolute identity* of subject and object in which both identity and difference are suspended and preserved.

Relative Identity and the Problem of Domination

I have underlined the speculative and logical significance of absolute identity as the guiding principle of Hegel’s critique of reflection since it provides a way forward in Hegel’s critical confrontation with Kant, Fichte, Jacobi, and even Schelling (to whom Hegel at this point remains deeply indebted). Absolute identity provides a guiding principle for critically confronting the philosophy of reflection; it suspends the fixed oppositions pertaining to the latter by relating the sphere of finitude to the Whole or Absolute,^[8] and thus becomes a critical principle for judging whether a philosophical system satisfies the speculative need to overcome dichotomy and re-articulate the sundered unity of reason. Moreover, it also allows Hegel to critically challenge the *reduction* of speculation to reflection, the reduction of absolute to abstract or relative identity. For although the standpoint of reflection can establish a connection between appearance and the Absolute, it can do so only through the relation of causality, which results in the subordination of concrete difference to formal identity. This is one of the essential points of Hegel’s critique: positing such a causal relation produces a “false” identity between subject and object with absolute opposition at its basis (D 32/115). Within the causal relation, whether we take subject or object as the primary cause, both opposites subsist unequally in a “forcible” union involving the subjugation of one term by the other (D 32/115). Hegel states this in the following terms:

In the causal relation [between the Absolute and its appearance – R.S.] both opposites have standing, but they are distinct in rank. The union is forcible. The one subjugates the other. The one rules, the

other is subservient. The union is “forced”, and forced into a mere relative identity. The identity which *ought* to be absolute, *is* incomplete (D 32/115).

The causal relation between the Absolute and its appearances is a relation of *domination*, one which forces the opposing terms into a forcible unity that fails to suspend their opposition. Expressed differently, the opposition between appearance and essence or appearance and reality has taken the form of a fixed dichotomy in which one pole (appearance) is privileged over the other (essence or reality). The point is here is not merely theoretical; for the primacy of the abstract identity between subject and object also has the practical implication of establishing a domination relation between subjects in their practical relations. In this regard, the problem of identity and difference has, for Hegel, serious moral-practical significance and implications for the modern “dirempted” culture of reflection.

In *Glauben und Wissen*, Hegel analysed the emergence of such relations of domination in the struggle between enlightenment and faith. Hegel argues there that whereas dogmatic metaphysics asserted the primacy of being over thought, the object over the subject, modern metaphysics, by contrast, inverts this relation in the name of autonomy, claiming the primacy of thought over being, subject over object. The philosophies of subjectivity (represented by Locke, Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte) ultimately reduce the unifying power of reason to the finite understanding; the identity of subject and object is sundered in the dichotomy between appearance and thing-in-itself. The rational identity of subject and object is replaced by their abstract identity for the understanding. Reflective philosophy thus reverts to dogmatism, positing either a primacy of the subject (as in idealism) or a primacy of the object (as in realism), without being able to reconcile these alternatives. In this sense, reflection philosophies maintain the “absoluteness of the finite and of empirical reality”; they set up a fundamental dichotomy between appearance and reality such that appearance is made primary and reality rendered unknowable, and thus oppose the finite and the infinite within an irresolvable hierarchy, one that exacerbates, rather than overcomes, the divided character of reason (GW 320/61). The outcome in practical terms is articulated in relations of domination.

The infinite and the finite remain absolutely opposed. Ideality (*das Idealische*) is conceived only as the concept. ... when this concept is posited affirmatively, the only identity of the finite and the infinite that remains possible is a relative identity, the domination of the concept over what appears as the real and the finite appearance—everything beautiful and ethical being here included. And on the other hand, when this concept is posited negatively, the subjectivity of the individual is present in empirical form, and the domination is not that of the intellect [*Verstand*] but is a matter of the natural strength and weakness of the subjectivities opposed to each another (GW 320/61).

Hegel makes the point here that Enlightenment reflection has both theoretical and practical

implications. The ideal is opposed to the real through conceptual abstraction—the “relative identity” between the general concept, which dominates over finite appearances. On the other hand, in the realm of practical subjectivity the real is opposed to the ideal; here the empirical subjectivity of individuals is articulated in relations of conflict, antagonism and domination. Two opposing extremes emerge in Enlightenment culture: theoretical abstraction that obliterates concrete difference, and social domination that subordinates finite individuals. Above this realm of opposition, Hegel argues, “there remains the Absolute as an emptiness of Reason”; an unknowable realm (of thing-in-itself and noumenal freedom) which becomes a new object of faith for the Enlightenment philosophies of reflection. Hence the need for a *speculative* overcoming of reflection, a suspension of the hierarchical oppositions between the finite and infinite, reality and ideality, the sensuous and supersensuous, “and the beyondness of what is truly real and absolute,” in order to overcome the theoretical problems of abstraction and dichotomy as well as the social-cultural problems of alienation and domination (GW 321/62). This critique of abstract identity, which anticipates aspects of Heidegger’s critique, forms the centrepiece of Hegel’s critique of the culture of reflection.

A. Critique of Kantian Formal Idealism

As earlier remarked, the post-Kantians all grappled with the distinct but related problems of comprehending organic nature (the issue of whether the teleological judgment of nature had a regulative or constitutive character) and the formalism of self-consciousness (as the principle of empirical experience and knowledge that is opposed to, yet unified with, determinate sensuous content). Together these problems were taken up in relation to a further issue already canvassed, namely the intuitive intellect problem. Hegel tackles these problems further in his confrontation with Kant’s formalism on the one hand, and the problem of comprehending organic nature on the other, a critique that remains fundamentally oriented by the principle of absolute identity. One aspect of this critique concerns the *formal* character of philosophical knowledge according to Kant, the restriction of speculative reason to the limits of the finite understanding, a restriction that in effect collapses reason into the abstraction and one-sidedness of the understanding and its principle of formal identity. On this score, Hegel argues that Kantian “formal idealism” has as its principle “subjectivism and formal thinking”; it renounces the true speculative idea of philosophy—absolute identity as the suspension of the antithesis between subject and object—and thereby elevates “the unity of reflection” over speculative reason (G 325/67). Related to this problem is the second aspect of Hegel’s criticism, namely that Kantian idealism, in maintaining that we can only ever have a comprehension of organic nature in terms of the regulative idea of the organism, thereby consolidates the separation and division between knowledge and being, freedom and nature, and thus renounces the possibility of all knowledge

of the Absolute (G 325/67). As a result of both these problems, the formalism of self-consciousness and the separation between reason and nature, the task of philosophy thereby ceases to be the comprehension of the Whole, the unity of reason and nature in spirit, and becomes instead the cognition of finite subjectivity, a critique of our cognitive powers (G 328/68). Hegel's critique thus underscores the insurmountability of dichotomy in Kantian idealism, the reduction of absolute to formal or relative identity, and hence Kant's failure to construct the absolute identity between freedom and nature in speculative reason.

Synthetic Unity and Productive Imagination

Let us consider Hegel's critique in more detail. Hegel begins with Kant's approach to the problem of the subject-object relation: this provides the focal point for Hegel's criticisms of Kant's failure to resolve the problem of identity and difference in a satisfactory manner. For Hegel, Kant's question concerning the possibility of a priori synthetic judgments articulates the speculative idea of a *subject-object identity*: "the Idea that subject and predicate are identical in the *a priori* way" (GW 327/69). Such judgments articulate the a priori or absolute identity between a particular subject (in the form of being) and a universal predicate (in the form of thought).^[9] The possibility of positing the identity of subject and predicate, and so of subject and object, is due to the synthesising power of Reason, which is itself "nothing else but the identity of heterogenous elements" (GW 327/69). Despite the "shallowness" of Kant's deduction, this speculative idea of absolute identity may be glimpsed in the principle of the transcendental unity of apperception, which comprises the "truly necessary, absolute, original identity of opposites" (GW 327/70). Hegel takes this synthetic unity to be the principle of both the productive imagination and of the understanding: the productive imagination is a "blind" unity, completely immersed in, but not detached from, the intuition of difference, while the understanding posits the difference as identical, but then distinguishes itself as unity from these intuited differences (GW 327/70).

Following Schelling, and taking up the issue of the possibility of intellectual intuition, Hegel challenges Kant's separation of our sources of cognition into concepts and intuition, understanding and sensibility. Both concepts and intuition are required for cognition, yet the understanding and intuition are not radically distinct. Rather, the understanding expresses intuition in the higher potency of synthetic unity by extracting identity from the manifold in the form of concepts, setting these concepts against the particularity of the manifold, and constituting itself as universality in this process. Hegel agrees with Kant that intuition without formal concepts is blind, for in mere intuition without form—the pure intuitions of space and time—there is no relative antithesis between intuition and

concept, and hence “no relative identity of unity and difference” (GW 327/70). Indeed, consciousness itself is constituted by this relative identity of unity (concept) and difference (intuition). Conceptuality is similarly empty without intuition; as self-consciousness it brings what is different in the intuited manifold to the unity of identity, but such that it simultaneously differentiates itself from and opposes itself to this manifold. The concept is relatively identical with the manifold of intuition to which it is opposed, and from which the content of cognition itself is supplied (GW 328/70-1). This relative identity of cognition is articulated in the Schellingian formula: “sensuous intuition $A = B$, concept $A_2 = (A = B)$ ” (G 328/71).^[10]

Hegel acknowledges, however, that the Kantian productive imagination is nonetheless a genuinely speculative idea (GW 328/71).^[11] The “synthetic unity” of Kantian apperception, Hegel remarks, is “undeniably the absolute and original identity of self-consciousness” (GW 328/71), as distinct from the abstract identity of the I as thinking subject or *ego cogito*. As such it designates the “absolute synthesis” or rational identity of subjective and objective that connects the empty I and the manifold of intuition (GW 328/71). This absolute identity of self-consciousness, according to Hegel, encompasses thought and the manifold of intuition in an undivided unity; it is only from the standpoint of reflective judgment that they become divided into the empty I and the manifold of intuition (Düsing 1976, 117). In this sense, the transcendental unity of apperception, on Hegel’s reading, is identified with Kant’s productive imagination. Hegel here transgresses Kant’s strictures on the possibility of intellectual intuition and explores instead the possibility of such intuition indicated in Kant’s talk of the productive (rather than passive or receptive) imagination. In combining the spontaneity of thought with the receptivity of sensibility, the productive imagination articulates the originary identity of subject and object, the idea of reason as it appears in the sphere of empirical consciousness (GW 329/73).^[12] In doing so, it emulates the intuitive intellect that Kant had ruled out for finite cognitive subjects such as ourselves. Drawing on Schelling, Hegel argues that reason as the identity of subject and object is the “in-itself” of empirical consciousness; imagination, understanding, and reason are but three differing potences of the same originary identity. Hegel thus criticises Kant’s confused description of productive imagination as partly psychological and partly transcendental, as well as Kant’s failure to recognise reason or absolute identity as the sole a priori. Instead of grasping the originary unity of reason from which the dichotomies of reflection emerge, Kant turns the originary synthetic unity, absolute identity, back into pure unity, an abstract identity “that is not originally synthetic” (GW 330/73). Reason and the productive imagination are reduced to the formal standpoint of the understanding and reflection.

Formal Identity and the Exclusion of Difference

The root of the dualisms within the Kantian system, Hegel argues, can be found in the conception of the I as an abiding singular self-identity that excludes all difference. In this sense, the basic opposition between a formally unified transcendental subject and empirical manifold of experience remains irresolvable. Although the deduction of the categories begins from the “organic Idea of productive imagination,” it soon loses itself in the “mechanical relation” between a unity of self-consciousness that stands in opposition to an empirical manifold (GW 343/92). Hegel thus charges Kant with *formalism*: that transcendental knowledge reverts to a formal knowledge of the relative identity of form sundered from all empirical content. The exclusion of difference from identity means that dualism and dichotomy remain insurmountable.

Hegel’s general claim is that this formal cognition, both in theoretical and practical respects, assumes the shape of an “absolute antithesis” between the formal identity of self-consciousness (A) and the manifoldness of experience (A + B). In practical terms, this formal identity is freedom and practical reason, whose absolute opposite is necessity and inclination:

This formal cognition takes the shape of its formal identity being confronted absolutely by a manifold; when taken to exist in itself, the formal identity is freedom, practical Reason, autonomy, law, practical Idea, etc., and its absolute opposite is necessity, the inclination and drives, heteronomy, nature, etc. (GW 344/93)

Freedom and nature remain opposed within an absolute antithesis; the formal identity of self-consciousness is set against the manifold of experience. As a result, “the manifold gets determined by the unity [in practical philosophy] just as the emptiness of identity gets plenished by the manifold [in theoretical philosophy]” (GW 344/94). What is lacking is the mediating term of reason that would unite the opposition between subject and object, identity and difference. This unity, however, is projected into an inaccessible and unknowable beyond, and subjectified in the demand that there merely *ought* to be reason. Reason, as the mediation of opposition, remains beyond us, an object of faith rather than knowledge (GW 344/94). Hegel’s critique of the Kantian philosophy of reflection thus may be summarised in the claim that the finite understanding provides only *formal* knowledge of possible experience, while denying speculative knowledge of the Absolute through reason. Reason, as a pure negativity, performs the destruction of all oppositions—between possibility and necessity, subject and object, particularity and universality—and becomes an absolute Beyond conditioned by the subjective conditions of the empirical world. Infinity and finitude remain opposed to each other within

an irresolvable dualism (GW 346/96). This ‘subjectivisation’ of the ‘absolute identity’ of freedom and nature means that there is ultimately no suspension of the dichotomies of reflection and no speculative identity of identity (subjectivity) and difference (objectivity). The consequences of this subjectivisation of the absolute identity of reason and nature are considerable: reason is reduced to the level of the understanding, thus elevating dichotomy to an insurmountable obstacle, while the practical sphere remains bedeviled by a freedom that remains without rational ground. Whether this can be taken to be a legitimate criticism of Kantian idealism, however, is another matter, since Kant’s project attempts both to articulate the limits of finite subjectivity as well as define the possibility of rational autonomy within the limits of our human experience. Hegel’s complaint, however, is that Kant, in failing to distinguish between absolute identity as a demand of reason, and the inevitable dichotomies such identity falls into from the standpoint of reflection, effectively obliterates the possibility of overcoming the standpoint of finite subjectivity, and thus reflects, rather than criticises, the alienated culture of Enlightenment.

B. Critique of Fichteian Subjective Idealism

Hegel’s critique of formalism is developed further in relation to Fichteian idealism, which fails to construct a genuine identity of empirical and pure self-consciousness. Fichteian idealism, according to Hegel, is based upon intellectual intuition or pure self-consciousness, the $I = I$ or the ‘I am’ (D 34/119). Fichte attempts, in other words, to overcome the Kantian dichotomy of concept and intuition, activity and receptivity, by positing the self-identity of self-consciousness, the intellectual intuition of the $I = I$, as the grounding principle of transcendental idealism. According to Fichte, the Absolute or Whole is a subject-object, self-consciousness and nature as a unified whole, while the I or Ego is this identity of subject and object (D 34/119). Hegel’s basic criticism is that the Fichteian Absolute remains *one-sided*: the $I = I$ articulates a merely *subjective* subject-object that cannot genuinely reconcile nature and freedom; self-consciousness remains ultimately opposed to nature as evinced by the undetermined *Anstoß* or ‘check’ that Fichte substitutes for the Kantian thing-in-itself. In this sense, Fichteian idealism achieves only the *incomplete* synthesis that I *ought* to be equal to I (that is, empirical and absolute self-consciousness ought to be fully identical), while at the same time they are still conceived in a fixed opposition to each other rather than as unified at the higher level of reason.

Let us turn to a reconstruction of Hegel’s exposition. According to Fichte’s “phenomenological” approach to the problem of self-consciousness, the philosophical observer can intuit the activity of intuiting, conceiving it as an identity of thought and being, of activity and product (D 35/120). The difficulty, however, is that this transcendental intuition performed by the philosophical

observer remains opposed to the ordinary consciousness taken as its object. We have not yet attained the *speculative standpoint*, which would overcome such opposition, but remain caught rather within the oppositions of reflection. According to Hegel's reading, genuine speculation, as in Schelling's philosophy of identity, must show that empirical consciousness is identical with pure consciousness through the real development of the objective totality out of transcendental subjectivity. In other words, we must be able to demonstrate how self-consciousness and nature are complementary aspects of the Whole or Absolute; we must be able to show how nature can be constructed from the standpoint of self-consciousness, while self-consciousness can be constructed from the standpoint of nature, and that both movements must be taken in their complementarity and unity in order to comprehend the Absolute as such. Within Fichte's system, however, pure consciousness, taken as the principle of the Absolute, is achieved through an act of abstraction from empirical consciousness; it therefore remains opposed, as pure identity, to empirical consciousness, which in fact remains part of nature. As Hegel points out, however, the I = I is not an abstract identity, but rather both identity and 'duplicity' [*Duplizität*]: the I = I encompasses the opposition between subject and object, while the I itself is both subject and object at once (D 36/122).

Hegel applies this criticism to Fichte's system, which cannot reconcile empirical with transcendental consciousness. The transcendental standpoint is construed from the perspective of reflection, reducing the I = I, which expresses the identity of identity and difference, to an abstract identity between subject and object that remains opposed to the Whole. Fichte's system thus cannot meet the speculative demand of reason to suspend the dichotomies of reflection, and to construct absolute identity of intelligence and nature in consciousness. As Hegel explains:

Ego = Ego is the absolute principle of speculation, but the system does not display this identity. The objective Ego does not become identical with the subjective Ego; they remain absolutely opposed to one another. The Ego does not find itself in its appearance, or in its positing; it must annul appearance in order to find itself as Ego. The essence of the Ego and its positing do not coincide: *Ego does not become objective to itself* (D 37/122-123).

The system's failure to return to its starting point in absolute identity, to reconcile the Absolute ego with its appearance, or transcendental with empirical ego, indeed freedom and nature, is expressed in Fichte's claim that the identity of subject and object *ought* to be absolute even if it *is* not. This reversion from the Is to the Ought signals, for Hegel, that the principle of identity, the unity of freedom and nature and reason, remains presupposition of the system, and a desideratum of its construction, but not a concretely developed principle that finds its completed articulation within the system.

Reduction of Absolute to Abstract Identity

The argumentation for this reduction of absolute to abstract identity emerges from Fichte's analysis of the three basic laws of reflective thought.^[13] The proposition of identity involves the absolute *self-positing* of the I, as expressed in the I = I (pure self-consciousness); the proposition of difference involves an absolute *counter-positing*, the positing of an infinite non-I (nature). The third proposition unifies identity and difference, attempting to avoid their contradiction with each other through a division [*Teilen*] of I and non-I, an apportioning of the infinite whole between a divisible I and a divisible non-I (D 37/123). These basic propositions are three absolute acts of the I; but their plurality implies that they are relative acts and principles abstracted from the Whole. Identity, difference, and contradiction are in this regard construed as ideal factors belonging to reflective thought; they are aspects of the construction of the totality of consciousness rather than of the Absolute (D 37/123). In short, Fichte fails to perform the self-destruction of reflection: the I = I expresses an abstract identity conditioned by empirical consciousness, while identity, difference, and contradiction, are reduced to relative or conditioned propositions.

Fichte thus attempts to resolve one major difficulty within Kantian idealism: the dichotomies of (theoretical) reflection are to be resolved by turning to the realm of practical reason. Nonetheless, Hegel's critique attempts to show how in Fichte's account, despite the practical grounding of self-consciousness, these activities of self-positing and counter-positing remain absolutely opposed to one another (D 40/126). The I as a theoretical power cannot rise above this opposition to nature, but nor can the I as a practical power, even though Fichte presents the latter as the foundation of his system. This opposition between I and non-I remains fixed and insurmountable even for the practical faculty of self-conscious reason. To demonstrate this point, Hegel undertakes a simultaneous exposition and critique of Fichte's 'deduction' of the objective world from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From the theoretical perspective, the I cannot posit itself entirely objectively, for while all determinations of the objective world are the products of intelligence (the theoretical I) the intelligence itself is necessarily conditioned by an undetermined otherness, namely the non-I (D 42/128). This pure negativity, the undetermined character of the *Anstoß* or "check," is nonetheless itself a determination, and must therefore be thought of as posited by the intellect. The immanence of the I is thus reinstated, but only by creating a new form of the opposition. The positing of this opposite by the I and its positing of itself thus contradict each other; the theoretical I remains caught within this opposition which can only be resolved in the realm of the practical (D 42/128). As we shall see, however, even this attempt to overcome the opposition between I and non-I fails, insofar as Fichte resorts to the device of an infinite task of reconciling I and non-I, freedom and nature, through moral practical action (I *ought* to be the same as non-I, but *is* not in fact equal with it). Practical reason too will culminate in an

insurmountable dichotomy, thus undermining the claim that the absolute identity of freedom and nature is the principle of the system as a whole.

Indeed, the difficulty Fichte faces is that we are left with another opposition between freedom and limitation. Either we set freedom as self-positing against limiting activity as op-positing (that is, as nature), but this makes freedom conditioned (ultimately by nature) and thus contradicts the demand of reason to be unconditioned; or we also posit limiting activity as the activity of freedom, but then freedom as absolute identity contradicts its appearance, which is always finite, conditioned, or non-identical (that is, appears as nature). In either case, the result is that the system begins from freedom as self-positing, from absolute identity, but remains caught in its self-development within finite reflection: the dichotomy between freedom and nature remains unresolved, whether we take the theoretical I as the starting point or the practical I of moral action. As Hegel observes:

In the system freedom does not succeed in producing itself; the product does not correspond to the producing [*Produzierenden*]. The system, which starts out from self-positing, leads intelligence to its conditioned condition in an endless sequence of finitudes, without reestablishing itself [as self-positing] in and through them (GW 44/131).

Fichte's system suffers from the defect that this supreme demand for identity, the unity of freedom and nature in reason, remains a mere postulate (D 45/132). In the practical postulation of the $I = I$, the I becomes an object for itself by instrumentally transforming the object that confronts it (nature). Causality thereby becomes the governing principle of the subject-object relationship; reason becomes fixed as opposed to nature and the true synthesis—absolute identity—between freedom and nature becomes impossible (D 45/132). The practical I remains within a standing opposition with the non-I, an opposition it can neither explain nor practically transcend. The highest synthesis in Fichte's system becomes a mere *Sollen* or Ought: “the I *equals* I becomes the I *ought* to be equal to I; the result of the system does not return to its beginning” (D 45/132). The task of achieving this identity cannot be realised, since it is self-contradictory; to do so would amount to a liquidation of the non-I, a liquidation of nature, which is supposed to be equally absolute. Consequently, the pure activity of the practical I, as moral-practical freedom, can only be expressed in an endless striving, but one which never attains that unity with nature that reason itself demands. The ought here expresses the *antithesis* of identity and difference, the insurmountable dualism between subjectivity and objectivity that can never be transcended through reason.

Practical Implications of Reflection

Hegel then points out the practical implications of Fichte's apparent failure to make good the demand for a unity of nature and freedom in reason. In this sense, Hegel's critique of reflection is both theoretically and practically motivated by the need to overcome the antinomies of modern culture. For the modern Enlightenment culture of reflection, Hegel argues, promotes an overly instrumentalist attitude both to outer and inner nature. Indeed, for Hegel, the contemporary turn towards romanticism in art and literature is itself a symptomatic protest against a one-sided conception of reason as dominated by reflection. These cultural phenomena indicate

... the need for a philosophy that will recompense nature for the mishandling that it suffered in Kant's and Fichte's systems, and set Reason itself in harmony with nature, not by having Reason renounce itself or become an insipid imitator of nature, but by Reason recasting itself into nature out of its own inner strength (D 8/83).

Hegel's remark not only sets the agenda for post-Kantian critiques of reason, it also anticipates themes that will return in Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and modernity. Let us turn to Hegel's account of the practical implications of reflection.

The first difficulty with Fichte's synthesis of nature and freedom concerns the suppression of drive and feeling by the power of reflection. For Fichte, natural drives "must be placed *in subservience to the higher*," namely to reflection (D 49/138). This abstract identity between thought and desire, with desire subordinated to reflection, is totally opposed to "the identity of the transcendental viewpoint" which posits the absolute I in a relation of *substantiality* to otherness. This means that the rigid opposition between reason and sensibility is overcome in the sense of no longer being articulated in a rigid dichotomy. In Fichte's reconstruction, however, the subjective and objective poles of the unity of reason and nature remain unequal, since these poles are posited in a relation of *causality*: "one I dominates and the other is dominated" (D 50/138). The originary unity of nature and freedom in the relation of substantiality, as presented by Schelling, becomes in Fichte's hands the subordination of nature to freedom through the relation of causality. Fichte's synthesis of nature and freedom thus proceeds "by way of domination" (D 50/138). Hegel's conclusion is striking:

Reason is nothing but the dead and death-dealing rule of formal unity, given over into the hands of reflection which puts subject and object into the relation of dependence of the one on the other, the relation of causality. So it comes about that the principle of speculation, identity, is wholly set aside (D 52-53/142).

Hegel's critique of "reflective" reason—of reason reduced to reflection—is thus motivated by the problem of domination, both of nature and of the other, within social and cultural modernity. In this sense, as I shall argue later, a significant parallel can be drawn with Heidegger's critique of modern metaphysics and technological modernity.[\[14\]](#)

The second difficulty Hegel identifies concerns the broader practical implications of reflection. In this respect, the reflective opposition of nature and reason can be examined in the context of Fichte's models of human community. Within the Fichtean community of rational beings, Hegel argues, the self-limitation of rational freedom—construed as a negative freedom between isolated subjects—degenerates into the tyranny of abstract law and state intervention. The negative freedom prevailing within such a community is "freedom regarded from the standpoint of reflection," from the viewpoint of the finite rational being rather than reason itself (D 54/145). According to this account of freedom, the intersubjective freedom of rational beings in a community requires the self-restriction of the indeterminate freedom of individuals. The reflective standpoint, moreover, understands this self-limitation solely as a limitation of indeterminate freedom by the common will codified in laws. Genuine autonomy gives way to heteronomy, rational and ethical freedom surrenders to coercion: "Reflection dominates [Life] and has gained the victory over Reason" (D 55/146).[\[15\]](#) The contradictory and disastrous outcome of the policing of indeterminate freedom by the state is an infinite limitation of freedom, the endless surveillance of its citizens. Indeed, for Hegel, Fichte's rational community depicts

the complete lordship of the intellect and bondage of the living being. It is an edifice in which Reason has no part and which it therefore repudiates. ... that State as conceived by the intellect is not an organisation at all, but a machine; and the people is not the organic body of a communal and rich life, but an atomistic, life-impooverished multitude (D 58/148-149).[\[16\]](#)

This "life-impooverished multitude" is composed of atomised individuals, "rational beings as a lot of [atomic] points". As material beings, such individuals are modified and manipulated by the calculating understanding (D 58/149). What binds the atomised culture of reflection together is an "endless domination"; abstract right and atomised individuality take the place of ethical community, destroying "all trust, all joy, all love, all the potencies of genuine ethical identity" (D 58/149). The obliteration of ethical identity, which embraces both universality and particularity, means that the culture of reflection is a culture of *domination*.[\[17\]](#)

Hegel also points to the inner domination that results from the internalisation of abstract law. Within Fichte's ethical human community, we find that "the Idea must absolutely dominate over drive,

that freedom must dominate nature” (D 58/149). The inner domination of natural drive, however, undermines the inner unity of the ethical individual. Within the state, right or law alone is to govern; for the moral subject, however, duty alone has power insofar as it is recognised by the individual’s reason as law (D 58-59/149). Whereas in the former, the ruling power appears as something alien over and against the subject, in the latter it emerges in the guise of “a suppression of nature by *oneself*” (D 59/150). What follows is an account of the *alienation* of the individual subject, an internalisation of the domination of nature by freedom through which one becomes one’s own master and slave. For Hegel,

once the commander is transferred within man himself, and the absolute opposition of the command and the subservience is internalised, the inner harmony is destroyed; not to be one, but to be an absolute dichotomy constitutes the essence of man. He must seek for unity; but with absolute non-identity at his very basis only a formal unity remains for him (D 59/150).

Atomised individuality becomes alienated subjectivity in which meaningful social solidarity and self-identity is dissolved. A consequence of this domination of sensuous drives by the unity of the formal concept is that inevitable collisions of duty end up being decided by arbitrary whim. Since the formal concept lacks definite content, the latter must be supplied through the manifold character of sensuous drives. Filling this empty concept with contingent content means that there might arise innumerable possibilities of action consistent with this formal principle. The formal universality of the concept is our only criterion for action, leaving us with a contradictory concept of freedom and arbitrary criteria of decision against the contingencies of choice (D 59/150). Fichte fails, Hegel concludes, to synthesise nature and freedom, which remain in absolute opposition.

Hegel’s practical critique of the culture of reflection adumbrates a critique of modernity that continues up to Heidegger and the Frankfurt School. Under the regime of reflection, formal identity is abstracted from, and thus opposed to, non-identity, which results in the domination of atomised individuality through the (abstract) understanding. The philosophical task, therefore, is to overcome the rule of reflection: to suspend abstract identity in order to construct absolute identity into a system of reason which reconciles the fundamental oppositions of subjectivity and objectivity, finite and infinite, nature and freedom. Ironically, the early Hegel, still in solidarity with Schelling, charges Fichte with this failure to preserve difference, a charge later directed at the Schellingian Absolute.

C. Schellingian and Hegelian Absolute Identity

It is important to recognise Hegel’s solidarity with Schelling here in the context of this conception of

absolute identity. It is also worth noting that Hegel's conception of speculation as the cognition of the absolute also prompted a reorientation of Schelling's own project[18]. Nonetheless, one must acknowledge the Schellingian influence and 'immaturity' of Hegel's own standpoint within these early works, most evident in Hegel's endorsement of the idea of an "absolute identity" (and "indifference" between nature and freedom), which becomes increasingly problematical until being abandoned in Hegel's mature conception of Spirit. The question at stake in this regard concerns the adequacy of the Schellingian principle of absolute identity, as the principle of unity between reason and nature, and the relation of this conception of absolute identity to pure self-consciousness.

The Absolute as Identity of Identity and Non-Identity

As we have seen, according to Hegel's criticism, the Fichtean system of transcendental idealism suffers from a debilitating formalism: the principle of this idealism, the subject = object identity, is not concretely developed but rather abandoned *in the actual elaboration of the system*. The subject-object identity remains an abstract starting point that is *lost* in the concrete development of the system, which ultimately reverts to the dualism between formal self-consciousness and natural desire and drives.[19] Within the Fichtean system, the absolute identity of "subjective" and "objective" subject-objects (or of freedom and nature) cannot be adequately established because the relation of difference between these poles (namely pure and empirical consciousness) is transposed into the causal relation. The subject-object thus turns into a *subjective* subject-object, which fails to suspend this subjectivity (of self-consciousness) and posit itself objectively (as nature) (D 62-63/155). As an alternative, Hegel contrasts the early Schelling's account of absolute identity, which, Hegel argues, remains the principle of Schelling's system as a *whole*: philosophical principle and development of the system coincide, while identity between subject and object is maintained both in the parts of system and in its overall result (D 63/155). According to Hegel's view, Fichte's *subjective* subject-object must be complemented by an *objective* subject-object. The highest speculative synthesis finds the Absolute in both intelligence and nature together, while also suspending them insofar as they are conceived (from the standpoint of reflection) as opposites. Schelling's absolute indifference point suspends the opposition of subject and object precisely in positing their absolute identity (which incorporates both their identity and difference): "As their point of absolute indifference, the Absolute encloses both, gives birth to both, and is born of both" (D 63/155).

The problem with this Schellingian approach, however, is how to maintain difference and determination within the Absolute. If the self-destruction of reflection is taken only in its negative aspect, namely as a negation of finite determination and difference without the moment of positive

determination within the Whole, this implies that “everything finite is drowned in the infinite” (D 63/156). We end up with the identity of subject of object but lose precisely their difference and concrete determination. Indeed, the dissolution of difference and determination in the Absolute or Whole culminates, Hegel suggests, in a “mystic rapture [*Schwärmerei*]” (D 63/156) which cannot determinately *know* the Absolute. This point is significant in that it signals a degree of critical distancing from an overly romantic, Schellingian conception of *Naturphilosophie*. Although Hegel here endorses Schelling’s conception of absolute identity, his claim anticipates the famous criticism that the Schellingian Absolute dissolves difference in the infamous “night in which all cows are black”.[\[20\]](#)

At this point, however, Hegel’s critical appropriation of the Schellingian absolute identity encompasses the identity of identity *and* difference, suspending the fixed or rigid opposition of subject and object characteristic of the standpoint of reflection. For this subsistence of subject and object in their difference, Hegel argues, is precisely what makes cognition itself possible (D 63/156). Knowledge involves both a separation performed by reflection, and an identity maintained within the Absolute. Insofar as any (concrete) knowledge is based on division, it is finite and therefore ‘false’ with respect to the truth of the Whole. On the other hand, since any knowledge is always also an identity, one that has its determinate place within the relational, conceptual context of the Whole, there can also be no absolute falsity.[\[21\]](#) In other words, according to Hegel, we always already stand within the (ontological) truth of the Whole. As Hegel insists, here following but also modifying Schelling, the validity of separation must be recognised as much as the validity of identity (D 64/156). Speculative philosophy must recognise separation in the subject-object relation, as well as the identity of subject and object in the structure of cognition. Separation is conditioned by the identity that opposes it, while identity in cognition is conditioned by the nullification of separation. Hence, “the Absolute itself is the identity of identity and non-identity; being opposed and being one are both together in it” (D 64/156). The Whole can be comprehended only if the standpoint of reflection, of finitude, difference, and opposition, is embraced within the dynamic subject-object identity of the rational Whole.

Hegel’s interpretation of the Schellingian Absolute here underlines the absolute identity of (abstract) identity [formal self-consciousness] and (conditioned) non-identity or difference [empirical nature]. This absolute *identity* or rational unity at the same time preserves the absolute *difference* between the identity ($A = A$) and non-identity ($A = B$), which together make up the poles of subjectivity and objectivity, even as it suspends their reflective opposition within the rational unity of the Whole. This appropriation of the Schellingian Absolute, which finds its roots in Spinoza’s monism of substance as *causa sui*, the unity of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, provides, I suggest, the guiding principle of Hegel’s critical reconstruction of the Schellingian system. At the same time, it also anticipates the issue that will prompt their break after 1803-4,[\[22\]](#) namely the problem of preserving difference and

determination in the absolute identity of nature and freedom.

Hegel then turns to a positive account of the antinomy between subject and object, freedom and necessity, within Schelling's system by considering the relationship between the complementary systems of intelligence and of nature. From this Schellingian-Hegelian perspective, absolute identity comprises the positing of both subject and object as subject-object, resulting in a subjective subject-object (self-consciousness) and an objective subject-object (nature). Each opposing term in this apparent polarity can become the object of a science defined by abstracting from the principle of the other (D 67/160). The Schellingian Absolute thus divides into the system of intelligence and the system of nature, with their respective sciences of the subjective subject-object (transcendental philosophy) and objective subject-object (philosophy of nature) (D 67/160). Although these two sciences may appear to contradict each other, both are complementary articulations of the one standpoint of reason (D 67/161). The contradiction arises once one of these sciences claims to be the exclusive science of the Absolute, and hence to deny the principle of the other science from its own standpoint, attempting to construe the Whole exclusively from the perspective of formalist self-consciousness (idealism) or material nature (realism).

Nonetheless, the principles of the two sciences—the subjective subject-object and the objective subject-object—display a fundamental interconnection; the system of objectivity contains subjectivity and the system of subjectivity contains objectivity: “Nature is an immanent ideality just as intelligence is an immanent objectivity” (D 71/166). The point, for Hegel, is that each science has within it the unity of the poles of cognition and being and their mutual indifference point, the “vanishing point” in which each pole transforms itself into its opposite. Each system, however, presents one pole, either ideal or real, as predominating over the other, which makes their complementarity and unification exceedingly difficult to comprehend from the fixed standpoint of either one pole or the other. Elaborating Schelling's account, Hegel argues that since each system has both ideal and real aspects, each is both a system of *freedom* and a system of *necessity* (D 72/167). Freedom is the character of the Absolute when it is posited as a subjective totality, as an ‘inner’ which can alter the way it appears in being (namely as consciousness). Necessity is the character of the Absolute viewed as an objective totality, as something outer (namely as nature), the parts of which have no being outside of the whole of objectivity (D 72/167).[\[23\]](#)

From the contrast between the systems of intelligence and of nature in their inner identity, Hegel turns to their suspension, the overcoming of their fixed opposition, within the one speculative science of the Whole. Not only must the relative identity of subject and object (namely the standpoint of reflection) be suspended in absolute identity; the latter must be constructed into totality—the unity

of subjectivity and objectivity, identity and difference—within a speculative system of reason. This project, as we shall see, will be taken up and elaborated in Hegel’s mature system. At this early ‘Schellingian’ stage of Hegel’s path, however, the Absolute, in the science of intelligence, is presented as subjective in the form of cognition, while in the science of nature it is presented as objective in the form of being (D 74/169). In the science of intelligence, cognition is matter and being is form, while the reverse is the case in the science of nature, with being taken as matter and cognition as form (D 74/169). Like Spinoza’s substance, however, one and the same Absolute is set forth in each science under different ‘attributes’, so to speak, namely either as *subjective* subject-object (self-consciousness) or as *objective* subject-object (nature). These subjective and objective totalities of freedom and nature nonetheless coincide within the Schellingian “point of indifference,” the conversion point or point of rational unity between subjective and objective poles of the Absolute.

Hegel then complicates matters by discussing how this indifference point can be taken either from the perspective of each science or from the standpoint of the Whole that embraces both polarities. From the perspective of each science as a relative totality, that is, as a quasi-independent abstraction from the Whole, the indifference point or point of absolute identity lies within the sciences themselves. From the perspective of the Whole as absolute totality—which is no longer even a ‘perspective’ but rather the self-comprehension of the Whole—the indifference point lies outside both sciences and marks the point at which they unite in speculative reason. According to Hegel’s reconstruction, each philosophical science, as articulating the identity of subject and object either as self-consciousness or as nature, must be developed into its opposite. Self-consciousness must be developed into nature and nature into self-consciousness, a movement of mutual complementarity and conceptual comprehension that develops both poles into *totality*, the systematic and rational Whole. From this speculative standpoint of reason, rather than reflection, the two sciences of nature and Spirit together thus appear as “the progressive evolution, or self-construction of identity into totality” (D 74/170). What Hegel describes here can be formulated as the speculative movement in which transcendental philosophy is “naturalised,” while the philosophy of nature is “transcendentalised”. Identity constructing itself as nature passes over into identity constructing itself as intelligence through the self-mediation of reason (which embraces both nature and intelligence). This speculative movement from identity to totality is the “self-construction of the absolute”: the self-construction of the rational Whole that emerges out of the self-destruction of reflection, the positive moment of speculative reason following the negative moment or dialectical undermining of reflection. Reason, as “the turning point of the two sciences,” is the unity of ideality and reality; in Schelling’s words, “the lightning stroke of the ideal upon the real” (D 74-75/170). Speculative science [*Wissenschaft*] establishes itself at this rational centre, dividing and unifying itself into two parts comprising the systems of intelligence and of

nature.

Nevertheless, the Schellingian system of identity, Hegel suggests, is not yet the genuinely speculative system of reason. Within Schelling's system, the original identity of being and thought expands into the objective totality of spatio-temporal contexts; however, it also contracts into the subjective totality of cognitive reason (D 75/171). Subjective and objective totalities are united in the self-intuition of the Absolute; the latter becomes objective to itself in the completed totality of speculative reason (D 75/171). As we shall see, Hegel will attempt to complete this project of a system of reason as a system of *Spirit*, already outlined here, which embraces art, religion, and speculation as the three ways in which the "self-shaping or objectively self-finding Absolute" constructs itself into totality (D 75/171-172).

At this point, however, Hegel's critique of the philosophy and culture of reflection embraces the Schellingian project of constructing the Absolute through the unification of the system of intelligence with the system of nature. To this point, Hegel's solidarity with Schelling is clear: Hegel sides with Schelling in arguing that the formalism, dualism, and subjectivism of Kantian and Fichtean idealism must be overcome by a speculative system organised according to the principle of the absolute identity of intelligence (identity) and nature (difference).^[24] On the other hand, Hegel departs from Schelling in outlining his own conception of what the true system of reason should encompass. Art is *not* the highest form of apprehending the absolute identity (a view which Schelling, too, would later abandon), but already at this point a subordinate cognitive level in the self-construction of the Absolute. How then to avoid the tendency to revert to a transcendental standpoint—and thus to the dualism of reflection—in the intuition of the "indifference point" between intelligence and nature? Hegel's critique of the philosophy of reflection suggests the need to transform the Schellingian principle of absolute identity; the latter needs to be *conceptually* constructed within a unified system that can account for its own self-development and self-comprehension. Hegel's endorsement of intellectual intuition (as transcendental intuition) will later be abandoned in favour of speculative comprehension, the rational comprehension of the Whole through systematic conceptuality, a movement of thought incorporating the negative moment of dialectic and positive moment of rational construction. The necessity emerges, Hegel argues, of completing Schelling's unfinished system by developing a theory of absolute *Spirit* that would encompass art, religion, and philosophy as the three ways in which the "absolute identity" can be made conceptually intelligible and developmentally self-grounding from the standpoint of speculative reason.

At this point, however, Hegel remains committed to a Schellingian approach to the absolute identity between subjective and objective poles of the Whole. Nonetheless, this 'Hegelian' version of

absolute identity is hardly reconcilable with the Schellingian idea of the completion of the speculative system by absolute Spirit in the form of art. Indeed, Hegel avoids explaining how the three modes of absolute spirit are interconnected within a developmental system, favouring instead a “parallelism” or strict equivalence between subject and object unified within the “absolute indifference point”. This parallelism, however, cannot be maintained, since the very principle of absolute identity is realised in nature only in the *alienated* form of externality. The reconciliation of nature and intelligence in art reflects this “alienated form” in the sense that art cannot account for the unity of itself with religion and speculation within absolute Spirit. The most significant point is this breakdown in the speculative identity between the Ego and nature: because nature ‘realises’ the absolute identity in the alienated form of externality, the question remains as to how the Ego can be reconciled with nature without generating further dichotomies or losing determinate difference. The very idea of a Schellingian “absolute identity” (and absolute indifference point) therefore becomes problematical for Hegel. The Absolute, in short, must be comprehended, not as “indifference point” between subject and object, but rather as self-knowing *Spirit*. Hegel’s conception of Spirit, as we shall see, will provide the true reconciliation of the opposition between reason and nature, infinite and finite, subject and object. This relational complex of meanings, encompassing logic, consciousness, and nature, will articulate conceptually the self-identity found in otherness and the relation to otherness as an essential moment of the Whole. After Hegel’s critical confrontation with Fichte and Schelling, it is the problem of the self-consciousness of Spirit that now emerges as a decisive problem: how to avoid the subjectivisation of the Absolute performed by transcendental philosophy, while also conceptually comprehending the self-construction of the Absolute into totality? In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel will address this problem by transforming Schellingian absolute identity into philosophically self-comprehending Spirit, thus definitively challenging the entire paradigm of reflection philosophy.

[1] Indeed, this concept of the substantiality relation, which develops into the “reciprocal relation”, will later be critically examined in the transition from the doctrine of Being to the doctrine of Essence in the *Science of Logic*.

[2] See Harris for a discussion of the young Hegel’s complex relationship with Schelling and breach with the Schellingian system in the early 1800s (1983, 234-5, 238ff.).

[3] The term “reflection,” for Hegel, covers distinct but related aspects of self-consciousness. From an Idealist point of view, reflection names the analytic thought of the understanding that posits fixed oppositions; it also describes the bipolar subject-object structure of theoretical cognition. At the same time, it articulates the structure of self-relation that characterises self-conscious subjectivity, the relation of the subject to itself within the subject-object relationship. As Hegel observes, the concept of reflection draws on the metaphor of the “mirroring” back of the self to itself in its cognitive relations with objects and practical relations with other subjects. (Enz. §2/25-6).

- [4] The dissolution of the Greek polis, for example, was an experience that provided the ground of classical philosophy. “Dichotomy [*Entzweiung*] is the source of the need of philosophy; and as the culture of the era, it is the unfree and given aspect of the whole configuration” (D 12/89).
- [5] Opposition is essential to the unity of life and spirit. Indeed, Life itself is formed through the positing and overcoming of opposition; living totality is only possible “through its own re-establishment out of the deepest fission”. Harris notes that Life is Hegel’s name for the religious Ideal that was earlier to be expressed in his own “mythology of Reason,” the Ideal of a beautiful unity of ethical life (1983, 5ff.).
- [6] Hegel’s critical exposition of Kant and Fichte attempts to show “how far reflection is capable of grasping the Absolute, and how far in its speculative activity it carries with it the necessity of being synthesised with absolute intuition” (D 16/94). The latter, the synthesis of reflection and intuition, is Hegel’s “transcendental intuition”—his version of Schelling’s “intellectual intuition”, the precursor of which is probably Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge, namely the rational intuition of the Absolute.
- [7] In his discussion of identity and difference Hegel refers primarily to Fichte’s interpretation of the formal principle of identity so as to turn it into a *Gegensatz*, but also refers throughout to Reinhold’s “principle of identity” (Harris: 1983, 28-29).
- [8] As Hegel remarks: “This satisfaction found in the principle of absolute identity is characteristic of philosophy as such” (D 30/112).
- [9] As Düsing observes, Hegel immediately determines the subject in a judgment ontologically in terms of being, and thereby draws close to an Aristotelian ontology of primary *ousia* and its logical formulations. During the Jena years, however, Hegel primarily develops his Frankfurt reflections on the structure of judgment as comprising division or antinomy and unification (1976: 111).
- [10] Sensuous intuition (A = B) is the first power of productive imagination while the conceptual judgment is the second power (A2). As Harris notes, judgment in this context is determinate judgment, the subsumption of a particular under a universal; the understanding, in turn, is the reflective awareness within judgement of the identity of subject and predicate in their difference. In moving from particular being to objects, and from concepts to the subject, Hegel will later analyse judgments as “the reflective awareness of the identity of subject and object in their difference” (Harris, 1977: 71n.).
- [11] See Kant, KRV A115-116, for his discussion of productive imagination as the power of original exhibition of object a priori. Cf. Heidegger’s interpretation of Kant’s initial breakthrough with productive imagination into temporality and his later “recoiling” from the implications of this “temporalising” breakthrough in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.
- [12] Cf. Heidegger’s intriguing remarks about Hegel’s interpretation of Kant’s productive imagination: “One understands the transcendental deduction only if the originary synthetic unity is understood in terms of the imagination. Sentences about the imagination that I could have copied from Hegel myself! And yet precisely here is the passage in which the sharpest opposition becomes clear and the field of confrontation determines itself” (1997: 200).
- [13] See Rosen (1974) for an interesting analysis of the connection between the Fichtean analysis of reflection and Hegel’s proposal of a new logic of reflection, all as part of the overcoming of nihilism (89-122).
- [14] Hegel’s critique of the displacement of speculation by reflection is mirrored by Heidegger’s discourse on the limitations of modern reason for thinking the question of being. Speculative thought of the whole, like the thinking of being, is displaced by the reflective philosophy of subjectivity.
- [15] The extreme case of the regime of reflection is to be found in the quasi-police state outlined in Fichte’s *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (GN III 299-300).

[16] Cf. the remarks made in the *Earliest System Programme of German Idealism* concerning the modern state as an alienating form of “machine”. With this characterisation of the domination of alienated individuals by the abstract legal state, Hegel returns to a fundamental criticism of the modern culture of reflection that had already been outlined during his Frankfurt years.

[17] This criticism of modernity also anticipates aspects of Heidegger’s thinking. Where Hegel and Heidegger differ is over the meaning of this critique of modernity. As we shall see, Hegel’s ultimate commitment to a critical legitimation of modernity contrasts sharply with Heidegger’s abandonment of the philosophical project of modernity.

[18] See especially Düsing (1976), Harris (1983), and Horstmann (1995) for interpretations that stress Hegel’s importance for Schelling. See also Redding’s discussion of Hegel’s early Schellingianism and the influence of Cusanus’s doctrine of the coincidence of opposites on Hegel’s interpretation of the Schellingian “absolute indifference point” (1996, 50 ff. esp. 57-61).

[19] Cf. “The principle of identity does not become the principle of the system; as soon as the formation of the system begins, identity is abandoned” (D 62/155).

[20] Heidegger makes the interesting remark that Hegel’s discussion of absolute identity is not to be confused with Schelling’s “absolute indifference”, but should be grasped as the totality of determinateness. Difference is suspended in identity according to the threefold movement of *Aufhebung*: “1. to remove - tollere, 2. to preserve - conservare, 3. to elevate - elevare. - (Absolute identity is not absolute indifference, but rather the totality of determinateness)” (GA 28, 199).

[21] This argument also anticipates the conception of truth as the system or whole as developed within the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

[22] See Harris (1983: 234-235) for a discussion of Hegel’s gradual turning away from the Schellingian ‘Identity Philosophy’ in the “Philosophy of Spirit” of 1803/4: “The goal of philosophical union with God remains the same, but now it is not the ‘union of the mind with the whole of Nature’ that is the means for this, but rather the recognition that the ‘nature’ is essentially the ‘otherness’ of the mind, its own expression in objective form. Spinoza’s conception of the goal of philosophy—and by implication of the Identity Philosophy—was fundamentally mistaken. The ‘otherness’ of nature is essential to its being; and hence Kant and Fichte were on the right track after all. The first truth of man’s existence as a spiritual being is his freedom *from* nature. ... it is essential that we should recognise here, a crucial break with his earlier metaphysics—the *beginning of his breach with Schelling*” (1983: 234-235).

[23] Hegel goes on to claim that intelligence and nature, however, are in *real* opposition since they are posited in the Absolute, while the *ideal* opposition between freedom and necessity belongs to both intelligence and to nature as real factors. One should ask, however, whether Hegel does not conflate logical with physical necessity here, since it remains unclear how far Schelling’s metaphysical construction of organic nature depends upon this conflation.

[24] For Hegel, the true method of philosophy, as Harris notes, “should be modelled on the pattern of organic growth,” tracing both transcendental and natural philosophy “from germ to ripeness, or from unity to totality” (1977, 48).