

CHAPTER 1

First Lecture

Monday, April 16, 1804

Honorable Guests:¹

Nothing about the venture which we now jointly begin is as difficult as the beginning; indeed, even the escape route which I just started to take by beginning with a consideration of the difficulty of beginning has its own difficulties. No means remain except to cut the knot boldly and to ask you to accept that what I am about to say is aimed at the wide world generally and applies to it but not at all to you.²

Namely: in my view the chief characteristic of our time³ is that in it life has become merely *historical* and *symbolic*, while *real* living is scarcely ever found. One not insignificant aspect of life is *thinking*. Where all life has degenerated into a strange tale, the same must also happen to thinking. Of course one will have heard and made a note of the fact that, among other things, human beings can think; indeed that many of them have thought, the first in this way, the second differently, and the third and fourth each in yet another way and that all have failed in some fashion. It is not easy to decide to undertake this thought process again for oneself. One who assumes responsibility for arousing an era like ours to this decision must face this discomfort among others: he⁴ doesn't know where he might look for, and find, the people who need arousing. Whomever he accuses has a ready answer, "Yes, that is certainly true of others, but not of us"; and they are right to the extent that, as well as knowing the criticized form of thought they are also familiar historically with the opposite schools, so that if someone attacks them on one side, they are ready to flee to the very position they currently reject. So, for example, if one speaks in the way I did just now, rebuking our historical superficiality, dispersion into the

The lecture begins at GA II, 8, pp. 2–3. Double numbers in square brackets refer to corresponding pages in GA II, 8. In that volume the two existing texts are printed on facing pages. Because translation sometimes alters word order, and page breaks in *SW* and *Copia* can differ, these page-break markers are sometimes only approximate. Throughout, I have worked primarily from *SW* and follow it as closely as is practicable.

most multifarious and contradictory opinions, indecisiveness about everything altogether, and absolute indifference to truth [4–5] in the way I have just rebuked these things, then everyone will be sure that he does not recognize himself in this picture, that he knows very well that only one thing can be true and that all contradictions must necessarily be false. If we accused him of dogmatic rigidity and one-sidedness for his adherence to the one, the very same person would praise his all-around skepticism.⁵

In such a state of affairs there is nothing for it but to assert briefly and sweetly at a single stroke that I presuppose here in all seriousness that there is a truth which alone is true and everything apart from this is unconditionally false; further, that this truth can actually be found and be immediately evident as unconditionally true; but that not even the least spark of it can be grasped or communicated historically as an appropriation from someone else's mind. Rather, whomever would have it must produce it entirely out of himself. The presenter can only provide the terms for insight; each individual must fulfill these terms in himself, applying his living spirit to it with all his might, and then the insight will happen of itself without any further ado. There is no question here of an object which is already well known from other contexts, but of something completely new, unheard of, and totally unknown to anyone who has not already studied the science of knowing⁶ thoroughly. No one can arrive at this unknown unless it produces itself in him, but it does this only under the condition that *this very person*⁷ produces something, namely the conditions for insight's self-production. Whoever does not do this will never obtain the object about which we will speak here. And since our whole discourse will be about this object, he will have *no object at all*; for him our entire discourse will be words about pure, bare nothingness, an empty vessel, word breath, the mere movement of air, and nothing more. And so let this, taken rigorously and literally, serve as the first prolegomenon.

I have still more to add, which however first presupposes the following. From now on, honorable guests, *I*⁸ wish to be considered silenced and erased, and you yourselves must come forward and stand in my place. From now on, everything which is to be thought in this assembly should be thought and be true only to the extent that you yourselves have thought it and seen it to be true.⁹

I said that I have more to add by way of introduction, and I will devote this week's four lectures to this task. Repeated experience compels me to remind you explicitly that these introductory remarks should not be viewed as most are, that is, as a simple [6–7] approach which the lecturer takes and whose content has no very great significance. The introductory remarks I will present have meaning, and what follows will be entirely lost without them. They are designed to call your spiritual eye away from the objects over which it has heretofore glided to and fro, directing it to the point which we must consider here, and indeed to give this point its existence for the very first time.

They are designed to initiate you into the art which we will subsequently practice together, the art of philosophy. They should simultaneously acquaint you, and make you fluent, with a system of rules and maxims of thinking whose employment will recur in every lecture.¹⁰

I hope the matters which are to be handled in the introduction will become easily comprehensible to everyone of even moderate attention; but past experience requires that I add a word about just this comprehending. First, one must not assume that the standard of comprehensibility for the science of knowing in general is comparable to the standard of study and attention which the introduction requires; since anyone assuming this will be unpleasantly disappointed later on. Thus, whomever has heard and understood the introductory remarks has acquired a true and fitting concept of the science of knowing sanctioned by the very originator of this science, but the listener has not thereby acquired the tiniest spark of the science itself. This universally applicable distinction between the mere concept and the real, true substance has particular bearing here. Possessing the concept has its uses; for example, it protects us from the absurdity of underestimating and misjudging what we do not possess; only no one should believe that by this possession, which is not in any case all that rare, one has become a philosopher. One is and remains a sophist, only to be sure less superficial than those who do not even possess the concept.

Following these prefatory remarks about the prefatory remarks, let's get to work.

I have promised a discourse on the science of knowing, and science of knowing you expect. What is the science of knowing?

First, in order to start with what everyone would admit, and to speak of it as others would: without doubt it is one of the possible philosophical systems, one of the philosophies. So much as an initially stated genus, according to the rules of definition.

[8–9] So what generally is philosophy and what is it commonly taken to be; or, as one could more easily say, what should it be according to what is generally required of it?¹¹

Without doubt: philosophy should present the *truth*. But what is *truth*,¹² and what do we actually search for when we search for it? Let's just consider what we will not allow to count as truth: namely when things can be this way or equally well the other; for example the multiplicity and variability of opinion. Thus, truth is absolute oneness and invariability of opinion. So that I can let go of the supplemental term "opinion," since it will take us too far afield, let me say that the essence of philosophy would consist in this: *to trace all multiplicity* (which presses itself upon us in the usual view of life) *back to absolute oneness*. I have stated this point briefly; and now the main thing is not to take it superficially, but energetically and as something which ought in all seriousness

to hold good. *All multiplicity*—whatever can even be distinguished, or has its antithesis, or counterpart¹³—absolutely without *exception*. Wherever even the possibility of a distinction remains, whether explicitly or tacitly, the task is not completed. Whoever can point out the smallest distinction in or with regard to what some philosophical system has posited as its highest principle has refuted that system.

As is obvious from this, *absolute oneness* is what is true and in itself unchangeable, its opposite purely contained within itself.¹⁴ “*To trace back*”—precisely in the continuing insight of the philosopher himself as follows: that he reciprocally conceives multiplicity through oneness and oneness through multiplicity. That is, that, as a principle, Oneness = A illuminates such multiplicity for him;¹⁵ and conversely, that multiplicity in its ontological ground can be grasped only as proceeding from A.

The science of knowing has this task in common with all philosophy. All philosophers have intended this consciously or unconsciously; and if one could show historically that some philosophers didn’t have this objective, then one can offer a philosophical proof that, to the extent they wished to *exist* (as philosophers), they must have intended it. Because merely apprehending multiplicity, as such in its factual occurrence, is history. Whoever wants this alone as the absolute one intends that nothing should exist except history. If this person now says that there is something in addition to history, which he wants to designate by the name “philosophy,” then he contradicts himself and thereby destroys his entire statement.

[10–11] Since, as a result, absolutely all philosophical systems must agree, to the extent that they wish to exist on their own apart from history, the difference between them, taken initially in a superficial and historical manner, can only reside in what they propose as oneness, the one true self-contained in-itself (e.g., the absolute; therefore one could say in passing that the task of philosophy could be expressed as the presentation of the absolute).

In this way, I say, various philosophies could be differentiated if one looked at them superficially and historically. But let’s go further. I claim that, to the extent that general agreement is possible among actually living individuals in regard to any manifold, to that extent the oneness of principle is in truth and in fact *one*. For *divergent principles* become divergent results, and consequently yield thoroughly divergent and mutually incoherent worlds, so that no sort of agreement about anything is possible. But if one principle alone is right and true, it follows that only one philosophy is true, namely the one which makes this one principle its own, and all others are necessarily false. Therefore, in case there are several philosophies simultaneously presenting different absolutes, either all, or all except one, are false.¹⁶

Further, this significant consequence also follows: since there is only one absolute, a philosophy which has not made this one true absolute its own sim-

ply doesn't have the absolute at all but only something relative, a product of an unperceived disjunction which for this very reason must have an opposing term. Such a philosophy leads all multiplicity back, not to absolute oneness as the task requires, but only to a subordinate, relative oneness; and thus it is refuted and shown in its insufficiency not just by the true philosophy but even by itself, if only one is acquainted with philosophy's true task and reflects it more prudently than this system does. Therefore the entire differentiation of philosophies according to their principles of oneness is only provisional and historical, but cannot in any way be adequate by itself. However, since we must start here with provisional and historical knowledge, let's return to this *principle of classification*. Again, the science of knowing may be one of the possible philosophies. Therefore, if it makes the claim, as it already has, that it resembles no previous system but is completely distinct from them all, new, and self-sufficient, then it must have a different principle of oneness from all the rest. What did these have as a principle of oneness? In passing, let me note that it is not my intention here to discuss the history of philosophy and to let myself in for all the controversies which would be aroused for me in this way, instead I simply intend to progress gradually in developing my own concept. For this purpose, what I will say could serve as well if it were assumed arbitrarily and were not historically grounded, as if it were historically true. This can be abundantly demonstrated if such demonstration is necessary and [if] there are people concerned about this. I claim that this much is evident from all philosophies prior to Kant, the absolute was located in *being*, that is, in the dead thing as thing. The thing should be the in-itself. (In passing: [12–13] I can add that, except for the science of knowing, *since* Kant, philosophers everywhere without exception, the supposed Kantians as well as the supposed commentators on and improvers of the science of knowing, have stayed with the same absolute being, and Kant has not been understood in his true, but never clearly articulated principle. Because it is not a matter of what one calls being, but of how one grasps and holds it inwardly. For all that one names it [i.e., the absolute] "I," if one fundamentally objectifies it, and separates it from oneself, then it is the same old thing-in-itself).—But surely everyone who is willing to reflect can perceive that absolutely all being posits a *thinking* or *consciousness* of itself;¹⁷ and that therefore mere being is always only one half of a whole together with the thought of it, and is therefore one term of an original and more general disjunction, a fact which is lost only on the unreflective and superficial. Thus, absolute oneness can no more reside in being than in its correlative consciousness; [14–15] it can as little be posited in the thing as in the representation of the thing. Rather, it resides in the principle, which we have just discovered, of the absolute *oneness* and *indivisibility* of both, which is equally, as we have seen, the principle of their disjunction. We will name this principle *pure knowing*, knowing in itself, and, thus, completely objectless

knowing, because otherwise it would not be knowing in itself but would require objectivity for its being. It is distinct from consciousness, which posits a being and is therefore only a half. This is Kant's discovery, and is what makes him the founder of *Transcendental Philosophy*. Like Kantian philosophy, the science of knowing is transcendental philosophy, and thus it resembles Kant's philosophy in that it does not posit the absolute in the thing, as previously, or in subjective knowing—which is simply impossible, because whomever reflects on this second term already has the first—but in the *oneness* of both.

But now, how does the science of knowing differentiate itself from Kantianism? Before I answer, let me say this. Whoever has caught a genuine inner glimpse of just this higher *oneness* has already achieved in this first hour an insight into the true home for the principle of the sole true philosophy, which is nearly entirely lacking in this philosophical era; and he has acquired a conception of the science of knowing and an introduction to understanding it, which has also been wholly lacking. [16–17] Namely, as soon as one has heard that the science of knowing presents itself as idealism, one immediately infers that it locates the absolute in what I have been calling *thinking* or *consciousness* which stands over against being as its other half and which therefore can no more be the absolute than can its opposite. Nevertheless, this view of the science of knowing is accepted equally by friends and enemies and there is no way to dissuade them from it.

In order to find a place for their superiority at improving things, the improvers have switched the absolute from the term in which, according to their view, it resides in the science of knowing to the other term to which they append in addition the little word “I” which may well be the single net result of Kant's life and, if I may name myself after him, of my life as well, which has also been devoted to science.