

The claims to self-sufficient knowledge: sense-certainty, perception, understanding

I. Sense-certainty

What would immediate knowledge be?

It has often seemed puzzling to both the casual and the initiated reader of Hegel's *Phenomenology* that a book whose longest portions seem to concern themselves with cultural, social, and ethical issues begins with some very abstruse chapters on the nature of consciousness, perception, and theory-formation instead of simply beginning with various problems relating to social self-identity or problems in the philosophy of religion. Yet Hegel insists in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* that it offers a theory of knowledge, and that such a beginning is necessary for it.

The most obvious reason for Hegel to begin the *Phenomenology* with the chapters that he does is his professed belief that any philosophical system must begin without any presuppositions and develop everything out of that presuppositionless beginning. (Thus, just as the *Science of Logic* begins with "pure being," the *Phenomenology* begins with "sense-certainty.") However, the more basic and systemic reasons for the introductory sections to take the form that they do have to do with Hegel's general aim in the *Phenomenology* to show that a wide variety of things, ranging from the rituals involved in Greek religious cults to the French Revolution, are in fact best understood as forms of knowledge (as what Hegel calls "formations of consciousness" – that is, as ways in which forms of life take certain types of reasons to be authoritative, mandatory for themselves), and, likewise, that all claims to knowledge are best understood as historically situated forms of social practice in which agents seek to affirm for themselves that the structures of their own thought and practice really match up with the way things are, or have to be. This overall aim gives Hegel two basic reasons for beginning with the chapters that he does. First, this overall aim is by no means a self-evident truth, and there are in fact many very powerful philosophical tendencies to deny such a claim. Indeed, at first glance, this general aim would strike those of a more empiricist bent as being almost self-evidently false. From the standpoint of an empiricist point of view (or from that of the post-empiricist points of view present in Hegel's day), it surely seems that we do indeed *know* certain things quite independently of any particular social practice and, moreover, that this kind of knowledge-independent-of-social-practice can serve as a kind of "touchstone," "standard," or "foundation" (depending on which metaphor one chooses) for all our other claims to know something. Thus, it might

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seem, for example, that we are directly acquainted with certain types of sensory objects independently of whether we are ancient Greeks or nineteenth-century Germans, and that this direct acquaintance with such objects gives us a knowledge of them. Or that we directly perceive certain types of objects in our immediate environments whether we are French or Chinese, and that this perception gives us a knowledge of these objects. Or, finally, and maybe more ambitiously, that there is a basic metaphysical essence to the world that any human being possessing the powers of rational reflection could come to know independently of the social practices or even perhaps the historical situation in which he participates. However, Hegel wishes to show in his introductory sections that the major candidates for the kinds of knowledge that presumably could be secured independently of any historically definite social practice (which he calls “sense-certainty,” “perception” and the “understanding”) fail to provide *on their own terms* the kind of knowledge that their proponents claim that they provide.

Second, Hegel wishes to show that the basic candidates for such knowledge logically lead to and culminate in what we can call the subject/object model of knowledge and practice: a picture of our epistemic practices and our various practical endeavors that interprets them in terms of a subject, an independent object, and a representation (*Vorstellung*) that supposedly serves as a metaphysical intermediary between the subject and the object. On this view (which, following recent fashion, we can call the *representationalist* picture of knowledge), the so-called “problem of knowledge” comes to be the issue of how we might determine whether these representations “match up” with the world as it is. Hegel’s second goal therefore in the three introductory sections is to show that such a picture also *on its own terms* fails to fulfill the goals that it sets for itself. Thus, by showing how the three available candidates for a kind of knowledge that would be independent of social practice break down, Hegel attempts to show how the view of ourselves as “metaphysical representers” of the world undermines itself and leads to the view of ourselves as organisms engaged in certain forms of historically mediated social practices whose general goal is the affirmation for ourselves that what we have historically come to *take* as true and right *really* is true and right. The problems intrinsic to a picture of ourselves as thinking substances inspecting the contents of our consciousness (our representations) to see if they match up with the world both leads to and gives way to a view of ourselves as being situated in a reflective form of life (or what Hegel calls *spirit*) that is in part constituted by a set of ends and beliefs that determine for the agents who participate in that form of life what is to count as knowledge, what is to count as a standard of right action and what is to count as a legitimate form of character. The rest of the *Phenomenology* then articulates and argues for the view that within various forms of life (of “spirit”), there are tensions and contradictions that in the historical development of that form of life come to the forefront of its practices and thereby appear in the self-consciousness of its members; and that out of this form of self-consciousness arise other types of practices whose purpose is to reflect on social practices in general, to see whether within the

terms set by that form of life, the participants of that form of life can possibly affirm for themselves collectively and individually that what they take to be true, real, and right actually is what is true, real, and right. The view that Hegel defends in the *Phenomenology* – of ourselves as organisms dealing with the world in a variety of historically and socially mediated ways, in contrast to the view of ourselves as “thinking substances” who “represent” the world – allows Hegel to shift the basic epistemological task away from constructing metaphysical theories about how our representations might possibly match up with the world toward one in which the basic issue comes to be how we have come to *take ourselves* as being the agents that we have come to be, and how we come to take certain types of “grounds” as authoritative for belief and action. Thus, the overall goal of the first three sections is to motivate a shift of philosophical inquiry away from the kind of metaphysical epistemological concerns that have dominated much of modern philosophy toward the kind of social and historical epistemological concerns that Hegel thinks are more proper to a fully modernist philosophy.¹

One way of beginning with the “immediate” would be to begin with those kinds of considerations that the readers of 1807 would have already taken for granted as authoritative for themselves. The *Phenomenology* would then begin with those considerations that count for its readers as obvious, certain, and as being the “essence” (in the sense of being the “authoritative grounds”) of their beliefs. In Hegel’s time, that would mean beginning with what certain post-Enlightenment theories of knowledge, perception, and theory construction took to be “certain,” “obvious” (and therefore “immediate”). By beginning with these kinds of taken-for-granted considerations, Hegel is of course not denying or making himself blind to the ways in which these kinds of empiricist and post-empiricist conceptions have their own history. However, the *Phenomenology* cannot begin with their history, because given the terms that the *Phenomenology* has set for itself, such a beginning would beg the question. The *Phenomenology* cannot simply assume contrary to these post-Enlightenment conceptions that an account of knowledge *must* be historical; it must instead show that these non-historical conceptions of knowledge both undermine themselves and lead to a conception of knowledge as historical. Later in the *Phenomenology* (in the section on the Enlightenment that comes under the large section-heading titled “Spirit”), Hegel will show how what seemed obvious and immediate to the readers of 1807 – and what is therefore the “immediate” beginning of a chapter on “consciousness” – rests in fact on a conception of knowledge and rationality whose own plausibility is itself the result of the historical insufficiencies of preceding accounts.² On the terms that Hegel has set for the *Phenomenology*, however, it must begin as if the history of those conceptions were irrelevant or as if they had no history in order to motivate the account that will lead to our understanding their historical nature.

It thus is quite natural that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would begin with an examination of some kind of claim to immediate knowledge that would grow out of a reflection on our natural awareness of ourselves and things.

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This immediate (non-inferential) knowledge (if it is possible) would be an example of something that we know without having to know anything else; no inferences would be necessary in order to validate it, and it would therefore be knowledge that would be available to any agent independent of his social or historical setting. By a “natural consciousness,” Hegel means a kind of pre-reflective view of ourselves in the world as one natural entity among others. Other ideas of ourselves – for example, as “subjects” of awareness – might be introduced later, but we cannot begin our reflections with such ideas, for that would involve importing some controversial conceptions into the discussion at the outset. Since ideas such as “subject of awareness” are introduced as theoretical constructions to explicate or explain how it is that such and such a form of life is possible, at the beginning of a work like the *Phenomenology* we should eschew such theoretical descriptions as much as possible. (It will turn out, as any reader of the *Phenomenology* knows, that Hegel believes such an eschewal to be in fact impossible; but it is a central Hegelian point that it must be shown and not assumed.) A description of our natural consciousness of the world would be something like the following: “We are aware of certain things such that we know them to be such and such.” The first question to be asked therefore would be: What is it that we *know* in such awareness in “natural consciousness”? Better: Is there anything that we know in this “natural consciousness” *immediately* (non-inferentially) – that is, something that we can know without having to know anything else? If there were to be any knowledge that is independent of social practice or history, such immediate knowledge would be it. We must therefore begin with “a knowledge of the immediate or of the *existing* (*Seienden*).”³ If there is anything in our awareness of the world that is immediate, then we would have an object of awareness from which no abstraction has been made; we would apprehend it as it really is, without any contribution from our own side.

Sense-certainty as immediate knowledge

Hegel calls this natural awareness of things in the world *sense-certainty*. In sense-certainty, we are certain that we are sensing an individual object, independently of whatever other claims that we might later wish to make about it, and this sensing of the object supposedly gives us a knowledge of it. Sense-certainty thus makes a claim to being a form of knowledge that is independent of social practice or historical context; it is immediate knowledge in that it involves knowing something without having to know about anything else. It should remain steadfast throughout the other changes that we make in our epistemic setup. We may come to believe, for example, that we should abandon Ptolemaic astronomy in favor of more Newtonian views, and we might come to believe that Jehovah is the real deity and Vishnu only a figment of our own construction; but throughout all these kinds of changes of our epistemic claims, we should never find that we have to alter any of our claims about what we are immediately aware of in sense-certainty.

Sense-certainty involves the following: I, an individual *sensor*, am sen-

sorily aware of an individual object.⁴ But what exactly are we certain of in sense-certainty? We are certain of the *object* that we sense in that we may be said to be *directly acquainted* with the individual object itself. But how should we describe this object?⁵ What can we say with certainty about this individual item except that it *is* and that we are directly acquainted with it? To say anything about what the object is would involve us in ascribing various predicates to it, which we could not in turn assert with the same certainty. (We might say that it is round, only to find that it is really oblong, or that it is black, only to find that it is really blue.) It would seem, then, that the object of sense-certainty can only be a purely singular object, the kind of thing to which we can only refer with demonstratives such as "this," "here," and "now." The truth about sense-certainty, so it seems, is that it "contains nothing but the *being* of the thing [*Sache*]." ⁶

It is all too easy at this point to misinterpret what Hegel is doing here by anachronistically reading into the argument certain twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophical themes about so-called non-inferential knowledge of sense-data. It would be only too easy to jump to the idea that the *object* of sense-certainty must be something like a sense-datum, an awareness of a specific mental object having certain sensuous qualities. While this understanding of sense-certainty might be compatible with many of Hegel's points, that is not the argument he is making there. The introduction of the idea of sense-data (as the authentic *objects* of sensuous consciousness) is the result of a theory of what the objects *must* be if there were to be the kind of immediate awareness that sense-certainty claims to provide. If we believe that there is indeed something of which we are immediately aware, then we might *postulate* sense-data (as a set of mental objects) as being the proper objects of sense-certainty in order to account for the possibility of such awareness. In the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, however, we are supposed to be describing natural consciousness as it immediately takes itself, and not yet postulating entities to explain it. At this point, we are only entitled to say: We are immediately aware of a singular object, this awareness seems to be both non-inferential and complete, and this consciousness *is* just its direct acquaintance with this singular object and nothing more. There is no expressible difference between our consciousness and the object of which we are conscious. Thus, it seems that what we have here is a relation between two items: an individual item (*eine Sache*) and an individual I.⁷ It remains completely open as to *what* this individual object of awareness might be and what this "I" might be. Perhaps only a sense-datum would fill the role of "object" adequately; perhaps something else would fit the role better. Hegel takes the important point to be whether there even is such a role to be filled.

The object of sense-certainty thus seems only to be describable as an existent individual. We cannot even *say* of it that it is such and such, for we cannot be certain of that – or at least we cannot be certain of anything we *say* about it, since saying anything about it would involve using descriptions, which would violate the condition of immediacy; we can only say that it *is*. The object of sense-certainty therefore must be something simple and unde-

scribable. Thus, the kind of immediate knowledge of which we are speaking must be (1) knowledge of pure individuals, and (2) knowledge construed as the immediate presence of an object to consciousness. Consciousness taken as sense-certainty is the awareness only of the *being* of things, and beyond that, we can say nothing about it.

Is this, however, an intelligible idea? Is sense-certainty even a *possible* form of consciousness? (If it is not, then we need not, for example, go to the trouble of postulating sense-data to explain *how* it is possible.) The problems with it begin to be clearly seen when one tries to characterize this immediate knowledge of an individual entity and to articulate in just what this knowledge consists. Assume that we are aware of existing individuals. If we describe the general form of this non-inferential awareness as “awareness of purely individual things,” then it seems that it has at least two components to it: (1) the individual perceiver, and (2) the individual object perceived. Each – the “I” and the individual object – are equally pure singularities. We need not presume anything about what this “I” is or what this object is; we need not presume, for example, that the “I” is a mental substance, a subject of experience, or a natural organism, nor whether the object is a sense-datum or an entity in space and time.⁸ We need only recognize that we have two types of singular objects: an “I” and an object of awareness.

Now it would seem, though, on reflection, that it is the *object* of awareness that is the crucial element here. After all, objects in themselves have a determinateness on their own, and we are aware of them truthfully when we are aware of them as they are in themselves.⁹ The object is what is authoritative in this relation of knowledge; it is, in Hegel’s terms, the “essence.” However, in attempting to describe the pure individual object as it is in itself, we find that we can only directly *attend* to it without being able to *say* much about it. (That is, we can *mean* it, in the sense of the German, “*meinen*,” without being able to articulate it.)

Hegel offers two different accounts of this kind of direct attention. First, we can *point* at it through the use of what we nowadays would call indexicals (terms whose reference varies with the context of their utterance, such as “this,” “here,” and “now”).¹⁰ Hegel’s discussion of indexicals in this context takes up the most room in the text and hence has been the subject of the most commentary.¹¹ In his discussion of these indexicals, Hegel has often been taken to be arguing that since the referent of “this” varies with the context, it follows that “this” must be a universal. Thus, if the content of sense-certainty is a “this,” then “it is in fact the universal that is the truth (*das Wahre*) of sense-certainty.”¹² This has led many people to criticize Hegel for seeming to argue that because their reference varies, indexicals are universals; the objection to this alleged Hegelian argument is that universals are things that can be *predicated* of many different individuals, whereas indexicals are not *predicates* at all. Thus, it is often concluded that Hegel had made a simple error here. The conclusion that indexicals are universals is not, however, Hegel’s point. What is crucial for characterizing the object of “sense-certainty” is its *singularity*, its “this-here-nowness.” As Willem deVries has argued, Hegel’s

point here is that the here-and-nowness of the object of "sense-certainty" is supposed to exhaust the object of awareness; there is no more to it other than its this-here-nowness.¹³ The problem that Hegel sees with the arguments of "sense-certainty" is not that "indexicals are universals" but that the *object* of which sense-certainty is supposed to be aware alters according to the context of the utterance; "this" can pick out at this moment (at this "now") the page in front of me and then later pick out the pen I am holding. Because of the way in which the objects of sense-certainty vary, Hegel's point is that the use of demonstratives ("this," "here," and "now") share with the use of singular descriptive reference (such as "the cat in the hat") the features of being mediated by "universals" – that is, being linked up with other sets of descriptions and therefore being forms of mediate knowledge.¹⁴

Hegel later expressed some misgivings about this introduction of indexicals at this stage of the argument in the Jena *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Since the use of indexicals presupposes the inferential knowledge of space and time, using them to prove that this so-called immediate, non-inferential knowledge is really inferential knowledge would be circular.¹⁵ Moreover, the objections concerning the use of indexicals could be easily avoided by the proponents of sense-certainty if they were to claim that the objects of sense-certainty (whatever they might be) are not in fact spatiotemporal objects at all (maybe they are sense-data), and therefore perhaps cannot be picked out by linguistic expressions at all.

But while that kind of move might meet some of the objections raised by Hegel in the first part of the section on sense-certainty, it would fail to meet his second and perhaps more crucial point, which has to do with the way in which this experiential attending to the singular objects of sense-certainty is an attending to ineffable individual *qualities*. Hegel speaks of the difference between what we *think* we are *saying* when we say that sense-certainty is an immediate awareness of individual objects and what we *really* are saying when we do so. If we cannot refer to or describe these things linguistically, then they must be beyond language and be completely unutterable, ineffable. Linguistic expression of this awareness is therefore impossible, since any linguistic expression of it will involve terms that link up with other terms or, as in the case of indexicals, with other forms of descriptions. If they cannot be referred to by means of demonstrative reference, perhaps they can be *named*. However, that will not work, since names have no cognitive content unless they are put into propositions to form judgments. If they cannot be expressed linguistically, then they cannot be put into propositional form, which means they cannot serve as premises for any argument. They would thus be without any cognitive significance. The upshot is that if the objects of sense-certainty are ineffable, then they cannot be expressed linguistically, and therefore they cannot preserve their status as objects of *immediate knowledge*. In stressing linguistic expression as a criterion of what we can be said to *know* (or to have a *cognitive* awareness of), Hegel is arguing that we are driven to the conclusion that we cannot be *cognitively* aware of these qualitative individuals in any non-inferential fashion; we are aware of them only as mediated through

certain universals found in linguistic expression.¹⁶ Thus, if we cannot be said to be cognitively aware of them, they cannot function as objects of non-inferential *knowledge*.¹⁷

The rest of the discussion of the chapter on sense-certainty repeats this argument with two other attempts at saving the idea of a cognitively significant awareness of individual objects. One such attempt is to see the object of awareness as the individual *awareness* itself, but that fails for the same reasons. Another is the attempt to see neither the object nor the individual awareness itself as the object of immediate knowledge, but the complex, "individual awareness of an individual object" as something that we non-inferentially know.¹⁸ But this too fails for the same reasons.

In fact, the upshot of sense-certainty is that there is no *cognitively* significant *immediate* awareness of objects of any kind and therefore no immediate knowledge in the sense that "sense-certainty" originally claimed. Even if we could be said to be non-inferentially aware in some non-linguistic sense of any such objects, they would still be ineffable and thus be without any cognitive import. Of the idea that there might be an ineffable given element in experience with some cognitive import, Hegel says: "What is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant but is not actually expressed."¹⁹

Hegel's point here seems to be: If you can't *say* it or *show* it, you don't *know* it.²⁰ Sense-certainty turns out not to be so certain, and the most basic form of cognitively significant awareness thus turns out not to be an immediate awareness of singular objects whose nature is to be "this-here-now." It turns out to be a mediated awareness of individuals as having general properties. Sense-certainty, that is, turns out really to be what Hegel calls *perception*.

The determinateness of the purest form of awareness, it turns out, is already mediated by other factors than just what at first *seems* to be included in the awareness itself. The awareness of the pure *contents of sense* turns out really to be an awareness of *things*. If there were such an area of mental awareness that could be known non-inferentially, then it is conceivable that the contents of that awareness might remain the same whatever the state of the world might be; our experience of seeing a chair that actually exists might be qualitatively the same even if the chair were not to exist. This would lead, of course, to that kind of modern skepticism familiar to readers of modern philosophy in which the contents of the mind are conceived as having some determinateness that is independent of the world such that it makes sense to ask whether our various types of awareness of the world might be globally wrong – whether the world might be one thing, and the contents of our minds might be another thing. But if our knowledge of our purest form of awareness is already a mediated (inferential) knowledge – if awareness of sense-contents is just an abstraction from our awareness of things – then it makes no sense to imagine that we could vary the things of the world and still have the contents of our own awareness remain the same. Hegel's discussion of sense-certainty is intended to be the first step in his argument that the mind is not some self-

illuminated sphere for which there is the basic metaphysical problem of how it could possibly be linked up with the world; in its most basic cognitive form, it is already linked to the objects of perception.

2. Perception

Individual things and general properties

The case for sense-certainty as an immediate knowledge of individuals turns out in fact to be the case for something else – namely, *perception* as a mediated awareness of individual objects having general properties. The claim that we are non-inferentially aware of pure individuals turns out not to be possible; what we really have is mediated knowledge of the objects of perception. We distinguish one object from another by means of inferential connections; in its most meager form, this involves designating something as “this” and “not that” (what Hegel will later call “pure difference,” which is one of the “pure essentialities,” the formal characteristics of thought²¹). Sense-certainty, or purely sensuous consciousness in general, turns out really to be an abstraction from the more determinate *perceptual* consciousness of objects.²²

If perception is the mediated awareness of individuals via universals (such as “cubical,” “green,” and so on), then it would seem that the objects of perception would not be the pure singularities of sense-certainty but what we would ordinarily term individual *things* with many *properties*.²³ The basis of perceptual consciousness would therefore not be that of an individual sensor sensing a purely singular item; it would be the awareness of the objects of perception as a complex of general properties and individual things, and everything else would be just an abstraction from that complex. Sense-consciousness itself would be only a special case of such perception.²⁴ Hegel's thesis is that this kind of characterization of perception, innocent as it may sound at first, ends up in a predicament very similar to that which we found in sense-certainty. “Perception” claims to offer a form of knowledge that is self-contained; those who claim that *purely* perceptual experience is a form of knowledge therefore must claim that this knowledge requires nothing else outside of perceptual experience itself, and that it is able to give a full account of itself by utilizing only the resources available in perceptual experience itself. In purely perceptual experience we should be able to *know* the individual objects of perception without having to know anything else; what will result from the dialectic of perception is, of course, the failure of perceptual experience to make good on that claim.

The arguments about perception begin with the conclusion reached at the end of the dialectic of sense-certainty – namely, that we are aware of individuals only as mediated by universals. We may now take this as the new “immediacy” – that is, as something that we can take for granted and accept without any further argumentation. (In the Hegelian dialectic, something that is mediated is said to become “immediate” again when it comes to function as an unquestioned starting point for other claims.) Accepting the conclusion of

the arguments about sense-certainty thus preserves the original point of the idea that sense-certainty provides us a kind of knowledge that is available independently of determinate historical and social conditions, for even if sense-certainty is itself mediated knowledge, the inferences involved are so meager and so non-controversial that it is safe to say that the knowledge we get from perceptual acquaintance with the objects of experience is the kind of knowledge that we could have without also having to have much of a background in any kind of social practice outside of that of the use of language itself (something that is common to almost all kinds of social practice). The perception of individual objects can thus play the role of something that we know independently of any social practice other than that of speaking a language.

The discussion of perceptual experience as a form of knowledge must then begin with a description of what it claims to be. Perceptual consciousness (understood as what sense-certainty *really* was) consists of picking out individual objects by some kind of demonstrative ("this," "here," or "now"), but it is not understood as an awareness of any kind of pure singularity. Perceptual experience is a matter of perceiving *this* red thing *here*, right *now*, and it can be extended, no doubt, to identifying the perceptual object as the same red thing over time. This perceptual experience gives us a knowledge of the *things* of perceptual experience, and this knowledge is not dependent on anything other than the ability to refer to individuals with demonstratives and to characterize them by the general characteristics available to our perceptual experience itself; to be *aware* of this red sweet thing is to *know* that this thing is red and sweet, and it does not require us to know anything else.

What this description of perceptual experience seems to put forward is therefore something like this. We seem to be directly aware of two items: the *thing* and its universal *properties*. (For example, we could perceive a green *x* and a green *y*; *x* and *y* would be two distinct things, and the property they share – the greenness of both *x* and *y* – would be the universal – that is, something that is not an individual but is a property that more than one individual can share.) The issue at hand thus has to do with the way in which the awareness of these two items is combined into the perception of one determinate thing. It will, of course, be part of Hegel's thesis that there are not in fact two *items* – individuals and general properties – to be "combined" here at all, and the failure of the account given in "Perception" will be attributed in part to the incoherence of the idea that we are aware of two distinct items, which we then somehow combine into the perception of one determinate thing.

The questions then are: (1) If it is indeed such *things* that we perceive, how do we characterize these objects of perception, how do we characterize their properties, and how do we characterize our awareness of them? (2) Can we be said to *know* individual things through our perceptual experience of them, without our having to presuppose anything other than that found within perceptual experience itself?

The *properties* of the thing are the sensuous items of which sense con-

sciousness was aware (inferentially, mediately).²⁵ So we might begin by asking what is the *thing* itself of which we claim to be aware. On the one hand, our description of the thing seems to be that it is the *x* that is red, that is round, that is sweet, and so on. The thing itself, however, does not seem to have any features of its own; it is merely what is referred to by some expression that picks it out, such as a name or an indexical. (Thus, we can characterize it here by the variable, "*x*.") But since that of which we seem to be directly aware is not the individual *per se* but its universal properties as *somehow* instantiated in an individual, it is therefore problematic as to how exactly we can be said to be directly aware of *the* thing at all. The failure of "sense-certainty," in which we were said to be aware of *the* individual object, led to "perception," in which we were said to be aware of *the* thing through the mediation of our awareness of its universal properties. The claims of the standpoint of "perception," as they work themselves out, are that we are directly aware of *this* green, *this* round shape, and so on, and that our awareness of the individual *x* is *only* our awareness of these individualized properties; it cannot be a direct awareness of the indeterminate "this," the "*x*" that *has* all these properties, at all.²⁶ The thing's properties are all logically distinct from each other (that the thing is red does not imply anything about its shape, about its taste, and so on). The thing itself, as the indeterminate *x* that *has* the properties, thus seems to be no more than the *collection* of these individualized properties, which themselves are (somehow) universal, capable of being instantiated in more than one thing.²⁷ The thing as determined by these properties seems therefore to be only "the indifferent also" of its properties, the conjunction of various individualized properties.²⁸ By this description, the awareness of the thing is no more than an awareness of a collection of such sensuous qualities. The thing itself is therefore nothing more than such a collection, a simple bundle of the properties ("a simple togetherness of a plurality," as Hegel puts it).²⁹ (Hegel remarks on a possible attempt at a naturalistic explanation for this view, citing some outdated eighteenth century physics to make his point: perhaps the thing itself can be conceived as being an "enclosing surface" that contains many otherwise independent individualized properties, which themselves would be some sort of "free matters" – "*freie Materie*" – collected in a spatiotemporal place.³⁰ This, however, will not work, because "free matters" are not properties of a thing; they are free floating individual things themselves that happen to coagulate around a region of space-time. Thus, this way out seems circular. If the various "matters" are individual things that themselves have general properties (such as redness), then the same kind of considerations that applied at the outset would apply to them, and we would be right back where we started. So this purported explanation cannot help us move the discussion forward in any significant way.)

Yet the claims of "perception" were not that we were not aware of individual things; it was that we were aware of particulars by virtue of their universal properties (that our knowledge of them was "mediated"). Yet the account given seems to suggest that we are not aware of particular things at all; we are

aware only of bundles of particularized universal properties. If the standpoint of “perception” is to make good on its claims, then it must offer an account of how we are indeed aware of such individual things. Otherwise, it would be completely mysterious as to how we could be aware of particulars at all. A thing is one individual thing in distinction from other individual things, and *it* individualizes the properties (which are “somehow” universals) as belonging to itself. The thing is the indeterminate *x* that has the properties that we perceive. Therefore, if we are to be said actually to *perceive* the individual *x*, the thing itself, then the thing itself, as distinct from its properties, must be conceived as simply an individual unit, a “one,” “a unity that excludes an other.”³¹ The thing as a “one,” a unit that excludes other distinct units (other “ones”) would be, to use Gustav Bergmann’s phrase, a “bare particular.” It would be a featureless (bare) unit that is different from all other units just by virtue of its very particularity. If we are to maintain that we have a knowledge of individual things in perceptual experience, then we must therefore claim to be directly acquainted with the bare particular itself (the “one”) even though it is a featureless unity that is simply different from other bare particulars, and our direct acquaintance with it is always of it *as* instantiating certain properties. (As Hegel puts it, we perceive it only *insofar* as it has such and such sensuous properties, but it, the bare particular, is nonetheless something of which we are directly aware.) According to the account of perceptual experience as a form of immediate knowledge, the thing of perceptual experience thus seems to have two components: It is a bare particular and a universal. In perception, we are aware of these two components as combined into the sensuous awareness of an individualized property.³²

If that is the case, however, then it would seem that we would be describing things from the standpoint once again of “sense certainty” – that is, on the basis of the idea that we are directly aware of pure singularities. If that is where we end up, then the same dialectic that brought us to “Perception” would simply begin again, and nothing would have been gained.³³ Therefore, if we are to be aware of the *things* of perceptions and not just their properties, it would seem that the thing itself cannot be a bare particular but must have some determinateness on its own.³⁴ This is one move that the standpoint of “perception” can make to salvage the idea that we have a knowledge of things by virtue of purely perceptual experience. We are directly aware of bare particulars, but we are directly aware of them only through their sensuous properties (which are instantiated universals).

However, the sensuous properties need not be the properties of the thing in itself. The thing in itself can have two different sets of properties: one set that it has in itself, the other that it has only for us. (This would correspond to the distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of the thing, although Hegel does not use those terms.) That things are red and sweet depends on our perceiving them in that way, on the fact that they affect our constitution in that manner. They are perhaps not really sweet or red in themselves but only for us. Thus, it at first seems that we ourselves as perceivers are the “universal medium” in which the sensuous properties are

seen as belonging to the single thing.³⁵ The various sensuous properties of the thing would actually be features of our own consciousness of the thing, not of the thing itself. But if this account is true, then we cannot be said to *know* individual things through perceptual experience, for we could not experience the *things themselves*, since, on this account, we only perceptually experience the *sensuous properties* of the thing, the way it affects our constitution.

Therefore, if we know the individual thing through perceptual experience, the sensuous properties must be properties of the thing itself; although the thing is sweet “for us,” its sweetness cannot be a free-floating property but something that the thing itself has. The individual thing (the *x* that is white and cubical) must be the true “universal medium” of the properties.³⁶ If perceptual experience, as a form of knowledge that depends only on its own resources, is to be possible, then we must somehow be able to give an account of how the features of the thing’s being individual and the thing’s having a determinateness on its own can be successfully combined with the idea that we can be aware of the individual thing itself without having to rely on anything outside of perceptual experience itself.

Moreover, if we are to have genuine *perceptual* knowledge, we must be able to distinguish within our own experience what is in fact genuine perceptual knowledge from what is simply an extrapolation by us or is something that we “read into” our experience that goes beyond what we can legitimately claim to *know* by virtue of our perceptual experience.³⁷ If we attend to perceptual experience carefully, we (supposedly) see that we are aware of singular things in our perceptual experience, and we are aware of their sensuous properties. The way therefore in which the thing seems to lose its individuality by being dissolved into a “bundle of properties” or into being merely an “enclosing surface” must be attributed simply to our own *reflections* on the matter, not to the way in which the thing as an object of perceptual knowledge is actually constituted.³⁸ In perceptual knowledge, therefore, the thing itself is *one* thing and thereby different from other things (that are also each “one” thing) even if our own reflections make this seem impossible; we must be said to be simply aware of singular things, of these bare particulars.³⁹

The perceptual object as a metaphysical object

In this account of perceptual knowledge, the oneness of the thing is not a relational property of the thing itself: It is not one thing relative to other things; it is one thing on its own, a bare particular.⁴⁰ Yet, so it also seems, in our perceptual experience we can distinguish one thing from another thing *only* by way of contrasting it with other things.⁴¹ Therefore, for this account, the oneness of the thing – its bare particularity – must be contrasted with its makeup (*Beschaffenheit*) in terms of its sensuous properties; this empirical makeup of the thing is the way in which we contrast and distinguish it from other things in our experience. Moreover, since a bare particular cannot exist without instantiating some sensuous properties, it is necessary to the thing

that it have a sensuous makeup to it, even if that sensuous makeup is unessential to its oneness. The thing is thus *essentially* a bare particular that *necessarily* has an empirical makeup (that is, it necessarily instantiates certain sensuous properties). Its makeup is not essential to its particularity, but having a makeup is necessary to it.⁴²

Like the previous conceptions of the thing of perceptual knowledge, this conception of the thing, however, fails to make good on the idea that we can know individual things with universal properties solely within perceptual experience itself – that is, without our having to go beyond that experience. Hegel notes that the distinction of something's being necessary but not essential to the thing is just playing with words.⁴³ Moreover, if this account of perceptual knowledge is to be maintained, it will not suffice simply to say that we see the thing *as* an individual and *as* a bundle of properties; we must be said to be directly acquainted with *two* different objects: the bare particular and the universal which it instantiates.⁴⁴ The dilemmas of the descriptions of perceptual knowledge may thus be seen to lie in the nature of the object of perception itself; the object of perception is a "combination," a nexus of two different objects, and for perceptual knowledge to be possible, we must be directly acquainted with both objects in order for us to have the knowledge of the objects of perception that the proponents of this form of "immediate knowledge" have been claiming. This means, however, that the *knowledge* that was claimed for purely perceptual experience therefore fails on its own terms, for it turns out that in order to know the objects of perception, we must *somehow* know that the *two* objects (the bare particular and the universal) are "combined" into *one* object of perception, and that knowledge of the nexus of connection is not *itself* given in perception; we do not *perceive* the nexus, we only perceive the object that is the result of the two distinct "objects" being combined.⁴⁵

The combinations of these two objects into the unity of the thing of perception, which is necessary for us to be able to be said to have immediate perceptual knowledge, is therefore not present in purely perceptual experience itself. It is rather something *posited* as being there in order to make perceptual experience possible. That implies, of course, that perceptual knowledge is not complete in itself; it requires a kind of knowledge that transcends perceptual knowledge *per se*. At this juncture in the argument, we seem to be required to conclude that we do not *directly* perceive the object of perception at all; what we perceive are its sensuous properties and its singularity, which are only the *manifestations* to us of its "inner" nature. The object of perception as a nexus of individuality and universality is the basis of these manifestations to us. Our perceptions of things thus do not seem to be a direct acquaintance with the things themselves that cause our perceptions; rather, at best they offer a mediated knowledge of them that goes beyond perceptual experience itself.

We must therefore conclude that we are *not* directly acquainted with the objects of perception but *only* with our representations (*Vorstellungen*) of them. The proponents of the idea that there is nonetheless a form of "self-

sufficient, self-contained knowledge" must therefore make their stand on the claim that the "understanding" brings together our direct acquaintance with these representations and inferentially combines them into a true picture of the world.⁴⁶ Perceptual experience was supposed to give us a knowledge of the objects of perception that relied on nothing other than what was available in purely perceptual experience itself; however, it has apparently turned out that all that is immediately available in purely perceptual experience is a direct acquaintance with our *representations* of things, and not the direct acquaintance with the things themselves. With that conclusion to the section on "Perception," Hegel turns his arguments now to whether this new version of a conception of self-sufficient knowledge can itself be sustained on its own terms.

3. Force and the understanding: appearance and the supersensible world

Reflective judgment

Perceptual experience was supposed to be self-contained, self-sufficient knowledge of sensible *objects*, but in fact it turned out to be only an awareness of two different types of *representations* of objects – namely, representations of particulars and representations of universals. Perceptual experience cannot account for this combination by relying only on its own resources (on what is simply given to it in perception); such an account requires something more than perceptual experience itself, namely, the reflective "understanding." The "understanding" thus is based not on the claim that we have a direct consciousness of objects in the world but on the idea that the immediate objects of our awareness are our *representations* of particulars and universals, and that the unity of the representations of the universals and particulars is to be explained by something non-perceptible, an underlying supersensible metaphysical essence. The underlying metaphysical essence is the seat of "powers" or "forces" whose function is to explain the unity of perceptual experience in terms of its being an experience of particulars having individualized universal properties. This requires more than simply an empirical explanation because it is not the empirical relations between observed entities that we are trying to explain; the object of explanation is the way in which two ontologically distinct "objects" ("bare particulars" and "universals") can be combined into the unity of one object of perception. Since what we immediately perceive are our representations of the things in themselves (and not the "things themselves"), we must therefore *infer* on the basis of these representations to the things themselves in such a way that we have knowledge of the things themselves that does not depend on anything other than our acquaintance with the representations themselves and our own powers of reasoning – that is, on nothing that is dependent on any historically determinate social practice. Knowledge of things in themselves is not perceptual knowledge; it is mediated knowledge that comes from our own rational capac-

ities to go beyond perceptual experience in order to arrive at a reflective knowledge of things in themselves.

Hegel's terms for the reflective judgmental activity that deals with these representations is "the understanding." The question is thus whether the kinds of concerns appropriate to the "understanding" themselves undermine themselves; Hegel argues that they do, and that this self-undermining leads to the kinds of accounts that are appropriate to "self-consciousness."⁴⁷

Hegel calls the standpoint at which the argument now plays itself out the "unconditioned universal."⁴⁸ This is Hegel's rather abstract name for that conception of a metaphysical – that is, a supersensible – basis for the resolution of the problems that confronted "sense-certainty" and "perception." The "unconditioned universal" is the supersensible essence that supposedly underlies our perceptual acquaintance with our representations of objects and which has nothing underlying it. Whereas the proponents of "sense-certainty" and "perception" took us to be directly aware of *objects* in the world, the proponents of the "understanding" take us to be directly acquainted only with our *representations* of those objects. Our representations, in this view, can therefore only be the sensuous *manifestations* of that underlying supersensible essence. That supersensible essence should reconcile the contradictory aspects of the "thing" of perceptual experience: its being a "one" independently of its relation to other "ones" (that is, what seemed to be a bare particular) *and* its being a collection of many sensuous properties (that is, being simply a medium in which many sensuous properties subsist and consequently being only a singularity whose identity is determined by whichever contingent sensuous properties it happens to have).⁴⁹

If the thing is not to be simply a bare particular, a featureless "one," then it must have some determinateness on its own that is different from the sensuous properties that it has in appearance. To the extent, therefore, that the thing itself has some determinateness that is not a matter of sensuous properties, the thing itself, so it seems, cannot *appear* to us as it is.⁵⁰ What explains the appearances, which are themselves sensuous, must therefore be something supersensible. If the two – the thing in itself and its appearances – are indeed linked in a non-causal manner – if the appearances are to be the appearances *of* a thing in itself – then the "understanding" must form some judgment about how the appearances are in fact linked to the supersensible essence of appearance. The questions are: What is the nature of the supersensible thing, and can we be said to know it?

Force

If we can be said to *know* the underlying supersensible essence by means of the reflective "understanding" (that is, if we can be said to know the essence without having any direct acquaintance with it), then we must have some way of linking that underlying supersensible essence with the appearances themselves such that the essence would be knowable *in* the appearances themselves. The appearance, therefore, must be the *expression* (*Ausserung*) of the

underlying essence. This notion of the essence “expressing” itself is not a causal conception of the relation between the essence and the appearance, and thus it is not subject to a naturalistic, scientific explanation. The essence is not some one thing that could be linked causally to another thing; rather, the appearance is the way in which the essence expresses itself and therefore appears to us such that we can be said to know it.⁵¹ The thing in itself – the “unconditioned universal” – is thus the seat of certain powers or forces (*Kräfte*) that manifest themselves to us in appearance.⁵² We *know* these forces *in* their appearances (their “expressions”) to us, and, as knowable, what the force is in itself should be *manifested* to us in its expressions in appearance.⁵³

In his treatment of the nature of force, Hegel discusses two different concerns present in his time. First, and least important for him at this stage in the argument of the *Phenomenology*, is his discussion of the science (or, perhaps more properly, the philosophy of science) of his day as to what the relation of forces were to their appearances in the world. In that discussion, Hegel is attempting to argue for a non-substantialist theory of force; a force, so he argues, is not an entity that stands in some relation to the entities of appearance. For example, in his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel uses the example of magnetic force and its bearers in iron: The *movement* of a piece of iron in the direction of the magnetic force is the *expression* of the force.⁵⁴ It is not as if there are two different entities – the force and its expression – with the problem being how they relate to each other. Rather, one sees something in appearance (the movement of a piece of iron) as an expression of an underlying force.⁵⁵ The movement of the piece of iron and the magnetic force are not two *things* soliciting each other; indeed, it is the *whole* (the postulated magnetic force and its expression in the movement of iron) that is force itself. A force that does not express itself would not play the role it must play in this account of knowledge; a force that did not express itself would be an unknowable thing-in-itself. Throughout this part of the discussion, Hegel makes reference to certain debates during his time, such as the relation between centrifugal and centripetal forces in planetary motion, or the relation between inertial and accelerative forces. Each of these forces (centrifugal and centripetal, inertial and accelerative forces) exists only if the other does, and one of the questions concerning, for example, centripetal and centrifugal force has to do with whether they are two independent forces or are only manifestations of one force. (Unfortunately, however, Hegel himself apparently misunderstands some of the ideas at issue, although it makes no difference here to the point he is making.⁵⁶)

More important for Hegel's concerns at this stage in the *Phenomenology*, however, is the *metaphysical* idea of force, which had been introduced by various contemporaries in order to solve the metaphysical problems raised by the attempts to give an account of perceptual knowledge. In this light, Hegel probably has Johann Herder in mind in his discussion of *Kraft* (force). In some places, he has Schelling in mind.⁵⁷ He links this metaphysical idea of force with the kinds of discussions in the emerging idealist philosophy of his

time concerning what the alleged implications of the natural scientific conceptions of force were. Since this force is not to be conceived as an entity that is related to another set of entities (as a metaphysical “one” relating to the multiplicity of the elements of experience), it must be conceived from the “understanding’s” point of view as *necessarily* expressing itself. Moreover, since the force is the “medium” of the elements of appearance (which Hegel, continuing to use the terminology of an older eighteenth-century physics, calls “matters”), it is the reason for their appearing as they do. Without the underlying force, the elements of appearance would not exist as the elements they are. Such a force supposedly explains why appearance has the ontological structure that it does, and we are supposedly aware of it through its manifestations to us in a similar manner to the way in which we are aware of other non-metaphysical forces through their manifestations in appearance.

The underlying metaphysical force is a “one” that accounts for the multiplicity of appearance. Since this force is a metaphysical, supersensible entity, nothing can *cause* the force to express itself; rather, it must express itself because of something internal to the makeup of such a force. Therefore what solicits a force to express itself must be a force itself, either the force soliciting itself or another force soliciting it.⁵⁸ The question then would be whether there is a better reason to hold that there is only one metaphysical force that solicits itself into expressing itself or whether there must be a play of multiple metaphysical forces each soliciting the other. Although Hegel scatters references to the science of his day throughout his discussion of this metaphysical force, what is important for the argument that he is presenting is not the details of this science but the overall issue as to whether the kind of claim to knowledge being offered here – that we can know the supersensible things in themselves by virtue of a series of inferences made on the basis of our direct acquaintance with our representations of the things – can be sustained. For this to count as the kind of knowledge that the “understanding” claims it is, it should be a form of a priori knowledge. Thus, if there is a necessity for there being more than one force – for there being, for example, in every particular case always at least two forces, one soliciting and one being solicited – then that necessity must arise out of conceptual considerations about the nature of force and not out of any observations of forces manifesting themselves.

Hegel notes that there seems to be a formal argument, at least within this point of view, for there being two forces, namely, that the concept of solicitation involves a passive and an active element. If a force is solicited, it must be passive, whereas a soliciting force must be active.⁵⁹ Unless a force can be both passive and active, it cannot solicit itself; therefore, there must be at least two independent forces. Each is the force that it is only in its relation to the other force. Moreover, the independence of the forces is not the independence of two entities, for a force, as we have seen, is not one entity standing in some relation to another entity (however that relation might be characterized); a force is the kind of thing that manifests itself in its appearances.⁶⁰ The importance of this argument (which Hegel of course rejects as wholly spurious) is that it seems to be a logical, conceptual claim, something that the

"understanding" can determine without having to any empirical research.⁶¹

On the basis of perceptual experience, empirical science extrapolates to the nature of the forces and how they are related. But, so the argument now goes, for the purposes of resolving the issues raised by the claims of purely perceptual knowledge, we must look beyond the forces that are studied by the empirical sciences of nature to the metaphysical forces (or essences) that are the grounds of the determinateness of appearance. These metaphysical forces, being related conceptually to each other, can supposedly be known by virtue of the "understanding's" reflecting on the representations that are their expressions.⁶² Although we cannot have any direct acquaintance with the objects themselves (as was erroneously claimed in "Sense-Certainty" and "Perception"), we may nonetheless be said to know what things are in themselves by virtue of *reflecting* on our representations of them as to what is necessarily manifested to us in these representations. As Hegel puts it, "[T]his true essence of things has been determined so that it is not immediately for consciousness; on the contrary, consciousness now has a mediated relationship to that which is internal and, as the understanding, *looks through this mediating play of forces into the true background of things.*"⁶³

We thus have a curtain of sorts between us and the world, and the "understanding" is capable of getting behind the curtain and gaining knowledge of the things in themselves.⁶⁴ This curtain is the world of appearance (*Erscheinung*), the mediating point between the world of the things in themselves (the essences that are the determining grounds of appearance) and the "understanding" (or perhaps more prosaically, the reflecting person). As genuine knowledge, this world of appearance (as reflectively understood) is not the way things only *seem* to be but may not be in themselves; it is the gateway for the "understanding" to the way things actually *are*. (It is appearance, *Erscheinung*, and not just seeming, *Schein*.)⁶⁵ The way in which things are in themselves is, of course, not to be identified with the world of appearance; the domain of things in themselves is a distinct realm that is *expressed* in the world of appearance, in perceptual experience, with these expressions being the means through which we reflectively grasp the supersensible determining grounds of appearance that are manifested within them.⁶⁶ If this conception is sustainable, then the knowledge that would be thus gained would be independent of history and social practice; it would be a knowledge available in principle to any rational agent who wishes to reflect on the world as it appears to him.

The supersensible world is thus the "truth" of the sensuous world of appearance in that the conception of such a supersensible world is developed out of the difficulties inherent in the conceptions of purely perceptual knowledge. This supersensible world (supposedly) explains the determinateness of the appearing world; the structure of appearance in perception is (supposedly) due to the determining essences "behind" or "beyond" appearance.⁶⁷ This world of appearance is the domain of our representations, and the world of things in themselves is (supposedly) expressed in our representations.

What appears to the "understanding" is the "play of forces," the way in

which the structure of appearance is explained in terms of the underlying plurality of metaphysical forces, with one force soliciting the other into expressing itself in appearance. We infer from the play of forces in appearance, the way in which we perceive concatenations of sensuous properties as forming one individual, to the metaphysical essence of appearance (the “inner” of the world of appearance, in Hegel’s terms.) In seeking to infer to this metaphysical essence, the “understanding” seeks to uncover the unity behind the multiplicity of perceptual experience. It thus must hold that the apparent difference between the various forces that seem to manifest themselves in appearance is *only* apparent. The earlier so-called conceptual argument for there being two forces saw the whole basis for the asserted difference as resting in the differences between the “form” and the “content” of the different forces (the formal difference being that between soliciting and being solicited, and the difference of content being that between force as the “medium of properties” and the force as a “one”). However, the different forces are not conceptually independent of each other; the two forces can only be identified and described in terms of each other. The two different forces, *x* and *y*, are the forces that they are (they have the determinateness that they do) only by virtue of the *unity* in which they are separately identified; the *x* can be the *x* it is *only* in standing in the relation of soliciting or being solicited with some other *y*, which in turn can be the *y* it is *only* by standing in the relation of soliciting or being solicited by *x*. The true essence is thus not the play of independent forces themselves manifesting themselves in appearance; it is the *unity* of the forces that determines them as being the forces that they are. It is therefore this unity that is the true object of the “understanding”; and in inferring to this unity, that manifests itself in the play of forces, we supposedly thereby gain the knowledge which this point of view has promised. The “understanding” therefore believes itself to be licensed to say that we know the world both as it appears (in our immediate knowledge of our representations) and as the way it really is “in itself.”

Laws

Hegel calls this unity the “law of force.”⁶⁸ For “the understanding,” this is the true “unconditioned universality”; it explains the world of appearance but requires nothing further to explain itself. As a domain of such laws (or as one Grand Law), the supersensible world is, in Hegel’s metaphorical phrase, the “tranquil image” of the flux of the appearing world.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, this conception of law makes it difficult to specify any content for such laws. On the one hand, the more humdrum laws of appearance are full of content; they are the observed regularities of the world that we extrapolate from experience (sugar dissolves in water, stones fall to earth when dropped, and so on). But what is the content of the more general “law of force”? If it is to play the role that it is supposed to play – to give us a knowledge of things in themselves by virtue of our inferring from the appearances – then it must be determinable by the “understanding” itself and not be

the result of contingent empirical observations. (Hegel spends a few pages discussing all the various moves that might be made to bolster this claim before he discards it, and his discussion is rendered somewhat more obscure than it need be by virtue of his various references to the rather extravagant philosophical claims that were being made about the status of scientific laws in the philosophical climate prevalent at the time in which he wrote. Hegel's discussion of the idea of a metaphysical force in these sections is probably directed not only to Herder's conception of force but also to Schelling's discussions of the concept of force – for example, to Schelling's claims to “deduce” the concept of opposed forces from considerations appropriate only to “the understanding.”⁷⁰)

The “principle of the understanding” cannot be satisfied with the plurality of laws, for it demands a unitary ground for the multiplicity of appearance.⁷¹ The “understanding” is driven to seek *one* metaphysical law for the same kind of reasons that it is driven to reduce all phenomenal laws to one law in the natural sciences. (As an example of a reduction of many phenomenal laws to one general law, Hegel obliquely refers to the Newtonian unification of the laws of terrestrial motion with those of celestial motion, that is, Newton's showing that the same laws of motion apply to ordinary things – such as throwing a ball – as apply to the movement of planets.⁷²) The “understanding” must therefore seek *one* metaphysical law from which all the other more particular physical laws may be (somehow) derived. However, the more generally stated this law is, the more empty it becomes. If it is general enough to be *the* law governing the so-called supersensible forces (and out of which the phenomenal laws are to be constructed), then it will have no content. If it is particular enough to have any content, it will not be general enough to be the “law of force” per se and will only be one phenomenally manifested force among many. The demands of the “understanding” to produce a metaphysical ground outside of appearance to explain the determinateness of appearance seem to lead only to progressively more empty statements. Therefore, for this metaphysical conception of force to work as an object of knowledge, it must be conceived not just as a progressive *abstraction* from more particular laws; rather, this law must exhibit some form of conceptual necessity to it such that the more particular laws can be seen to be *necessary* consequences of this more general law; in this way, the “understanding” may deduce the more particular laws from it in ways that it cannot simply “deduce” the regularities of appearance.⁷³

This kind of metaphysical law could as well be called “force” (the ultimate metaphysical “force” of the world, similar to Herder's idea of a basic metaphysical *Urkraft*). Moreover, those who argue for this kind of metaphysical force could find what might seem like intellectual support for this view in some of the science of Hegel's time, which tended to divide various powers into opposites (for example, the opposition of north and south poles to explain magnetism, positive and negative electricity to explain lightning – it was even a fashionable scientific opinion that all tastes were combinations of sweet and sour).⁷⁴ But that general law, however it might be stated (perhaps

as something to the effect that there is a general metaphysical law to the effect that nature's basic force must divide itself into positive and negative sides) is too general and indifferent to any particular law to have any real cognitive content. The so-called necessity for this (for the deduction of the division of nature into sweet and sour, positive and negative electricity, and so on, on the basis of some unitary and fundamental metaphysical factor such as a basic force) is spurious. For example, in many so-called natural laws dealing with forces, such as (to use Hegel's own example) the law of motion, there is not one item (for example, motion) out of which we then *logically* derive the constituent elements (space, time, distance, velocity). At best we can develop these constituent moments of motion out of motion itself only by an *analysis* of the *concept* of motion, in which case we would not have an instance of a basic force (or whatever) "dividing itself up" into positive and negative elements but only the articulation (the analysis) of what was already contained in the concept as it was being used in some particular scientific theory.⁷⁵

The "understanding" thus cannot make good on its claim that nature's differentiating itself into positive and negative elements or forces is something that the "understanding" can deduce out of some more general law, such that the "understanding" can be said to know things in themselves purely by some kind of a priori reflection. In fact, it seems to be quite the opposite: It seems to be something that "the understanding" imposes on nature; it is the result of a theory that the "understanding" constructs about the way nature "must be" in itself. Rather than being the result of a special insight that goes behind the curtain of appearance to the world of supersensible things in themselves, it seems to be the "understanding" itself demanding that nature conform to a theory that it has laid down.⁷⁶ (Hegel gives an example of the emptiness of such spurious explanation: One states a law and then postulates a ground for that law in some kind of "force," which on closer inspection just turns out to be the law restated in a substantialized manner; for example, lightning is explained by reference to laws of electricity, which are themselves then "explained" by reference to "electrical force." But "electrical force" turns out just to be a restatement of what was already contained in the "laws of electricity." These kinds of tautologous explanations serve no genuine cognitive purposes.⁷⁷)

This account of what we can know therefore threatens to undermine itself just as the accounts in "Sense-Certainty" and "Perception" did. Rather than giving us a knowledge of the inner metaphysical necessities of things in themselves, this point of view seems to give us a knowledge only of the necessities in the way in which the "understanding" works; it seems more to study the way in which we *think* of things rather than the way in which things really are.⁷⁸

There is, however, another move available to the proponents of the point of view of the "understanding" to deny that this failure to establish that there is one metaphysical force shows that the "understanding" necessarily fails to provide a knowledge of things in themselves. They can argue that these results show only that the "understanding" should not be so "monistic" but

instead should be more "pluralistic." Thus, they can draw the opposite conclusion than had originally been drawn: it is a mistake to hold that there is *one* force; rather, there is a basic *duality* of forces; and modeling metaphysics on the success of mechanics (which had reduced the laws of terrestrial and celestial motion to one law) was a mistake.⁷⁹

If one were to take seriously the idea that the world metaphysically requires these negativities of forces (as Schelling apparently did), then one would have to conclude, Hegel argues, that the supersensible world would therefore have to be the opposite of the world of appearance in order for its forces to elicit the structure of appearance as we experience it. We must therefore imagine a kind of supersensible world that functions like a negative pole to the positive pole of appearance. This is intended as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the kind of way in which the "understanding" posits metaphysical substructures as explanations of the determinateness of appearance (especially in terms of these kind of imposed "oppositions"), and is one of the many places in the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel is simply having fun with what he takes to be the flawed ideas of some of his contemporaries.

This constructed, opposite world is called by Hegel the "inverted world."⁸⁰ The term applied in Hegel's day to a very popular type of engraving, in which the normal world was shown as having gone topsy-turvy (the hare is grilling the huntsman, children are lecturing professors, the mouse is pursuing the cat, and so on); it also formed part of some Carnival celebrations.⁸¹ Hegel picked up the popular term, the "inverted world," to describe this fanciful supersensible world in what is a genuinely sardonic section of the *Phenomenology*. His point is that the very absurdity of this idea should motivate those who have this kind of conceptualization to think about what is going on in such a case – to think, that is, about the *nature of their conceptualizing activity* rather than about the particular oppositions that arise.

The point of view of the "understanding" originally claims that it is capable of knowing the internal essence of the world by reflecting on our representations of that world, that it can correctly infer to what is behind the curtain of our representations to what the world is in itself. The "understanding's" claim to *know* the things in themselves, however, is completely undermined by the fact that it can assert both that the "unconditioned universal" is a unitary force lying behind appearance and that it is a plurality of forces lying behind appearance and, worse, that not only is each assertion equally valid, each is equally riddled with the same kinds of dilemmas and contradictions. (The resemblance here to Kant's "Antinomies" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is probably not accidental.⁸²) What this shows is that the "understanding's" concern with the "unconditioned universal" is not in fact adequate to the claims that the "understanding" makes about it. What is truly going on in the "understanding's" claims about the nature of this metaphysical supersensible world is that the "understanding" is making claims only about *its own activities* of construing the world. It is not so much describing a supersensible world beyond appearance as it is describing its own structure for describing the world. (To use Wittgenstein's metaphor, it is describing the frame around

the picture all the while thinking that it is describing the picture itself.) The “understanding” took itself to be determined in its structure by the “things themselves” – that is, it took the nature of the object to be authoritative for it. However, it has turned out that what is authoritative for it is its own conceptualizing activity; in setting its own terms, the “understanding” turns out thereby to be free from determination by the “things themselves.” The “understanding” took the oppositions that are really a feature of its own conceptual activity as being the structure of things in themselves; thus, it took the logical structure of conceptual opposition to be a relation between two kinds of entities (the sensuous entities of the appearing world and the supersensible entities of the world of things in themselves.)⁸³ The true “essence” at play here is, however, not a supersensible entity that is different from and lies behind the entities of appearance; it is the work of the “understanding” itself. The oppositions at work of universal and particular, of inner world and outer appearance, are in fact aspects of the way in which the “understanding” conceives the world, not features of some entity (the supersensible metaphysical ground) that stands behind appearance. In following out the vicissitudes of “the understanding,” we, the readers, come to see (under the guidance of our narrator, Hegel) that it is only by thinking of our cognitive and practical relations to the world in terms of some set of mediating *representations* that such an idea would be engendered in the first place; if we think of the realm of our consciousness as a realm of mental objects (representations) that are then related in some way to another realm of objects (the domain of things in themselves), we will always be caught in the dilemmas of trying to match the mental objects with the other kind of objects, and we will find that all the proposed matches ultimately undermine themselves.⁸⁴

Self-consciousness

The true object of “the understanding,” therefore, is the “understanding” itself. (Hegel also calls this an “infinity,” meaning a structure that sets its own conditions.⁸⁵) The oppositions that the “understanding” originally claimed to have found in things in themselves are in fact really just part of the structure of our inferential system, of the “social space” in which we operate. In coming to have its own activity for its object, the “understanding” comes to have an object that is *in itself as it appears* to “the understanding”; the “understanding” can thus claim to know what it is as it really is, rather than claiming to know what these metaphysical things in themselves are.

The contradictory nature of the accounts that the “understanding” has given of its “objects” has compelled it to reflect on the nature of those accounts. In this way, the subject/object model (that of “consciousness”) is replaced by the more complex idea of *self-consciousness*. The conception of “consciousness” that informs the first three sections of the *Phenomenology* is that picture of ourselves in relation to the world that sees that relation in terms of a dualism between subject and object, a dualism underpinned by taking that relation to be mediated by *representations* that serve as the meta-

physical “mediums” that stand between the subject and the object.⁸⁶ The contradictions intrinsic to this representationalist understanding of our relation to the world (which have emerged in the dialectical give and take of “Sense-Certainty,” “Perception,” and “Force and the Understanding”) have thereby put us, the readers, into a position to see that the subject/object model of “consciousness” is not the natural metaphysical structure of our conscious lives but a way in which we have historically come to *understand ourselves*. In putting the issue in terms of self-consciousness, of the way in which we take ourselves to be, Hegel puts us in a position to shift away from asking the question, “How do we *represent* the world?” and to ask instead another question, “What must *we* be like, in our historically developing social practices, in order to make such a claim?” This shift moves us away from the subject/object model of knowledge to an understanding of *self-consciousness* – that is, to understanding that the question of how “we” relate to the world depends on how “we” understand ourselves to be. If we take ourselves to be metaphysical representers, then we will understand our relation to the world in one way; if we take ourselves to be something other than metaphysical representers, we will take our relation to the world in some other fashion. Thus, once the subject/object model of knowledge is replaced by that of “self-consciousness,” we will be in the position to see that our claims to knowledge do not involve a metaphysically understood *representation* of reality but rather a way in which we *take ourselves* to be dealing with the world and each other. In this move to a view of ourselves as “forming views of ourselves as a component part of claiming to know things,” we will drop entirely the picture of ourselves as *representing* the world, and we will come to see ourselves as social creatures forming *concepts* of ourselves as already world-related. By shifting the issue in this way, we come to see that the old question of how we represent the world is to be replaced by the new question of how we are to understand the self-conscious sociality of the organisms that we are.

The effect of beginning the *Phenomenology* with three sections on “Consciousness” and with problems involved in a post-empiricist understanding of knowledge is that it motivates our discarding the representationalist picture of our relation to the world and replacing it with a reflection on the kinds of social creatures we are. Knowledge, as Hegel understands it in the rest of the *Phenomenology*, is not to be understood as a metaphysical relation between a “subject” and an “object” but as a way in which the peculiarly social organisms that we are establish a relation with the world and ourselves that involves both the kinds of ends we pursue and the kinds of subjects we take ourselves to be. To understand what we take to be valid claims to *knowledge* is to come to understand the kinds of *persons* we take ourselves to have become. To put it another way: We move away from a representationalist picture of knowledge to the idea of socially situated reason-giving activities; we thus move away from a picture of ourselves as “subjects” *representing* the world to an understanding of ourselves as *participants* in various historically determinate social practices.

But this abstract sketch of what knowledge is can here only be a kind of

promissory note; the filling out of this very general claim requires the rest of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Nonetheless, with the closing of the section on “Consciousness,” Hegel completes part of the task of an introductory section to a book with the title the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As a *phenomenology*, it must be a study of “consciousness,” of how we take certain thing as authoritative for ourselves (in Hegel’s terms, how we see ourselves in relation to the “essence” of things). This must begin with the theories taken for granted in Hegel’s own day and the subject/object models of knowledge and action that they entail. Hegel has shown that “consciousness” is not a self-enclosed, self-illuminated sphere that must somehow be linked up with the world in some metaphysical fashion; it is already world-involving at its most basic levels, and it involves a form of *self-relating*.⁸⁷ “Consciousness” can only be understood in terms of various “formations of consciousness,” of the ways in which certain historically determinate communities take certain kinds of things and practices as authoritative for themselves in determining what counts as knowledge. The next step, therefore, is to develop a conception of *spirit*. This is the goal of the next section, “Self-Consciousness.” In that section, Hegel looks at an alternative version of self-sufficient knowledge. Instead of the conception of ourselves as self-illuminated minds who could know something about the world without having to know anything about anything other than what was contained in “sense-certainty,” “perception,” or “the understanding,” we come to a view of ourselves as self-sufficient practical agents who attempt to deal with the world solely in terms of our own desires and to establish relations to it and even to our social context that need not take into account our sociality. The failure of those attempts at self-sufficiency sets the stage for the rest of the *phenomenology of spirit*, the dialectical history of the accounts that the European community has given of what could be authoritative for itself.