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978-0-521-03909-3 - The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel

Edited by Sally Sedgwick

Excerpt

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## Introduction: Idealism from Kant to Hegel

SALLY SEDGWICK

The development of German idealism after Kant is in large part a story of the various ways in which features of Kant's Critical philosophy get either preserved or transformed in the systems of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. While Fichte and Schelling represent their forms of idealism as basically consistent with the main principles of the Critical philosophy, Hegel tells us that an adequate form of idealism can be achieved only by parting ways with Kant in fundamental respects. An adequate form of idealism, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel agree, is an idealism that provides a genuine alternative to subject-object dualism. It is in fact in order to challenge dualism, according to these thinkers, that philosophy comes into existence at all.<sup>1</sup> The central task of philosophy or of idealism in particular is to achieve harmony or reconciliation, to replace dichotomy with "identity."<sup>2</sup> To varying degrees, each of these later idealists believes that, although Kant's philosophy invites the charge of dualism, it also contains resources for overcoming it.

With one exception, the authors contributing to this collection have written their papers with the intention of illuminating the reception and interpretation of Kant's Critical philosophy by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.<sup>3</sup> They represent a wide range of views in their estimation of the claim of the later idealists to have developed or completed a philosophical program already defended by Kant. They also represent a diversity of opinion with regard to the question whether the transformation of idealism from Kant to Hegel counts as an instance of philosophical progress.

Rather than summarize the papers of this volume, I provide in this introduction background material that I hope will aid the reader in appreciating them. Beginning with the "deduction" of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, I offer a guide to key moments in the development of German idealism, highlighting topics covered in greater detail in the essays which follow. In common with the contributions to this volume, my introduction presupposes some familiarity with Kant. It is intended for the reader who, although relatively well acquainted with the transcendental philosophy of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, has not yet explored in any depth the systems of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. The reconstruction I offer, I should also point out, reflects a certain interpretative

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bias. My topic is the development of idealism from Kant to Hegel, and my account of that development is guided by Hegel's portrayal of it in his Jena writings of 1801–3. To be sure, Hegel's is only one of the many ways in which this complicated story can be told.

### I. Fichte's Defense of Idealism over Dogmatism in the *Wissenschaftslehre*

In his two Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794, Fichte announces his intention to dedicate his life to the task of providing a correct rendering of Kant's philosophy. The "transcendental idealism" of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, he writes, is "nothing other than Kantianism properly understood."<sup>4</sup> "Properly understood," Fichte goes on to tell us, Kant's Critical philosophy is not the "dogmatism" it is commonly taken to be, but indeed a form of "idealism."

The dogmatist contends that the cause and explanatory ground of our ideas both of our freedom and of objects of nature derives from outside self-consciousness or intelligence, from what Fichte refers to as the realm of "things-in-themselves."<sup>5</sup> The dogmatist, he writes, "wants . . . to assure to [the thing-in-itself] reality, that is, the necessity of being thought as the ground of all experience, and will do it if he proves that experience can really be explained by means of it, and cannot be explained without it . . ." <sup>6</sup> The idealist reverses this order of explanation and asserts that objects are instead grounded in human intelligence. This does not mean that, according to the idealist, human self-consciousness has the capacity to bring mind-independent objects or things-in-themselves into being. Rather, objects are grounded in human intelligence for the idealist in the sense that self-consciousness grounds or makes possible objects as they are *experienced* or *thought* by us. Because the thing-in-itself is defined as independent of the forms of intelligence, it is for the idealist not a possible object of human experience or consciousness. This is why Fichte tells us that it is "disposed of" in the *Wissenschaftslehre*.<sup>7</sup>

Below I will have more to say about this idealist assumption that objects are determined by or grounded in self-consciousness. But, first, how does Fichte defend his preference for idealism over dogmatism? One problem with dogmatism, he says, is that it cannot account for the "fact of presentation." Dogmatism, that is, has no means of demonstrating how something so utterly unlike our ideas could be their cause and explanatory ground.<sup>8</sup> On the assumption that intellect and object are distinct kinds of thing, intellect and object in Fichte's words, "inhabit two worlds between which there is no bridge."<sup>9</sup>

Fichte goes on to admit, however, that the *consistent* dogmatist has no reason to assume that intellect and object are distinct kinds of thing. For the consistent dogmatist, the soul or intellect is simply the product of interactions among things-in-themselves. But even if what this implies is that the consistent dogmatist need not be concerned about the problem of bridging the gap be-

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tween object and idea referred to above, Fichte draws our attention to a further reason for choosing idealism over dogmatism. Since the consistent dogmatist claims that the soul or intellect is nothing other than a product of interactions among things-in-themselves, the soul or intellect cannot according to this form of dogmatism be free. It is this implication that is decisive for Fichte. Neither idealism nor dogmatism can successfully refute the other on theoretical grounds, he says; our choice between the two systems must therefore in the end be practical. Since a consistent dogmatism implies fatalism, in his view, it is not a position that can be affirmed by those fully conscious of their freedom.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Fichte's Interpretation of Kant as an Idealist

As noted above, Fichte claims that idealism is implied by a proper understanding of Kant's first *Kritik*. This interpretation of Kant as an idealist accords, if not with the "letter" of Kant's philosophy, he says, surely with its "spirit."<sup>11</sup> It is true that there are passages in the *Kritik* that appear to support the dogmatic reading — for example B 1, where Kant asks: "[H]ow should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses partly of themselves produce representations . . . ?"<sup>12</sup> Fichte notes that passages such as this are typically taken to support the view that, according to Kant, our consciousness of objects of experience is "founded upon something outside self-consciousness . . ."<sup>13</sup> But although Kant writes of our being "affected by objects," he cannot mean by "object" a content independent of the synthesizing activity of the intellect, in Fichte's view. He cannot mean this, Fichte insists, because the argument of the transcendental deduction of the first *Kritik* demonstrates that "object" can refer only to the product of an act of combination or synthesis performed by the understanding on some manifold of either pure or empirical intuition. What Kant, in other words, establishes in the transcendental deduction is that in the absence of that synthesizing activity, nothing can be thought or known by us as an object at all.

So Kant's philosophy is idealistic rather than dogmatic, according to Fichte, because the transcendental deduction implies that the thing-in-itself is not a possible object of human consciousness, and therefore not an object we can ever know to cause or explain our ideas. The *Wissenschaftslehre* is a system of idealism because it consistently carries out the implications of Kant's transcendental deduction.<sup>14</sup> In common with Kant's philosophy, it sets out from the "absolutely basic principle" that: "[A]ll consciousness . . . stands under conditions of the original unity of apperception."<sup>15</sup>

## III. Intellectual Intuition and the Deduction of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

Given Fichte's intention to reformulate Kant's transcendental deduction in a way that discourages the dogmatic reading, it is puzzling that in his

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Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre* he chooses the name “intellectual intuition” [*intellektuelle Anschauung*] for the faculty of self-consciousness that Kant in the first *Kritik* refers to as “pure apperception.”<sup>16</sup> This is puzzling for two reasons: First, an intuition that is intellectual, in Kant’s definition, does not depend upon being affected by a given sensible content; it produces its content or objects out of its own intuiting activity. Second, it is precisely because intellectual intuition produces its objects that it can know them, according to Kant, as they are in themselves. As we have seen, however, Fichte rejects the dogmatist’s assumption that we can know things-in-themselves. Furthermore, he is committed to the view that we must in experience rely upon sensible affection. Why, then, is “intellectual intuition” his name for that act of self-consciousness upon which all our acts of consciousness depend? Given his insistence upon the inaccessibility, for our form of knowing, of things-in-themselves, why does he claim that intellectual intuition is a faculty of human cognition at all?

Clearly what intrigues Fichte about Kant’s conception of intellectual intuition is the fact that this form of cognition, in producing objects out of its own activity, is in *immediate* cognitive contact with them.<sup>17</sup> For this form of cognition, that is, there simply is no worry about whether its ideas or representations of things are capable of revealing the nature of the things themselves. Fichte wants to claim that human understanding has this capacity of intellectual intuition and thus this kind of immediate cognitive contact with its objects. But how can a form of understanding that does not create but must be affected by a given sensible content be in immediate cognitive contact with its objects?

The answer to this question requires us to consider once again Fichte’s understanding of the implications of Kant’s transcendental deduction. In §6 of his Second Introduction, Fichte writes that, “certainly our knowledge all proceeds from an *affection*; but not an affection by an *object*. This is Kant’s view and also that of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.” We must indeed be sensibly affected in experience, in Fichte’s view; nonetheless, we cannot claim that what affects us are objects. Why not? Because of the conception of object that follows from the argument of Kant’s transcendental deduction: Something can be an object for consciousness only if synthesized by the faculty of pure apperception. When Fichte suggests that human understanding is in immediate cognitive contact with its object, he therefore means by “object” an *already conceptualized content*. For the idealist in contrast to the dogmatist, the pre-synthesized matter of sensation (the “thing-in-itself”), *qua* unsynthesized, lacks the credentials of objecthood.<sup>18</sup>

So, in Fichte’s view, if we have understood the argument of Kant’s transcendental deduction correctly, there will be for us nothing contradictory about asserting both that we must, in experience, be sensibly affected, and that we are nonetheless in immediate cognitive contact with objects. Our form of intellec-

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tual intuition is in immediate cognitive contact with its objects simply because, as Fichte points out, it is that act of “spontaneity” responsible for combining the given content of sensible intuition into a thinkable content. Intellectual intuition is “by its nature objective,” he says, since by means of its activity objects of consciousness first come to be.<sup>19</sup>

To summarize the points covered so far: Fichte’s project of promoting the “spirit” if not the “letter” of Kant’s idealism is driven by his conviction that idealism must be chosen over dogmatism on practical grounds: Idealism is the only system compatible with our experience of ourselves as free. His strategy for defending idealism relies on what he understands is the idealist implication of Kant’s transcendental deduction: that the object of human consciousness is “posited and determined” by the cognitive faculty, not “the cognitive faculty by the object.”<sup>20</sup> Without denying that our form of intelligence must in experience be sensibly affected, Fichte claims that objectivity is nonetheless the contribution of self-consciousness or intellectual intuition. For our form of understanding, the object of experience is an already conceptualized content, a “conceptualized sensory intuition . . .”<sup>21</sup> As an already conceptualized content, it is a unity of form and content – a unity, Fichte writes in one passage, of the a priori and the a posteriori.<sup>22</sup> The “thing-in-itself” is “disposed of” in the *Wissenschaftslehre* because, as an unconceptualized content, it is unthinkable and therefore of neither explanatory nor justificatory significance.

#### IV. The Incompleteness of the Deduction of the *Wissenschaftslehre*

We can now turn to that feature of Fichte’s idealism that is the most important for our discussion of Hegel below, since it is the feature that Hegel believes is responsible for the inadequacy of Fichte’s idealism. The feature in question is the incompleteness of Fichte’s deduction. On the one hand, Fichte introduces intellectual intuition as the act that demonstrates the absolute self-sufficiency of reason – that in other words demonstrates, in opposition to the dogmatist, that there is nothing (of epistemic import) outside or independent of the “I’s” self-positing. But then he tells us, on the other hand, that the deduction cannot be completed if we rely on this original act of intuition alone. Not only can it not be completed, it cannot even get started, in his view.<sup>23</sup> Intellectual intuition seems not to be self-sufficient after all.

By examining Fichte’s reasoning step-by-step, we can see how he arrives at these conclusions. As noted above, the deduction is supposed to demonstrate that objects are “posited and determined” by the cognitive faculty. Its First Principle, “I am I,” expresses what Fichte refers to as the most “primordial” act of the subject: the intellectual intuition or preconceptual awareness of its own free activity.<sup>24</sup> Anyone can become aware of this activity, he claims, by performing the Cartesian exercise of withdrawing attention from external objects

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of cognition and focusing on the act that must accompany all cognition as a pre-condition: the act of thinking itself. What intellectual intuition reveals, Fichte writes, is that everything that the self is, is “founded in itself, and explained solely from itself, and not from anything outside it . . . ”<sup>25</sup> This intuition in other words is supposed to reveal a subjectivity at the foundation of all acts of consciousness that is itself “absolutely self-sufficient” or “self-positing,” as he famously puts it.<sup>26</sup> As self-positing or self-constructed, this form of subjectivity is nothing other than what it posits itself to be. It is at once the “activity [of positing] and the product of that activity” — “a necessary identity,” in Fichte’s words, “of subject and object: a subject-object . . . ”<sup>27</sup>

But the intellectual intuition or awareness of our own free subjectivity, Fichte claims, is not yet knowledge or even consciousness of any object. What is more, intellectual intuition can provide no evidence in support of the idealist’s central hypothesis: that out of the “I’s” self-positing activity, we deduce “*specific* presentations: of a world, of a material, spatially located world existing without our aid . . . ”<sup>28</sup> We can expect to derive evidence for this hypothesis, he says, only from the deduction itself. The deduction is supposed to demonstrate, then, that the self-positing “I am I” not merely accompanies but completely determines all objects of consciousness in what Fichte sometimes characterizes as its own capacity for self-limitation or self-legislation.<sup>29</sup>

But no sooner does Fichte assert the “absolute” self-sufficiency of the “I am I” than he seems to need to take it back. Although the first act is necessary for the possibility of all consciousness, it is not in his judgment sufficient. Taken in isolation, he says, the “I am I” is indeterminate or empty. As mentioned above, it is not yet even an act of consciousness. This is because consciousness according to Fichte is necessarily consciousness of *something*, of some *object*. Consciousness therefore requires some means of distinguishing the self-consciousness that thinks from the thing that is thought. In Fichte’s words, “If I am to present anything at all, I must oppose it to the presenting self.”<sup>30</sup> As we have just seen, however, what the preconscious awareness or act of intellectual intuition discloses is not opposition but identity: the identity of the subject that posits and the product of its positing. In order to proceed from the self-positing activity of the “I” to a deduction of objects of consciousness, Fichte tells us that a second and equally absolute or self-sufficient act or principle must be introduced: the principle that “not-I is not equal to I.” The first act or “I am I” only gains determination (is only able to make the transition from the preconscious awareness of itself as a free subjectivity to a consciousness of objects) when brought into relation to something other than itself: an equally absolute “not-I.”<sup>31</sup>

As it turns out, then, we cannot simply proceed from the “I am I” to specific presentations or objects, in Fichte’s view. In absence of the “not-I,” “I am I” is indeterminate: it is neither already a consciousness of objects, nor capable of

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providing for their deduction. What was first set up as the fundamental principle of the deduction, "I am I," for this reason ends up depending for its determination on something else. And this second principle, Fichte goes on to argue, in turn requires a third. In the absence of a third principle, the second principle, too, is insufficiently determinate. What the third principle states is that neither the first nor the second principle is the nullification of the other. The "not-I" is required if the first principle is to have determination and if we are to be able to deduce objects, but it does not cancel out or replace the first principle. It cannot do this, because there of course can be no "not-I" without an "I." According to the third principle, then, the "I" is only *in part* "not-I," and vice versa. So, just as the second principle is necessary for the determination of the first, the third principle is necessary for the determination of the second. With each additional positing we achieve further determination or limitation. In Fichte's words, what is "*first set up as a fundamental principle and directly demonstrated in consciousness is impossible unless something else occurs along with it, and . . . this something else is impossible unless a third something also takes place, and so on until the conditions of what was first exhibited are completely exhausted, and this latter is, with respect to its possibility, fully intelligible.*" Its course is an unbroken progression from condition to condition; each condition becomes, in turn, a conditioned whose condition must be sought out."<sup>32</sup>

We can perhaps now understand why Fichte comes to admit that the deduction of the *Wissenschaftslehre* must remain incomplete. The claim that each condition "becomes . . . a conditioned whose condition must be sought out," suggests that on his account the deduction not only does not begin with a condition that is itself unconditioned, but also never concludes with one. The "I" of the intellectual intuition which was initially presented as "absolutely self-sufficient" and so responsible for completely determining or grounding the existence of all "specific presentations," turns out on Fichte's own estimation to at best determine only what presentations *ought* to be produced or posited. The "I," he writes, "is posited as what *ought* to contain within itself the ground of the existence of the 'not-I'."<sup>33</sup> The deduction is thus most accurately described as a striving or task, because, as Fichte puts it, the "absolutely posited is impossible."<sup>34</sup>

## V. Hegel on the Deduction of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*

As noted above, the incompleteness of Fichte's deduction is in Hegel's judgment responsible for the inadequacy of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.<sup>35</sup> By reviewing Hegel's reasons for this assessment, we can derive clues for understanding what motivates his own alternative.

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Hegel correctly represents Fichte's idealism as an attempt to dispense with things-in-themselves, that is, as an attempt to argue against the dogmatist that objects are posited and produced by the "I" and that there is nothing outside the "I's" self-positing.<sup>36</sup> In opposition to the dualism assumed by "ordinary" consciousness between what Hegel calls "pure consciousness" (the "I" of intellectual intuition) and (objects of) "empirical consciousness," Fichte sets out to demonstrate that objects of empirical consciousness are, in Hegel's words, "completely grounded in, and not just conditioned by, pure consciousness . . ." <sup>37</sup> This is, in Hegel's estimation, a worthwhile undertaking; moreover, he believes that Fichte starts off on the right track by grounding his system in intellectual intuition, the faculty Hegel describes as "pure thinking of itself, pure self-consciousness, I = I, I am."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Fichte's First Principle, "I = I," Hegel writes, is "the authentic principle of speculation boldly expressed."<sup>39</sup>

But Fichte is not successful in demonstrating what he sets out to demonstrate: that objects of empirical consciousness are posited by self-consciousness and as such "completely grounded in" self-consciousness. As we have just seen, this seems to be Fichte's assessment of the deduction of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and it is Hegel's as well. Far from self-sufficient, the act of self-positing with which the deduction begins turns out to be an expression of deficiency and dependency.

The cause of this failure, according to Hegel, is neither Fichte's goal of dispensing with the thing-in-itself, nor his insight that intellectual intuition is the act with which the deduction must begin. Responsible for the failure, rather, is Fichte's particular conception of that act. On the one hand, he correctly discovers in the intellectual intuition of the activity of self-consciousness grounds for asserting an "identity" between subject and object: The self-positing "I" is not dependent upon any object outside itself; what it is, is completely determined by its act of positing. In addition, Fichte correctly envisions the project of his deduction as demonstrating, against the dogmatist, that objects of empirical consciousness are grounded in the positing activity of the "I" and that therefore the dualism of pure self-consciousness and objects of empirical consciousness is derivative (a product of abstraction) rather than original. Where Fichte goes wrong, in Hegel's judgment, is in characterizing the first act or principle of the deduction as empty and in need of completion by further independent acts of positing. The problem is not Fichte's recognition that all consciousness presupposes some way of distinguishing the "I" that presents and the thing presented (presupposes, that is to say, an opposition between the "I" and the "not-I"). The problem is rather his insistence that we can only achieve such opposition by appealing *outside* the first act to a second, and then a third, and so forth. The problem, in other words, is Fichte's conviction that opposition and therefore determination is *not already given in or a moment of the original act of the "I" itself*.



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One of the ways in which Hegel expresses this objection is to say that Fichte's understanding of the act of intellectual intuition is limited by his adherence to the "logic of reflection." According to the logic of reflection, "A = A" is an expression of a "pure unity" (unity without opposition). Hegel contrasts this with the interpretation of "speculative logic," which takes "A = A" to express both identity and opposition. For speculative logic, in his words, "A = A contains the difference of A as subject and A as object together with their identity . . ." Presumably the "difference" Hegel has in mind here refers to the distinction presupposed in this judgment between the "A" that is the subject-concept and the "A" that is the predicate-concept.<sup>40</sup> Fichte's "I = I" is properly characterized as a "pure unity" or a "unity in abstraction from opposition," then, just because it does not recognize this difference, or just because it is determined by the logic of reflection.

This is why Fichte's idealism is unsuccessful in sustaining its thesis, against the dogmatist, of the self-sufficiency of self-consciousness or of the "identity" of subject and object. Because of his adherence to the logic of reflection, Fichte must assume that the "I" and the "not-I" are absolutely opposed. Did he not rely on this assumption, Hegel points out, he would not need to portray the self-positing act of the "I" with which his deduction begins as deficient or empty, as dependent for its determination upon further acts not derivable from the first. It is in other words because Fichte adheres to the logic of reflection that the emptiness or deficiency of the "I," its absolute opposition to the "not-I," must become, in Hegel's words, "the principle of [the deduction's] advance . . ." <sup>41</sup>

Far from successful in providing an alternative to dogmatism, therefore, Fichte is in a certain respect unable to escape its hold. This is because, far from demonstrating that objects are "completely determined" by self-consciousness, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is committed to the thesis that, as Hegel puts it, "[T]he object of the theoretical faculty necessarily contains something not determined by the Ego."<sup>42</sup> Again, Fichte's deduction is unable to achieve its aim because it is carried out within the narrow confines of the logic of reflection. Fichte has no option but to interpret the "I" as a pure identity or unity, as containing within itself no difference or opposition. He therefore cannot understand the "I" of intellectual intuition to express an original identity of subject and object. As Hegel says, the "I" for Fichte remains something "subjective": a "subjective Subject-Object."<sup>43</sup>

## VI. Hegel on the Inadequacy of Fichte's Practical Philosophy

Hegel's assessment of Fichte's idealism is no more positive when its object is the deduction of Fichte's practical philosophy. Once again deriving inspiration from Kant, Fichte insists that, in its practical employment, reason has a special kind of causal power, the power to bring "moral objects" (moral intentions and behaviors) into being.<sup>44</sup> His hope is that, armed with this special productive

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power, practical reason will succeed where theoretical reason failed: in establishing the identity of the “I” and the “not-I” or in demonstrating that in the realm of the practical the object is absolutely determined by the subject. But Fichte ends up conceding failure in this domain as well. In effect, he gets caught between contradictory aims: On the one hand, he seeks to establish, against the dogmatist or dualist, the self-sufficiency of practical reason. To this end, he portrays practical reason as the bearer of objectivity, as responsible for positing its objects. On the other hand, he insists that in order to gain determination practical reason requires relation to something absolutely opposed to itself—something that *cannot* merely be the product of its own positing. As we have seen, these contradictory demands are what undermine his effort to deduce the “not-I” from the “I” in the theoretical domain, and they are equally destructive of his effort in the domain of the practical.<sup>45</sup> Fichte thus finds himself in the position of having to admit that practical reason is no more self-sufficient than its theoretical counterpart. Practical reason *ought* to have the power to realize morality, it *ought* to be able to bring our empirical nature into conformity with its demands as well as insure that our good intentions are rewarded with happiness. But, in Hegel’s words, “this supreme demand remains, in Fichte’s system, a demand.”<sup>46</sup>

We might sum up Hegel’s critique of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in the following way: Fichte is unable to demonstrate the identity of self-consciousness and objects of empirical consciousness, according to Hegel, because of a feature his conception of self-consciousness shares with Kant’s. The “I” of Fichte’s intellectual intuition and the “I think” of Kant’s discursive understanding, rather than self-sufficient, are in fact essentially *dependent* forms of consciousness. For both philosophers, Hegel tells us, the unity or harmony of the “I” and the “not-I” is at best an idea, postulated as a task, and as a task that can never be completed. It cannot be completed because this would violate a principle apparently dearer to both philosophers than the goal of identity: namely, the principle required by the logic of reflection of the “absolute opposition” of the “I” and the “not-I.” The demand for harmony in both idealisms thus not only cannot be realized, it is a “self-destructive” demand, according to Hegel. It is “self-destructive,” he says, because it is a demand that can only be met at the expense of the logic of reflection. Its fulfillment, for Fichte as well as Kant, therefore “must not happen.”<sup>47</sup>

## VII. The Influence of Schelling on the Young Hegel

We have seen that since the “I” of intellectual intuition is for Fichte a dependent form of consciousness, absolutely opposed to the “not-I” upon which it must rely for determination, it remains ultimately “subjective” on Hegel’s characterization. But what about the “not-I” of Fichte’s idealism? It is as much