CHAPTER 3

After Kant

Fichte and Schelling

Fichte and Schelling play an important role in the development of Hegel’s philosophy, particularly in his Jena-period (1801–1806). That Hegel both learned from and distanced himself from Fichte and Schelling does not by itself mean that he superseded them, as the narrative often goes. Both Fichte and Schelling continued on their own paths. Unaware of Hegel, Fichte followed a path influenced by his discussions with Schelling up until his death in 1814. It was the late Schelling who witnessed the downfall of German idealism in Berlin in the 1840s. There he delivered lectures consisting of, among other things, a critique of Hegel that became influential in the following century, particularly through Kierkegaard, who was present as a listener. There are different approaches to assessing the relationship between the German idealists. These range from the claim that it was exclusively one of the idealists that fulfilled German idealism,144 to the claim that they all represent unique forms of fulfillment.145 My concern here is only the influence Fichte and Schelling had on Hegel through their response to Kant, in particular through how they attempted to develop a system of philosophy and to find an appropriate philosophical method for it. I will first give an outline of the response to Kant and the role Fichte played in it, before I proceed to the main points of Fichte’s and Schelling’s system at the time they began influencing Hegel. Finally, I will look into Fichte’s and Schelling’s correspondence from 1800–1802. This forms the background to Hegel’s first public appearance as a writer, creating a philosophical identity for himself as a mediator between Fichte and Schelling.

3.1 The Quest for a System of Transcendental Idealism:
Anti-Philosophy and Skepticism

In the wake of Kant’s critical philosophy followed a rise of skepticism, mainly aimed at its theoretical foundations. Since one of Kant’s main concerns was to

give an answer to skepticism, the shadow of doubt extended to the very core of his philosophy. In addition, there was a challenge from the proponents of faith, the main figure being Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), who charged the whole of philosophy with fatalism, nihilism and atheism, a charge that would follow on the heels of all the German idealists. These were not simply intellectual and light-hearted objections – Fichte saw the loss of his professorship in Jena due to charges of atheism. Jacobi was a champion of the individual and of faith, and can therefore be understood as a proto-existentialist. He had already attacked Kant and tried, unsuccessfully, to identify Kant’s philosophy with Spinozism.146 Such identification would imply that Kant was a pantheist, which would put Kant in a difficult position, since pantheism was understood to lead straight into atheism.

Jacobi was very much the anti-philosopher, praising immediacy and feeling while scorning the feeble attempts of humans at grasping the absolute through reason. The nihilism that Jacobi accused Fichte of was a nihilism of the sort that saw everything outside the I as unreal, as a chimera.147 This may at first seem to be an unfamiliar conception of nihilism. Jacobi understood the human being as a creature very much dependent on God for its connection to a reality greater than itself. God secures the objectivity of truth and sets the moral standard. Without God, philosophy dissolves into subjectivism. This subjectivism was at the core of nihilistic philosophy – “sie löst alles auf im Nichts der Subjektivität.”148 Jacobi thought it best to leave all philosophy behind and turn to faith.

Later when discussing the relationship between Jacobi and Fichte, Hegel claimed that both of them remained within the nothingness of subjectivity. For Jacobi it was the subjectivity of faith, for Fichte the subjectivity of infinite striving. Still, according to Hegel, it is of vital importance that philosophy passes through and into “nothingness” in order to reach truth. However, it is this “nothingness” which lies beyond the opposition of the finite and the infinite, and which is not really devoid of inherent content.149 Here we see the beginnings of a conception of a “determinate nothing,” a speculative unifying moment, lying beyond but still including the oppositions that are problematic for philosophy.

149 TWA 2:410.