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The appearance of finitude: A systematic perspective on Hegel's 'Know Thyself'

1. What must one know to know oneself?

In § 377 of *The Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel understands the *absolute Gebot* “know thyself” as addressing *human* “truth and knowledge”. As regards ‘knowledge’, Hegel distinguishes between *Wissen* and *Erkennen*. When I know (*weiss*) something, I am aware of myself in so far as I am aware of an external object: I can know of myself only in knowing an external object, through objectifying *my* thought of *that* object. More technically, *Erkennen* is the intelligent activity of spirit positing the concrete sensory content within oneself, in the inwardness and universality of one’s thinking ‘I’, simplifying that content and making it ideal: the real is ‘cognized’ as something thought. Regarding ‘knowledge’ in relation to ‘truth’, in § 416 Hegel distinguishes between certainty and truth; the former is formal, while the latter is determinate, concept-like knowing (§ 445). The spirit ‘certain’ of oneself as a one-sided subjectivity or as one’s phenomenal consciousness of an independent object standing over against oneself, formally knows that object as given and found. The spiritual capacity of intelligence as knowing posits that which is externally found as its own; by both appropriating it and objectifying itself, intelligence raises that known certainty to *Erkennen* and ‘truth’. In true rational knowing, this ‘appearance’ of a finite subject confronting an alien object, *essentially* other than spirit, is sublated. In the Psychology section of the Philosophy of Spirit, Hegel writes that the formal knowledge of certainty raises itself into knowledge which is determinate and in conformity with the concept; i. e., it raises itself into infinite, un-limited agreement of the subject, not with its existence limited by a ‘found’ object, but with its objectified essence, whereby the subject is by itself within *its* otherness. In the conceptual preliminaries of the 1830 Logic, Hegel distinguishes between common and philosophical senses of ‘truth’. Ordinarily, our consciousness supposes that a representation or thought-determination is true when it conforms to some given, found, external object. By contrast, the philosophical sense of truth is the agreement of a content with itself, by sublating the phenomenal opposition between a subject opposed to an alien object; truth presupposes self-certainty, and hence the mediation of the