Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy was intended to solve the dilemma that was uncovered in the epistemology of Enlightenment philosophy. It sought to provide grounding for its rationalistic tendency and to reinforce humanism with a solid philosophical basis in the sciences, as well as provide a commanding rational authority for ethics, jurisprudence, and independent governmental bodies—while also according independent value to artistic creativity. But the solution that he offered, by presenting a definite verdict of the limits of human reason and human rule over nature, raised a new dilemma in place of the previous. It brought about a profound and continuing crisis that found especially poignant significance in the domain of grappling with the problem of religion. It became clear that the crisis that befell religion in its first encounter with scientific rationalism, humanistic ethics, and political theory, now befell philosophy, which represented rationalism and humanism as against religion. The weakness of rationalism and humanism was exposed in the same way the weakness of religion had been exposed earlier.

The problem was formulated anew in the face of a radical choice: Could philosophy overcome its newly exposed weakness, and expel religion once and for all from its position in the culture, in order to take its place? Or should philosophy perhaps renounce its original ambition and rely instead on religion in those sensitive areas where its own shortcomings had been revealed? The systems of Kant’s three principal disciples and critics—Fichte, Hegel and Schelling—exemplified these two opposing directions.

Hegel’s philosophy continued along Fichte’s path in its tendency to reconstruct Spinoza’s pantheistic monism through a dialectical thought-process. It led to a more radical outcome than Spinoza with respect to religion. In his zeal for philosophy, Hegel strove to overcome the limits of knowledge that had been laid down by Kant’s epistemology. He
sought to establish the uncontested authority of autonomous human reason in all areas of social ethics, law and political governance, and in all areas of human science and creativity, by arriving at knowledge of the higher truth that gives a unified interpretation of all reality.

With this radical determination, to insure for philosophy a hegemonic status in all areas, Hegel went beyond Spinoza and effectively revived Plato’s totalitarian ambition. In the Middle Ages, religion seized for itself the authority to govern in the name of the truth that was revealed through it in ways transcending the limits of human reason. Philosophy was required to serve religion and had to accept this demand for appearance’s sake, at least in the political realm. We saw that Spinoza did not dare to rebel against religion without paying his respect to this appearance, which found justification in the political realm. By contrast, Hegel thought that in the modern age scientific and cultural development had matured and prepared the tools necessary for realizing Plato’s total ambition. The time had arrived when philosophy could be completely liberated from the yoke of religion and capture the hegemony that was rightfully hers, in order to lead the culture to realizing the possibilities of progress. Philosophy would reveal the whole truth that had been veiled by religion, and would raise it up to the level of reason. Religion would melt away and disappear into philosophy, like a cloud lit up by the sun shining with all its own radiance and piercing through it.

It is hard to refrain from commenting on the overweening ambition and dominating stance that was expressed in the definition of philosophy’s mission in Hegel’s system. His aspiration for total dominance in the realm of knowledge was like a declaration of sovereign ownership of the truth. It departed sharply from the finite, creaturely sense of proportion in the humanism in whose name it spoke. In traditional religious philosophy, such a single, all-inclusive language was ascribed

2 “...and would raise it up” (ve-ta’aleh). Schweid here paraphrases the key Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*, a tricky German word with the simultaneous meanings of “raise to a higher level” and “supersede,” which Hegel uses simultaneously in both meanings. Characteristically, one idea is *aufgehoben* by being transformed into a higher-level idea, which preserves part of the original idea while rendering other parts of it obsolete. In this key instance, the partial truths of religion are supposedly preserved in philosophic form, thus making religion itself no longer necessary. This notion recurs repeatedly in the current chapter on Hegel, and will occur in the chapter on Krochmal (Chapter 9). Standard English philosophical translations of *Aufhebung* are “sublation” or “sublimation”; these terms will be used below where appropriate. (See Glossary, “Sublation.”)