

## HEGEL, IDEALISM AND GOD: PHILOSOPHY AS THE SELF-CORRECTING APPROPRIATION OF THE NORMS OF LIFE AND THOUGHT

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**ABSTRACT:** Can Hegel, a philosopher who claims that philosophy ‘has no other object but God and so is essentially rational theology’, ever be taken as anything *other than* a religious philosopher with little to say to any philosophical project that identifies itself as *secular*? If the valuable substantive insights found in the detail of Hegel’s philosophy are to be rescued for a secular philosophy, then, it is commonly presupposed, some type of global reinterpretation of the enframing idealistic framework is required. In this essay, this assumption is challenged.

Kant’s interpretation of space and time as a response to Newton’s theologically based spatio-temporal *realism* is taken as a model of what it is to be a Kantian *idealist* about God and the self. In turn, Hegel’s philosophy is taken as a development of this approach that overcomes the limitations of Kant’s formal approach. Hegel’s major contribution to Kant’s revolutionary transformation of the task of philosophy is, it is argued, his recognitive conception of ‘spirit’. While this has been widely appreciated with regard to the relations between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ spirit, it is suggested that a fuller understanding of the nature of Hegel’s *absolute* idealism requires a proper understanding of how this approach also applies to the domain of ‘absolute spirit’.

**KEYWORDS:** Hegel; Philosophy; Religion; God; Spirit; Recognition

Hegel can be said to have taken philosophical idealism to its most extreme point, the point of *absolute* idealism, and, from the perspective of much contemporary philosophy, this has been enough to damn him.<sup>1</sup> However, an adequate approach to what such a philosophical stance entails, as well as what possibilities it holds for philosophy today, must depend on a clear understanding of the core commitments of idealism itself, and, two hundred years after Hegel finished the earliest of his well-known works,

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1. In this, at least, there has been a degree of consensus between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ stands of twentieth century philosophy, which both oppose idealism in the name of some account of existence that stresses its *materiality*—in analytic philosophy, one that takes the form of a predominant scientific naturalism, and in continental philosophy, one that tends to stress the historical and material nature of the *linguistic ground* of thought (as in the work of Derrida, for example), or, some more generally existentialist sense of ‘being’ as the ground of thought that is thereby not reducible to it (as in the work of Heidegger). In this essay I am concerned to bring to the surface ways in which the commitments of idealism are in fact *not* subject to the usual objections brought from such philosophical positions.

the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, what these commitments amount to is still far from clear. If Bishop Berkeley is taken as the model of idealism, as often seems to be the case among Anglophone philosophers, then idealists would seem to be committed to some combination of his two complementary theses of *subjectivism* and *immaterialism*. However, as recently argued by Frederick Beiser, the trajectory of the German idealist movement from Kant onwards towards Hegel is best seen as a struggle *against* the subjectivism that Berkeley and others had inherited from Descartes.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when one considers the ‘objective’ turn within idealism found in the world of Friedrich Schelling, idealism so understood seems more like an attempt to infuse matter with life and spirit, rather than to eliminate it in the name of something ‘immaterial’.<sup>3</sup>

However, if Schelling took idealism in the direction of this acknowledgement of the materiality of the world,<sup>4</sup> Hegel’s programmatic statements often seem to take idealism off on a different path. Consider Hegel’s claim, for example, that philosophy ‘has no other object but God and so is essentially rational theology’. Philosophy, along with art and religion, belongs to what he refers to as ‘Absolute Spirit’, and these three realms having this same content—God—‘differ only in the *forms* in which they bring home to consciousness their object, the Absolute’ (LA 101).<sup>5</sup> With claims like these, Hegel seems anything but an advocate of the type of modernizing philosophy that Kant had opened up, or as the type of philosopher intent on acknowledging the fundamental materiality of existence. Nevertheless, one needs to ask exactly what the concept ‘God’ *means* within a system of absolute idealism. To be an absolute idealist is, presumably, to be an idealist about everything about which one could be a ‘realist’, and, if one adopts a properly Kantian rather than Berkeleyan starting point, one might get a very different sense of what might be entailed by Hegel’s absolute idealism to that given in traditional accounts. For one, it is clear that from Kant’s perspective a crucial thing wrong with Berkeley’s metaphysics was not so much its *idealist* assumptions as certain of its *realist* ones. That is, what had allowed Berkeley to be ‘idealistic’ about the material world—his immaterial-

2. Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002.

3. It should not be surprising, then, that there has emerged within recent philosophy a radical reassessment of the nature and plausibility of Hegel’s idealism, for example, as in the influential work of Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard. See Robert Pippin’s seminal *Hegel’s Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, as well as *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999, and *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, and Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, and *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002. From the side of analytic philosophy, such an interpretation of Hegel has been embraced by Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994, *Articulating Reasons*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, and *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002, and John McDowell, *Mind and World*, second paperback edition with a new introduction, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996.

4. See, for example, the essays collected in Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman, *The New Schelling*, London, Continuum, 2004, for an account of Schelling’s approximation to materialism.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 101 (henceforth cited as LA).

ist reduction of that world to it to a realm of subjective ideas—was his corresponding *realism* about the mental—in particular, his realism about the subjective mind and its contents, and, beyond this, the mind of *God*.<sup>6</sup> But both the individual mind and the mind of God were just the sort of topics that Kant was an *idealist* about, effectively claiming that rather than think of ‘the soul’ and ‘God’ as types of referring terms, we should see them as ‘ideas’ playing ‘regulative’ roles in our cognitive lives. Read as an ‘absolute’ idealist in a post-Kantian sense, then, Hegel might be seen as extending such a non-realist approach to both the individual soul and to God. Given the depth to which notions of God and the soul were embedded in early modern philosophy we may expect his non-realism about these things to have very significant consequences.

In this essay, from this general starting point I want to consider some of the implications that being an idealist about God might entail, and to consider this in contrast to the more conventional way of extricating God from modern philosophy. I start by examining the relationship between Kant’s idealism and the thesis on the basis of which he was thought to be a Berkeleyan, his idealism about *space*, as this can provide a helpful model for understanding exactly what it would be to be an idealist about God.

#### IDEALISM AND REALISM ABOUT SPACE AND GOD

Perhaps the most obvious sense in which Kant was an idealist was in his opposition to the ‘reality’ of time and space,<sup>7</sup> an opposition which has been interpreted by many as suggesting a version of Berkeley’s *immaterialism*. The picture motivating this interpretation is, I suggest, something like the following.

- Space and time, Kant thinks, are not real but in ‘the mind’.
- But the contents of the empirical world are contents we take to be in space and time.
- Therefore, according to Kant, those contents too are in the mind.

At this level then, that is, at the level of the empirical world, Kant is seen as being a subjectivist and an immaterialist. He may have *supplemented* this Berkeleyan position with realist assumptions about a *second* world—an unknowable world of ‘things in themselves’—but *that* world is not the world that we *take* to be ‘the world’. The world that we *take* to be the world, the empirical world, is, on this reading of Kant, ‘in the mind’.<sup>8</sup>

6. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Jonathan Dancy (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982.

7. ‘I understand by the **transcendental idealism** of all appearances the doctrine that they are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not as things in themselves, and accordingly that space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or conditions of objects as things in themselves. To this idealism is opposed **transcendental realism**, which regards space and time as something given in themselves (independently of our sensibility).’ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, A369.

8. On this traditional phenomenalist reading of Kant, and the ‘revolutionary’ reading of Kant which opposes it see, for example, Graham Bird, *The Revolutionary Kant: A Commentary on the Critique of Pure Reason*, Chicago, Open Court, 2006.

To the advocates of a non-Berkeleyan interpretation of Kant, such an inference may look no better than one which suggests that because I am conscious of a pain in my left foot, and my left foot is in my left shoe, then I am conscious of a pain in my left shoe. Rather than suggesting a form of Berkeleyanism, we can see Kant's attack on the 'reality' of space and time as an attack on the framework that understands space and time as 'containers' within which the material world exists, and, in an analogous way, understands *the mind* as a container within which 'representations' exist. But on such a reading, what are we to say about what Kant *is* committing himself to with transcendental idealism? One way of approaching this, I suggest, is to look to the commitments of the concomitant form of *realism* to which his idealism was opposed, in this case, that of Newton. And here, Newton's realism about space and time can be seen as relevant precisely because of its connection with his traditionally theistic beliefs about God.<sup>9</sup>

While Kant opposed his transcendental idealist account of space and time to the sort of realist account found in Newton, the *content* that they were respectively idealist and realist about was much the same. Here, Kant was on the side of Newton *qua* instigator of modern physical science, and, concomitantly, against Aristotle, for whom the more basic notion in physics was not that of 'space' but 'place'—*topos*.<sup>10</sup> For Aristotle, place had been a fundamental concept in the explanation of movement because the elements making up the cosmos were all accorded natural 'places' to which they would move if unimpeded. Thus earth had its natural place at the centre of the cosmos, fire, its natural place away from the earth in a layer or shell surrounding it, the layer containing the orbit of the sun, while water and air naturally layered themselves between these two regions, with a fifth element, the *aether*, filling the remaining outer regions. In short, as the derivative term, space, for Aristotle, was just the *finite totality* of qualitatively differentiated *places*.

Central to Newton's achievement had been the application of mathematics—in the first instance, of the constructable space of Euclidean geometry—to physical space, and this necessitated overturning its Aristotelian treatment. As Max Jammer has put it, 'How could Euclidean space, with its homogeneous and infinite lines and planes, possibly fit into the finite and anisotropic Aristotelian universe?'<sup>11</sup> Newton therefore had to transform the available conception of space in order to bring mathematics to bear within a universalized nomological treatment of the behaviour of objects in space, but with this he confronted a host of difficult metaphysical questions.

A long debate over the reality of empty space or 'void-space' had stretched back to Aristotle for whom the very notion itself was contradictory. Simply put, if the 'void' is nothing, how *could* it be real, that is, be *something*.<sup>12</sup> Newton's realist answer to objections

9. To simplify I will restrict the discussion to the issue of realism about space rather than both space and time.

10. Aristotle, *Physics*, bk. IV, 208b8–25 and bk. VIII, 261b31–a6. For a helpful discussion of these issues see Benjamin Morison, *On Location: Aristotle's Concept of Place*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 38.

11. Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 26.

12. Later, such an objection was implicit in Descartes' identifying extension as the fundamental property of matter, depriving the notion of an 'empty' extended space of meaning.

to the reality of void space was complex but had a theological dimension.<sup>13</sup> As a variety of commentators have pointed out,<sup>14</sup> Newton seems to have been influenced by the Cambridge neo-platonist Henry More, who, in opposition to Descartes, had insisted that *spirit*, and not just matter, was extended. Combating the ‘nullibilists’, More equated the empty space *containing* matter with God’s extension. Newton’s concept of space was not quite the same as More’s, but like More, he was to give the thesis of the absolute nature of void-space a profoundly theological basis: far from being ‘nothing’, space and time were, for Newton, attributes of divine spirit.<sup>15</sup> In turn, Leibniz led the attack against Newton’s absolutization of space on grounds that were compatible with the nullibilist hypothesis that ‘space’ considered in abstraction of everything in it was, in fact, nothing. Leibniz thus used the principle of the identity of indiscernibles to criticize the very idea of thinking of any two points in empty space, or any two moments in empty time, as distinct—an idea needed by Newtonian realism.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, in contrast to Newton’s realism about space and time, Leibniz had treated the ideas of space and time as abstractions from relations among particular substances. *Outside* of these relations, space and time were, in fact, nothing.

These were the disputes that formed the background to Kant’s ‘transcendentally’ idealist treatment of space and time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. First, Kant was criti-

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13. This had been made explicit in the ‘General Scholium’ to Book III, added to the second edition of Newton’s *Principia* in 1713: ‘This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. ... This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all; and on account of his dominion he is wont to be called *Lord God* pantokrator, or *Universal Ruler* .... He is eternal and infinite; omnipotent and omniscient; that is, his duration reaches from eternity to eternity; his presence from infinity to infinity; he governs all things and knows all things that are or can be done. ... He endures for ever, and is everywhere present; and by existing always and everywhere, he constitutes duration and space ... In him are all things contained and moved’. F. Cajori (ed.), *Sir Isaac Newton’s Mathematical principles of natural philosophy, and his System of the world*, trans. A. Motte, trans. revised F. Cajori, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1962, p. 544.

14. See, for example, Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1957, pp. 159–68, Jammer, *Concepts of Space*, pp. 40–7 and 108–12, and Edward Grant, *Much Ado About Nothing: Theories of Space and Vacuum from the Middle Ages to the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 244–5 and 252–4.

15. Nevertheless, strongly influenced by the mechanist Pierre Gassendi, Newton attempted to avoid the dichotomy of substance and accident that had structured the approach of More and most other participants in the debate to that time. By appealing to the 17th century distinction between a thing’s ‘nature’ and its ‘existence’, Newton described time and place as ‘common affections’ characterizing the *existences* of all things, while the substance-accident distinction applied only to those things’ *natures*. Thus, while Newton held that God was *extended*, and what we know as empty space just was that divine extension, he could avoid construing space as a necessary property of God—an element of his *essential nature*—an idea that had worrying pantheistic connotations. See in particular, J. E. McGuire, ‘Force, Active Principles, and Newton’s Invisible Realm’, *Ambix*, no. 15, 1968, pp. 154–208, reprinted in J. E. McGuire, *Tradition and Innovation: Newton’s Metaphysics of Nature*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1995.

16. Next, Leibniz used the principle of sufficient reason to argue against the theological concomitant to Newton’s absolutization of space—the idea that God created the material world into some specific spatio-temporal region. Such a view which had God creating the world at some specific point of time, rather than another, portrayed God as acting arbitrarily, because there could *be* no reason for such a decision.

cal of Leibnizian relationalism,<sup>17</sup> and wanted to insist, like Newton, on the difference in analysis employed when one thought of material substances and their properties, on the one hand, and the properties of the ultimately unified space that such substances ‘occupied’, on the other. Here Kant employed his fundamental distinction between ‘concepts’ and ‘intuitions’ as forms of representation.<sup>18</sup> While the objects that occupied space were to be understood conceptually as subjects of predication, the space occupied by those objects was to be understood geometrically and hence in terms of the determinations of a distinctly *non-conceptual* form of representation—pure intuition. Thus like Newton, he identified the space of Euclidian geometry with physical space, but he then *opposed* Newton’s theologically supported realism, in which Euclidean geometry was regarded as *representing* an independent ‘real’ space—the space regarded as the extension of God. And with this Kant transformed the very concept of philosophical investigation, shifting the focus of the inquiry away from ‘space’ itself, about which philosophy has nothing to say, to the *form* in which we finite but rational minds *represent* space.

On Kant’s novel understanding of the nature of space, just as the infinite space of the Euclidean geometer is co-constructed as the space within which specific figures are themselves constructed in diagrams, so too do we finite but rational perceivers construct the Euclidean spatio-temporal framework within which we represent the empirical world to ourselves in perceptual experience. It was this type of reversal of perspective that Kant alluded to with the image of Copernicus’ reversal of perspective when he transformed the ancient geo-centric picture of the cosmos into the early modern helio-centric one.<sup>19</sup> Just as the ancient cosmologists *mistook* the movement of the earth on which they were located for the movement of the sun, so too, on Kant’s account do *realists* about space and time mistake the products of their own representings for the attributes of space and time themselves. But this shift of focus had implications far greater than simply for how Kant understood space and time, it had implications for how philosophy from the Kantian perspective was to deal with the concept of God.

Newton’s realist account of space and time, as we have seen, had been predicated on what might be called his ‘spiritualist realism’—that is, his belief that ultimately reality was not material nature but a non-material, extended spirit, identified as the traditional Christian God. Significantly, Kant’s approach to the concept of God was similarly opposed to such realism in the same way that his approach to space and time had been opposed to Newton’s realism in that domain. That is, just as Kant had shifted philosophical analysis away from space itself to the mind’s representation of space, so too he shifted philosophy away from the *subject matter* of God, to that of the functioning of the mind’s *representation* of God—that is, of the ‘idea’ of God. Here, Kant interpreted

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17. More specifically, he objected to Leibniz’s relationalism on the basis that it could not account for the phenomenon of incongruent counterparts, and it was here that he appealed strongly to a view something like Newton’s absolutism. See, for example, Kant’s essay of 1768, ‘Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space’, in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. and trans. D. Walford and R. Meerbote, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

18. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A19/B33; A320/B376–7.

19. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xvi–ii, xii n.

Plato's conception of 'idea' as being as a non-empirical 'pure' concept which belonged to the rational faculty, but instead of primarily functioning in the context of theoretical reason, it now had a central role in the operations of *practical* reason.<sup>20</sup> Thus God was eliminated as a relevant subject for theoretical analysis as seen, for example, in Kant's attack on traditional proofs for the existence of God.<sup>21</sup> Ideas could not play a 'constitutive' role in theoretical knowledge, claimed Kant, only a 'regulative' one, mirroring the role they played in practical reason in determining the content of the moral law. But the purely conceptually articulated moral law needed some way of being applied in actual life, and it was here that Kant located the idea of God. In order to be applied, ideas needed to be given *sensibilized* forms, and it was this type of symbolically or analogically expressed idea that formed the traditional picture of God.<sup>22</sup> The traditional theological conception of God, so Kant claimed, has resulted from taking a particular idea (the one associated with forms of explanation employing the disjunctive syllogism) and employing it in a 'constitutive' rather than 'regulative' way. More specifically the traditional theistic concept of God had resulted, he claimed from 'realizing' 'hypostatizing' and 'personalizing' that idea.<sup>23</sup>

With this, Kant initiated a symbolic approach to the content of traditional religious belief that can be recognized not only in near post-Kantians like Schelling and Hegel, but also in more distant ones such as Nietzsche and Durkheim.<sup>24</sup> But while Kant had concentrated on the role of the representation of God within the moral life of the individual subject, Schelling switched attention away from modern individualized life to the very different life-form of the ancient Greek polis, now considering the role of 'the gods' as represented within the public and communal aesthetic practices of the Greeks. Moreover, he claimed to find in the common consciousness of such forms of communal life an awareness that Kant had struggled to establish by philosophical argument in modernity. The Greeks, Schelling asserted, were not concerned with the question of the *existence* of their gods in the way that later became crucial for christian thinkers. The gods had their very being *in* their representations—the myths told within the community as well as the statues, poems, plays and so on that drew their contents from those myths. The Greeks

20. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, Bk II, Ch. II, section V, 'The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason'.

21. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Division, Bk. II, Ch. III, 'The Ideal of Pure Reason'. This attack drew on his separation of matters of existence from that which can be examined in terms of conceptual content, a separation that was *itself* consequent upon the differentiation of concepts and intuitions as functionally different forms of representation.

22. For a comprehensive treatment see Heiner Bielefeldt, *Symbolic Representation in Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

23. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A583/B611 n.

24. Many recent interpretations of Nietzsche have tended to stress his relation to Kant. See, for example, Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche and Philosophy: Thinking Freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, and R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche's Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of his Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003. On the influence of late 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-Kantianism on Durkheim see S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1973, pp. 54–7. Durkheim's relation to Kantianism is further explored by Warren Schmaus, *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

did not then pose the *further* question of how or if those representations did or did not relate to some reality beyond the stories that were told about them.<sup>25</sup>

The underlying approach was, nevertheless, Kantian, as Schelling interpreted Greek mythology as a realm of representations that gave a peculiarly *figurative* form of representation to that which was represented *discursively* as ‘ideas’ within the realm of Platonic philosophy. The ‘same synthesis of the universal and particular that viewed in themselves are ideas, that is, images of the divine, are, if viewed on the plane of the real, the gods.’<sup>26</sup> The reality of the Greek gods was expressed in what they enabled those who revered them to *do* and the way in which they were enabled to *live*. Thus the whole significance of ‘ideas’ and their sensibilized ‘ideals’ was to be found in the role they played in the life of the community. However, this meant that in an account such as Schelling’s, ideas could no longer simply be regarded as playing a merely ‘regulative’ as opposed to ‘constitutive’ role as in Kant’s transcendental idealism. Given their participation in shaping and reproducing an *objective way of life*, this way of life could be thought of as an realm of which those ideas played a ‘constitutive’ role.<sup>27</sup>

Schelling’s approach was the starting point of Hegel’s which also exemplified these basic features of Kant’s idealist stance to theology, and this, I suggest, is how we should understand Hegel’s philosophy as an *extension* of Kant’s idealist turn. To be an *absolute idealist* was to shift philosophical attention away from what philosophical *realists* had traditionally taken as fundamental objects or features of reality, to the role played by the representations of such objects or features in the individual and collective life of the community.

## HEGEL ON THE GREEKS AND CHRISTIANITY, NATURE AND SPIRIT

In the context of the type of pre-Christian pagan thought celebrated by the youthful Schelling and (the slightly older) Hegel in their writings of the 1790s, the worldliness

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25. Thus, Schelling criticizes the idea that the reality of the gods can be understood on the model of the reality of the objects of the world of experience and understanding. ‘Anyone who is still able to ask how such highly cultivated spirits as the Greeks were able to believe in the reality or actuality of the gods ... proves only that he himself has not yet arrived at that stage of cultivation at which precisely the *ideal* is the real and is much more real than the so-called real itself. The Greeks did not at all take the gods to be real in the sense, for example, that common understanding believes in the reality of physical objects.’ F. W. J. von Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, trans. D. W. Stott, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 35. This coheres with a point made by Robert Pippin in reference to the views of both Nietzsche and Hans Blumenberg. There is no evidence that the Greeks argued about which among the many diverse accounts of the gods was the *true* account. Robert Pippin, ‘Truth and Lies in the Early Nietzsche’, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 311–329, p. 318.

26. Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, p. 28.

27. It is because Kant equates the empirical world with the realm of what Anscombe has described as ‘brute facts’ that ‘ideas’ cannot be constitutive of the empirical world. (G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘On Brute facts’, *Analysis*, no. 18, 1958, pp. 69–72.) For Schelling and Hegel, however, who think of the social world as constituted by ‘institutional facts’, ideas *can* be constitutive, but not constitutive in the sense that Kant had intended when *denying* their constitutive status. On the relevance of this distinction between Kant and Hegel see my *Hegel’s Hermeneutics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.



and plurality of the Greek gods contrasted with the single, transcendent, omniscient and omnipotent God, the type of Christianity found in Newton. This ‘pagan’ anti-christian orientation was in turn bound up with features of their *philosophical* position, as in their growing opposition to the way that Fichte had developed Kant’s normative concept of the thinking subject, the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’.

One of Kant’s fundamental ideas had been that thinking itself required the implicit act of ascription of thought by the thinker to herself conceived ‘transcendentally’, the ascription of all representations to the thinking ‘I’ that accompanies all thought.<sup>28</sup> In Fichte’s development, this notion of a transcendental normative subject had become the concept of the *self-positing* ‘absolute I’,<sup>29</sup> a conceptual corollary to the god of Newton’s natural philosophy—the omnipotent and omniscient god who created the material world *ex nihilo* into the space and time with which he was co-extensive, and who decreed the laws of its operation. The ‘paganism’ of Schelling and Hegel, then, would be expressed in their conception of the norms of theoretical and practical reason. For example, in the domain of epistemology, such a critique would be directed at a conception of the norm of knowledge as expressed with the phrase ‘god’s-eye view’, presupposing as it does the christian transcendent and omniscient god. But while the early Hegel has shared this pagan characterization of the normative, after his break with Schelling that had been signalled in his well-known remarks in the *Phenomenology*’s Preface (PS ¶ 16),<sup>30</sup> he had incorporated a more conventional Christian theological outlook, the significance of which was to remain disputed among his followers after his death. Eventually, Hegel came to distinguish *two* non-conceptual forms in which gods/norms are represented pre-philosophically: while the Greeks represented their gods artistically, in sensuously presented objective cultural representations such as statues or religious dramas, the christian god came to be represented predominantly in the internalized mode of *memory*—the *memorialized* narrative of the person of Christ (LA 101–4), the god who having become man, had therefore to suffer a fate hitherto unknown to gods, the fate of dying. But in this Christian account, as befitting a god, he returned to life in the form of the *spirit* of the community of followers which was symbolized in the third person of the trinity. This gave the idea of *this* god a complexity and depth within the psychic lives of individuals that had been missing within the sensuous modes of representation of the Greeks. Christians now thought of themselves as carrying their god *within them*, a relation symbolized by the ritual of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ and which was expressed in the significance given to the phenomenon of individual *conscience*.<sup>31</sup> With

28. ‘The **I think** must **be able** to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me.’ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B131–2.

29. J. G. Fichte, ‘Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge’, in *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 93–102.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, ¶ 16 (henceforth PS).

31. I consider Hegel’s account of conscience in relation to that of Fichte in ‘Hegel, Fichte and the Pragmatic Contexts of Moral Judgment’, in Espen Hammer (ed.), *German Idealism: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2007.

this, Hegel reaffirmed the element of *subjectivity* that was the distinctive trait of modern philosophy which marked it off from that of the ancients.

This turn by the later Hegel from the more pantheistic and polytheistic outlook of his youth to the position fully realized in his Berlin *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* is often taken as of a piece with a purported turn to a more conservative *political* outlook of his Berlin period, as is expressed in the *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>32</sup> These are complex questions that cannot be adequately treated here. As is well-known, an ambiguity seems to have marked Hegel's politico-religious position in his Berlin period, an ambiguity that, upon his death, became manifest in the split that developed between the left, humanist and right theist factions among his followers. One consequence of this move away from the pantheism of the early Schelling does need to be confronted, however, as we might think that this pantheistic stance at least seems more compatible with the type of extended Kantian attitude to religion that I have been here treating as the mark of an idealist orientation to God. To the extent that Hegel moved away from this to more conventionally Christian forms of religious culture, does not this undercut the picture being presented of a progressively 'idealist' move away from early modern theo-centric philosophy of, say, Descartes, Newton and Leibniz, and would we not expect to find in pantheism a closer connection to the more 'naturalistic' orientation that is thought of as typical of modern philosophy? To answer to this, I think, is bound up with the issue of what, from the account of idealism that I have been suggesting here, might be perceived as being wrong with the naturalistic de-theologization of philosophy that has since become typical of modernity. And this is bound up with a consideration that was at the core of post-Kantian idealist thought: that of the charge of 'nihilism' brought by Friedrich Jacobi against the developing rationalist-scientific culture when he ignited the 'pantheism' dispute in Germany in the mid 1780s.<sup>33</sup>

Schelling, like many others of his generation, had been attracted to the Spinozism against which Jacobi issued his warnings, but was intent on showing that Spinozism was *not* nihilistic. Rather, he claimed, Spinozism was compatible with the human freedom that was at the centre of Kantian philosophy. But such a reconciliation had to work against the grain of that reading of Spinoza shared by many of his admirers as well as his critics and that identified Spinozism with any type of mechanical materialism. Thus the somewhat mechanistic conception of Spinozism as inherited from the 17<sup>th</sup> century came to be replaced by a more 'organic' version, especially in the light of the interest that had arisen in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century in the emerging life sciences. From this point of view, matter was fundamentally *living*.

In *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, written in 1797, Schelling posed what he described

32. Pantheism had been associated with the political radicalism since the English Civil wars of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the history of the relation between pantheism and republican politics in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Lafayette, Cornerstone Books, 2006.

33. F. H. Jacobi, 'On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn', in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. G. di Giovanni, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 1994, pp. 173–251, 339–378.

as the fundamental philosophical question: 'How a world outside us, how a Nature and with it experience is possible'.<sup>34</sup> Kant had taught that something *as known* had to have a form contributed by the knower, and Schelling seems to be led by this question to the existence of the knower itself, and his answer has to be seen as standing in sharp contrast with the sorts of early modern answers that had come down to the eighteenth century. 'The knower' who had supplied 'the form' of the world had traditionally been conceived as *God*, a conception, as we have seen, still alive in the otherwise 'naturalistic' philosophy of Newton. But for Schelling it was only after the knowing subject had 'disentangled itself from the fetters of nature and her guardianship' that such nature *could be there* as something *knowable for the knower*. Thus this knower is clearly not the divine transcendent knower of Newton, nor that reflected in the idealistic transformation of this in Kant or Fichte, but a much more naturalistically conceived one. Moreover, the idea that this knowing subject must have become 'disentangled' from the world presupposes an earlier state in which the two are presumably 'tangled' together forming an existence that is reducible *neither* to the knowing subject *nor* the known world. For the mind to have 'disentangled itself' from nature there must have been an original unity *to be* disrupted:

As soon as man sets himself in opposition to the external world ... the first step of philosophy has been taken. With that separation, reflection first begins, he separates from now on what Nature had always united, separates the object from the intuition, the concept from the image, finally (in that he becomes his own *object*) himself from himself.<sup>35</sup>

Schelling's idea of the subject disentangling itself from nature thus needs to be seen in relation to the 'subjects' of Kant and Fichte which still model themselves on a transcendent omnipotent and omniscient god. And his conception of nature breaks with the conceptions of both Kant and Fichte for whom nature stands over against such an ideal knowing subject as the domain of the *knowable*. Schelling, by suggesting a 'prior' state in which subject and object were combined, suggested a conception of nature quite different to the type of nature conceived of only *after* the disentanglement. Schelling's nature was one *immanent* with subjectivity, not abstractly *opposed* to it.

For Hegel too, nature conceived in the way of modern naturalism could not constitute 'the absolute' for essentially the reason that had been given by Schelling. What is taken as an object of knowledge must be conceived in relation to the opposed notion of a subject for whom it is an object. But Schelling, in his more Spinozistic reaction to this, had presupposed the thought of an *original* nature preceding the separation of the subject and object—mind and world—and giving rise to them both.<sup>36</sup> And the very idea of this original nature was in line with his appeal to a type of 'intellectual intuition' of which we are capable, a form of cognition which combined elements of the conceptual com-

34. F. W. J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. E. E. Harris and P. Heath, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 10.

35. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, p.10.

36. Such an original nature could, of course, no longer be thought of in the way that nature was thought *as object*, as this both presupposed and left out the 'subject' for whom it became an object. Schelling himself moved away from his use of the notion of intellectual intuition in his later writings.

prehension and intuitive apprehension that Kant had carefully separated. Resisting the idea of intellectual intuition, Hegel was truer to the Kantian origins of idealism. Without any internal distinctions which would be available only on reflection, the 'absolute' to which Schelling appealed, so he famously claimed, could be no more than a 'night in which ... all cows are black' (PS ¶ 16).<sup>37</sup> In line with this move away from Schelling's pantheistic conception of an original nature immanent with life and mind, Hegel started to appeal the more conventional christian imagery of 'nature' as an externalization or negation of 'spirit'.

This is easily seen, and has been traditionally seen, as a move away from the early Schelling's more 'naturalist' approach and as a regression back to a more explicitly theo-centric *spiritualist* one. In line with this, much of the left 'young Hegelian' thought, such as that of Ludwig Feuerbach, had manifested a philosophical orientation closer to Schellingian phase of the early Hegel, in contrast to the position of the mature Hegel. However, such a criticism might be put in a different light when one takes note of Hegel's innovative conception of 'spirit', a conception that grounds it in a specific type of embodied social interaction that, following Fichte, he called 'recognition'. Conceiving of spirit as something that existed only *in its* recognition *by* spirit, Hegel's theory of spirit can be seen as thoroughly idealistic, in the sense suggested here. That is, read on the basis of a post-Kantian approach to idealism, Hegel's recourse to 'spirit' would be *anything but* 'spiritualistic' in the conventional sense.

#### HEGEL'S RECOGNITIVE CONCEPTION OF ABSOLUTE SPIRIT

Hegel's classic statement on the constitution of spirit by reciprocally presupposing acts of intersubjective recognition appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 4. From it we learn that recognition by another self-consciousness is a condition for the *existence* of a self-consciousness:

A self-consciousness exists *for a self-consciousness*. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it. `

Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged (PS ¶¶ 177-78).

This is just what it is to be an *idealist* about self-consciousness. Just as Fichte had conceived of rights as only existing in their recognition by others, Hegel extended the recognitive approach to the self in *all* its determinations.<sup>38</sup> This does not make selves *unreal* or *fictional*, it simply makes their reality, unlike that of nature, conditional upon their recognition by others. Without this system of recognition, there is no self, just a natural organism.

37. While this has standardly been taken as referring to Schelling, H. S. Harris has persuasively argued that this was directed not at Schelling himself but at his followers. See, H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997, vol. 1, p. 50-1.

38. See, for example, Robert B. Pippin, 'What is the Question for which Hegel's Theory of Recognition is the Answer?', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2000, pp. 155-72.

Clearly, to prevent an infinite regress, recognition must be reciprocal, and it is such a system of reciprocal recognition mediating relations between members of a community that constitutes the ‘spirit’ within which they can be said to have their existence:

... A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much ‘I’ as ‘object’. With this, we already have before us the concept of *spirit*. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’ (PS ¶ 177).

While Hegel’s conception of the ‘recognitive’ basis of spirit has become relatively well-known in the context of his approach to what he calls the ‘objective spirit’ of the concrete socio-political sphere, the systematic importance for the notion of recognition for Hegel’s concept of spirit more broadly conceived, and especially for his conception of ‘absolute spirit’, has been generally less well appreciated.<sup>39</sup> But there is no reason to assume that it applies *there* any less than it applies in the concrete social realm.

Spirit, Hegel tells us, has three forms: ‘subjective’; ‘objective’; and ‘absolute’. *Subjective* spirit is spirit in its finite individual form, and the study of subjective spirit might be seen as roughly equivalent to what we now think of as ‘philosophy of mind’. In something like the picture found in the thought of the later Wittgenstein, Hegel makes it a condition of mindedness that an individual belongs to a social realm of rule-governed interactions: it is this realm that is where that individual can find the recognition that is a condition of their *being* a self-conscious individual. Thus the study of the conditions of subjective spirit takes us to the realm of *objective* spirit—spirit as it is ‘objectified’ in those forms of finite, culturally encoded normative (or rule-following) practices and institutions in which an individual ‘subjective spirit’ engages with others.<sup>40</sup> When Hegel studies ‘objective spirit’, as he does in the *Philosophy of Right*,<sup>41</sup> he engages with overtly normative phenomena, such as systems of explicitly worked out laws to which members of a community hold themselves, as well as more generally culturally specific and less formalized ‘sociologically’ normative practices of social life. The subjective and objective forms of finite spirit will be mutually presupposing, as the social roles codified in objective spirit will require intentional agents and not merely biological organisms to bear those roles, and individuals can become those agents only by being inducted into social life already structured by those roles.<sup>42</sup> But a *further* level of spirit is required to allow us to think how

39. For a systematic application of the notion of recognition to Hegel’s ethical and political thought see Robert R. Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997. I have suggested the broader application of the notion in *Hegel’s Hermeneutics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996, ch. 7.

40. Objective spirit can thus be thought of as a realm of ‘institutional facts’ that obtain in virtue of being *recognized* as obtaining.

41. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Allen W. Wood (ed.), trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

42. In recent times Robert Brandom has, within the context of analytic philosophy, built an approach to the social and pragmatic conditions of intentionality that attempts to capture Hegel’s concept of recognition. See, in particular, Brandom, *Making It Explicit* and *Tales of the Mighty Dead*. For a comparison of Brandom’s approach with that of the historical Hegel see my *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*,

the structures of subjective and objective spirit can be unified. This is the role of absolute spirit, the level of spirit within which the norms presupposed in subjective and objective spirit are given *explicit* forms of representation.

In the first instance ‘absolute spirit’ simply refers to a certain subset of the social practices making up objective spirit, specifically, the cultural practices of art, religion and philosophy, spheres of culture with products which will have the type of endurance which allows them to normatively shape the practices of a community and ensure its continuity. In Hegel’s account it is clear that there is a development in the medium of these practices from the more sensuous and imagistic through to the more conceptual and linguistic. It is their objectification in this way that gives these products a relative autonomy from the more concrete practices of the culture from which they emerge. Nevertheless, as symbolic products or representations they only exist *as* meaningful in the recognition of subjects whose lives are historically located. But I take the *difference* between absolute and objective spirit to signal that from the point of view of the recognizing *subjects*, these representations are afforded a type of necessity that would be lost were they to be regarded as *merely* the cultural reflections of a particular finite society. This necessity is part of the status they have *as* norms—Kantian ‘ideas’—that individuals take as regulative of their interaction and as constitutive of their identities.

As we have noted, Hegel effectively takes over Kant’s symbolic approach to religion in modernity, and like Kant he wants to preserve the normative status of religious representation at the same time as divesting those representations of the sort of ontological status they have for believers. This, of course, is a fine line to walk, as the fate of Hegelianism after his death suggests. Does not the ‘death of God’ have the nihilistic consequence that ‘everything is permitted’, as Jacobi had charged? Both Kant and Hegel wanted to reply ‘no’, and both appealed to the normativity of reason itself rather than any other authority to secure the grip of norms on individual lives. This is a central commitment *of* idealism. And while Hegel sought to anchor these norms in historically considered social practices, he nevertheless still wanted to make their grip on individual lives have something of the ‘categorical’ nature that Kant had found in the categorical imperative. This attempt to integrate normativity with a ‘this-worldly’ and otherwise naturalistic position, places huge demands on a philosophy, and Hegel’s degree of success here is far from clear. For our purposes, however, it may be enough to indicate that it is at least equally far from clear that he *fails*, or fails in the way the ways in which he is commonly taken to fail, or fails where *others* have succeeded. And to get some sense on the possibility that Hegel’s idealism points in the right direction here, it may be useful to focus on the way that he appeals to aspects of the christian version of religious myth that exemplify aspects of his own way of construing the normativity of reason.

We might start by attempting to grasp the relevance of christianity for Hegel’s conception of philosophy by reflecting on the fact that for Aristotle, ‘*theos*’ or ‘God’, construed as the process of ‘thought thinking itself’, was effectively an idealization of philo-

sophical thought itself.<sup>43</sup> We should note that such a process in which thought reflects on the conditions and limits of thought *itself* rather than anything *beyond* thought, is also just the way that philosophy is conceived after Kant's Copernican turn. But for Kant, this is conceived from the side of *finite* thinking subjects, not from the side of Aristotle's *theos* construed realistically as a prime mover located at the outer edge of the cosmos and *as* so located as free from the limitations and finitude that characterize the life of humans on earth.<sup>44</sup> If we then think of Aristotle's *theos* as analogous to the first person of the christian trinity, we can see how the movement from the perspective of ancient philosophy to modern philosophy is going to coincide with a movement from the perspective of a transcendent god to one 'fallen' into the realm of objectified living existence on earth. Modern philosophy and religion are going to be characterized by a type of finite subjectivity largely alien to ancient philosophy.

In the theological register, the modern 'consummate' religion of Christianity brought God into the world as an exemplar and thereby subjected him to the sufferings attendant on human life. Analogously, in the context of philosophy, Hegel brings the norms of thought itself into the world where they are objectified in the social life of human communities as a series of finite 'shapes' of consciousness and self-consciousness, all destined, like individuals, to appear in the world, have a short existence, and then die off to be replaced by something different. The recognition of such finitude is, of course, often responded to with skepticism or relativism. To discover that the norms to which we hold ourselves *are* finite can lead to the assumption that 'all is permitted'. But Hegel is clearly opposed to such skepticism. Because even *God* is affected by such finitude, an idea he takes to be at the heart of Christianity, Christian mythology gives expression to a stance which undermines the normative assumptions upon which skepticism makes sense. When, in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel notes that the usual skeptical responses in philosophy vanish 'as soon as Science [philosophy] comes on the scene' and 'just because it comes on the scene', the parallel with the christian myth is obvious. Philosophical knowledge is now conceived as no longer transcendent, like the self-consciousness of Aristotle's God, but as having come into the world (having come 'on the scene') like the 'son of God', it 'is itself an appearance'. But what has come on the scene is not yet 'Science in its developed and unfolded truth' (PS ¶ 76), and this points to the peculiarity of philosophy's intersubjective medium—conceptually articulated language.

Philosophy (in contrast to art or religion) can be properly 'scientific' not because it is based in some kind of intuitively certain experience—the sort of primordial intuitive experience Hegel had objected to in Schelling—but because it has a self-transcending character, allowing it at any one time to be not yet 'in its developed and unfolded truth'.

43. Aristotle, *Aristotle XVIII, Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Harvard, Loeb Classical Library, 1982 book 12, ch. 9. Hegel quotes Aristotle's conception of 'noesis noeseos noesis' at the conclusion of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, (G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: Part III of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, § 577).

44. Of course the Copernican turn destroyed such a *location* for God, hence the type of difficulties for Christian thought in the early modern period that Newton tried to address by his making space an *attribute* of God.

Here the special nature of conceptual cognition resides, as Wilfrid Sellars was later to urge, in its self-correcting nature.<sup>45</sup> Having achieved an explicitly conceptual form, philosophical thought can subject itself to the same sort of critical reflection to which thought can subject anything. It is in this way that philosophy is able to free itself from the historical contingency that afflicts the individuals who philosophize, and it is the conceptual nature of philosophy's form of representation that makes its project into that of the 'making explicit' of those norms itself. But this should not be seen as a type of discovery of something belonging to a realm beyond us. The norms must be those which have come to constitute ourselves as rational beings, they must be *our* norms—hence the *Phenomenology's* retrospective recollection of the complex genealogy seen as constitutive of the modern self. But unlike that which occurs in those who discover their 'roots' in, say, religious or nationalist mythologies, we are meant to come to identity with the norms *qua* norms that are self-correcting, replaceable parts of a process whereby what we hold ourselves to at any one time will, by necessity, be shown to be finite.

I have tried to extricate Hegel from the some of the assumptions normally brought to the very idea of 'absolute idealism', but this is not, of course, to extricate him from *all* the objections traditionally brought against him. Among these, a certain form of criticism extending from the later Schelling and finding expression in Heidegger is critical of Hegel's enlightenment optimism in reason. On this charge, it is *this* aspect of his idealism that implies his inability to come to terms with the depth of the brute *non-rational* materiality of the world. Such a criticism has continued to find adherents in the light of what has seemed to many to be the *failure* of the enlightenment project over the last century. A defence of Hegel here might take its orientation from the considerations of the type just rehearsed, that is, those in which Hegel tries to temper the enlightenment faith in reason with an acknowledgement of the dimension of finitude that is always found in it. But whatever form such a defence might take, it is clear that the debate over Hegel must be one that is over the views of the actual philosopher, and not those of the straw man who has been the target of much traditional criticism.

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45. Compare Sellars's view that 'empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once'. Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 79.