

—— 1 (EE.) • The Dialectic of Absolute Knowing

In absolute knowing, the distinction between subject and object has fallen away. Spirit is that form of self-certainty which grasps its own notion—namely, the notion of science. As consciousness, it has the form of objectivity, and its content is nothing other than its own self-mediation. But since consciousness now recognizes that this mediation is its own act, it is no longer divided into a consciousness and the world it confronts. Rather, consciousness knows itself to be this world. Spirit is thus immediately present to itself in the individual absolute knower, an immediacy which it brings to itself by reflecting explicitly on its own self-mediating experience.

Spirit is the single individual's consciousness of itself as being identical with the universal self-consciousness. This no longer signifies, as it did at the level of the beautiful soul, that the individual affirms merely his own identity with the universal while denying this to others. In absolute knowing, as in revealed religion, the distinction between the "we" and the "I" has fallen away. Each individual receives from others a recognition of his participation in the universal precisely insofar as he grants them this same recognition.

Now, from the standpoint of absolute knowing, all earlier standpoints have been superseded and taken up in this final shape of spirit. Yet in nature, the previous shapes of spirit have not been thus superseded, but rather can be found existing in and for themselves as particular manifestations of the totality of spirit. Thus, although all these previous shapes can no longer have any independent validity for the spirit that is raised to the standpoint of absolute knowing, there remain individuals for whom an earlier shape of spirit appears itself to be an endpoint rather than a mere stage along the way. These independently existing shapes manifest themselves under the guise of the various religions. And although each cannot claim for itself the absolute standpoint, nonetheless each expresses a moment of the absolute and so is valid as such.

But in another respect, the spirit raised to the standpoint of absolute knowing recognizes only one of these religious shapes as possessing the right to claim for itself the absolute truth of its perspective—namely, revealed religion. In absolute knowing, spirit articulates itself to itself as the systematic, notional comprehension of that particular content which is depicted in revealed religion; philosophy has merely purified revealed religion's absolute knowing of its representational character. Yet although revealed religion is posited by absolute knowing as being in and for itself the most intelligent form of this picture-thinking, nonetheless absolute knowing must chide it for its failing to rise to the level of the notion. Moreover, as the determinate negation of the sphere of religion in general, philosophy transcends the internecine battles of all the earlier stages of spiritual combat, and as such it has no special allegiance to any particular religion. To privilege so-called revealed religion over any other religion would be like defending the apple's superiority to the leaf, or the leaf's superiority to the branch, just because it appears later in time. Accordingly, absolute knowing both does and does not posit itself as the truth of revealed religion. But this contradiction has not been made explicit yet. Indeed, the truth of philosophy's independence from religion will reveal itself only after the achievement of absolute knowing has collapsed.

That the question of the relationship between revealed religion and philosophy remains unraised does not merely signify an uncertain wrinkle in the fabric of absolute knowing that can quickly be ironed out. This ambiguity rather threatens to unravel the very fabric itself. For the broaching of this question will signify the splitting up of absolute knowing into a consciousness which affirms the truth of revealed religion and a consciousness which negates this truth. But the consciousness that negates this truth will no longer put itself forth as possessing the absolute, for on the contrary it will be the explicit consciousness of the failure of absolute knowing. Instead of seeking reconciliation, the unsatisfied absolute knower will lash out against this latter consciousness, declaring the necessity of its destruction. In this way, the dialectic of the unraveling of absolute knowing will culminate not in a reconciliation, but rather in a canceling of the mutual confessions which earlier inaugurated the stage of the religious community in the first place. With this rescinding, we will leave the realm of the spiritual absolute and enter a new shape of consciousness—the consciousness of language.

But this sphere is as yet a long way off; it will appear on the scene only after the dialectic of absolute knowing has passed through the self-actualization of individual absolute knowers (EE), and the concomitant recapitulation of the dialectic of spirit in its materialist mode (FF).

That the dialectic did not reach its final resting-place with the immediate achievement of absolute knowing springs from the fact that this

achievement is, precisely, only immediate. To be sure, the absolute standpoint is an immediacy achieved by way of mediation, but this unity of immediacy and mediation is itself something only immediate at first. The individual absolute knower who knows himself as spirit, despite his certainty of the unity of the universal with the individual, must actualize this certainty and so raise it to the level of truth. The absolute knower must accordingly descend from the divine heights of his philosophical Olympus in order to enter, once again, the fray of earthly history, to accomplish the actual work of mediation—if, indeed, this is possible at all.

A. Independence and Dependence of Absolute Knowing: The Philosophical Master Presumed to Know and those who Presume he Knows it

The earlier dialectic of self-consciousness raised the self-consciousness of two individual “I’s” to the standpoint of the “we” of a rational society. Having achieved the truth of this “we,” each individual then again had to struggle to reconcile his own individual “I” with it; this was the struggle between the individual’s pleasure principle and society’s reality principle—the struggle for the individual to actualize his rational self-consciousness. By finding for himself a way of living in which he sees his own law united with the law of society—that is, by becoming Oedipalized—the individual managed to achieve the truth which he expresses in the identification of the “I” with the “we.” The word *spirit* was then used to express this perceived identity. But no sooner had the individual affirmed this identity than he found himself again (though not always self-consciously) recapitulating the earlier struggles for recognition. For the “we” of spirit was at first a split subject, divided between its existence as a totality which exists for the sake of its individual members and the individual members who exist for the sake of the totality. In other words, the identification of the individual’s pleasure-seeking with the good of society turned out to be ambiguous to the extent that it was left unclear which of the terms of the equation was the substantial subject and which the mere predicate. Is it that I, the individual, am the substantial subject and the community merely one of my attributes, or is it that I, the community, am the substantial subject and the individual merely one of my attributes? The uncertainty here—or rather the splitting up of the community into those who are certain of the former truth and those who are certain of the latter—played itself out in the confrontation between the divine law and the human law. Thus, the individual once again found himself struggling for recognition. But instead of confronting another individual (dialectic of self-consciousness) or a mere collection of individuals (dialectic of rational self-consciousness), the

individual now found himself pitted against the reified, substantial “we” of society. The dialectic of spirit ultimately resolved itself with the de-reification of the “we” which took place in the transition from the state to the religious community. Once again, the individual could identify with the “we” of community, but now without losing his own individual self-consciousness.

Looking back over this entire process, we see that the individual “I” had first to work up to the “we” of society (dialectic of self-consciousness), and then back from this “we” to the individual “I” (dialectic of spirit). Hence, the ultimate identification of the “I” with the “we” in absolute knowing actually signifies two distinct and hence only seemingly tautological achievements: $[I = we] + [we = I]$. Viewed as the major and minor premises of a syllogism, the conclusion is, of course, the $[I = I]$ which the individual absolute knower claims for himself at the end of the process. It is just the achievement of this third term by way of the first two which constitutes the immediacy that has arisen out of mediation.

Now, to the individual absolute knower at first raised to this standpoint, the whole matter appears settled. But in fact it is not. For the identification of $[I = I]$ rests on a merely immediate consciousness of the identity of the $[I = we]$ with the $[we = I]$. The individual absolute knower is, of course, certain of their identity, but this certainty has not yet been raised to the level of truth. In the equation $[I = I]$ which *results* from the process of mediation, the “I” on the left side of the equation and the “I” on the right side of the equation are identical only from the standpoint of the individual who has completed this movement. Now, were this merely the $[I = I]$ of immediate self-consciousness, there would be no problem. But in absolute knowing, the $[I = I]$ posits the identity of this individual “I” with every other individual “I,” and as such the two sides of the equation are not identical but different. The certainty that $[I = I]$ is merely immediate because it is only a particular individual absolute knower who claims their equivalence.

To be sure, the absolute knower lays claim to this certainty on the basis of the movements which constitute the major and minor premises of the syllogism—the $[I = I]$ has been mediated by the $[I = we]$ and the $[we = I]$. But this assumes that the two premises have in fact been reconciled with each other; that is, the absolute knower must assume the equivalence of the $[I = we]$ with the $[we = I]$. This equivalence, however, is as yet not something achieved but merely something posited by the individual absolute knower. For itself—that is, for the individual absolute knower—the $[I = we]$ and the $[we = I]$ appear to be absolute equivalents. But in itself, the truth of absolute knowing has split these into distinct moments: $\{[I = we] \text{ is not equal to } [we = I]\}$. This split, though, manifests itself not in the individual absolute knower’s consciousness, but appears rather in the dif-

ferent consciousnesses of distinct individuals. Thus, the individual philosopher, though in and for himself conscious of being at the absolute standpoint, will remain ignorant of the tenuousness of his achievement until he is forced to confront another individual who also claims to have reached the absolute standpoint. The rupture between the [I = we] and the [we = I] reveals itself when two absolute knowers share their different truths with each other.

Despite his initial ignorance of the insufficiency of his achievement, the philosopher is nonetheless aware of a need to encounter another individual who will confirm him in his claim to the absolute standpoint, and so he immediately sets out to seek this recognition. But he can be recognized as an absolute knower—as a philosopher of the absolute—only by another philosopher of the absolute. This peculiarity is not, in one respect, due to any special feature of philosophers, but follows merely from the general fact that an expert in any field can only be recognized as such by another expert in the same field. Yet in another respect, there is something special in the case of the philosopher of the absolute; in claiming for himself the standpoint of absolute knowing, he is conscious of a self-identity which can be acknowledged only by someone who shares this consciousness. Just as earlier, when he first achieved self-consciousness, the individual had required the recognition not of merely another consciousness, such as that of an animal, but of another self-consciousness, that is, of a human, so this time the recognition of another “merely human” self-consciousness will not suffice; the absolute knower must be recognized by another who is self-conscious of his own identity with the absolute—that is, by a “divine” absolute knower. Put otherwise, he is conscious of himself as [I = I], but in the mediated sense of recognizing this self-identity through the mediation of the “we”; hence to be recognized as a self-identical “I” in *this* sense requires not encountering merely another self-conscious individual, but a similarly mediated self-conscious absolute knower. He cannot settle for any of the types of recognition that had earlier satisfied (or, rather, not satisfied) him on his journey to this standpoint.

In *seeking* recognition, the absolute knower at first has no reason to fear that he might have to *struggle* for recognition as he did earlier. This is because he has reached the standpoint of absolute knowing precisely by already having recognized another who recognizes him. The series of confessions which leads ultimately to the coming-together of the religious community suggests, in fact, that the absolute knower has already achieved his status in the company of others. Put otherwise, his self-recognition as absolute knower should already contain within it a reciprocal recognition between himself and at least one other who has traveled with him on his journey. By definition, moreover, the fellow absolute knower he seeks is an

individual who, by definition, *will* recognize him. Thus, although the absolute knower still requires recognition, it would seem a simple matter of acquiring it; he need only turn to his philosophical companion and each will acknowledge the other. The externality of confession in speech is no longer even necessary; for each knows within himself that the other knows that he and the other have both attained the absolute.

Such silence is surely golden. But it is a fool's gold, for so long as their mutual recognition remains merely something inner, it signifies nothing higher than the easy agreement of those who have nothing to say. Were they to remain silent, theirs would be a mere phrenology of the gaze. In order to make real what they already believe they know to be fully actualized, they must resume speaking to each other. Their speech is, at first, rich in its gentle tones, each rewarding itself with the kindness of its words to the other. But this gentleness *toward the other* is at once both necessary and impossible. It is necessary, for the mediated [I = I] of the individual absolute knower must perform the sacrament of going out to the other in order to return to himself as a genuinely mediated, rather than selfishly immediate, "I." But it is equally impossible, because, in the first place, in reaching out towards the other he is doing so only in order to return to himself, and in the second place, in recognizing himself in the other he is in fact encountering the other not as other but as himself in his own externality. For the "thou" which exists in the moment of the "we," is now taken up into the mere—albeit mediated—"I" of the individual. Therefore in his apparent solicitude toward the other, each absolute knower is in actuality being kind only to himself. In an effort to balance these conflicting moments, the absolute knower tries to affirm both his identity with the other and his difference from the other. Toward this end, the gentle tones of his speech are offered in a sincere attempt to recognize the other as other; but this is done so that the other will not assert his otherness. Thus, the gentle speech of the absolute knowers is in bad faith, for each claims to recognize the other, but does so only to the extent that the other's otherness is denied.

This narcissism of an absolute knowing that recognizes the otherness of the other only to the degree to which this gift-giving enables each to give something to himself, now leads to each one's discovering that the more his own otherness is affirmed by the other, the more in fact the other recognizes only himself. But rather than blame the other, each at first blames himself. The reason for this is that each sees both that, as an absolute knower, he himself can be recognized only by an absolute knower whose otherness he recognizes for the other's own sake, and yet that at the same time he is not really recognizing the other for the sake of the other but for his own sake. In other words, each absolute knower becomes aware

of his own narcissism and views this as what stands in the way of their reciprocal recognition. Accordingly, he sets out to undermine his own narcissism by redoubling his efforts to recognize the other for his otherness. He sees, moreover, that the other does the same for him, and so he is rewarded for his efforts. But he also sees the other similarly rewarded, and in fact he becomes conscious of the fact that it is the other's narcissism which underlies his solicitousness. Yet he cannot in good conscience blame the other for this, because in becoming aware of his resentment of the other he realizes that he himself had similarly been recognizing the other only in order to be recognized. He realizes, in other words, that his own condemnation of his own narcissism was also performed for narcissistic reasons. The absolute knower is thus perpetually in bad faith, for no matter how sincere the effort to respect the other for the sake of the other, beneath his apparent gift-giving there lurks the expectation of exchange. The movement, whereby the absolute knower tries to usurp this, his own expectation of reciprocal exchange by giving freely to the other, is always in contradiction with itself. And this same contradiction is of course mirrored in the other, who performs precisely the same movements. As such, the pair enter on a kind of inverse path such as was found in the struggle to the death, which eventually ended up in a sort of mutual kindness; for here, they struggle for kindness but threaten to kill each other with it. Each denies the other, seeks to overcome this denial of the other by acknowledging the other, thereby further denying the other, and so on. This bad infinite of the dialogue of absolute knowers eventually leads to a point where each is virtually identical to the other in their thoughts, their way of speaking, their manner of dressing, and so forth, for each has tried to accommodate himself to the other absolutely. At restaurants, for instance, they say, "No, I'll have what you're having," "No, no, I'll have what *you're* having," and so on. To an outside observer, they would appear to be the best of friends. Yet the more similar they become, the more they are in fact revolting against each other. This movement eventually comes to an end when one of the pair refuses to acknowledge himself in the other. He notices some very small difference between them—say, the side on which each parts his hair—and insists on the absolute error of the other's way. This is the narcissism of minor differences, and indeed it can only concern a difference that is minor, for were it a major difference between them they would follow the initial instinct of desiring to affirm the other's otherness. If one suddenly announced he was a pederast, the other would affirm it as something to be praised. But let him announce that he will wear his trousers unrolled, and the other accuses him of the most unforgivable sin.

The tenuous link between them is now broken, as each realizes that the other's apparently total recognition was in fact no real recognition at

all. Yet each still requires recognition—and, moreover, recognition from each other, for each still requires the recognition of another who is conscious of being at the absolute standpoint. Accordingly, there emerges between them a recapitulation of the earlier struggle for recognition. Yet it is still not a struggle to the death, for each knows full well he requires the other's recognition. At the same time, each now believes that the other's demand to be recognized is one-sided, while not acknowledging that his own demand is similarly one-sided. Each accuses the other of having severed the relationship; each accuses the other of succumbing to a narcissism, but not himself. In this they remain, of course, in bad faith, but it is a bad faith that is necessary for each to retain the pretext of being himself at the absolute standpoint. Moreover, since to affirm the absolute means to postulate not only the possibility but the necessity of mutual recognition, each insists to himself that the other must be made to realize the error of his ways. Yet each cannot recognize the other as being at the absolute standpoint until he is recognized by the other. Their struggle is, accordingly, an immediately unresolvable one. Were they the only two individuals alive, they could remain at this impasse for all eternity, never able to leave each other but never able to come together again.

Luckily, though, they are not the only two individuals alive. There are others, and the struggle for recognition between the pair of absolute knowers now continues under the guise of the struggle for public recognition. The divorce is made public and each blames the other "ex-" for having been an intolerable spouse. More specifically, each pleads his case before the philosophical community, trying to persuade all others that he alone has divined the true absolute. The debate between the two absolute knowers is now mediated through the community, and as such it takes the form of the earlier struggle between the adherents of the law of the divine and the law of the human, each claiming for itself a consciousness of the totality. Yet unlike this earlier shape, the struggle for public recognition is fought not on the battlefield of the state, which for now has dropped out as insignificant from the divine heights of the philosophical community. It is, rather, fought on the battlefield of the notion itself.

Now, from our perspective—that is, those who live in the aftermath of this struggle—it matters little which of the two (or more) absolute knowers eventually wins this struggle. From our standpoint, what is significant is that the struggle can end only when a single proponent of the absolute standpoint wins the recognition of the community of philosophers. In winning this recognition, the victor assumes the status of philosophical master, with all other philosophers, including the one(s) he has defeated in battle, forced to take on the roles of philosophical apprentices.

The fact that there can at first be only one absolute knower is viewed, from the perspective of the community, as a contingent fact—that is, they believe that “it just so happens” that there is one philosophical genius alive in the present moment. But in this the philosophical community itself is in bad faith. For as the struggle for public recognition wages on, the stakes of the struggle become apparent to all. The individual absolute knower lays claim to positing an identity in difference—that is, he claims to recognize that everyone is capable of attaining the absolute standpoint. But as the narcissism of minor differences pointed out, what lurks behind this claim is really the absolute knower’s desire to have everyone agree with him. Were he to acknowledge this fact, the absolute knower would withdraw from the struggle altogether, conceding that, in fact, he has not attained the absolute standpoint. For truly to attain this standpoint would signify, as he well knows, that he does not merely insist on the absolute validity of his own subjective standpoint. But the absolute knower is not ready to acknowledge this bitter truth, and he can, moreover, persist in his narcissism by continuing to blame his rival for being the one who keeps the public from realizing the truth that he, the true absolute knower, has attained. Furthermore, the rivals themselves, so long as they compete, are encouraged not to withdraw by a philosophical community that is ready to throw its allegiance behind whomever appears destined for victory. For the members of the community also yearn, as do the individual combatants, for the recognition that will come their way if they correctly recognize the one who will be crowned champion. By recognizing the “right” one, they will be confirmed as having the wisdom to have ascertained with Solomonic judgment the difference between the genuine absolute and the sham absolute. Of course, theirs is the most comic position of all, for they fail to notice that it is precisely their own arbitrary decision to label one true and the other false that will lead to the alchemy whereby the arbitrary will take on the luster of the destined, and they can glow in the reflected shine of this magical transformation. They are like children who play “eeny, meeny, miny, moe,” and when their finger arrives at the victor they congratulate themselves for having the brilliance to have selected the real McCoy. And so in this way, one of the absolute knowers receives his baptismal recognition.

Now, unlike the uncertain confessing evil consciousness who bares his soul without knowing if he will be returned to himself by a mutually confessing and forgiving other, those confronted by an other who professes beforehand the necessity of performing this movement are promised just such a return in advance. But precisely because nothing need thereby be risked, the movement of confession and forgiveness is too easily performed. This was why it was so easy for those craving absolution to select a winner

in the struggle between absolute knowers, rather than denying the title of master to anyone.

Politically, this has the significance that the people are ready for genuine democracy, but can at first come to it only by way of a constitutional monarchy more appropriate for feudal relations than for bourgeois society. In both cases—that is, in both the philosophical and political spheres—the communal bonds are at once based on reciprocity and equality, on the one hand, but also on devotion to a single individual, whose sole right it is to give to them their sense of equality among one another, on the other. In short, they are still too fearful of the terrors of absolute freedom to sever the need for a lord. They have sought a master and they have found one, thereby entering into a servitude which they themselves, however, view as liberation.

Within the philosophical community, the absolute master's rule is a more or less benevolent one—more so for those who lavish praise on him and less so for those who do not. From the perspective of the victorious absolute knower, his victory signifies not the community's arbitrary need for a master of any sort, but rather the truth of his own claim to have achieved the absolute standpoint. He, therefore, remains ignorant of the tenuousness of the recognition that confirms for him the truth of his self-consciousness. Moreover, those who recognize his mastery are themselves ignorant of this as well, for they persist in the bad faith of proclaiming to be the destiny of genius what in fact was the caprice of hero-worship. The master/community relationship can remain in this its tenuous cohesion for some time; indeed, the passage of time will even grant it a more secure, if no less illusory, sense of legitimacy. For the more that he and the community shore up the pretense that he alone has achieved the absolute standpoint, the more they all believe that he is truly unique.

Yet their acknowledgment of the master as master is granted on the condition that the master reciprocate, after a fashion. The asymmetry of the relationship prevents him from recognizing that they, too, are masters, but he must grant to them certain rights and entitlements. The philosophical community is ruled by a type of feudal lord who acknowledges his serfs' entitlements to plant and reap in their little plots of absolute knowing, so long as they recognize that he is the one to whom all right of ownership to the land and its products is conceded.

Those who ascribe to the master the status of absolute knower do not realize that it is they, rather than he, who possess the right to pronounce who is and who is not at the absolute standpoint. They have, in short, fetishized him, and for this reason they view it as just that they should merely be day-laborers in the great field of the system. For this reason too,

they readily take on the role of missionaries as well; only tell us the truth, they say to the master, and we will mouth it unto the people.

These individual missionaries are in this way conscious of the gulf that separates them from the master—and, accordingly, for it signifies for them the same thing—of the gulf that separates them from the absolute standpoint, which, as serfs, they both do and do not possess. Because they do not recognize the fetishistic character of their relationship to the master, they view his mastery as something naturally given—he is a genius. But this means that they are alienated from their own work; for they give to him the “natural” right to possess the system itself, as if he had climbed the tree of knowledge and plucked its ripe fruit. Accordingly, they view themselves as lacking the competence to judge the master, despite the fact that this sense of incompetence has arisen merely from their judging him to be superior. This sense of incompetence they experience as a lack; they lack what the master has—namely, the absolute standpoint. But this experience of lack signifies their inability to know what it is the master has which they lack. They can therefore only presume to know that the master knows what they do not know. Moreover, their inability to say what it is that the master has which they lack they see as confirmation of the master’s having “it.” The master, then, is the subject presumed to know, though they know not what it is they presume him to know. The *absolute* is a perfect name for what it is the master is supposed to know, because it is a word that says nothing. All this might be put in the form of a circular argument: Q. What is the absolute? A. What the master knows. Q. What does the master know? A. The absolute. The master’s disciples are forever watching him to see a sign that will reveal to them his hidden secret knowledge.

So long as the subject presumed to know the absolute lives, he stands in a privileged place with respect to the possibility of absolute knowing. His thoughts are granted an authority which his disciples attribute to the master’s ability to identify with the absolute to a degree to which they themselves cannot yet do. The individual disciple accordingly resolves to shut off his own thinking and absorb the thinking of the master, for it is the latter alone that is the truth. From the master he will learn how to think properly—that is, to think from the perspective of the absolute. What is absurd in this movement, of course, is that the disciple believes that he will learn the art of thinking for himself precisely by shutting off his own thoughts. He himself, in fact, is made aware of this absurdity—though not by his own thinking, which he denies, but by none other than that of the master. For as teacher of absolute knowing, the master expects others to confirm his own thinking by their duplicating it for themselves; after all, he still needs to be recognized by someone who is himself really and truly an absolute

knower and not merely a disciple. His status as master, moreover, has enabled him to suspend the narcissism from which this need springs, and so he has returned to the solicitude of the absolute knower toward those who recognize him. For these reasons, he indulges a false modesty, denying that he alone is unique, and preaches the doctrine that one can only learn the art of thinking by thinking for oneself from the outset. The master invites his disciple to dine and exchange thoughts with him. The blustery disciple, having shut off his thinking and ready to obey the thoughts of the master, is in this way instructed to begin thinking again, and in obedience he does this. But no sooner does he start thinking for himself than he finds that his own thoughts do not always correspond to those of the master. To the disciple, this can signify only that he himself has fallen short of the absolute again; and the master's expressed disagreements with him are felt as the most violent blows to his sense of self. Whether because the master now expects universal assent from his disciple or whether the disciple himself can think only as a disciple, he again resolves to be guided by the thinking of the master. The dialogues between master and disciple always end with each one returning to his role; neither achieves any genuine recognition from the other.

The master and his disciples find themselves in the same type of mutual alienation which was experienced in the earlier master/slave dialectic, and they now recapitulate its movements. That is, they will pass through stages of alienation analogous to those which we have already seen under the guises of stoicism, skepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. But whereas in the dialectic of self-consciousness, each struggled to achieve his sense of being an *individual*, in the ensuing dialectic here, each struggles to achieve the consciousness as an *absolute knower*. But in their formal structures, the two movements parallel each other: just as with the earlier dialectic, so here the dialectic can resolve itself only with a mutual confession that leads from two isolated subjects to the mutual recognition of the [I = we]. It will then be necessary to recapitulate the movement back from the [I = we] to the [we = I]. But by then we will have left the dialectic of absolute knowing and entered the dialectic of materialist spirit. For now, we enter the dialectical movements associated with the *philosophical community*.

B. Freedom of Absolute Knowing: The Philosophical Community

The philosophical community reaches a point of stability once the master/disciple relationship has been established. Unlike the struggle between the absolute knowers, the fetishized master has been recognized as the privileged absolute knower. This means that all philosophical disagreements can

be resolved by deferring to him, the subject presumed to know. Previously, disagreements between the rival absolute knowers threatened to undermine the idea that any individual could attain the absolute standpoint. But the privileged standing of the "true" master now obviates this problem. However, it is obviated only because it has been repressed; so long as no rival claimants to the status of master appear on the scene, the illusion that all particular absolute knowers will agree with one another can be sustained. Because the contradiction implied in the idea of multiple absolute knowers has been repressed, the philosophical community fails to recognize that its continued existence requires that there be only one master. Hence it appears to the members of this community a mere contingency of circumstance that there is one individual who stands ahead of all the others; they collectively sustain the false illusion that, in principle, everyone could attain the status of master. As already indicated, they view the master's supremacy as something natural rather than as socially constructed.

The master thus appears to have actualized his own certainty of having attained the absolute standpoint. However, the disciples are in a more explicitly ambiguous position. On the one hand, they recognize only the master as the true absolute knower; on the other hand, as self-conscious members of the philosophical community, they also claim this title for themselves. To the extent that they pride themselves on having had the insight to recognize the master's mastery, the disciples expect to receive the same recognition in return. Yet to the extent that they acknowledge the gulf separating themselves from the master, they do *not* expect this reciprocal recognition. So long as they remain disciples, they cannot resolve this contradiction, for to fetishize the master is, precisely, not to see that the master's supposed mastery is merely something fetishized.

However, to the consciousness of a *newcomer* to this philosophical community, the fetishistic character of the relationship between master and disciple will be readily apparent. To him the community appears like a cult. After all, not only do these loyal subjects tell the naked emperor that his clothes are spectacular, but they also genuinely believe themselves to be dazzled by the splendor his finery. But rather than blame the disciples for having fetishized their master, the newcomer assumes that the master has himself seduced them through charlantry. Rather than expose the idea of mastery, therefore, he merely accuses the particular master himself. When the members of this cult offer him the right to become a disciple himself, the pride of his self-consciousness makes him recoil at the thought. As a more recent disciple, he would not win the accolades of a founding fetishizer. But even if he could, he would lack the true fetishizer's ignorance of his fetishization, and so he would be immediately aware of his bad faith. Like the immediately certain self-consciousness, the newcomer prefers to risk

death—or, in this case, banishment from the philosophical community—rather than give up his claim to self-certainty. After all, there is no reason why a master who is really no master at all should even be presumed to be a formidable opponent. To become his disciple without a struggle would be like volunteering to be a slave. Refusing to give up his own certainty of self, the newcomer challenges the master's right to the title of absolute knower: he becomes the master's would-be *usurper*.

In his attacks on the cult of absolute knowing, the usurper resumes the struggle between rival absolute knowers, seeking to wrest from the master the right to be called master. In doing so, he makes explicit the latent tension between the authority of the master and the independent thought of the disciples. For by affirming his *own* authority, the usurper does what the disciples themselves would like to do. However, the disciples cannot assert themselves without undermining their claim to a share in the master's holding company; their self-certainty rests on their consciousness of being members of the philosophical community. Thus, although the disciples cannot but envy the usurper, they also resent him for rocking the boat. Accordingly, they respond to his challenge by rallying behind the master.

Now, from one perspective, the usurper appears to be a kind of democratic revolutionary who would overthrow the tyranny of the lord. But in fact he has broken with the master only in order to affirm his *own* mastery. To this extent, he is not at all a democratic thinker, but simply a lord without any loyal subjects. It is for this reason that the disciples have nothing to gain from recognizing him. What they need is to be freed from the self-consciousness of discipleship; all the usurper gives them is the opportunity to switch masters. Not only do they have no particular reason to switch, but also they cannot resurrect the struggle between absolute knowers without risking making plain to themselves the pretense behind their allegiance to any master whatsoever. Therefore, even those willing to follow the lead of the usurper could not follow *him*, but would instead have to claim their *own* independence from the master.

The usurper thus loses his battle for recognition. But he, for his part, cannot return to the fold. Neither can he withdraw from the philosophical community entirely, for like anyone claiming for himself a consciousness of the absolute, he requires the recognition of others. Therefore he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge defeat, and insists on speaking to those who refuse to listen to him. In this way, the usurper wages a perpetual struggle to win from the master his disciples. In order to show his contempt for the master, he goes so far as to try to lecture to the disciples even when the master is speaking to them.

The usurper is conscious of the fact that he cannot remain in his claim to be a master if no one else acknowledges and confirms him in this. Yet at the same time, he knows that he is not a disciple. Without giving up his pretension to mastery, therefore, the usurper now posits the unattainability of true mastery, declaring in effect that he is an absolute knower by virtue of his consciousness that no one is an absolute knower. Thus, he reverts to the position which posits the absolute as something unattainable and as existing in a "beyond."

Conscious of the gulf between the infinitely beyond absolute and his own immediate certainty of this infinite beyond, the usurper stoically persists in his alienation from the rest of the philosophical community. In affirming the unattainability of the absolute, he becomes pessimistic; but insofar as he holds out the hope of having his pessimistic certainty acknowledged as a form of absolute knowing, he remains optimistic about his prospects for being recognized by the community. Like the stoic, the pessimistic usurper proclaims a True and a Good that remain forever beyond the reach of the individual; to this extent he preaches a kind of humility, and he attacks the master for having the hubris to think that he is an absolute knower. But his supposed humility is in direct conflict with his own hubristic desire to be master; everything in his pessimistic consciousness arises from resentment.

The usurper is thus in bad faith. On the one hand, he has attained the certainty that there are no true masters; yet, on the other hand, he professes to be a master himself. Were he to give up this latter pretension, he could present the truth of his certainty to the community. Instead, he prefers to lapse into the loquacious ranting and raving of a self-fetishized genius. In this, his speech resembles that of the individual heart who succumbed to the frenzy of self-conceit. He stoically persists in his blustering ways indefinitely, hoping for one thing only—that he will outlive the master so that he can vie to be crowned the master's successor by those who will still require a master to follow.

While the usurper's pretension to mastery is hypocritical, his claim that there are no masters cannot be completely ignored by the disciples. Especially to the more independent-minded members of the philosophical community, the pessimist shows the absurdity of thinking that one and only one individual can have attained the absolute standpoint. Rejecting not the master's claim to being an absolute knower but the community's claim that the master is unique, these disciples carry out the philosophical community's democratic revolution, declaring everyone in the community to be on equal footing. This is the truth of the *philosophical equal*.

The philosophical equal's self-consciousness has emerged out of the pessimist's refusal to accept the unique status of the master. But unlike the usurper, the philosophical equal does not deny the master his mastery; he merely denies the master his uniqueness. To this extent he remains loyal to the master, but he now expects a kind of reciprocity in his dealings with him. However, the earlier problem of how to resolve disagreements among multiple absolute knowers immediately resurfaces.

The disciples were always willing to defer to the judgment of the master. By contrast, the philosophical equal now expects the master to capitulate at times. For while he does not claim to be right about everything himself, he is certain that the master cannot be right about everything either. However, the philosophical equal is taken aback to find that the fetishized master has gotten quite used to the idea of always being right, and is unwilling to defer to the judgment of others. Outraged at the master's anti-democratic spirit, the philosophical equal is angry at first. But since he lacks the self-confidence of the master, he supposes that he may indeed have judged wrongly. However, since he is certain of himself as a philosophical equal, he cannot simply lapse back into the role of disciple. Depressed, the philosophical equal falls back on the pessimistic truth of the usurper, declaring that no one possesses the absolute truth.

But unlike the pessimist, the philosophical equal does not affirm that there are no masters; rather, he affirms that everyone is a master. To this extent, he maintains that there must be a universal truth which all members of the community can agree on. And, indeed, the form of the community itself provides him with this common element. As a community of absolute knowers, the members of this community share their certainty in the master's way of thinking—that is, in his method. Disagreements arise merely in the application of this method. Hence, the philosophical equal distinguishes between what is idiosyncratic and therefore fallible in the master's thinking—the particular *system* he constructs—and what is universal in it—namely, the *method* of absolute knowing. Specific disagreements can now be blamed on the master's dogmatic insistence on the truth of his own system. By introducing this distinction, the philosophical equal thus becomes reconciled once again to the master—or at least reconciled to one part of the master's teaching. He is now able to think for himself without fearing that discrepancies between his own thinking and that of the master will necessarily vitiate the method of absolute knowing.

What is true is the method. But since possession of the true method should in principle give rise to a true system, this distinction can be made only by distinguishing between the method in itself and the method as it exists for the master. In other words, so long as the master claims truth for his system, the equal cannot in good faith distinguish between the method

and the system. Only by severing the absolute link between the master and the method will the distinction between system and method be viable. To sever this link is, of course, to complete the unfinished work of defetishizing the master. But so long as the master exists he carries that aura around with him. Thus, the philosophical equal finds himself wishing for the death of the master. Yet this is a wish which he must immediately repress. For to desire the death of the master would reveal that beneath the longing for a universal method there lurks the conflict between his own thinking and that of the master. In itself, in other words, the desire for the death of the master still signifies a desire to be master. Yet the philosophical equal knows that the ascendancy of the universal method requires that no one be master—or, what amounts to the same thing here, that the method itself be master. What matters is just the abstract universality of the method, the ascendancy of which requires that all masters die. The moment of bad faith in this lies, however, in the fact that the philosophical equal wants this universal agreement because it will signify that he himself is at the absolute standpoint. It is the desire to become God which lurks behind the desire that no one—or everyone—be God. So long as the master lives, the philosophical equal works “within the system.” But his proper work is to reform the system. Only once the master dies, therefore, can the philosophical equal take up his true consciousness as the *philosophical reformer*.

The mere certainty that universal agreement is possible *in principle* is not enough; actual agreement in the results of absolute knowing must be reached. The work of the philosophical reformer, accordingly, is to strive to actualize the ideal of universal agreement—or, expressed not in the language of the philosophical community but in political terms—to remake the world so that the real will actually coincide with the rational.

However, the individual reformer is not alone in his desire to carry out the true work of the master—that is, to universalize the master’s method. He is one among many former disciples, each of whom has devised his own “system,” and naturally they do not all agree about how to define this method. Or, what amounts to the same thing, they differ over their interpretation of precisely how to distinguish between what was merely the subjective thinking of the master, on the one hand, and what was universal in it. The problem of how to purify the method from the system is not an easy one to solve.

The rivals find themselves splitting off into two mutually opposed camps. On the one side stand those who settle the problem in the simplest manner possible, by denying that anything in the master’s teaching was merely subjective. In making this claim, they correctly realize the slippery slope problem that would result from affirming a gap between the master’s own particular standpoint and the absolute standpoint. To affirm the existence

of such a gap threatens, after all, to undermine completely the master's claim to have achieved the absolute standpoint. This position is easy to defend, because the members of this camp can cease to be philosophical reformers and become instead the *preservers of the master's legacy*. They puff themselves up with the pretense of loyalty to the dead master, and affirm that everything the master uttered gave expression to the divine. That this position is in bad faith can be seen quite readily. For one thing, the preservers of the legacy find themselves in the absurd position of having to swear allegiance to literally everything the master ever said. So if the master mistakenly thought that there must be seven planets, and subsequent scientific discovery shows that in fact there are nine, the preservers of the legacy must insist that really there are only seven, or they must explain why the nine planets can, "in a deeper sense," be thought of as seven. But their position is in bad faith on a more personal level as well. For while the master lived, they, too, were reformers who often disagreed with the master. They, too, secretly wished for the master's death. Now that the master is dead, he can no longer disagree with what the preservers of the legacy say in his name. So now they find themselves free to think whatever they think and claim for it the status of absolute knowing. Of course, the preservers of the legacy still disagree among themselves, and so they bicker about points of interpretation, each calling the other a heretic or a bad reader of the master's corpus.

Over and against the preservers of the legacy stand those who refuse to lapse into the bad faith of swearing allegiance to everything the master said. They affirm that the only true way of carrying out the master's legacy is to purify the method, and hence to purge out whatever in the master's thinking arose from subjective "noise" in the system. To do this means not to preserve the master's legacy but on the contrary to radicalize it. They are no longer philosophical reformers, but *philosophical radicals*.

At first, the philosophical radicals see themselves standing in solidarity with one another not only because they share a common goal, but also because they come under vicious attack by the preservers of the legacy. The latter, moreover, find themselves in a much more powerful position than the former. The reason for this lies in the fact that the preservers of the legacy keep alive the master's own pretense to have identified his own thinking with that of the absolute standpoint. In the master, faith in this identification was easy to maintain because all of his disciples seemed to confirm him in this faith. Did they not constantly defer to him in all matters philosophical? This faith enabled the master to make headway in the science of the absolute, but not without cost. For this faith kept the master one step behind his disciples. They, for their part, recognized the importance of questioning the relationship between the individual thinker's

standpoint and the absolute standpoint. But he failed to recognize the importance of this problem precisely because no one ever told him that he was wrong about anything. The result of this, his megalomaniac identification of his own thinking with the thinking of the absolute—expressed in his certainty of the truth of “the system”—naturally led to a certain conservatism in the master’s thinking. Since the absolute had only reached the stage that it had already achieved at that precise moment in *his life*, to identify with the absolute meant to identify with the rationality of the present. This, of course, meant that whatever had *de facto* legitimacy in the political arena was granted a kind of *de jure* legitimacy in the thought of the master.

It would therefore have been easy to foresee whose side the state would take in the battle between the preservers of the legacy and the philosophical radicals. The former are inclined to agree with the master’s pronouncements of the intrinsic rationality of the present order. In this, they show themselves to be even more conservative than the master himself had ever been. For even while the master was articulating the rationality of the present, he himself saw the need to transform the world in accordance with the dictates of the system; as such, the master was himself a latent philosophical reformer. Certainly he did not believe that either historical change or the necessity of continuing philosophical thinking would end. On the contrary, the system itself was something historical and thus continually involving. But for the preservers of the legacy, both thought and history have come to an end with the death of the master. And just as they pledge themselves to keeping alive the dead thoughts of the master, so they seek to eternalize the living mausoleum of the society whose present rationality the master had articulated.

By contrast, it is precisely this mausoleum that the philosophical radicals pledge themselves to destroy. For it is the contingency of the empirical content that must be purged from the master’s thinking. Hence rather than affirm the rationality of the present, the radicals accuse the present age of its irrationality. Of course, just as the preservers of the legacy are liable to lapse into the absurdity of defending everything the master said, so the radicals risk the parallel absurdity of defending the master by attacking everything he said. Yet at first they do not recognize this danger, for they cling to the notion that they are purifying the master’s thinking in order to glean its true method. They can isolate this pure method, of course, only by stripping it of all connection to the empirical. The philosophical radicals accordingly stress the difference between the picture thinking of so-called revealed religion and the purely conceptual character of absolute knowing. To free the method of absolute knowing from its dependence on empirical content, it is necessary to sever the identification between philosophy and

religion. For the philosophical radicals, the absolute standpoint can be achieved only by ridding the world of religious superstition entirely. In this way, they raise anew the Enlightenment's charge against faith.

For their part, the preservers of the legacy take up once again the side of faith in opposition to the Enlightenment. For in maintaining the frozen instant of the spirit that was the air breathed by the master, they insist on the truth of revealed religion as strenuously as they defend the rationality of the state. Thus, the confrontation takes on a kind of retrograde character, but one whose necessity calls into question the master's claim to have demonstrated the compatibility of faith and Enlightenment, religion and philosophy, in absolute knowing.

In this confrontation, the preservers take on the role of the master. They can do so, however, only by maintaining the pretense that they agree with everything the master taught. For their part, the dialectic of knowing would appear to have ended with this master—and no wonder, for it is easy for an unthinking person to believe that the history of thought has reached its end. The preservers of the legacy can continue on their way for eons, dogmatically affirming the “timeless” truths of the past. It is therefore left to the radicals to carry on the torch of thinking, and this they do so with the confidence of those who know what it is they are aiming at.

Each side in this confrontation, of course, claims the mantle of the master, but the radicals find themselves distancing themselves from the master more and more. In their efforts to isolate the method of absolute thinking and distinguish it from the master's particular applications of it, they find that however much they purify the method there remains some empirical element in it, contaminating the absolute. This situation is complicated, moreover, by an inner contradiction that lies within their task of purification. The radicals seek to purge philosophy of its connection to religion, and this they do in order to purify thought from its connection to empirical content. Yet at the same time, the picture thinking of revealed religion was itself a negation of the empirical as such, and in fact the radicals blame religion for turning people away from the empirical world. Religion is thus criticized from two sides at once—it taints philosophy because it is too empirical but it taints life because it is not empirical enough. Were they to think through this opposition and seek to reconcile its two sides, the radicals might be forced to admit that their grounds for critiquing religion might equally be grounds for critiquing philosophy—at least to the degree to which they envision absolute thinking as absolute opposition to the empirical world. Yet even were they made aware of this objection, the radicals would protest that what they seek is a reconciliation of the empirical with the philosophical; after all, their task is precisely to make the real rational—that is, to make the empirical philosophical. So, in