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I

FREDERICK BEISER

The Enlightenment and idealism

I Introduction

It is a commonplace of intellectual history that any philosophical movement must be understood in its historical context. This dictum is especially true of German Idealism, whose aims and problems become intelligible only in the context of the culture of late eighteenth-century Germany. This culture was essentially that of the Enlightenment or *Aufklärung*, which had dominated intellectual life in Germany since the middle of the eighteenth century.

Toward the close of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment began to show signs of a crisis. The more it extended its fundamental principles, the more they seemed to lead to dire consequences. The fundamental principles of the Enlightenment were rational criticism and scientific naturalism. While criticism seemed to end in skepticism, naturalism appeared to result in materialism. Both results were unacceptable. If skepticism undermines our common-sense beliefs in the reality of the external world, other minds, and even our own selves, materialism threatens the beliefs in freedom, immortality, and the *sui generis* status of the mind. There were few *Aufklärer* in Germany ready to admit such disastrous consequences; but there were also few willing to limit the principles of criticism and naturalism.

German Idealism grew out of this crisis of the Enlightenment. All its various forms – the *transcendental idealism* of Kant, the *ethical idealism* of Fichte, and the *absolute idealism* of the romantics – were so many attempts to resolve these *aporiai* of the Enlightenment. For all their criticisms of the Enlightenment, the German idealists were true to its two fundamental principles: rational criticism and scientific naturalism. Though German Idealism assumes such different, even incompatible forms, what all its forms have in common is the attempt to save criticism from skepticism, and naturalism from materialism.

The dynamic behind the development of German Idealism, the source of all its transformations, consisted in the long and bitter struggle to save these principles of the Enlightenment. One form of idealism succeeds another as each later

form finds an earlier one inadequate to preserve these principles. Kant would insist that only his transcendental idealism avoids the dangers of skepticism and materialism. Fichte would complain that Kant's transcendental idealism, if it were only consistent, collapses into skepticism, and that the only escape from skepticism and materialism lies with his ethical idealism. The romantics would also object that Fichte's ethical idealism has no response to skepticism, and they would insist that only their absolute idealism could provide a basis for naturalism without materialism. Behind all these permutations, there remains the constant attempt of the German idealists to preserve the legacy of the Enlightenment.

II The inner tensions of enlightenment

What is enlightenment? The *Aufklärer* themselves had no single answer to this question, which became the subject of intense debate among them in the 1780s.¹ But all would have agreed that the age of Enlightenment was "the age of reason." The phrase was indeed accurate since the Enlightenment had made reason into its highest authority, its final court of appeal, in all moral, religious, and political questions. Reason provided the criterion to judge all beliefs, laws, works of art, and sacred texts; but it could not be judged by any higher criterion. Nothing was sacred or infallible before the tribunal of critique – except, of course, that tribunal itself.

What did the Enlightenment mean by reason? What was this faculty to which it had attributed such awesome powers? There were many definitions of reason during the Enlightenment, but two conceptions were fundamental and widespread. First, reason is a *faculty of criticism*, the power to examine beliefs according to the evidence for them. Second, reason is a *power of explanation*, the capacity to understand events by seeing them as instances of general laws. The Enlightenment had a specific paradigm of explanation, namely *mechanism*, which it derived from the new physics of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton. According to this paradigm, the cause of an event is not its purpose or final cause but its efficient cause, some prior event in time. Since the effect of such a cause can be measured in terms of impact, by how much a body changes place in a given amount of time, the laws of mechanism are quantifiable. Hence one of the great advantages of mechanism was that it led to a mathematical conception of nature where all laws could be formulated in precise mathematical terms.

The crisis of the Enlightenment grew out of each of these concepts of reason. Each concept, if universalized and pushed to its limits, led to unacceptable consequences. But the crisis was inescapable since the Enlightenment *had to* radicalize each of them. For to limit them in any form would be a form of

“unreason”: it would be either obscurantism or “dogmatism,” the limitation of reason by authority.

Radical criticism seemed to lead of necessity to skepticism. The skeptic had always claimed that doubt is the necessary result of criticism, the demand that we have sufficient evidence for all our beliefs. For it seems inevitable that the more we examine the reasons for our beliefs, the more we find they are inadequate. We discover that the evidence is doubtful, or that it does not imply its alleged conclusions. This seems to be the case especially with regard to our beliefs in the reality of the external world and other minds. We find that we have no reason to trust our senses, or that even if they are reliable they are not sufficient in number or in kind to give us complete knowledge of the object in itself. These kinds of skeptical arguments, which go back to Sextus Empiricus and the Pyrrhonism of antiquity, were revived in the seventeenth century by Montaigne and Charron, and in the eighteenth century by Bayle and Hume. They would have been familiar to any *Aufklärer*.

This dialectic from criticism to skepticism only seemed confirmed by the development of epistemology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Enlightenment concern with epistemology grew directly out of its demand for criticism. For if we are to be systematic and thorough in examining the reasons for our beliefs, we should investigate the sources, conditions, and limits of knowledge in general. The epistemology of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in Britain, of Descartes, Malebranche, and Condillac in France, and of Leibniz, Tetens, and Kant in Germany, all came from the need for a more systematic and rigorous form of criticism. But the more epistemology advanced, the more it seemed to lead to the conclusion that *what* we know – the object of cognition – is conditioned by *how* we know – the act of cognition. Nowhere is this conclusion more apparent than in the theory of ideas, which is endemic to the epistemology of the Enlightenment. According to this theory, the role of sensory organs and perceptual activities in cognition makes the immediate objects of perception not things themselves but the ideas we have of them. It was just this theory, however, that seemed to lead directly to skepticism. It seemed to bring down “a veil of perception,” so that the subject directly knew only its ideas; it was then necessary *to infer*, somewhat hazardously, the existence of the external world.

If radical criticism seemed to end in skepticism, a radical naturalism appeared to lead to materialism. This seemed to be the inevitable result of universalizing the Enlightenment’s paradigm of explanation, of claiming that *everything that exists* is explicable, at least in principle, according to mechanical and mathematical laws. If something falls under mechanical and mathematical laws, then it must be quantifiable or measurable. But to be quantifiable or measurable it must be extended, having a determinate size, shape, and weight; in other words, it

must be material. Hence the mechanical-mathematical paradigm of explanation applies only to matter; and if it explains everything, everything must be material.

The only escape from such materialism seemed to be a form of dualism, a sharp distinction between the material and the mental. Such dualism admits that the mechanical-mathematical paradigm explains everything in nature, but it denies that everything that exists is within nature. It makes a distinction between extended substance, which falls inside nature, and mental or thinking substance, which falls outside it. But such dualism also has its price: the realm of the mental becomes something mysterious, inexplicable according to scientific laws. Hence the Enlightenment's mechanical-mathematical paradigm of explanation seemed to lead to an *aporia* in the philosophy of mind where the only possibilities were materialism and dualism. But both are unacceptable. For if materialism explains the mind, it also denies its distinctive status, reducing it down to a machine; and if dualism recognizes the unique qualities of mind, it makes it into a mysterious entity. Hence the mind becomes either a machine or a ghost; on no account is it possible to explain its characteristic qualities according to natural laws.

The crisis of the Enlightenment went even deeper. Its problem was not only that each of its concepts of reason had unacceptable consequences, but also that these concepts were in conflict with one another. Criticism and naturalism, when universalized, undermine one another. Since criticism ends in skepticism, it undermines naturalism, which is committed to the independent reality of nature and the necessity of scientific laws. Since naturalism results in materialism, it undermines criticism, and more specifically its claim to be in possession of universal and necessary standards of reason. For materialism ends in relativism, given that it claims that everything, including human rationality, is the product of material forces at a specific time and place.

The conflict between these concepts of reason appears time and again in the epistemologies of the Enlightenment. The epistemologies of Descartes, Locke, Hobbes, and Hume attempted to provide some foundation for the new natural sciences; yet they also ended in a skepticism that completely undermined scientific naturalism. This tension was apparent in Descartes, who could resolve his doubts about the reality of the external world and the applicability of mathematics only by a question-begging demonstration of the existence of God. It was also plain in Hobbes, who affirmed materialism only to question whether "the phantoms" of perception have any resemblance to things outside them. It was no less clear in Locke, who wanted his epistemology to be a handmaiden of the new natural philosophy, but who also made the perceiving subject directly aware only of its own ideas. Finally, it was also evident in Hume, who doubted the reality of the external world and induction, but who also wanted to develop a science of human nature.

These problems with the Enlightenment concepts of rationality were already

fully apparent in Germany by the 1770s, the decade Kant wrote his *Critique of Pure Reason*. The dangers of materialism were widely felt. The writings of Holbach, Helvétius, and Diderot had a wide clandestine circulation in Germany; and the views of La Mettrie and Maupertuis were notorious, not least because these *philosophes* were prominent in the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The writings of the English free-thinkers – John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal – had been translated into German and were widely read.² Although materialism was more advanced in France and Britain, there were also some notable German materialists, such as Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch, Theodor Ludwig Lau, and Gabriel Wagner, who were inspired by Spinoza to develop mechanistic explanations of human actions.³ Spinozism was a notorious doctrine in Germany, but it was so not least because it represented a mechanistic materialism. The threat of skepticism was also widely recognized. Skepticism became known chiefly in the form of Berkeley's and Hume's idealism, which was interpreted as a form of solipsism or "egoism," as doubt about the reality of everything except one's own self.⁴ So well known were Berkeley's and Hume's versions of idealism that they became a favorite subject of refutation in lectures on metaphysics. That Humean skepticism is the inevitable result of the way of ideas was a well-known doctrine in Germany, especially from the writings of Thomas Reid and the Scottish philosophers, who had a large following among the *Popularphilosophen*.⁵

III Transcendental idealism and the Enlightenment

It has sometimes been said that the crisis of the Enlightenment began with the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in May 1781.⁶ Without doubt, Kant was one of the harshest critics of the Enlightenment, and few of its enemies could match his ruthless and relentless dialectic. Still, Kant came to save the Enlightenment, not to bury it. His aim was to give a lasting foundation to its fundamental article of faith: the authority of reason.

No one saw more clearly than Kant, however, that the Enlightenment had to keep its house in order. If reason is not aware of its limits, he taught, then it undermines itself, turning into unreason by lapsing into all kinds of fallacies. The sleep of reason breeds monsters: amphibolies, antinomies, paralogisms. Kant was confident that a fully aroused and alert reason, properly disciplined through the critique, could stay firmly within its own limits and so save the Enlightenment from self-destruction.

In the 1770s Kant could already see that the Enlightenment was heading for trouble. Before he wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason* he was unsettled by the dangers of skepticism and materialism. Kant was well aware that criticism could end in skepticism, given his appreciation of Hume, who had awakened him from

his “dogmatic slumbers.” Kant was also fully conscious that naturalism, if radicalized, presents the danger of materialism, and it was for just this reason that he believed it necessary to deny knowledge to save room for faith. His early concern to refute skepticism and materialism is apparent from several sources: his 1755 *Nova dilucidatio*, his 1766 *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, his 1770 Inaugural Dissertation, and his lectures on metaphysics during the 1760s and 1770s.⁷

To prevent the impending crisis of the Enlightenment – to save reason from self-destruction – was a central motive behind Kant’s development in the 1770s. Kant had two fundamental tasks to rescue the Enlightenment. The first was to prevent criticism and naturalism from self-destruction. He wanted to establish criticism without skepticism, and naturalism without materialism. A criticism without skepticism would provide an account of our knowledge of the external world that is resistant to Cartesian and Humean doubts. A naturalism without materialism would insist that everything in nature is explicable by mechanical laws, yet it would forswear the claim – crucial to materialism – that everything that exists is in nature. Kant’s second task was to disarm the conflict between criticism and naturalism, so that each could be universalized without destroying the other. He wanted to create a criticism immune from the dangers of naturalism, and a naturalism free from the threat of skepticism. A criticism immune from materialism would ensure that reason is an autonomous faculty, a source of universal laws, independent of the causality, and hence the relativism, of the historical and natural world. A naturalism free from skepticism would show that the laws of physics apply to nature itself and do not simply consist in our habit of associating impressions. The Critical philosophy intended to avoid, therefore, that tension between naturalism and criticism that had so marred Enlightenment epistemology.

Kant’s solution to all these problems was nothing less than his famous Copernican Revolution. As Kant describes that Revolution in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it consists in a reversal of the normal externalist conception of truth (Bxvi–xvii). According to that conception, truth consists in the conformity of concepts with objects, in the correspondence of our representations with things that exist independent of them. While Kant is willing to accept such a conception of truth within ordinary experience, he thinks that it is profoundly misleading if it becomes an account of truth in general or the possibility of experience itself. Such a conception of truth aids skepticism because it is impossible to get outside our representations to see if they conform to an object in itself. To avoid such problems, Kant proposes that we see truth as the conformity of objects with our concepts, as the agreement of our perceptions with certain universal and necessary concepts that determine the form or structure of experience. If we adopt this conception of truth, it is no longer necessary to get outside our own representations to see if they conform

to objects in themselves. Rather, the standard of truth will be found within the realm of consciousness itself by seeing whether a representation conforms to the universal and necessary forms of consciousness itself.

Kant's transcendental idealism grew out of the new conception of truth behind his Copernican Revolution. Since Kant held that we do not create the objects of our cognition, and since he also claimed that we know these objects only insofar as they conform to the conditions of our cognizing them, he concluded that we know these objects only as they appear to us but not as things in themselves. Hence Kant would explain transcendental idealism in terms of two fundamental doctrines: the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, and the claim that we know things only as appearances and not things in themselves.⁸ Accordingly, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant defines his transcendental idealism in contrast to a *transcendental realism* that makes just the opposite assumptions: it conflates appearances with things in themselves and assumes we know things in themselves.

Transcendental idealism was Kant's solution to the imminent crisis of the Enlightenment. It was a very strategic doctrine because it allowed him to avoid the dangers of both skepticism and materialism. Through its new conception of truth, transcendental idealism could escape the snares of skepticism. Kant could now argue that the skeptic's doubts were based upon a false conception of truth, for they presuppose the externalist conception of truth according to which truth consists in the correspondence of a representation with a thing in itself.⁹ The skeptic's doubts are based upon the possibility that such a correspondence might not take place, that we cannot determine whether our representations conform to something completely independent of them. While Kant admits that such a standard of truth is unrealizable, he also doubts its necessity. The truth of all empirical judgments would still be preserved, he maintains, if we explain it in terms of the conformity of representations with the universal and necessary forms of consciousness.¹⁰ It was the great merit of his transcendental idealism over Descartes's and Hume's skeptical idealism, Kant contended, that it could maintain an empirical realism within itself. While skeptical idealism doubts the reality of the external world, transcendental idealism is committed to its reality because it shows that objects in space must exist outside us. The reality of these objects in space consists not in their existence as things in themselves, to be sure, but in their conformity to universal and necessary forms of consciousness, which is sufficient to establish that they are not illusory.

Through its distinction between appearances and things in themselves, transcendental idealism also secured the possibility of naturalism without materialism. Kant maintained a universal naturalism, so that everything that occurs in nature must be subject to universal laws; yet this does not entail materialism since he limited nature to the realm of appearances, denying that the laws of

The Enlightenment and idealism

nature are applicable to things in themselves. Kant therefore undermined the central contention of materialism: that *everything that exists* must be in nature. Such a contention simply conflated appearances with things in themselves, assuming, wrongly, that what is true of the phenomena of nature must also be true of reality itself.

It was in virtue of his distinction between appearances and things in themselves that Kant could also resolve the classical conflict between criticism and naturalism. Criticism would not undermine but support naturalism since it would show how the fundamental principles of natural science apply without exception to *all* appearances, to *any* object of experience. Conversely, naturalism would not undermine criticism because transcendental idealism would show how naturalism operates *only* in the sphere of appearances and cannot be extended to things in themselves. Transcendental idealism would ensure the autonomy of reason, its freedom from the determination of experience and history, by showing how the standards and activities of reason do not operate in the natural realm at all.

It is important to see that Kant's transcendental idealism rejects both idealism and realism in the traditional sense. Kant insisted on describing his transcendental idealism as *critical* idealism because it limits knowledge to experience alone and makes no claims about reality in itself.¹¹ This means that it must reject idealism as well as materialism insofar as both make claims about the nature of all reality. From the standpoint of critical idealism, the idealist claim that the essence of an object is perception is no better than the materialist claim that the essence of an object is its occupation of space. Both are metaphysical propositions that go beyond the realm of possible experience. Hence Kant indignantly rejected the imputation of many of his early critics that his idealism was essentially the same as Berkeley's.

IV The pantheism controversy

Despite its brilliant strategy, the *Critique of Pure Reason* could not prevent the crisis of the Enlightenment. The issues that had been simmering for decades – the skepticism and materialism implicit in a radical rationalism – finally burst on the public stage in the late 1780s. Ironically, no one played a greater role in their transmission than Kant himself. For all his good intentions toward the Enlightenment, Kant had posed its fundamental problems in a way that made them impossible to ignore. When his critics complained that Kant himself could not resolve these problems, the crisis had become public and seemed utterly irresolvable.

If there is any single year that marks the beginning of the crisis of the Enlightenment it would have to be 1786. On 16 August Frederick II, the king of

Prussia, died after more than forty years on the throne. Since Frederick was “the philosopher king,” who had advocated such enlightened policies as toleration and freedom of the press, his death seemed very symbolic, like the demise of the Enlightenment itself. Sure enough, his successor, Frederick William II, was not so liberal. Fearful of the effects of free-thinking upon his subjects, his minister C. G. Wöllner began in 1788 to lay down decrees imposing censorship and greater control over religious consistories.¹² Some of the foremost journals of the *Aufklärung*, such as Nicolai’s *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, were forced to stop their presses in Prussia. The halcyon days of the *Aufklärung*, which came from the blissful alliance of throne and philosophy, were truly over.

The year 1786 is also significant because it marks the onset of the “pantheism controversy” between Moses Mendelssohn and F. H. Jacobi. No other controversy had a greater effect upon the fate of the Enlightenment. This dispute had been brewing for over a year in the increasingly bitter correspondence between Mendelssohn and Jacobi; but in early 1786 it erupted into a storm that captured the public imagination. Of the impact of this controversy upon its age Goethe later wrote of “an explosion” and Hegel of “a thunderbolt out of the blue.” Almost every notable thinker of the 1790s developed his philosophy as a response to this controversy. Herder, Reinhold, Kant, Rehberg, Hamann, and Wizenmann all wrote contributions to the dispute; and the notebooks of the young Schlegel, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Novalis, and Hölderlin reveal their intense involvement in it.

Prima facie the dispute concerned little more than Lessing’s Spinozism. Jacobi had shocked Mendelssohn and many *Aufklärer* by claiming that Lessing had confessed to him in the summer of 1780 that he was a Spinozist. Since Spinozism was synonymous with atheism and fatalism in eighteenth-century Germany, publicizing Lessing’s confession would besmirch his reputation as the most revered thinker of the *Aufklärung*. But these biographical issues were only of secondary importance. Lessing was really only a vehicle for Jacobi, a means of drawing attention to, and indeed dramatizing, his own critique of the *Aufklärung*. For years Jacobi had harbored the deepest animosity for the “*morgue berlinoise*” – the clique of Berlin *Aufklärer* consisting in Mendelssohn, Nicolai, Biester, Eberhard, and Gedike – because, unlike Lessing, they were unwilling to admit the ultimate consequences of all rational inquiry: atheism and fatalism. Hence Lessing was a symbolic figure for Jacobi, the only *Aufklärer* he could admire, because he alone was willing to take his reason to its limits and to confess its atheistic and fatalistic consequences.

That rationalism ends in atheism and fatalism was an old pietist complaint. In the 1740s pietists like Andreas Rüdiger and J. F. Budde had leveled this charge against Wolff’s philosophy, insisting that its rationalism made it nothing more than a half-way house on the road to Spinozism. While any *Aufklärer* could

grumble that he had heard this refrain before, there was still something new and deeply disturbing about Jacobi's criticisms. For Jacobi had equated rationalism not with the old geometric method of Spinoza's philosophy, which had been discredited even before Kant, but with the mechanistic paradigm of the new sciences. These sciences had been making remarkable progress, extending this paradigm into new areas, such as physiology and cosmology. The more they advanced, the less room there seemed to be in the world for the supernatural, for God, freedom, and immortality. So what Spinozism represented for Jacobi was a radical naturalism. He said that the spirit of Spinozism was epitomized in the dictum "*ex nihilo nihil fit*," from nothing comes nothing, because Spinoza extended the series of natural causes to infinity. Spinoza admitted no exception to the principle of sufficient reason, so that there had to be a cause for every event, such that the event could not be otherwise. Like Kant, Jacobi concluded that given such a principle there cannot be God or freedom, which presuppose spontaneity, a first cause not determined by a prior cause.

The sum and substance of Jacobi's polemic was thus to renew the threat of a radical naturalism, a materialism in Spinozistic dress. The *Aufklärer* were presented with a dramatic dilemma: either a rational atheism and fatalism or an irrational leap of faith; either a rational materialism or a *salto mortale* affirming the existence of God, providence, and freedom. There was no middle path, however, which would attempt to prove faith through reason.

V The meta-critical campaign

The crisis of the Enlightenment grew out of the critique of Kant's philosophy as much as the pantheism controversy. This critique began in earnest in the late 1780s when a horde of polemics, books, reviews, and even journals, appeared attacking Kant. The net effect of this attack was to further weaken the Enlightenment. While the pantheism controversy had revived the danger of materialism, the criticism of Kant's philosophy had resurrected the threat of skepticism.

One of the central themes of the criticism of Kant's philosophy in the 1780s was the widespread interpretation of Kant as a skeptical idealist. The threat of egoism, which had troubled the *Aufklärer* in the 1760s and 1770s, had now returned more potent than ever. It seemed to many of Kant's early critics that he had not refuted but radicalized Hume's skepticism. Kant was a "Prussian Hume" because his philosophy, if it were only consistent, ends in a complete skepticism which gives us no reason to believe in the existence of anything beyond our own passing representations. Such skepticism seemed to be the inevitable consequence of two often repeated statements of Kant: that external things are only appearances, and that appearances consist in nothing but representations. These

critics duly noted Kant's commitment to the existence of things in themselves; but they countered that Kant had no right to assume their existence on his own premises, given that he limited all knowledge to experience and that things in themselves are not in experience. They were also not impressed with the "Refutation of Idealism" of the second edition of the *Critique*, where Kant attempted to prove the existence of objects in space outside us; for they pointed out that Kant also held that space is nothing but a form of representation itself. By implication, if not intention, then, Kant had revived the specter of a skepticism that had haunted the *Aufklärung*.

One of the most interesting results of the criticism of Kant's philosophy in the late 1780s and early 1790s is the rise of a neo-Humean skepticism in Germany. Among these neo-Humean skeptics were G. E. Schulze, Solomon Maimon, Ernst Platner, and A. W. Rehberg; Jacobi, Hamann, Justus Möser and Thomas Wizenmann were also very sympathetic to and influenced by Hume's skepticism. The central theme of their neo-Humean skepticism is that Kant's Transcendental Analytic cannot refute Hume, and that the critique of knowledge, if it is consistent, must end in a total skepticism.

These neo-Humean critics make many objections to Kant, which vary greatly in quality and force. But there is one objection in their complex polemic that stands out for its central role in the later development of German Idealism. This objection stresses the problematic status of the Kantian dualisms. Kant had famously insisted that knowledge requires the most intimate interchange between understanding and sensibility – "intuitions without concepts are blind and concepts without intuitions are empty" – but he had made such a sharp distinction between these faculties that it seemed impossible for them to interact with one another. The understanding was active, formal, and intellectual, while sensibility was passive, material, and empirical. Maimon claimed that the dualism between these faculties was analogous to the old Cartesian dualism between the mind and body, and that all the problems of the older dualism should hold *mutatis mutandis* for the new one. Such was the heterogeneity between understanding and sensibility, Maimon further argued, that there could be no criterion to determine how the concepts of the understanding apply to the intuitions of sensibility.¹³

By thus pointing out these problematic dualisms, Maimon and the neo-Humean critics left a foothold open for skepticism *within the framework of Kant's own philosophy*. For now the question arose how two such heterogeneous realms as the intellectual and the sensible could be known to correspond with one another. The problem was no longer how we know that our representations correspond with things in themselves but how we know that a priori concepts apply to a posteriori intuitions.

VI Fichte's ethical idealism

The net effect of the crisis of the Enlightenment was the return of its old enemies: skepticism and materialism. Now that Jacobi had resurrected Spinoza and the meta-critique of Kant had revived Hume, these monsters seemed stronger than ever. It was the task of the later idealists to slay them, to succeed where Kant had failed.

Fichte's early philosophy – the so-called 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Science of Knowledge*) – grew directly out of the crisis of the Enlightenment. In fundamental respects the young Fichte's ideals were still very much those of the Enlightenment. Like Kant, Fichte too wanted to uphold the authority of reason, which he saw as the ultimate standard of truth and value. He also shared Kant's basic philosophical ideals: a criticism without skepticism, a naturalism without materialism. But in the early 1790s, after the revival of Spinoza and the criticism of Kant, these ideals seemed even more impossible to achieve. Transcendental idealism no longer seemed to be the surest safeguard against skeptical idealism and mechanistic materialism.

For the young Fichte, the main challenge of philosophy was to defeat the traditional enemies of the Enlightenment: the skeptical idealism of Hume and the mechanistic materialism of Spinoza. Fichte famously stated that there were only two possible positions in philosophy: the "dogmatism" of Spinoza and the "criticism" of Kant; but he also understood the problematic versions of these positions to be materialism and skepticism. For Fichte, dogmatism represented materialism, the complete denial of human freedom and the overturning of all moral responsibility (I, 431).¹⁴ And the degenerate form of criticism was Hume's skeptical idealism. Fichte was painfully aware of, and profoundly influenced by, the neo-Humean skeptics, who convinced him that Kant's philosophy, at least in its present exposition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, ends in "a skepticism worse than Hume's."¹⁵ After reading Schulze and Maimon in early 1794 he vowed to rebuild the critical philosophy on a new foundation.

The central task of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* was to defeat the materialism of Spinozism, and the skepticism of the neo-Humeans. To combat skepticism, Fichte had to grapple with the problematic dualisms of Kant's philosophy, which had made it vulnerable to doubt. Somehow, he had to establish that understanding and sensibility, the form and content of experience, stem from a single source and unifying principle. Hence in his first exposition of the *Wissenschaftslehre* – his 1794 *Foundations of the entire Wissenschaftslehre* – Fichte postulated an absolute ego, of which the ego and non-ego, the subject and object of experience, are only parts or aspects (I, 105–23). This absolute ego would also be the antithesis of Spinoza's single universal substance. Just as

Spinoza's substance has the mind and body as its modes, so Fichte's absolute ego has the subject and object of empirical consciousness as its parts.

No one knew better than Fichte, however, that this postulate created more problems than it solved. It was hardly likely to convince the skeptic. For where was this absolute ego, and how could we know of its existence, if it were not within experience? Such an hypothesis was transcendent, going beyond possible experience, which Fichte too saw as the limits of knowledge. Even worse, the postulate also could not explain the basic structure of experience. For if there were an absolute ego, why did it limit itself by positing a non-ego outside itself? To assume that the absolute ego posits the world outside itself is not only metaphysically extravagant but logically absurd, since it presupposes that something completely active somehow makes itself passive, or that something infinite somehow makes itself finite. For all these reasons Fichte refused to give the absolute ego a constitutive status and insisted instead that it could be no more than a regulative idea (I, 260–I, 270, 277).

Rejecting the constitutive status of the absolute ego still left Fichte with the tricky task of explaining experience. His problem took the form of a dilemma: he had both to affirm and deny the dualism between subject and object of our ordinary experience. He had to affirm this dualism because it is just a basic fact of our experience that the object is given to us, and that its qualities appear independent of our will and imagination. He also had to deny this dualism, however, because knowledge required some correspondence or interaction between the subject and object. Furthermore, if there were a dualism, there would also be a foothold for the skeptic, who could ask why our representations correspond with things.

Fichte's solution to this dilemma is his concept of striving (*Streben*), which he expounds in the third section of his 1794 *Grundlage*. This concept is the very heart of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*, which Fichte even called "a philosophy of striving" (*Strebensphilosophie*). According to this concept, the absolute ego, which creates all nature, is not a reality but only an idea, the goal for the striving of the finite ego. All that is left for the finite ego is constant striving, the ceaseless struggle to make nature conform to the demands of its rational activity. If the finite ego strives to control nature, it approaches, even though it never attains, the ideal of the absolute ego. This concept then resolves the dilemma regarding dualism. Doing justice to each horn of the dilemma, it both affirms and denies the dualism. It affirms this dualism because the subject never gains complete control over nature, which continues to resist its efforts. It also denies this dualism because the subject gains some control over nature, making it conform to the demands of reason. Hence Fichte could do justice to the fact that we are finite beings who have a world independent of our control, and to the demand that there be some correspondence between the subject and object of knowledge.

The Enlightenment and idealism

This concept of striving was Fichte's weapon to slay the monsters of skepticism and materialism. Both fail to appreciate the role of human activity in knowledge. The problem with skepticism is that it presupposes a contemplative model of knowledge, according to which the subject's representation must somehow correspond to an object given independently of it. What it fails to see, however, is that the subject can *act* upon the object, making it conform to the standards of its activity. To an extent the skeptic is indeed right: *if* the object remains simply given, if it cannot be acted upon, then we cannot know it; but there is no reason for such an assumption in the first place. It is just a fact that we change the world, making it into something we can know. The problem with materialism is analogous. The materialist too underrates the role of activity in knowledge, for he hypostatizes the laws of nature, thinking that they represent forces that govern us, when in truth they too are our own creation. If the materialist only paid sufficient attention to the role of our activity in the creation of nature, he would see that we are indeed its lawgivers, and that there are no given objects to whose laws we must submit.

Such, in crude summary, was the spirit of Fichte's early 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. This philosophy is best described as an *ethical* idealism for two reasons. First, it maintains that the world *ought* to be ideal, but not that it *is* so. Idealism thus becomes a goal of our moral activity, our ceaseless striving to make the world conform to the demands of reason. Second, it gives priority to our activity in the production of knowledge, so that *what* we know, and even *that* we know, depends upon our efforts to conquer nature according to our moral ideals. Fichte went beyond Kant in giving practical reason priority over theoretical reason, for he made the activity of will central to the very foundation of knowledge itself. It was not only the understanding but the will that became the law-giver of nature.

VII Absolute idealism

For all its brilliance, the *Wissenschaftslehre* had a brief life. Like a rocket, it quickly rose to the heights but only to explode in mid air. The young romantics – Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel, Novalis, Schlegel, and Hülsen – were deeply impressed by Fichte, whose lectures some of them attended in Jena in 1795. But no sooner had they heard “the titan of Jena” than they began to topple him. As early as the winter of 1796, Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel began filling their notebooks with criticisms of Fichte's idealism.¹⁶ It is in these notebooks that we can trace the beginnings of *absolute idealism*.¹⁷ This new standpoint will find its more systematic exposition in Schelling's and Hegel's writings in the early 1800s.

The romantic critique of Fichte is complex and wideranging, but their objections against his idealism reduce down to a few points. First, Fichte does not

escape Hume's skeptical idealism after all. The concept of striving traps the ego inside the circle of its own consciousness, so that it knows either itself or nothing. Insofar as the ego succeeds in controlling nature, it knows only the products of its own activity; but insofar as nature resists its control, it becomes an unknowable thing in itself. Fichte himself admitted that this was a circle he could not avoid but only extend to infinity; but, to the romantics, this was tantamount to an admission of failure. Second, Fichte does not surmount Kant's dualisms but only restores them in new form. The Fichtean subject is active, noumenal, and purposive, while the Fichtean object is inert, phenomenal, and mechanical. How, then, can there be any correspondence between the subject and object required for all knowledge? To be sure, Fichte, unlike Kant, thinks that the striving subject makes some progress in reducing the dualism; but insofar as its striving is an infinite task the dualism must remain; and the question remains how it makes any progress at all, given that this would require some interaction between completely heterogeneous entities. Third, Fichte's absolute ego cannot be an ego at all, because something absolute transcends all finite determinations, and the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, are finite determinations. It is only possible to say that the absolute is pure being or the indifference point of the subjective and objective.

The romantic critique of Fichte did not ease their problems but only exacerbated them. For now they faced anew the very dilemma that had once troubled Fichte. On the one hand, it was necessary for them to overcome the dualism between the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, for there had to be some correspondence and interaction between them to explain the possibility of knowledge. On the other hand, however, it was also necessary for them to preserve that dualism, because this alone would explain the reality of an external world. The problem was then how to have both some identity and some non-identity of the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real. As Hegel later formulated the point, the task of philosophy was to establish the identity of identity and non-identity.

The romantic solution to this problem came with *Naturphilosophie*, their philosophy of nature, which had been developed by Schelling, Novalis, Schlegel, and Hegel. The central strategy behind the philosophy of nature was to surmount the persistent dualisms of modern philosophy by reexamining the nature of matter itself. According to the romantics, the source of these dualisms arose from the Cartesian conception of matter as inert extension. Since neither mind nor life are conceivable in spatial or mathematical terms, this made it impossible to explain them according to the laws of nature. As long as this concept of matter prevailed, there could be only those two unsatisfactory options in the philosophy of mind: dualism or materialism.

The only escape from these extremes, the romantics believed, lay in going back

to a competing concept of matter, namely, the concept of matter as living force, *vis viva*. It was this concept that Leibniz had once cited against Cartesianism, and that the *Naturphilosophen* now intended to revive. They saw Leibniz not as the founder of the pre-established harmony, which made the dualism between the mental and physical a perpetual mystery, but as the father of a vitalist physics, whose conception of living matter surmounted that dualism. The great strength of the Leibnizian concept of matter, in their view, is that it overcomes the dualism between the subjective and objective while still accounting for the differences between them. Rather than heterogeneous substances, they now become different degrees of organization and development of a single living force. There is indeed a difference in *degree* or *form* between them; but there is not a difference in kind or substance. There is a single force of which the subjective and objective, the ideal and the real, are simply different expressions, embodiments and manifestations. The mind and body now become completely interdependent. The mind is the highest degree of organization and development of the living forces of the body, while the body is the lowest degree of organization and development of the living forces of the mind. The subjective and ideal is the *internalization* of living force, while the objective and the real is the *externalization* of living force. As Schelling put it in some poetic lines: “[M]ind is invisible nature, while nature is visible mind.”¹⁸

It was this concept of matter that lay behind the organic conception of nature, the central and characteristic concept of romantic *Naturphilosophie*. The romantics saw all of nature in terms of a living organism, which they understood in a Kantian sense. In paragraph 65 of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant had defined an organism or natural purpose by two central characteristics: the idea of the whole precedes its parts; and the parts are mutually the cause and effect of one another. This second characteristic did not just mean reciprocal causality, which is also characteristic of inorganic matter, but that an organism is self-generating and self-organizing, having the cause of its motion within itself. While the romantics endorse the Kantian conception of an organism, they also differ fundamentally from Kant in insisting upon dropping the regulative constraints he had placed upon it. They insisted that nature *is* an organism, and not only that we must proceed in our inquiries *as if* it were one. It was only by giving this concept constitutive status, the romantics believed, that they could overcome the outstanding Kantian dualisms, which had made the solution of Kant’s own problem impossible.

This organic conception of nature is the basis of the romantic doctrine of absolute idealism. This doctrine consists in three fundamental propositions. First, there is a single universal substance in nature, which is the absolute. Second, this absolute consists in living force, so that it is neither subjective nor objective, but the unity of them both. Third, through its organic structure all of

nature conforms to a purpose, plan, or design, which is not created by God but inherent in matter itself. The first proposition makes absolute idealism a form of monism; the second makes it a form of vitalism; and the third makes it a species of idealism. In sum, absolute idealism is a form of vitalistic monism or monistic vitalism.

It should be clear that absolute idealism is not an idealism in the same sense as Kant's transcendental idealism or Fichte's ethical idealism. Unlike Kant's and Fichte's idealism, absolute idealism does not understand the ideal in terms of the realm of subjectivity or consciousness. Rather, the ideal is conceived as the underlying purposiveness and rationality of nature itself. It is the archetype, form, or structure of nature, which both the mental and the physical, the subjective and objective, instantiate or exemplify in equal degrees.

It is important to see that absolute idealism involves a profound break with what it called the "*subjective idealism*" of Kant and Fichte. It would be a serious mistake, as is often done, to interpret the "absolute" of absolute idealism in terms of some universal and impersonal ego or subject. The romantics decisively reject such a subjectivist interpretation of their absolute, which they insist transcends all finite determinations, such as the subjective and objective. Hence they persistently define the absolute in terms of *the unity* or *indifference* of the subjective and objective. The break of absolute idealism with subjective idealism becomes very apparent as soon as one recognizes that it permits a much greater degree of realism and naturalism – a realism and naturalism that Kant and Fichte would have rejected as "dogmatism" or "transcendental realism." Absolute idealism allows a greater realism because it permits the existence of nature independent of any consciousness whatsoever, even the activities of the transcendental ego; and it permits a greater naturalism because it claims that all self-consciousness, even that of the transcendental subject, derives from the laws of nature.

The romantics understood absolute idealism as a synthesis of idealism and realism, as the union of Fichte and Spinoza. Their doctrine involves a form of Spinozism because of its greater realism and naturalism; but it also contains an element of Kant's and Fichte's idealism because it continues to understand the subjective or ideal as the purpose of nature itself. They maintain that the self-consciousness of the ego is the highest organization and development of all the organic powers of nature. The mistake of Kant and Fichte came in failing to see that self-consciousness is only the purpose of nature and not its cause, that it is first in order of explanation but not first in order of being.

While absolute idealism involved a fundamental break with Kant and Fichte, it could also claim to be the final realization of their goals. This seemed to be the final victory over skeptical idealism and materialism. Absolute idealism was in no danger of lapsing into skeptical idealism because it allowed for a much greater

degree of realism and naturalism than subjective idealism. Nature existed completely independently of all consciousness, which was the product of its organic development. Absolute idealism also provided for a naturalism without materialism because, although it understood everything as a mode of a single universal substance, it was the product not of mechanism but a living force. Hence the romantics never broke the Enlightenment's ideal of a complete explanation of all of nature. They did, however, transform the paradigm of explanation: to understand an event is not to explain it as the result of prior events in time but to see it as a necessary part of a whole. Their paradigm is thus holistic rather than mechanistic.

Absolute idealism would thus claim to be the apotheosis of the idealist tradition, the final achievement of its goals, a criticism without skepticism, a naturalism without materialism. But, naturally, like any philosophy it too had its weaknesses. For how did it know that nature exists independent of our consciousness? And how could it establish that nature is an organism except by analogy with our own human ends? It was not surprising that the neo-Kantians would accuse absolute idealism of metaphysical speculation and a relapse into dogmatism. It was one of the deeper ironies of the history of philosophy that the neo-Kantians attacked absolute idealism and *Naturphilosophie* in the name of Kant and a return to the Enlightenment.

NOTES

- 1 For a translation of some of the contributions to the debate, see James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 47–85.
- 2 On the influence of the free-thinkers in Germany, see Hermann Hettner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1979), I, 350–1.
- 3 On the early German materialists, see Gottfried Stiehler, ed., *Beiträge zur Geschichte des vormarxistischen Materialismus* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1961), which contains useful accounts of their lives and philosophies. Also see Gottfried Stiehler, ed., *Materialisten der Leibniz-Zeit* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag, 1966), which contains selections from their writings.
- 4 On the problem of idealism or egoism in German philosophy before Kant, see Henry Bracken, *The Early Reception of Berkeley's Immaterialism: 1710–1733* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1959), 1–39, 83–4; Manfred Kuehn, “Kant and the Refutations of Idealism in the Eighteenth Century,” in Donald Mell, Theodore Braum, and Lucia Palmer, eds., *Man, God, and Nature in the Enlightenment* (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1988), 25–35; and Dietmar Heidemann, *Kant und das Problem der metaphysischen Idealismus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998) (*Kant-Studien Ergänzungsheft* 131), 15–46.
- 5 On the influence of the Scottish philosophers of common sense in Germany, see Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).
- 6 See Reinhard Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 90.

- 7 On Kant's early opposition to idealism, see *Nova dilucidatio*, 1:411–12; the Inaugural Dissertation §11–12, 2:397–8; *Metaphysik* L1, 28:207; and *Metaphysik* Herder, 28:43. On his opposition to materialism, see *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, 2:327, and again *Nova dilucidatio*, 1:411–12. References to Kant's works are cited by volume and page number of *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1900–).
- 8 See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A369, 490–1.
- 9 See Kant's argument in the *Critique* of the Fourth Paralogism, A369, 372.
- 10 See Kant's argument in the first edition of the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, A26, 37, 39.
- 11 See *Prolegomena*, 4:374–5.
- 12 For a good introductory account of the edicts and the controversies leading up to them, see Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 112–75.
- 13 See Solomon Maimon, *Versuch über die Transcendentalphilosophie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. V. Verra (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), II, 62–5, 182–3, 362–3.
- 14 All references in the text are to *Johann Gottlieb Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit & Co., 1845–6).
- 15 The influence of these skeptics upon Fichte is apparent from his early fragment “Wer Hume, Aenesidemus und Maimon noch nicht verstanden hat . . .,” in *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Gliwitzky, and Hans Jacob (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962ff.), II/3, 389–90 (henceforth abbreviated AA for Akademie Ausgabe). Also see his November 1793 letter to L. W. Wloemer, AA III/2, 14; his mid-December 1793 letter to Heinrich Stephani, AA III/2, 28; and his 15 January 1794 letter to F.V. Reinhard, III/2, 39.
- 16 These notebooks consist in Novalis, “Fichte-Studien,” in *Novalis Schriften*, ed. Richard Samuel, Hans Joachim Mähl, and Gerhard Schulz (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–88), II, 104–296; Schlegel's *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (Munich and Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958f.), XVIII, 3–15, 31–9, 505–16, 517–21; Hölderlin's important fragment “Über Urteil und Seyn,” in *Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke, Grosser Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beissner (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1946), IV/1, 216–17.
- 17 This term is not anachronistic, as is sometimes said. The first to use it appears to have been Friedrich Schlegel, who applies it frequently in his notebooks. See his *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* XVIII, 33, 65, 80, 85, 90, 282, 396. On Schelling's use of the term, see his *Fernere Darstellungen meines Systems der Philosophie*, in *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61), IV, 112; his “Über das Verhältniß der Naturphilosophie zur Philosophie überhaupt,” V, 112; “Zusatz zugleich Einleitung” to the *Ideen zur einer Philosophie der Natur*, II, 67, 68; and *Bruno*, IV, 257, 322. On Hegel's use of the term, see *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, §160 Zusatz, 32 Zusatz, and §45 Zusatz.
- 18 See Schelling's introduction to his *Ideen zur einer Philosophie der Natur*, II, 56; *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 42.