Introduction

Writing around the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Hegel could, more or less, assimilate the natural and social sciences of his day and accommodate them in a system. This provided philosophy with a flattering role: it could unify and systematize all the knowledge available to human beings. But soon after Hegel’s time, the expansion of the sciences and their growing prestige made this impossible. What were philosophers to do?

This chapter explores some of the options that German philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth, writing in the aftermath of Hegel’s philosophical system, saw as viable for the future role of philosophy. After sketching the reasons for the rise of neo-Kantianism in the second half of the nineteenth century, it focuses on two thinkers who each were influenced by both neo-Kantian and Hegelian thought, but took them up in such different ways that they ended up in opposition to one another: Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Cassirer’s philosophy of culture is strikingly similar in structure to Hegel’s account of the different forms of consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Heidegger also engaged with the *Phenomenology*, and wrote an extensive commentary on its Introduction. An analysis of this text shows, however, that Heidegger’s reading of Hegel depends on some controversial assumptions, and it illustrates the ways in which Heidegger’s basic philosophical questions differ from those raised by Hegel in the Introduction.

Cassirer’s and Heidegger’s conflicting views of what philosophy should be about culminated in a remarkable public debate that took place in Davos in 1929. It can be understood as an encounter between
a philosophy of culture that by and large remains within the orbit of Hegelian thought (Cassirer) and a philosophy of 'Dasein' that starts from the existential conditions of human life. Cassirer's own analysis of Heidegger's way of doing philosophy, however, suggests that there are alternatives to the latter's individualistic approach that saves a form of Hegelian idealism into the twentieth century. But whether or not this is a reading of Heidegger's philosophy that Heidegger himself would accept is, again, open to debate.

'Back to Kant!': the rise of neo-Kantianism

One alternative for philosophers in the nineteenth century was to become the handmaiden of the sciences and to adopt the mechanistic materialism that science seemed to recommend. But some philosophers declined this humble role with the cry 'Back to Kant!' – a slogan coined in 1865 by Otto Liebmann (1840–1912). Philosophers were to continue Kant's (1724–1804) project of transcendental idealism, resisting both materialism and Hegelian metaphysics. In the view of these philosophers, Kant pursued epistemology, not ontology, our knowledge of things, not the things of which we have knowledge, and in this they followed Kant. Like Kant, they also equated knowledge with the mathematical and natural sciences. They explored the foundations, and presuppositions, of the sciences. But they had some differences with Kant. Kant believed that behind things as we know them, there are things-in-themselves that we cannot know. On the one side there is us, with our inbuilt presuppositions – space and time, and categories such as substance and causality. On the other side are things-in-themselves. Things-in-themselves are not, or cannot be known to be, in space and time, nor subject to causality. But things-in-themselves transmit to us sensations and on these we impose the forms of spatiality and temporality, and the categories of substance, causality, and so on. In this way we produce the appearances or phenomena we do know – in contrast to the noumena, the things-in-themselves, that we cannot know. Kant erects a 'Keep Out' notice before things-in-themselves: 'Do not ask questions beyond this point'. However, Kant retained unknowable things-in-themselves, for he clung to certain ethical and religious beliefs. Men are free and immortal, and there is a God who underwrites these gifts. The deterministic world of phenomena leaves no room for God, freedom and immortality. But Kant locates them in the realm of things-in-themselves. This is faith, not knowledge. 'I had to deny knowledge', Kant said, 'in order to make room for faith'.