

Hegel's Critique of the Subjective Idealism of Kant's Ethics

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1.

In paragraph 135 of the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel formulates his well-known objection to the "empty formalism" of Kant's theory of morality: "[I]f the definition of duty is taken to be the absence of contradiction," he tells us, ". . . then no transition is possible to the specification of particular duties nor, if some such particular content for acting comes under consideration, is there any criterion in that principle for deciding whether it is or is not a duty."¹ One could try to defend Kant against this objection by proposing that Hegel's reading is merely in need of supplementation.² Had Hegel read beyond the first formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork* and interpreted it in light of the other two, for example, he might then have understood Kant's definition of duty to indicate more than just an arbitrary "formal correspondence" of the will with itself, or "absence of contradiction." And had he included in his acquaintance with Kant's project of providing for the foundation of morality a consideration of the latter's effort to outline the specification of the moral law in the form of a doctrine of rights and duties (in the *Metaphysics of Morals*), he might not have been so ready to dismiss the categorical imperative as an effective guide to action.

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, vol. 7 of *Werke*, 20 vols., ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970). All references to this work cited hereafter in parentheses, PR.

² See, e.g., T. M. Knox, "Hegel's Attitude to Kant's Ethics," *Kant-Studien* 49 (1957): 70–81.

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One might respond to Hegel's critique in this way, and argue that it is precisely in virtue of the content that the categorical imperative does have that it can neither be appealed to to universalize any maxim we please, as Hegel thought, nor be taken to require of us a form of universal philanthropy (almsgiving, for example³) which, in failing to discriminate among the diversity of human needs and capacities, leads to its own annulment. One could further show, I think, that an *extension* of what Kant gave us as a very general outline of the application of the categorical imperative (containing duties "of man to men"⁴) can indeed be carried out in the form of an "applied ethics," without violating the principles of his "pure moral philosophy."⁵

As worthwhile as these projects are in clarifying and developing Kant's position, I don't believe that they succeed in silencing the Hegelian objection. They *would* succeed were it the case that Hegel's portrayal of the standpoint of "Moralität" in the *Philosophy of Right* depended simply on his *neglect to note* any distinction between the idea that I remain logically consistent in my adherence to any maxim I choose to adopt, and all that Kant intended in the command that I not contradict the law of practical reason.⁶ Far more seriously, however, Hegel believed that the latter in Kant *reduced* the former. And on this interpretation it then followed that Kant was at fault—not for failing to carefully formulate the content of the categorical imperative and then complete its specification in the form of a doctrine of duties—but for presuming that any such specification could be carried out *objectively*.

As is clear in the *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere in his discussions of Kant's ethics, Hegel was convinced that the very nature of Kant's "abstract" derivation of the moral law from pure reason was responsible for its "emptiness" both as a determinate guide to action and as an objective gauge of moral worth. On this view, the "formalism" of the Critical philosophy could produce no better than the inevitable corruption of the categorical imperative into a license for subjective arbitrariness—reducing ethics to the "special theory of life held by the individual . . . and his private conviction" (PR #140e). The ultimate dissolution of any objective distinction between good and evil, even, was presumably a

3 Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 2, *Jenaer Schriften 1801–1807*, "Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungssarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften," 465f. Or see T. M. Knox's translation of this essay, *Natural Law* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 80.

4 Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the "Metaphysics of Morals,"* trans. Mary J. Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 75.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1969), 5, 31f.

6 In this paper I assume—rather than argue for—this distinction, and refer my skeptical reader to Kant's discussion of objective versus subjective ends in the Second Edition of the *Foundations*, as well as to the fine article by Julius Ebbinghaus, "Interpretation and Misinterpretation of the Categorical Imperative," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (April 1954): 97–108.

consequence of what Hegel referred to as the "Degradation" into which philosophy had fallen, thanks to the Kantian formalist approach.

This, then, is the connection I want to explore: Why is it that Hegel believed that the formal foundation of Kant's moral theory necessarily entailed its "emptiness" and inevitable reduction to "private conviction"? Why is it that he understood the "infinite abstract self-certainty" supposed to be characteristic of the will at the Kantian standpoint of *Moralität* ("Good and Conscience") to mean, "at the same time . . . the certainty of *this* subject," i.e., of a *particular* or merely *contingent* will? (PR #137) Again, Hegel traces the limitations of this stage of morality back to the mode in which Kant derives its supreme law. As he notes in an early text, it is simply "contradictory" to look to practical reason for content in the form of an objective legislation of moral laws, or *Sittengesetzgebung*, if it is assumed that the essence of practical reason is to have abstracted from all content.⁷ We know, then, that Hegel saw a need to move beyond the stage of *Moralität* to *Sittlichkeit* because of this feature he associated with Kant's notion of practical reason of having "abstracted from all content"; what we do not yet know, however, is precisely what this means. Hegel tells us in the *Philosophy of Right* that this feature of Kant's moral philosophy follows from that "thinking in terms of relation" (PR #135) and standpoint of "abstract identity" (PR #29) characteristic of Kant's formalist orientation as a whole. He tells us further that *Moralität* must culminate in the loss of objectivity in ethics because it is "directly connected" with the philosophy which, "denies that the truth is knowable," and finds its principle (in science as well as in morals) in the realm of "mere appearance" (PR #140e).⁸

⁷ Hegel, "Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts," *Werke*, 2: 461; *Natural Law*, 76.

⁸ See also, G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, ed. by Dieter Henrich (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983). In the chapter, "Das Gute and das Gewissen," Hegel says: "One takes the abstract Good to be the True, but just because it is abstract, it is not true, but subjective. It has been said that we cannot know the True, but that knowledge is merely subjective. Thus, what is good and a Duty, is merely a subjective pleasure (*Belieben*). This is the corruption of philosophy in our time: that knowledge has been presented as something merely subjective" (109f, my translation). See also, 103.

It is important to note early on that the line between Hegel's critique of Kant and his critique of Fichte is not easy to draw. As commentators have indicated, this is especially the case with regard to his remarks about the "self-certain" and "Conscience." See, e.g., Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 468. When referring to the stage of "Conscience" in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel does explicitly tell us that he has Fichte, not Kant, in mind (PR #140A). For the most part, however, we are left to wonder whether what appears to be Hegel's critique of Kant is not really a critique of other philosophical positions which he understands to be consequent upon or completions of the Critical philosophy. See, e.g., in his "Lectures on the History of Philosophy," *Werke*, vol. 20: 387, where he tells us that Fichte's philosophy is the "completion" or "perfection" of Kant's. In the opinion of one commentator, no line can be drawn between Hegel's critique of Kant and his critique of Fichte, simply because his interpretation of Kant is Fichtean through and through. See Ingrid Görland, *Die Kantkritik des*

These are surely clues that we may gain insight into Hegel's critique of Kant in the *Philosophy of Right* if we look at his rejection of the formalism of the Critical philosophy in general. What is really under attack in the section on "Good and Conscience," and what Hegel believes is ultimately responsible for the "emptiness" of the moral law and for the loss of objectivity in ethics, I think, is the very idea in Kant that there are laws necessary for the possibility of experience—in both theoretical and practical realms—which are legislated independently of experience, by reason which is somehow autonomous or prior to experience. What I want to do in the pages that follow is shed some light on Hegel's characterization of what he takes to be the Kantian stage of morality by considering his particular reading and rejection of the epistemological premises of the Critical philosophy. This seems to me to be a step that has to be taken—not simply in order to clarify Hegel's objections, but to expose the injustice they render to Kant's view.⁹

2.

First, what are the features of "Good and Conscience" which explain Hegel's characterization of this stage of morality as specifically "Kantian"? We know

jungen Hegel (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1966). Another commentary which focusses on the Fichtean influences on Hegel's reading of Kant is: Andreas Wildt, *Autonomie und Anerkennung: Hegels Moralitätskritik im Lichte seiner Fichte-Rezeption* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982).

⁹ I am not claiming here, as I did in an earlier version of this paper, that Hegel's critique of Kant's ethics simply *derives* from his reading of Kant's epistemology. As a reader for this journal pointed out to me, while it may be true that Hegel's interpretation of the epistemology of the Critical philosophy to some extent influenced his critique of Kant's ethics, especially in its mature form, in the *Philosophy of Right*, there is really not enough evidence to substantiate the stronger claim that his critique of ethical formalism is wholly derived from or dependent upon his critique of the formalism of Kant's theoretical philosophy. In fact, the relation of dependence may very well proceed in the opposite direction—at least to some degree. That is, we do have evidence that it was with Kant's practical philosophy and philosophy of religion, and not his theoretical philosophy, that Hegel was initially preoccupied. While Hegel's first exposure to Kant may have been the first *Critique*, his earliest writings indicate that epistemology was not on the top of his list of philosophical concerns. See H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Toward the Sunlight 1770–1801* (Oxford University Press, 1977), xx. As Ludwig Siep notes in *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes* (Freiburg/Münster: Verlag Karl Alber, 1979), Hegel expresses his lack of interest in purely theoretical (versus moral, political and religious) questions in a letter to Schelling written in 1795 (146). But while the focus of Hegel's early interest in Kant is unambiguous, the same cannot be said about the impact of his interpretations of various aspects of Kant's philosophy on each other. The most that can be said, I suppose, is that the relationship between his reading of the Critical ethics and of the Critical epistemology is one of mutual dependence. What I do in this paper is use his critique of Kant's epistemology to illuminate his critique of Kant's ethics. For other discussions of Hegel's early critique of Kant and its preoccupation with moral, religious, and political concerns, see esp., Thomas Baumeister, *Hegels frühe Kritik an Kants Ethik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1976); and Görland, *Die Kanthkritik des jungen Hegel*.

that at the general stage of *Moralität* (of which "Good and Conscience" is the final "moment"), the will has overcome its original consciousness of itself as "abstract ego"—as the merely unindividuated embodiment of abstract and universal freedom—and now recognizes itself as a particular, concrete subjectivity which at the same time possesses a universal aspect. As self-conscious, the will at this level of development "knows" that while on the one hand it is identical with the Good in that it contains the principle of freedom within itself, on the other hand it stands in opposition to this purely universal and abstract principle, as an individual will or "subject" with its own independent desires and purposes. This gap between the will as universal (*an sich*) and the will as a particular subjectivity (*für sich*) narrows with each progressive stage of *Moralität* until finally, in "Good and Conscience," the particular will adopts as its end the realization of that Idea of good which is its implicit, universal principle. At this level, the "value and dignity" of the will is entirely determined by the extent to which, "its insight and intention accord with the good" which is now its essential aim (PR #131).

The limitedness or "finitude" of this stage of morality, according to Hegel, consists at least partially in the fact that the Good remains "abstract" or not yet fully realized: the will, as he says, "has not yet been caught up into it and established as according with it" (PR #131). Rather, the Good is that end which the particular subject ought to adopt; it exists—not in actuality—but in the form of the command or imperative that the will bring its merely potential or implicit freedom to concrete realization. For Hegel this means that subjectivity at the standpoint of Kant's ethics stands forever "in relation to" that capacity within itself to rise above its own particularity. It has before itself the "task" of realizing its universal or "formal" aspect; and yet, this is a task which is never to be fulfilled, because subjectivity at the same time is bound to the various needs and the interests of its sensible nature.

Not only does this moral point of view require actions of us which are thus not within our power to perform, on Hegel's reading, it appears to condemn us to a unique form of servitude as well. For even though its imperative is self-legislated, what it commands is that we abstract from that content which is the will as a particular subjectivity, and act in conformity with the purely formal requirements of the will as a universal. In this way the will is divided within itself, and its particular aspect must be subject to a law which is not of its own making. In Hegel's words, the will "has not yet got *itself* as its content and aim . . ." (PR #15).

This latter idea—that there is a sense in which the will at the stage of Kantian morality is subservient to its own law—is given fuller expression in Hegel's *Phenomenology* (in the section entitled "The Moral View of the World"), as well as in some of his very earliest writings. In the (c. 1798) essay,

“The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate,” for example, he writes (with Kant in mind): “the man who listens to his own command of duty . . . carries his lord in himself, yet at the same time is his own slave. For the particular— impulses, inclinations, pathological love, sensuous experience, or whatever else it is called—the universal is necessarily and always alien and objective.”¹⁰ In the *Phenomenology* Hegel characterizes “moral consciousness” as the sacred lawgiver or “master and ruler of the world”—responsible for conferring validity upon the specific duties adopted by the particular or concrete consciousness.¹¹ Outside its “self-certainty,” or “knowledge” of the Duty which is its inner law, there exists no object for moral consciousness. If its own sensible nature or the realm of Nature in general have significance for it at all, it is only because they must be brought into conformity with its command. In that it is “completely locked up within itself,” as Hegel says, moral consciousness behaves with utter “indifference” towards anything external to it.¹²

Hegel’s critique in this section of the *Phenomenology* has long been accepted as having conclusively demonstrated the internal contradictions and absurdities of Kantian moral theory. Since according to this (“Kantian”) “moral view of the world” the subject is necessarily divided between its sensible and rational natures, any hope of realizing the ideal of moral perfection must be projected out beyond the conflicts and contingencies of this world. This projection, says Hegel, takes the form of a postulated harmony of freedom and nature, a postulated afterlife in which this harmony is achieved, and a postulated model of moral perfection: God. But, as we have seen above in our discussion of his critique in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel has little patience with the very project of postulating ideals which cannot be concretely realized. Kantian Duty is supposed to command that we subordinate our sensible inclinations to the laws of our freedom, but this is in fact something we can never successfully do. The command is that we be what we cannot be—that we act to realize what cannot be realized. In this way, Hegel thinks that Kant’s postulated ideals are not only absurd but insincere. Since Kantian morality is defined in terms of the conflict of freedom and nature (or, more precisely, since there would be no possibility of the exercise of free choice for us at all were we not also subject to the constraints of sensibility), it cannot be the case that we

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 211. See also 214 where Hegel refers to the universal (will) as the “master,” and to the particular (will) as the “mastered.”

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit,”* trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 370.

¹² *Ibid.*, 364f.

sincerely strive to achieve the ideal of ality, because this would in effect entail the destruction of morality. It mor is the "insincerity" or "duplicity" intrinsic to this point of view, Hegel concluds, which finally forces moral consciousness to retreat further and further from objectivity into pure "self-certainty" and "inwardness" ("Conscience").¹³

So long as we make no advance beyond the stage of Kantian ethics, then, it would appear that we not only have to abandon all hope of ever harmonizing the demands of desire and inclination with the requirements of morality in this life, but we also have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that according to this point of view our sensible nature must remain forever subject and subordinate to that part of ourselves which presumably 'knows' the moral law. These, anyway, are consequences Hegel takes to follow from the Kantian standpoint. As we will see below, the idea here that the universal will or the will as practical reason dictates its autonomy or "mastery" over a world that has no significance for it, and is "locked up," as Hegel tells us, in its own "self-certainty," is one which we also find in his interpretation of pure reason in Kant's theoretical philosophy.

But first, there is another aspect of Hegel's critique of Kant's ethics which we have not yet considered: namely, the "emptiness" which he takes to be characteristic of its supreme law. We know already that Hegel believes that

13 As noted above (footnote 8), Hegel's remarks here may apply more appropriately to Fichte than to Kant. See Görland's discussion in *Die Kantkritik des jungen Hegel*, 200–21. Görland and others demonstrate, I think, that for all its wide acclaim as a devastating critique of Kantian ethics, Hegel's discussion in this section of the *Phenomenology* either is not really directed at Kant, or is a misrepresentation of Kant's true view. See, in addition to Görland, R. Z. Friedman, "Hypocrisy and the Highest Good," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 24, No. 4, for a nice critique of Hegel's reading of Kant's postulates. The most challenging defense of this aspect of Hegel's critique of Kant which I have come across is Joachim Ritter's "Moralität and Sittlichkeit. Zu Hegels Auseinandersetzung mit der Kantischen Ethik" in *Metaphysik und Politik: Studien zu Aristoteles und Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969); translated by Richard Dien Winfield as "Morality and Ethical Life: Hegel's Controversy with Kantian Ethics," in *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the "Philosophy of Right"* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982). There Ritter puts his finger on what I think is the most provocative of Hegel's objections: "The Kantian rigidifying of the distinction of inwardness and externality into a dualism of disunion has led to a detachment of philosophical ethics from the framework of legal and political theory, which emigrated from philosophy following the Kantian distinction of legality from morality. What is ethically essential for the inner life of the free man is supposed to exist only as an ideal, and so as something behind reality" (157f, Winfield trans.). Hegel's "insight," Ritter continues, is that "moral reflection in the inner struggle of duty and inclination . . . is also involved in the objective relationships and presupposes them" (174). While it is true that Kant's emphasis on human finitude requires the projection of moral ideals and the purely formal or a priori foundation of his practical philosophy, it is on my view neither the case that he thought that those ideals must be absolutely unrealizable for us, nor that the application of the moral law is to be decided only in abstraction from empirical context. But to argue either of these points would take me far beyond the scope of this paper.

Kant's dichotomization of the will into sensible and universal aspects is responsible for the fact that the moral Good at this standpoint can never be brought to concrete realization. It is also the case, however, that he understands this same outcome to follow from the very nature of Kant's moral imperative itself. As "abstract" or "formal," its command is intrinsically arbitrary and corruptible, on Hegel's view—so that the Good at the level of *Moralität* remains not only unrealized, but ultimately indistinguishable from evil as well.

In an important passage in the section on "Good and Conscience," Hegel offers us his rendition of the Kantian conception of Duty: "Duty itself in the moral self-consciousness is the essence or the universality of that consciousness, the way in which it is inwardly related to itself alone; all that is left to it, therefore, is abstract universality, and for its determinate character it has identity without content, or the abstractly positive, the indeterminate" (PR #135). In what way, precisely, is moral self-consciousness "inwardly related to itself" and "without content," as Hegel says? Its principle, he tells us further on, is nothing but that of "formal correspondence with itself," or "absence of contradiction." We know only, then, that we are to will duty "for duty's sake," because we "contradict" our "abstract essentiality" if we fail to do so. We also know, Hegel remarks, that if our actions are to be counted as moral from the Kantian point of view, they must be representable in the form of universalizable maxims. But in the absence of any principle specifying which maxims ought to be universalized (in the absence of any "content" to the moral law other than the principle of non-contradiction), it would appear that we are in effect given license to universalize whatever maxim we please. So on this understanding of Kant's moral theory, any maxim we choose to adopt is justifiable in the name of Duty, provided that we remain consistent in our adherence to it. As Hegel notes in a passage in the *Encyclopedia*, the law of practical reason expresses no more than the rule that, "there must be no contradiction in the act of self-determination."¹⁴

Without entering into a discussion of Kant's various formulations of the categorical imperative and what he intended, precisely, in the idea of a contradiction of practical reason, it should at least be obvious that he intended more than the requirement that our actions conform to a principle of logical consistency. Why is it, then, that Hegel insisted upon this latter inter-

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's "Logic": Part One of the "Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences,"* trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §54. See also his discussions in the section "Good and Wickedness" in *Hegel's "Philosophy of Mind": Part Three of the "Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences,"* trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), §507–12; in his early 1802/03 essay, "Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts"; and in his *Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. Henrich, esp. 104–20.

pretation? It is not that his point was merely a psychological one, i.e., that in practice the original objective content of Duty degenerates into emptiness, because we manipulate it to serve our selfish purposes. This kind of claim, in any case, is not one with which Kant would have had any quarrel. What Hegel had in mind, rather, was the more serious objection that the will at the level of Kantian morality cannot in principle provide us with objectively determinate laws or commands. It cannot, because when it turns inward to reflect upon that part of itself which is supposed to know the Good—its “abstract essentiality”; what it finds, in the form of objectively necessary requirements, is arbitrariness.

I think that Hegel's reasons for arriving at this conclusion bring us to the point at which we can begin to see not only where his rendering of Kant's view goes most off track, but also the respect in which his critique of Kant's ethics parallels his reading of the epistemology of the Critical philosophy. As we saw above, he characterizes the will at the stage of Kantian morality as “inwardly related to itself” in its universal aspect. “Subjectivity in its universality reflected into itself,” he says further, “is the subject's absolute inward certainty of himself (*Gewissheit*), . . . his conscience (*Gewissen*)” (PR #136). The Good of *Moralität* is abstract and formal precisely because it is the product of conscience alone—of practical reason's reflections upon itself. It exists, as he says, “simply and solely in thinking and by means of thinking” (PR #132). Here in Hegel's understanding of reason or of the determinations of our thinking in the moral sphere, we find little trace of Kant's idea that there are laws or requirements which follow necessarily from the possibility of human freedom as such. The “self-certainty” of practical reason on Hegel's view is not taken to indicate the conditions of its possibility, but rather the contingent determinations of a particular conscience. As abstract, as a product of reason, the self-certainty of the will at this standpoint is, in his words, “at the same time . . . for this very reason the self-certainty of *this* subject” (PR #137). All that he finds, then, in that universal aspect of the will which he calls “conscience,” is the subject's right to determine the Good in any way it sees fit: “Conscience is the expression of the absolute title of subjective self-consciousness to know in itself and from within itself what is right and obligatory, to give recognition only to what it thus knows as good, and at the same time to maintain that whatever in this way it knows and wills is in truth right and obligatory” (PR #137).

The question that remains, of course, is why Hegel was convinced that the universal will of Kant's practical philosophy amounted to no more than this? Why did he insist that the “content” of the categorical imperative was ultimately decided by personal conviction and “insight,” rather than by what Kant refers to as the conditions of the possibility of human freedom as such? One might argue that he simply mistook Kant as embracing the empiricist project

of grounding Duty in feeling. But in fact Hegel nowhere misrepresents the character of Kant's task in this way. We know this because, as we have seen, he charges the categorical imperative with "emptiness" precisely on account of its purely formal character—precisely because it is presumed to derive from reason independently of feeling or sensibility.

Nonetheless, while Hegel cannot be said to have conflated formalist and empiricist orientations to moral philosophy in his reading of Kant, he does seem to have thought that they shared something in common. In full awareness of Kant's endeavor to derive morality not from feeling, but from reason, he seems to have believed that the premises of the formalist approach were no less "arbitrary" and "subjective" than those of the empiricist. On this interpretation, any reference to "objectively necessary requirements" or "laws" commanded by reason in the moral sphere, could signify no more to him than the contingency of feeling.

If this is true—if Hegel's portrayal of the standpoint of "Good and Conscience" reflects, as I have been urging, not so much an incomplete consideration of Kant's moral philosophy, but his particular interpretation and rejection of its uniquely *formal* character—then it will be useful to consider those texts in which he presents his own rendering of the formalism of Kant's theoretical philosophy. We saw above (87) that Hegel himself indicates the necessity of this step in the connection he draws between the outcome of "Good and Conscience" and, in his words, "that self-styled philosophy . . . which denies that the truth is knowable . . ." (PR #140e).¹⁵ We know as well that he believed that the principle of "abstract identity" and standpoint of "relation" which are presumably responsible for the emptiness of the categorical imperative, are also distinguishing features of the project of Kant's Critical epistemology.¹⁶ On my view, Hegel's critique of Kant's ethics stands or falls according to whether or not he conceived the terms of that project correctly.

3.

There is one passage in the section on "Good and Conscience" which shows very clearly the extent to which Hegel's reading of Kant's ethics parallels his critique of the theoretical philosophy. The will of Kantian morality, he tells us there, resolves itself into a kind of "ambiguity": "The ambiguity in connexion with conscience lies . . . in this: it is presupposed to mean the *identity* of subjective knowing and willing with the true good, and so is claimed and recognized to be something sacrosanct; and yet at the same time, as the mere subjective

¹⁵ See above note 8.

¹⁶ See Hegel, "Logic": *Part One of the "Encyclopedia"*, #52z, #54, #61; "Philosophy of Right," §135.

reflection of self-consciousness into itself, it still claims for itself the title due, solely on the strength of its absolutely valid rational *content*, to that identity alone" (PR #137). A moral maxim on the Kantian model is one which successfully harmonizes subjective inclination with the objective requirements of Duty. But since Duty or the moral law is itself a product of, as Hegel says, "the mere subjective reflection of self-consciousness into itself," it cannot be objective at all.

What this means for Hegel is that the Critical philosophy rests on two fundamentally incompatible claims: Kant wants us to accept not only that he has provided for objectivity in the spheres of theoretical and practical inquiry, but also that the ground of that objectivity lies in a subjective (or purely formal) condition. Hegel often characterizes this as Kant's effort to raise finitude to the status of an "absolute." While on the one hand the Critical philosophy is unrelenting in reminding us of the limits to what we can know, on the other hand it presumes to have grasped those limits "absolutely," and so be warranted in grounding the possibility of objective knowledge upon them.¹⁷ So, the "ambiguity" which Hegel attributes to the will as conscience in the *Philosophy of Right*, appears again in the *Encyclopedia* as the "inconsistency" intrinsic to Kant's Critical project overall: "It argues an utter want of consistency to say, on the one hand, that the understanding only knows phenomena, and, on the other, assert the absolute character of this knowledge, by such statements as 'Cognition can go no further'; 'Here is the *natural* and absolute limit of human knowledge.'" ¹⁸ Likewise, Hegel would say that "it argues an utter want of consistency" to claim both that morality is decided by conscience or subjective self-certainty, and that what this conscience 'knows' is at the same time the true or objective Good.

We find traces of this same objection in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*. Here again, Hegel informs us that the mistake of the formalist project lies in its insistence that the way to objective knowledge is solely decided by the conditions of subjectivity.¹⁹ In this text, however, he emphasizes not only what

17 See, e.g., Hegel's discussion of Kant in *Werke*, vol. 2, "Glauben und Wissen oder Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen als Kantische, Jacobische und Fichtesche Philosophie," 313: "Things recognized by the understanding are only appearances, nothing in themselves—this is an entirely true result; the immediate conclusion, however, is that also an understanding which only knows appearances and a nothing-in-itself (*ein Nichts-an-sich*), is itself an appearance and nothing in itself. But the so knowing, discursive understanding is on the contrary considered [by Kant] as absolute, and the knowledge of appearances is taken to be the only mode of knowledge—and the knowledge of reason (*Vernunftkenntnis*) is denied" (my translation).

18 Hegel, "Logic": *Part One of the Encyclopedia*, §60.

19 While Kant is not explicitly referred to here, this discussion parallels others in which Hegel does mention Kant by name. See especially the section entitled "The Critical Philosophy" in his "Logic": *Part One of the Encyclopedia*.

he understands is the inconsistency of this assumption, but also its self-defeating character. Kant begins with the presupposition, Hegel says, that there is an incommensurability between our cognition of objects and what objects are in themselves, and then proceeds to argue that the only way we may hope to bridge this gap is by turning to an investigation of the a priori requirements or limits of cognition. He presumes from the start, in Hegel's words, that "the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other,"²⁰ and then—in inquiring into the a priori conditions of knowledge—turns knowledge itself into a kind of object: the object of our investigation. The inconsistency here, again, involves the assumption that subjectivity—which presumably knows objects only as "appearances," only as limited by the conditions of its own possibility—can somehow be completely transparent to itself; or, to express this in another way, that a "critique" of the cognitive faculty (itself an instance of cognition) can somehow determine with apodeictic certainty the laws and limits of cognition. The self-defeating nature of this project in its endeavor to ground objective knowledge in what is true for subjectivity, consists in the fact that the object as it is in itself thereby recedes ever further from subjectivity's grasp. As Hegel puts it, "if cognition is the instrument for getting hold of an absolute being, it is obvious that the use of an instrument on a thing certainly does not let it be what it is for itself, but rather sets out to reshape and alter it. . . . [In this] way we employ a means which immediately brings about the opposite of its own end; or rather, what is really absurd is that we should make use of a means at all."²¹ So again, not only has Kant no warrant in supposing that a "critique" of cognition can be consistently carried out, but his own execution of that project succeeds only in broadening the gap between our subjective comprehension of the world and the world itself.

This latter objection is one that we have come across before. At the stage of Kantian morality, remember, the will as subjective inclination remains ever in conflict with its abstract conscience of the Good, and that postulated harmony between its conflicting aspects which is to appear in the form of concrete acts and institutions is simply never to be realized. The subjective, particular will thus stands forever in relation or in opposition to its universal aspect, which commands it to a task it cannot perform. Now, in his critique of Kant's theoretical philosophy, Hegel speaks not of the estrangement of subjective inclination from Duty, but of the inability of finite cognition to ever know the "thing-in-itself." Here it is not Kant's separation of the will into irreconcilable aspects

²⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, §74. See also in "Logic": *Part One of the "Encyclopedia,"* §48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, §73. See also Hegel's discussion of the Critical philosophy in "Logic": *Part One of the "Encyclopedia,"* for this same critique (esp. §41).

which is the target of Hegel's attack, but the Critical philosophy's dichotomization of reality into "noumenal" and "phenomenal" realms. And just as he thinks that at the stage of *Moralität* Duty is decided by no more than the determinations of conscience, so Hegel tells us that Kant's theoretical philosophy requires that we content ourselves with the cognition of "mere appearances." All of this is presumably the product of what he refers to as Kant's "subjective idealism": "According to Kant, the things that we know about are *to us* appearances only, and we can never know their essential nature, which belongs to another world we cannot approach. Plain minds have not unreasonably taken exception to this subjective idealism, according to which what forms the content of our consciousness is something which is *only* ours [ein *nur* Unsriges], posited only by *us* [nur durch *uns* Gesetztes ist]."²²

Here, as in his critique of Kantian morality, Hegel's view is clearly that those laws of the understanding which are supposed to be necessary for the possibility of experience, are themselves merely contingent—merely a "reduction of the facts of consciousness to a purely personal world." No more than this is to be expected from what in his words is Kant's "revival" of the "absolute inwardness of thought": "Its abstractness indeed prevented that inwardness from developing into anything, or from originating any special forms, whether cognitive principles or moral laws; but nevertheless it absolutely refused to accept or indulge in anything possessing the character of an externality. Henceforth the principle of the independence [*Selbstständigkeit*] of Reason, or of its absolute self-subsistence, is made a general principle of philosophy, as well as a foregone conclusion of the time."²³ This, then, is Hegel's general diagnosis of the various shortcomings of Kant's Critical program. The arbitrariness and contingency of the "laws" of theoretical and practical reason; the dichotomization of the real and the apparent, of the moral and sensible will; the projection of our knowledge of the Absolute and of the concrete realization of the Good out into an unreachable *Jenseits*; and finally, the impossibility of consistently carrying out the very project of a "Critique"—*all* of this is taken to follow from Kant's insistence upon the "inwardness of thought" or the *Selbstständigkeit* of reason. In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel suggests that this is that "idealism of the finite" which Kant shares in common with Fichte and Jacobi, whereby "the whole of philosophy consists in determining the universe with respect to . . . finite Reason."²⁴ It is the "culture

²² Hegel, "Logic": *Part One of the "Encyclopedia,"* §45. Here I have altered part of Wallace's translation to correspond more closely to the German. My thanks to Stephen Houlgate for his help with this translation.

²³ *Ibid.*, §60; see also Hegel's "Philosophy of Right," #138A.

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 64.

of reflection raised to a system”: the cognition of God or of the Absolute transformed into the “cognition of man.”²⁵ It is the tendency to turn philosophical reflection inward which was the way of Socrates. And, Hegel tells us in the 1819/20 *Vorlesungen* on the *Philosophie des Rechts*, it is also the reason why the Athenians were prompted to condemn Socrates to death.²⁶

I think it is clear that what we have here is no more than a caricature of Kant’s view, which loses Kant very seriously somewhere along the way. The real difficulty is to determine precisely at what point Hegel’s interpretation begins to lead itself off in un-Kantian directions—begins to understand the Critical philosophy as a species of “subjective idealism.” While I don’t believe that there is a simple answer to this, I want in the remaining pages to explore at least one clue as to where one could begin.²⁷

4.

Both in *Faith and Knowledge* and in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel notes that while Kant intends to be offering an alternative point of view to that of his empiricist predecessors in arguing for the a priori nature of reason, in actual fact the Critical philosophy remains “directly within the [empiricists’] sphere.”²⁸ Like Locke, Hegel tells us, Kant confines his project to an investigation of the finite intellect; unlike Locke, however, his inquiry into the role that universality and necessity play in cognition leads him to an examination of the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments. Kant explains the fact that universality and necessity are constitutive of experience in terms of the a priori “spontaneity” of reason; but his explanation of that fact, according to Hegel, is based on no better than dogmatic “psychological and historical grounds.”²⁹ The Critical philosophy as Hegel reads it makes psychology (“and that in its empirical condition”) “the basis of metaphysics.” It consists “of nothing but the empirical apprehension and analysis of the facts of human consciousness, merely as facts, just as they are given.” The result of this, on Hegel’s view, is that “all attempts have been abandoned to ascertain the necessity of essential and actual reality, to get at the notion and the truth.”³⁰

²⁵ Ibid., 64f.

²⁶ Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/20*, 110.

²⁷ Regarding what follows, I ask my reader to bear in mind my remarks in footnote 9 above. Also, for a much more thorough discussion of Hegel’s critique of Kant’s epistemology, see Karl Ameriks, “Hegel’s Critique of Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46, No. 1 (September 1985).

²⁸ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 63.

²⁹ Hegel, “Logic”: *Part One of the “Encyclopedia,”* §41.

³⁰ Hegel, “Philosophy of Mind”: *Part Three of the Encyclopedia,* §444. See also, *Faith and Knowledge*, 89: “Kant has simply no ground except experience and empirical psychology for holding that the human cognitive faculty consists in the way that it appears.”

So, while Kant presumes to break with the tradition of Locke and Hume in asserting reason's a priori contribution to experience, in actual fact the Critical philosophy remains, as Hegel says, "directly within its sphere": "it gives only a historical description of thought, and a mere enumeration of the factors of consciousness. The enumeration is in the main correct: but not a word touches upon the necessity of what is thus empirically colligated."³¹ The reference here, I take it, is to Kant's derivation of the twelve categories from the Table of Judgments. And as Hegel remarks elsewhere, it is "well known" that in the course of providing this ("metaphysical") deduction, Kant "did not put himself to much trouble."³²

As far as the metaphysical deduction is concerned, then, Hegel's complaint seems to be that Kant's "enumeration of the factors of consciousness" depends upon an uncritical acceptance of a merely "empirical classification" of the laws of thought by "common logic."³³ But what of the *transcendental* deduction of the categories? What of Kant's justification of their a priori necessity for the possibility of experience? Again, Hegel's interpretation depends on comparing Kant with the empiricists: "In common with Empiricism," he says, "the Critical Philosophy assumes that experience affords our sole foundation for cognition."³⁴ This is a puzzling analogy for Hegel to draw, especially in light of acknowledgment in other passages of Kant's insistence upon reason's a priori role in the constitution of experience.³⁵ The question then arises as to whether Hegel really grasped the point of the transcendental deduction, or of what Kant had in mind by the a priority or "independence" of reason at all.

At best, Hegel's position on this is ambiguous. But even a wavering association of the premises of Kant's project with those of his empiricist predecessors suggests a serious miscomprehension of what Kant was up to. For we know that Kant thought that any attempt to trace the "occasioning causes" of the categories back to experience (by way of an "empirical deduction") could not account for the necessity of their application to objects.³⁶ We know that he believed that a consistent empiricism had to lead to a thoroughgoing skepti-

³¹ Hegel, "Logic": *Part One of the "Encyclopedia,"* §60.

³² *Ibid.*, §42.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, §40.

³⁵ See e.g., *Ibid.*

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1929), A86/B118. As Kant remarks in the A Paralogism: "if we regard outer appearances as representations produced in us by our objects, and if these objects be things existing in themselves outside us, it is indeed impossible to see how we can come to know the existence of the objects otherwise than by inference from the effect to the cause; and this being so, it must always remain doubtful whether the cause in question be in us or outside us" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A372).

cism, in regard to a posteriori knowledge and in regard to a priori knowledge as well. Kant rejected the Lockean view, then, that all our concepts ultimately drive from sense experience; and in that he also rejected Leibniz's alternative that our knowledge of objects is simply the product of our thinking them, he was left with the task of providing a radically new account of the origin and objective validity of our concepts.

A few remarks about Kant's own conception of that task will make clear the inappropriateness of Hegel's characterization of it as empiricist. As one commentator has noted, Kant began by rejecting an assumption that both the Lockean and Leibnizian positions shared in common: that all our representations of objects—whether originating in the pure intellect or in sense experience—reveal to us objects as they are in themselves.³⁷ This is a point that we need to bear closely in mind if we are to appreciate Kant's distinction between a transcendental and an empirical deduction. Were it the case that our representations were produced in us immediately by objects as they are in themselves, there would be no problem of justifying the application of our concepts to them: we would need only specify a "historical description of thought" in the manner of Locke and Hume which traced the source of our concepts back to sense experience. But it is the argument of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" that our knowledge is not immediate—that objects of experience cannot appear to us in themselves, but only as conditioned by our a priori forms of intuition, space and time. This is Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy—his insistence that we view knowledge not as consisting in the conformity of our concepts to objects, but rather in the conformity of objects to the a priori conditions in virtue of which they may appear to us and be thought by us at all.

So the arguments in the "Aesthetic" that there are a priori constraints on our faculty of intuition, mark Kant's departure from both his rationalist and empiricist predecessors, and call for a new way of providing for the possibility of theoretical knowledge. Rejecting the Lockean view that the objective validity of our concepts can be established in reference to their derivation from objects as they are in themselves, Kant offered a "transcendental deduction" of the subjective necessity of those concepts which serve as rules without which objects that appear to us cannot be objects of our thought at all. What he intended, then, in insisting that the categories as well as our sensible forms of intuition are a priori, was not that they are somehow abstracted from experi-

³⁷ In this discussion I rely a great deal on L. W. Beck's article, "Kant's Strategy," in his book *Essays on Kant and Hume* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978). See also, "Kant's Letter to Marcus Herz, February 21, 1772" in Beck's *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

ence, but rather that, as schematized, they explain how experience is possible for us.

One need not be an avid defender of Kant's program to concede in light of these considerations that in an important respect Hegel never adequately confronted it. In that he read the Critical philosophy to share so much in common with the projects of Locke and Hume, he cannot have sufficiently grasped the uniqueness of Kant's endeavor to move beyond them. At the very least it is clear that he missed what Kant had in mind by the a priority of the categories. But what this means is that he cannot have correctly conceived the terms of their lawfulness. And given the parallels I have drawn above, this suggests that his trivialization of the relation of pure reason to its laws in Kant's theoretical philosophy is at work in his reading of the relation of pure reason to its supreme practical law as well—and explains why it is that in his critique of the standpoint of *Moralität*, Hegel never addresses Kant's arguments for the necessity of the law of practical reason as conditioning the possibility of the experience to which it applies.

A comprehensive defense of Kant's ethics in the face of Hegel's critique would have to include the following points: First, that in spite of the apparent severity of its command, Kant's categorical imperative neither requires that we do all we can to rid ourselves of our sensible nature, nor that we realize ideals that are in no way within our reach. Second, that the categorical imperative is not just a formal principle of logical consistency, empty as an objective guide to action and blind to the contexts relevant to determining its proper application. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, that laws of practical as well as theoretical reason in Kant's philosophy are not, as Hegel thinks, arbitrary constructions of subjectivity, founded on nothing other than a metaphysics of empirical psychology. I have not attempted to defend Kant on any one of these points here, but I hope to have at least established that there is good reason to do so.

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