

## *Hegel's Epistemology?*

**I**N THIS chapter we approach the question of the epistemological security of Hegel's philosophical system, the system which receives its final and most complete expression in Hegel's *Encyclopedia*. This baroque system has been too well explored by others to require, and is too complex to allow, anything but the briefest of summaries here. Its governing principle, which is supposed by Hegel to encompass and explain everything, is Absolute Spirit or Hegel's version of the God of Christianity. Each of the three parts of the *Encyclopedia* captures an essential aspect of the constitution or self-movement of Absolute Spirit. The Logic expounds Absolute Spirit as the divine logos—an ascending, self-moving conceptual hierarchy which permeates and explains all natural and spiritual phenomena. It expounds this divine logos in abstraction from such phenomena or, in Hegel's words, in the form of "God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of Nature and a finite Spirit."<sup>1</sup> The Philosophy of Nature expounds the self-externalization of the divine logos in Nature, which is accordingly ordered in an ascending, self-developing hierarchy mirroring the earlier stages of the ascending, self-moving conceptual hierarchy of the divine logos expounded in the Logic. This natural hierarchy includes merely mechanical and physical phenomena at the lower end and organic ones at the higher end. The Philosophy of Spirit continues to expound the realization of the divine logos, but at the higher level of mental or spiritual phenomena, which are accordingly ordered in an ascending, self-developing hierarchy corresponding to the later stages of the ascending, self-moving conceptual hierarchy of the divine logos. In doing so, it ascends from general mental characteristics of men to the social and political institutions of the state and their historical development and finally to art, religion, and philosophy, which express the truth about Absolute Spirit and hence constitute Absolute Spirit's return to itself and its achievement of an essential

knowledge of its own nature. This philosophical system can be understood, on one level at least, as a defense or reworking of the Christian conception of God. In particular, its three parts represent an attempt to make sense of the Christian doctrine of a triune God: the Logic depicts God as he is in himself, the Philosophy of Nature depicts God the Son, and the Philosophy of Spirit depicts God the Holy Spirit.

Now it is not, I think, widely recognized that Hegel was seriously concerned about, or made significant efforts to ensure, the epistemological security of this extraordinary philosophical system. A first acquaintance with his works often produces the impression that it was erected in blissful disregard of epistemological problems, and that its metaphysical extravagance may be largely attributable to this fact. The feeling easily arises that Hegel might have spared himself much onerous and futile philosophical labor if only he had read his Hume a little more attentively. In something like this spirit Scruton recently wrote: "Much of Hegel's metaphysics develops independently of any epistemological basis. He avoids the first-person standpoint of Descartes not through any rival theory of knowledge, but by a process of abstraction which, because it abolishes the individual, leaves no evident room for the theory of knowledge at all. This makes Hegel's metaphysics so vulnerable to skeptical attack that it has now little to bequeath us but its poetry."<sup>2</sup>

The verdict of many Hegel specialists on the issue of Hegel's relation to epistemology has not been so very different. Thus many books on his philosophy simply ignore the question of his epistemology and even so sympathetic and generally reliable a critic as Baillie explicitly argues that Hegel is naively unconcerned about epistemological difficulties. According to Baillie, Hegel, "acting on the principle which he . . . described as learning to swim by entering the water . . . at once assumes that the knowledge which philosophy professes to furnish is possible, is not to be sought or justified by a preliminary inquiry, but has simply to be expounded and exhibited."<sup>3</sup> On Baillie's reading, "whether thought is able to know, or how far it can know being at all, is a problem which from the start [Hegel] never seems to have considered, at any rate never discussed at length."<sup>4</sup> Hegel's confidence in his philosophical principle was accordingly based on nothing more than the feeling that, as an explanation of reality, it "agreed with the needs of religion and the general conclusions of the philosophy of his time."<sup>5</sup> In sum, for Baillie's Hegel "there was . . . no initial problem regarding knowledge."<sup>6</sup>

In short, there is a widespread assumption that Hegel showed little or no interest in securing his system against epistemological challenges in general or skeptical attacks in particular. However, this common view is a misconception on a grand scale. An absolutely fundamental feature of Hegel's thought from as early as his first years in Jena was his develop-

ment of a clear and exacting set of epistemological standards and his devotion of a large portion of his philosophical energies to meeting these standards on behalf of his own philosophical system. This epistemological struggle was first and foremost an attempt to meet the challenge of skepticism as Hegel conceived it, and his Jena years, specifically 1802–1807, constituted the period of its greatest intensity. Both of these facts are recorded in an unlikely but interesting source—a biographical poem composed in Hegel's honor in 1826 by the heavy Teutonic hand of his friend, Friedrich Foerster:

And so our hero announced himself in early years,  
When the skeptics had sent him serpents of doubt.  
Faith! He crushes the monsters like Goettingen sausages,  
And only the empty husk of skepticism remained behind.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Hegel's epistemological strivings are largely concentrated, and certainly most readily perceptible, in works of the Jena period, many of which have been relatively neglected until recently, goes some way toward explaining the common oversight of this quite fundamental aspect of his thought. Once one recognizes the form taken by his epistemology in these early works, though, his concern with the subject becomes readily perceptible in later writings as well.

Hegel's concern to confront epistemological difficulties in general and skeptical ones in particular in a sense puts him in the mainstream of German idealism. For contrary to another fairly widespread misapprehension, the German idealists as a group were by no means epistemologically irresponsible, dogmatic system-builders who carelessly left their systems open to skeptical attack. They were in fact distinguished by a shared recognition of the importance of skepticism and by a determined effort to answer it on behalf of their systems.<sup>8</sup> So much so that whether or not Fichte's comment is true of philosophy in general, a strong case can certainly be made for its truth of the development of German idealism from Kant to Hegel: "It cannot be denied that philosophical reason owes every noticeable advance it has ever made to the observations of skepticism on the precariousness of the position where it has for the moment come to rest."<sup>9</sup> Kant's debt to the skepticism of Hume, who by Kant's own confession "first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigation in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction," is of course well known.<sup>10</sup> Less well known is the way in which Reinhold attempted to reform Kantian idealism by reconstructing it systematically on the foundation of a single, self-evident principle in response to his realization that Kant's own formulation of his idealism had left it resting on various presuppositions vulnerable to skeptical attack. Again, it was largely in response to criticisms of Reinhold's fundamental

principle, the "proposition of consciousness," raised by the soi-disant skeptic Schulze that Fichte sought to derive that principle from an epistemologically firmer foundation, the deed or *Tathandlung* of the self's self-positing, and so generated his own idealist system.<sup>11</sup> And even Schelling paid lip service to this tradition of respect for skepticism, saying that skepticism was the necessary starting point of transcendental philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Hegel's concern to confront skepticism puts him in this tradition only "in a sense," though, because he has a distinctive and unusually well-thought-out conception of the skeptical difficulties which it is important to solve and, as we shall see, a quite original set of proposals for solving them having little in common with the solutions offered by his idealist predecessors.

Of course, Hegel's writings undeniably contain much which offers *prima facie* support for the common view that he was indifferent to skeptical or other epistemological difficulties. For example, there appears to be a shameless lack of self-criticism in his method of Critique as this is described and practiced in the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, a method which consists essentially in presupposing the truth of his own system and then tracing hints of its standpoint in the works of other modern philosophers as a means to their evaluation.<sup>13</sup> Thus Haym interprets this method naturally enough as an expression of Hegel's dogmatic and uncritical conviction in the truth of his own philosophical principle.<sup>14</sup> Again, in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* Hegel says of his and Schelling's philosophy and its fundamental principle of identity: "There is . . . no truth in the claim that the new philosophy attempts to ground (*ergruenden*) the possibility of the identity presupposed in common life, for it does nothing but express and recognize that presupposed identity."<sup>15</sup> And in *The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy* he attacks the "tendency to give and establish by grounds" (*Begründungs- und Ergründungstendenz*) in Reinhold's philosophy. Again, in the *Encyclopedia* and elsewhere Hegel attacks the Kantian project of critically investigating our faculty of knowledge in advance of applying it, resting the attack on the argument that "the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge" and that "to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim."<sup>16</sup> This remark, it will be recalled, was one of Baillie's grounds for finding Hegel uninterested in epistemology. However, it will become clear that all these aspects of Hegel's work are to be understood not as signs of a general lack of interest in or hostility toward epistemology but at most as rejections of certain conceptions of how it should be done.

A glance at the *Phenomenology* suffices to raise some serious doubts

about the adequacy of the common view that Hegel acknowledged no epistemological responsibilities toward his philosophical system. Schelling, whose philosophy of identity had a decisive and lasting influence on Hegel, really was guilty of being cavalier in matters epistemological in much the way that Hegel is often wrongly supposed to have been. Thus Schelling accepted his philosophy of identity in a crudely dogmatic manner as the gift of an alleged faculty of "intellectual intuition," understood as an unteachable, absolute precondition of philosophical insight the possession of which justified the philosopher in a complete disregard of all other viewpoints.<sup>17</sup> In the *Phenomenology* Hegel alludes to this dogmatic attitude disparagingly as "the rapturous enthusiasm which, like a shot from a pistol, begins straight away with absolute knowledge, and makes short work of other standpoints by declaring that it takes no notice of them."<sup>18</sup> And he criticizes such an attitude on the grounds that the standpoints which it dogmatically dismisses as the products of an inferior sort of cognition lacking its truth may with no less right turn round and dismiss *it* on the ground that it is inferior to *them* and lacks *their* truth, since "*one* bare assurance is worth just as much as another."<sup>19</sup> This dissatisfaction with Schelling's epistemological carelessness in fact antedates the *Phenomenology* by several years—going back to Hegel's early days in Jena, when he and Schelling were jointly developing the philosophy of identity. Again, Hegel in the *Phenomenology* writes dismissively of a strategy which, like that seemingly at work in his own earlier method of Critique, seeks to establish Philosophical Science over against alternative viewpoints by "appeal to whatever intimations of something better it may detect in the cognition that is without truth, to the signs which point in the direction of Science."<sup>20</sup> His objection is fundamentally that such a strategy, like Schelling's, relies on a dogmatic presupposition of the truth of Philosophical Science and has Philosophical Science "appealing to itself, and to itself in the mode in which it exists in the cognition that is without truth"—something which contrary viewpoints might quite well do too, and with no less right.<sup>21</sup> Again, Hegel refers to the *Phenomenology* as the place where he gives a *justification* of his Science or undertakes to *prove the necessity* of its philosophical standpoint.<sup>22</sup> Are we simply to dismiss all these concerns of the *Phenomenology* as the ephemeral stirrings of an otherwise dormant epistemological conscience? Surely not.

Hegel's impatience with Schelling's dogmatic appeal to intellectual intuition is part of a consistent pattern in his writings of rejecting such epistemological shortcuts. We might usefully mention a few of the other epistemological shortcuts offered by his contemporaries which Hegel explicitly rejects, for this will serve to reinforce the point that he is unlikely to have been guilty of epistemological carelessness himself. Hegel offers

extended criticism of Jacobi's appeal to immediate knowledge, faith, or feeling as the guarantor of truth.<sup>23</sup> He is equally dismissive of the similar epistemological shortcuts of his Romantic contemporaries: Friedrich von Schlegel's appeal to an immediate knowledge of God, Novalis's conviction that the true infinite lies in the depth of the human soul, Schleiermacher's foundation of religion on a feeling of absolute dependence, an immediate consciousness of a relationship of immediate existence, and so forth.<sup>24</sup> Nor does Hegel accord any value to appeals to common sense of the kind which flourished in the Germany of his day as imports from the Scottish common sense philosophers.<sup>25</sup> The following are some of Hegel's most important objections to such epistemological shortcuts. First, he objects that merely labeling our firmest and dearest convictions products of intellectual intuition, immediate knowledge, common sense, and the like, or finding some special introspectible property of these convictions which we identify by such titles, does nothing to show that these convictions are actually true of the world.<sup>26</sup> Second, he points out that titles of this kind can be conscientiously applied by different people to quite different and indeed inconsistent propositions.<sup>27</sup> Third, he argues that the reliance on such epistemological shortcuts leads to an unrestrained, arrogant, self-righteous dogmatism.<sup>28</sup>

The common view that Hegel was careless about epistemology becomes still less plausible when one considers the space and energy which he devoted to the consideration of skepticism in its various forms from an early point in his philosophical career and the sophisticated and sympathetic understanding of large parts of the skeptical tradition at which he arrived.<sup>29</sup> Is it likely that someone in this position would have failed to do his utmost to ensure that his own philosophical system remained invulnerable to the epistemological difficulties which he saw arising out of skepticism? Once again the answer must be no.

Hegel's understanding of the skeptical tradition sketched in Part One provides a key with which to unlock his epistemological enterprise. Once we recognize which epistemological problems posed within the skeptical tradition were considered by Hegel to merit attention, we can find in his work an elaborate network of defenses erected to protect his philosophical system against them. This network of defenses was put in place early on in Hegel's career, but remained thereafter as a constant, if easily overlooked, aspect of his thought.

On the basis of Hegel's critical interpretation of the skeptical tradition considered in Part One and his account of the historical role of a skeptical culture considered in Part Two, we may reasonably predict that there will be two skeptical problems which he feels bound to answer on behalf of his own philosophical system above all: the ancient skeptic's problems of equipollence in general and concept-instantiation in particular. The

interesting claim made by Hegel in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* and in the *History of Philosophy*, that the content of his own philosophical system is invulnerable to the attacks of even the genuine ancient form of skepticism, will mean specifically that his system is invulnerable to the problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation. He articulates that claim as follows in the *History of Philosophy*: "The operations of skepticism are undoubtedly directed against the finite. But however much force . . . its negative dialectic may have against the properly-speaking dogmatic knowledge of the Understanding, its attacks against the true infinite of the Speculative Idea are most feeble and unsatisfactory."<sup>30</sup>

On the same basis we can also predict that Hegel will *not* feel obliged to spend time defending his system against the difficulties distinctive of the modern skeptics, founded as these are on dogmatic presuppositions which themselves succumb to the genuine skeptical problems of the ancient skeptics. In particular, he will feel no need to answer modern skepticism's veil of perception problem since it is based on the various dogmatic assumptions which we considered in Part One. And this allows us to clear up one source of Scruton's misunderstanding of Hegel's attitude toward epistemology immediately. The fact that Hegel avoids "the first-person standpoint of Descartes," as Scruton correctly says he does, should not be seen as an indication that he abandons an interest in epistemology in general or in the task of confronting skeptical difficulties in particular, as Scruton wrongly infers. On the contrary, it is quite consistent with, and perhaps even a symptom of, Hegel's respect for and concern with skepticism—namely the radical skepticism of the ancients which, taken to its logical conclusion, undermines the Cartesian's dogmatic confidence in his own mental states or *cogitationes*.

If Hegel was concerned that his philosophical system should confront and withstand the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation, as I have suggested, then we should be able to detect these specific concerns in his writings. And indeed once we know to look for them, they become readily apparent in texts from the Jena period on.

Consider first the problem of equipollence. Throughout his career Hegel was particularly concerned to deal with a special case of this problem—the special case in which an equal balance of arguments for and against a claim arises for the reason and in the sense that the claim is advanced *without any* supporting arguments and is then confronted by a contrary claim advanced in the same way.<sup>31</sup> Hegel gives an early and explicit statement of this special case of the equipollence problem when he discusses ancient skepticism in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy*. There he says that the fourth of the five tropes of Agrippa "concerns *presuppositions* (*Voraussetzungen*)—against the dogmatists who in

order to avoid being driven into an infinite regress posit something as simply first and unproven, and whom the skeptics immediately imitate by positing the opposite of that presupposition with just the same right."<sup>32</sup> It is crucial to note Hegel's concern with this special case of the skeptical equipollence problem if one is to recognize his elaborate attempts to answer skepticism in both earlier and later works for what they are.

In his later works, for example, Hegel often expresses a determination that his own philosophical system should not be or have *presuppositions*. Thus the very first paragraph of the *Encyclopedia* states that philosophy may not make "presuppositions and assurances (*Voraussetzungen und Versicherungen*)" and notes that this appears to cause a difficulty for the beginning of philosophy, "since a beginning, as an immediate, makes its presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) or rather is one itself."<sup>33</sup> The presuppositions which Hegel is concerned to avoid here and elsewhere are not simply claims put forward without further grounds, as interpreters have tended naturally enough to assume.<sup>34</sup> Hegel does not see the making of such claims as a problem *in itself*. Hence in early texts, as we saw, he dismisses the "tendency to give and establish by grounds" in philosophy and says of his own philosophy that "there is . . . no truth in the claim that the new philosophy attempts to ground the possibility of the identity presupposed in common life, for it does nothing but express and recognize that presupposed identity." And in the *Encyclopedia* he says that the beginning of his philosophical system, pure Being, "cannot be anything mediated or further determined."<sup>35</sup> No, the problem of presupposition with which Hegel is really concerned is the special case of the ancient skeptical equipollence problem which he early in his career identifies in the fourth trope of Agrippa: the problem of advancing a claim without further grounds *and having it confronted with an opposite claim advanced in the same way and therefore with equal right*. That this more specific problem of presupposition is the problem Hegel has in mind in the *Encyclopedia* is shown by the fact that shortly after his initial mention of the problem at the start of the work he explains that no provisional explication of philosophy is possible because it would be no more than "a tissue of presuppositions, assurances, and rationalizations (*Voraussetzungen, Versicherungen, und Raesonnements*)—that is, of contingent claims, over against which with the same right the opposite claims could be assured to hold (*versichert*)."<sup>36</sup>

Turning to earlier texts, the reader will recall that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel raises an objection both to a position like Schelling's, which simply asserts the truth of its own philosophy and the superiority of its form of cognition while dismissing the claims of other viewpoints as the products of an inferior sort of cognition, and to a position which seeks



to establish its philosophy over against competing viewpoints by finding in them intimations of its philosophy's true account of things. Note, first of all, that both these positions are themselves oriented toward coping with the circumstance that there exist alternative viewpoints opposed to a philosophical viewpoint—a circumstance which threatens to give rise to an equipollence problem for that philosophical viewpoint. Second, note that Hegel objects to the former position explicitly, and to the latter implicitly, that they rest on a dogmatic assurance of the truth and superiority of their philosophical viewpoints which other alternative viewpoints might with no less right mimic on their own behalf, since “one bare assurance (*Versichern*) is worth just as much as another.” This objection is an application of the special case of the equipollence problem found in the fourth trope of Agrippa, to which Hegel drew attention explicitly a few years prior to writing the *Phenomenology* in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy*. In short, two positions which might be adopted in order to defend a philosophical viewpoint against the threat of equipollence skepticism succumb to it themselves. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel's proposal for answering the initial skeptical threat to his own Philosophical Science in such a way that the answer will *not* itself succumb to that threat is as follows. It will not prove necessary for Philosophical Science to assume its own truth and the superiority of its form of cognition in order to dismiss competing viewpoints as an inferior sort of cognition, or to assume its own truth and superiority in order to interpret and evaluate those competing viewpoints as mere intimations of its truth, either of which approaches itself falls victim to the kind of skeptical equipollence problem it was supposed to prevent. And this will not prove necessary because the alternative viewpoints which these approaches strive in vain to cope with in a sense condemn themselves even before Philosophical Science passes an extraneous verdict upon them; they show themselves to be self-defeating. This is Hegel's idea when he argues that Philosophical Science need not rely on applying an external criterion to these alternative viewpoints which they might not accept, since “consciousness [the alternative viewpoints] provides its own criterion within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself”—that is, a comparison in which it will always be found to be in conflict or contradiction with itself.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed five years before writing the *Phenomenology* Hegel was already expressing the same concern that the skeptical equipollence problem seemed to threaten his Philosophical Science and was already indicating a strikingly similar strategy for solving this problem. Thus in the 1802 essay *On the Nature of Philosophical Critique in General and Its Relation to the Present Condition of Philosophy in Particular* (hereafter *On the Nature of Philosophical Critique*) Hegel makes the point that his

method of Critique cannot be applied to viewpoints which lack all traces of his own philosophical principle since it essentially consists in indicating such traces. He suggests that Critique's only recourse in these cases is therefore simply to discard the viewpoints in question. However, he points out that this generates a problem in that it leaves his philosophical principle and these discarded viewpoints facing one another with nothing in common:

Because reciprocal recognition is hereby eliminated, there are only two subjectivities facing one another. Views which share nothing in common come forth just for this reason with equal right, and Critique has thus declared itself to be a nullity and turned itself into something subjective, by declaring the viewpoint to be judged to be anything but philosophy, while the viewpoint, on the other hand, claims to be nothing but philosophy, and its claim appears to be a one-sided decree . . . Its judgment is an appeal to the ideal of philosophy which, however, because it is not recognized by the adversary, becomes an alien court for the latter.<sup>38</sup>

Hegel first discusses the fourth trope of Agrippa version of the skeptical equipollence problem in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* at about the same date as this passage, and it is fairly clear that in this passage he is expressing concern about Philosophical Science's apparent vulnerability to such a version of the equipollence problem. This is the same concern which we have seen him to express a few years later in the *Phenomenology* and later still in the *Encyclopedia*. In *On the Nature of Philosophical Critique*, as in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel proposes to solve this problem for Philosophical Science by showing that the viewpoints opposed to Philosophical Science condemn themselves or are self-defeating in such a way that Philosophical Science has no need to apply an extraneous standard to them: "There is nothing to do but to recount how this negative side [i.e., the opposed viewpoints] expresses itself and confesses its nothingness (*Nichtssein*); and since it cannot fail to happen that what is nothing at the start in its development appears more and more as nothing . . . in this way Critique will, through this continuous construction proceeding from the first nullity, reconcile again even that incapacity which could see in Critique's initial claim nothing but high-handedness and arbitrariness."<sup>39</sup>

This makes it clear that Hegel's early method of Critique, understood as the presupposition of the truth of his own philosophical principle and the subsequent investigation of the extent to which it is anticipated in the philosophies of his contemporaries as a means to their evaluation, by no means testifies to a dogmatic and uncritical confidence in that principle on Hegel's part, as Haym takes it to. For the discipline of Critique was understood by Hegel from the start to be complemented by a discipline

providing a solution to the skeptical problem of equipollence which seemed to afflict his philosophical principle because of the availability of competing viewpoints. This solution pursued the strategy of showing competing viewpoints to be self-condemning or self-defeating. While Hegel was actively committed to the project of Critique and throughout most of the Jena period the discipline which provided this solution was his early Logic. By the end of the Jena period it was his *Phenomenology*.

Turning to the skeptical problem of concept-instantiation, we can easily see that Hegel was concerned from his early years in Jena to answer this problem on behalf of his own philosophical principle. For example, in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* he offers extensive criticism of what is in effect an attempt to apply a dogmatic version of the skeptical problem of concept-instantiation to the content of his own philosophical principle. This attempt is Schulze's objection that all metaphysical or "rational knowing aims . . . at *plucking out* a being from a thinking or existence from concepts."<sup>40</sup>

Hegel was, then, indeed concerned from the early Jena period on that his own philosophical principle should meet the epistemological standard of being invulnerable to the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation. Having touched on one strategy by means of which he hoped to ensure this invulnerability with respect to the equipollence problem in general, we should now give a more comprehensive indication of the network of defenses which he erected in order to defend his own philosophical system against these two skeptical problems.

Roughly speaking, Hegel's attempt to defend his philosophical system against the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation works on two fronts. First, Hegel has answers to these problems which focus directly on alleged special characteristics of the content of his philosophical system. These answers take the form indicated in Part One of exploiting the thought that there are certain natural presuppositions which skeptics must make about any given claim to which they apply these problems, but which do not in fact hold for the claim which articulates Hegel's own system. Hegel already embraces these answers unequivocally in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy*. Thus, as we noted, application of the equipollence problem to a claim presupposes that the claim has a negation. But despite the naturalness of this presupposition, Hegel holds it to be false of the single claim which articulates his own philosophical system.<sup>41</sup> And for this reason he supposes the equipollence problem to be inapplicable to that claim. This, in essence, is the point of his argument in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* that the claim of his own system, the Rational, does not fall victim to the version of the equipollence problem found in the fourth trope of Agrippa, which holds that an ungrounded presupposition faces the diffi-

culty that its opposite may be presupposed in an ungrounded way with equal right, because the claim of his own system or the Rational “has no opposite.”<sup>42</sup> Again, application of the concept-instantiation problem to a given concept presupposes that that concept is distinct from the things in the world which instantiate it in such a way that it could exist without having any such instantiation. This presupposition, though again natural, is one which Hegel holds to be false of the single concept which articulates the claim of his system.<sup>43</sup> For this reason he supposes the concept-instantiation problem to be inapplicable to that claim. This is Hegel’s line of thought when in *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* he counters Schulze’s attempt to raise a concept-instantiation problem about the claim of his system by observing that Schulze’s attempt rests on the dogma, untrue of that claim, that “concept and object are not one.”<sup>44</sup> We shall take a closer look at this first front in Hegel’s defense of his own philosophical system against the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation in Chapter Seven.

The second front on which Hegel seeks to defend his system against the skeptical problems focuses directly on alleged special characteristics of viewpoints *other than* the viewpoint of his own system. It would seem that an equipollence problem or anything like it could arise for the claim of Hegel’s own system only if there were coherent alternative viewpoints. As we have seen, Hegel holds that one alternative viewpoint essential to any application of the equipollence problem as standardly conceived to the claim of his own system does not exist: that claim’s negation. But Hegel goes further than this in his effort to show that neither the equipollence problem nor anything like it could arise for his own claim, by undertaking to demonstrate that *there are no coherent alternative viewpoints whatever*. This is the fundamental strategy for answering the equipollence problem which we found advocated in both the *Phenomenology* and *On the Nature of Philosophical Critique*—the strategy described in the former text as one of showing that “consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself,” a criterion with which it always stands in internal contradiction, and in the latter text as one of showing “how this negative side expresses itself and confesses its nothingness.” Hegel thus envisages a demonstration of the “nothingness” or incoherence of all alternative viewpoints as a solution to the threat of equipollence problems or similar problems facing his system. In *The Relation of Skepticism to Philosophy* such a destructive demonstration is said to be an essential side of any genuine philosophy.<sup>45</sup> During the Jena period this destructive demonstration was given first in the early Logic and later in the *Phenomenology*. Somewhat analogously, Hegel offers a solution to the problem of concept-instantiation apparently threatening the concept of his own system which focuses immediately on alleged special characteristics of

concepts other than that of this system. His strategy appears to be to show by an examination of these other concepts both that they do not constitute genuine alternatives to the concept of his system because they are incoherent or self-contradictory and that they exhibit indirectly, in a way to be explained later, the fact that the concept of his system is not distinct from its instantiation (the fact whose direct assertion was one of Hegel's defenses on the first front). The execution of this strategy for solving the concept-instantiation problem occurs in the same disciplines as the execution of the destructive strategy for solving the general equipollence problem: the early Logic during the first part of the Jena period and the *Phenomenology* at the end of that period. We shall take a closer look at this second front in Hegel's defense of his philosophical system against the threat of skepticism in Chapter Eight.

Of the pieces of prima facie evidence mentioned earlier for Hegel's carelessness about epistemological problems in general and skeptical problems in particular, the appearance of shameless dogmatism in his early method of Critique has already been shown to be illusory. We are now in a position to account for the rest of the prima facie evidence as well. Consider first Hegel's rejection of the "tendency to give and establish by grounds" typified in Reinhold's philosophy and his insistence that his own philosophy, far from seeking to ground its principle of identity, "does nothing but express and recognize that presupposed identity." Hegel's rejection of the attempt to ground or furnish a foundation for his own philosophy, in the sense of finding some premise or premises distinct from the claim of his philosophy or less than that claim in its entirety from which to argue in its favor, has two major sources.<sup>46</sup> These sources show that his rejection of such a grounding of philosophy is not at all indicative of a general carelessness about epistemology. One source of this rejection was mentioned earlier: Hegel does not see the circumstance of advancing a claim without further grounds per se as epistemologically problematic. To this extent he could accept the later Wittgenstein's judgment that "justification comes to an end."<sup>47</sup> He therefore does not see any unconditional epistemological need to ground his philosophy. What he does find epistemologically problematic is the, in his eyes importantly different, circumstance of making ungrounded claims *against which opposite claims can be advanced in a similarly ungrounded fashion*, which gives rise to the equipollence problem in its fourth trope of Agrippa version. But as we saw, Hegel believes that the claim of his own philosophy, though resting on no deeper grounds, escapes this epistemological problem because it has no negation and indeed no coherent alternatives. The second source of Hegel's rejection of any attempt to ground the claim of his own philosophy on a premise distinct from or less than itself is that he sees no possibility of doing so. The reason for this is ultimately his

conviction that all claims other than or less than the complete claim of his own philosophy which might be used to ground the latter are incoherent. This conviction receives early expression in a difficult passage from *The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*, where Hegel explains that we should not think of the "need for philosophy," or those divisions in the contemporary world-view which it is the function of Hegel's philosophy to overcome, as a *presupposition* of philosophy, "since in this way this need receives the form of Reflection. This form of Reflection appears as contradictory propositions . . . One can demand of propositions that they justify themselves; the justification of these propositions, as presuppositions, is supposed not yet to be philosophy itself. And so the activity of establishing by and giving grounds (*Ergruenden und Begruenden*) begins/comes undone (*geht los*) before and outside of philosophy."<sup>48</sup> Hegel's thought here is somewhat as follows. If we attempt to treat the "need for philosophy" as a presupposition of philosophy, as a claim distinct from or less than the complete claim of philosophy upon which philosophy's claim is grounded, then precisely by distinguishing this claim from philosophy's, we turn it into something self-contradictory and thus useless for such a grounding of philosophy, since any claim distinct from or less than the claim of philosophy is self-contradictory. Moreover, any further proposition adduced in support of this presupposition, since it too must be distinct from or less than philosophy's claim, will be in the same unhappy condition. Hence the whole business of establishing philosophy by grounds or giving grounds for it both *begins* and *comes undone* before and outside philosophy. (Hegel here puns on several senses of the verb *losgehen*: "to begin," "to go off," in the sense of being detonated unintentionally, and "to come undone," said of a loose button for example.) Hegel's conviction that any claim distinct from or less than the claim of his own philosophy is self-contradictory is a corollary of his destructive strategy for overcoming the skeptical problem of equipollence by demonstrating all claims other than the single claim of his own philosophy to be self-contradictory. Thus this second source of Hegel's rejection of the idea of grounding his philosophy is no more indicative of a general carelessness about epistemology than was the first.

The final piece of *prima facie* evidence for Hegel's carelessness about epistemology was his rejection of the Kantian demand for a critical investigation of our faculty of knowledge in advance of its application, on the grounds that "the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge" and that "to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim." Hegel's criticism of Kantian epistemology here is not really the naive suggestion that Kant is engaged in the

obviously incoherent project of attempting to find out about (and hence necessarily acquire knowledge of) our faculty of knowledge in advance of applying it to anything.<sup>49</sup> For Hegel recognizes that Kant only requires an investigation of our faculty of knowledge to precede any application of this faculty to *metaphysical* subjects and there is no obvious incoherence in *this* requirement.<sup>50</sup> Part of Hegel's point is rather the far from naive criticism that the professed a priori character of the results of Kant's critical investigation seems to leave them among those synthetic a priori claims which, like those of metaphysics but unlike those of, for example, mathematics, by Kant's own account require the critical investigation of their possibility as knowledge to be completed before they can be legitimately made. This part of Hegel's point is thus directed against a specific weakness which he perceives in Kant's way of doing epistemology rather than against epistemology per se.

A second part of Hegel's point may be approached via an objection which he often raises against Kantian epistemology. This is the objection that it essentially rests upon various *presuppositions*.<sup>51</sup> Hegel means by this in the first instance that it rests on various claims accepted without deeper grounds which might be confronted with opposite claims made in the same way and therefore with equal right, or in other words that it succumbs to the fourth trope of Agrippa version of the skeptical equipollence problem. For example, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel accuses Kantian epistemology of "presupposing something—a great deal in fact—as truth, supporting its scruples and inferences on what is itself in need of prior scrutiny to see if it is true."<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in the *Heidelberg Encyclopedia* he speaks of Kant's "critical procedure, which above all ought to have investigated its own presuppositions."<sup>53</sup> In the *Berlin Encyclopedia* he gives one of his more plausible examples of the kind of presupposition Kant is guilty of: "The critical philosophy has in common with empiricism that it assumes experience to be the sole foundation of knowledge."<sup>54</sup> This point, that Kantian epistemology essentially rests upon presuppositions which are themselves vulnerable to the equipollence problems raised by the ancient skeptics, is a plausible and important one (irrespective of the extent to which Hegel successfully identifies the presuppositions). By itself, this basic objection of Hegel's against Kantian epistemology is enough to show that in rejecting it he is not motivated by any general indifference toward epistemology, that on the contrary he is motivated by taking very seriously indeed certain epistemological problems, namely those of the ancient skeptics.

But Hegel's objection that Kantian epistemology essentially rests upon presuppositions also helps to explain and show consistent with an interest in epistemology a further part of his criticism that "to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not

to venture into the water until he had learned to swim.” As we saw from *The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*, it is for Hegel ultimately an implication of saying that a claim is a presupposition that it is incoherent or self-contradictory. His suggestion that Kantian epistemology rests on presuppositions therefore ultimately implies that it rests on self-contradictory claims.<sup>55</sup> And from this we can infer that Hegel’s likening of Kantian epistemology to an attempt to avoid entering the water before learning to swim expresses the following thoughts. First, just as the only way to learn to swim is by actually entering the water, so the only way to conduct an investigation into our faculty of knowledge is by entering the “water” of metaphysics straight-away.<sup>56</sup> Second, this is so because only the complete metaphysical claim expounded in Hegel’s own system is true, and any other or lesser claim is self-contradictory and untrue. Third, as a corollary of these points, any attempt in a Kantian spirit to conduct an investigation of our faculty of cognition which is prior to or less than an exposition of Hegel’s indivisible metaphysical truth is bound to come to grief on self-contradictoriness and falsehood, just as any attempt to learn to swim prior to entering the water is bound to fail. This criticism of Kantian epistemology rests squarely on Hegel’s belief that he can show all claims other than or less than the complete claim of his own metaphysics to be self-contradictory. Since, as we have seen, this belief is a reflection of Hegel’s strategy for defending his metaphysics against the skeptical problem of equipollence, clearly the criticism which it supports is not an expression of epistemological indifference on his part.

In short, then, none of the *prima facie* evidence for Hegel’s lack of concern with epistemological problems amounts to *more* than that. Rather, it must all be understood against the background of a clearly conceived and deeply cherished antiskeptical project which Hegel is pursuing.

So far we have noted that Hegel accepted as standards of epistemological respectability for a philosophical system its invulnerability to the skeptical problems of equipollence in general and concept-instantiation in particular. And we have noted that he attempted to ensure this invulnerability for his own system by working on two fronts—the one front focusing on special features of the viewpoint of his own system, the other on special features of other viewpoints. These aspects of Hegel’s epistemological enterprise remained largely constant from early in his Jena period throughout the remainder of his career. For all its importance, though, Hegel did not regard the task of answering skepticism on behalf of his own philosophical system as *exhaustive* of the task of making this system epistemologically secure. The texts of the Jena period in particular reveal that he accepted and strove to meet an additional standard of



epistemological respectability as well. This standard included the very exacting demand that the viewpoint of his own system be provided with a way of eliminating even the *appearance* of a vulnerability to the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation. Hegel alludes to this standard in the *Science of Logic* when he writes that the beginning of the Logic "is neither something arbitrary and only provisionally accepted nor something which appears arbitrary (*noch ein als willkuerlich Erscheinendes*)."<sup>57</sup> To be more specific, Hegel understands this additional standard to comprise three extraordinarily rigorous conditions. First, the elimination of the appearance of Philosophical Science's arbitrariness must take the form of providing it with a way of demonstrating its non-arbitrariness for each nonscientific viewpoint. Second, this demonstration of nonarbitrariness for each nonscientific viewpoint must show it that all nonscientific viewpoints are inferior to Philosophical Science, so that Philosophical Science faces no equipollence problem; that Philosophical Science confronts no concept-instantiation problem; and that Philosophical Science is true. Third, there must be a *demonstration* of these circumstances for each nonscientific viewpoint in the sense of a proof which is completely compelling for each viewpoint entirely on the basis of views and criteria to which it is already committed. Let us for short refer to a procedure which satisfies these conditions as a *proof of Philosophical Science for all nonscientific viewpoints*.

This complex and demanding epistemological standard underlies Hegel's statements in the *Phenomenology* that "the intelligible form of Science is the way open and equally accessible to everyone, and consciousness as it approaches Science justly demands that it be able to attain to rational knowledge by way of the ordinary Understanding," and that "the individual has the right to demand that Science should at least provide him with the ladder to this standpoint [Science's], should show him this standpoint within himself."<sup>58</sup> These statements are the most explicit avowals of a commitment to the standard in question in Hegel's texts. Beyond them his commitment to this standard must be inferred from the fact that the details of his texts, above all of the *Phenomenology*, seem designed to meet it.

In coming to accept this standard of epistemological respectability during the Jena period, as in much of his epistemology, Hegel was sharply deviating from the views of his erstwhile philosophical ally Schelling. For Schelling did not see the construction of a bridge between nonscientific viewpoints and Philosophical Science as necessary or even desirable. Thus contrast with the preceding passages from the *Phenomenology* the following statement by Schelling in his *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy*, written roughly five years before the *Phenomenology*: "It is unintelligible . . . why philosophy should have an ob-

ligation to be considerate of incapacity, it is rather appropriate to cut off the approach to [philosophy] sharply and to isolate it on all sides from common cognition in such a way that no path or pavement can lead from [common cognition] to [philosophy]. Here begins philosophy, and whoever is not already there or is afraid to reach this point—let him stay away or flee back.”<sup>59</sup>

It is not entirely clear what considerations moved Hegel to embrace this demanding epistemological standard. Perhaps he was influenced by the reflection that the ancient skeptics did not assert that anyone’s doctrines *really* fell victim to the problems of equipollence or concept-instantiation but only that they *appeared* to the skeptics to do so, with the result that his demonstration that his own Philosophical Science did not *really* succumb to such problems still left him with the task of eliminating the *appearance* that it did so. Perhaps the focus on the authority of viewpoints other than one’s own which was involved in the equipollence problem made this additional epistemological ideal attractive to him. Whatever the exact origin of this epistemological standard may have been, it does have considerable intrinsic appeal and complements the other epistemological standards which Hegel accepts.

At the end of the Jena period, in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel made his most earnest and explicit attempt to meet this additional epistemological standard of providing a proof of Philosophical Science for all nonscientific viewpoints. During the Jena period as a whole his degree of commitment to this standard, his conception of what exactly would be required in order to meet it, and his strategy for meeting it underwent constant and rapid change. This is seen primarily by reading the *Phenomenology* alongside the several versions of the early Logic which preceded it. Such instability contrasts with the relative stability over the same years of the other parts of his epistemological enterprise. The trend during the Jena period was toward a deeper commitment to the standard in question, a more exacting conception of what would be required in order to meet it, and a correspondingly more scrupulous and ambitious strategy for doing so. Recognizing this trend enables one to make sense of many otherwise bewildering changes which Hegel’s philosophy underwent at this time, particularly in the disciplines of the early Logic and the *Phenomenology*. They become intelligible as reflections of an unfolding epistemological enterprise having a coherent direction of development. We shall chart the course of Hegel’s developing attempts to meet his additional epistemological standard in Chapter Nine.

How, in general terms, does Hegel propose to meet this additional epistemological standard on behalf of his own Philosophical Science? We can distinguish two major components of his strategy for doing so. First, he takes the systematic demonstration of the self-contradictoriness of all

nonscientific claims and concepts which constitutes the core of his solution on one front to the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation and he attempts to make this demonstration compelling for all nonscientific viewpoints themselves on the basis of their own views and criteria. We can detect this aim in two passages considered earlier where Hegel describes his destructive solution to the problem of equipollence. Thus the *Phenomenology* says that "consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a *comparison of consciousness with itself*."<sup>60</sup> And *On the Nature of Philosophical Critique* says that "there is nothing to do but to recount how this negative side expresses itself and *confesses* its nothingness" and that, in its development, this negative side "can be *pretty generally recognized* as [nothing]."<sup>61</sup>

The second component of Hegel's strategy is to demonstrate to all the self-contradictory nonscientific viewpoints in a way compelling for them on the basis of their own views and criteria that his Philosophical Science is true. This ambition is perhaps already expressed in the remark from *The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy* that "the Absolute should be constructed for consciousness."<sup>62</sup> It receives more explicit expression, and is more clearly pursued, in the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel says that "the individual has the right to demand that Science should at least provide him with the ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within himself."<sup>63</sup> It was because Hegel accepted the realization of this proof of the truth of Philosophical Science for all nonscientific viewpoints as part of a standard of epistemological respectability that he could, notwithstanding his criticism of the "tendency to give and establish by grounds" that in attempting to prove Philosophical Science on the basis of something other than or less than itself this tendency would fall into the absurdity of attempting to prove Philosophical Science by grounding it on self-contradictions, claim that the method of the *Phenomenology* was "to begin from the first, simplest appearance of Spirit, the immediate consciousness, and to develop Spirit's dialectic up to the standpoint of Philosophical Science, the necessity of which is demonstrated by this process."<sup>64</sup> That is to say, the process referred to here of showing Philosophical Science to be somehow implied by lesser perspectives is not supposed to support the claim of Philosophical Science's truth, to "demonstrate" its "necessity," by grounding it on something other and more secure than itself. Rather it is supposed to do so by showing that the standard of epistemological respectability that the truth of Philosophical Science should be provable for all nonscientific perspectives on the basis of their own views and criteria can be met.

Much in Hegel's epistemological enterprise makes essential use of his

notorious dialectical method. This is true, for example, of his demonstration that all nonscientific concepts and claims are self-contradictory, which is a central part of his response to the skeptical problems of equipollence and concept-instantiation. It is also true of both sides of his proof of Philosophical Science for all nonscientific viewpoints. Indeed the dialectical method was initially developed by Hegel in the early *Logic* of the Jena period largely because of the roles which it was to play within his epistemological project. After indicating more fully what these roles are during the coming chapters, I shall make a few remarks on the nature and value of the dialectical method itself in Chapter Ten. These remarks should serve as both a further clarification of Hegel's epistemological project and a first step toward its evaluation.

So Hegel was concerned with epistemology after all, and indeed from a very early date in his philosophical career. He had a set of clear, sensible, and rigorous standards of epistemological adequacy and made strenuous and original efforts to meet them on behalf of his own philosophical system. We may now turn to the details of the various parts of Hegel's epistemological project indicated in this chapter.