

The Metaphysical and Theological Commitments of Idealism: Kant, Hegel, Hegelianism

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It is sometimes said that changes in academic philosophy in the twentieth century reflected a process in which a discipline that had been earlier closely tied to institutional religion became increasingly laicized and secularized.¹ In line with this idea, the idealist philosophy that had flowered within British philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century can look like the last and ill-fated attempt of a Victorian religious sensibility to guard itself against a post-Darwinian God-less view of the world and ourselves.² Such a view generally represents, I believe, the attitudes of many contemporary philosophers to British philosophy prior to the transforming work of Russell and Moore of about one hundred years ago. Against the luxuriant and mystical metaphysics of the idealists, fuelled by religious longing, the “new philosophy”, it is thought, affirmed the brute materiality of the world and its independence from mind, be it divine or human.

A similar development is commonly understood as carrying from Hegel through the “young Hegelians” to the mature Marx. Thus for Feuerbach, for example, Hegel’s idealist doctrine that “nature or reality is *posited* by the idea” was “merely the *rational* expression of the theological doctrine that nature is created by God”.³ Hegel’s philosophy had thus provided a “last place of refuge and ... rational support of theology”, and escaping from this condition (more prison than refuge) required rejecting idealism and confronting the fact that “the true relation of thinking and being is simply this. *Being is subject and thinking a predicate* but a predicate such as

¹ For example, Gilbert Ryle, “Introduction”, in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *The Revolution in Philosophy*, (London: MacMillan, 1956), pp. 1–11.

² For an explicit account, see David Stove, “Idealism: a Victorian horror-story (Part One)”, in *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

³ Ludwig Feuerbach, “Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy”, in Lawrence S. Stepelevich (ed.), *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983), p. 167.

contains the *essence* of its subject. Thinking comes from being but being does not come from thinking. Being comes from itself and through itself".⁴ But whereas Hegel's thought came to be largely abandoned within the analytic philosophy that dominated institutional Anglophone philosophy for much of the twentieth century, core Hegelian ideas were meant to be retained in the new "historical" version of materialism. Thus the young Marx complaining that the "chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively".⁵ It was just this "active side" that had "in contradistinction to materialism" been "developed abstractly by idealism".⁶ Marx nevertheless remained at one with Feuerbach as to the fundamentally theological nature of Hegel's idealism and of the consequent need to transform it into its contrary. Hegel had considered the process of thought as itself "a self-sufficient subject" which he named the "idea", effectively regarding it as a "demiurge which shapes the actual", and of which the actual was "only its outer appearance". But Marx's contrary stance was to take the ideal as "none other than the material (world) transplanted into and translated within the human mind".⁷

This view shared by Feuerbach and Marx as to the opposed natures of materialism and idealism would, I take it, be relatively unopposed within much contemporary analytic philosophy. Between the materialist and idealist stances it is usually assumed to be the latter that provides a place for the God of (more or less) orthodox Christian belief.⁸ However, such a view is usually premised upon an

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Karl Marx, "Concerning Feuerbach", first thesis, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, intro. Lucio Colletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 421.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Karl Marx, "Afterword" to the Second Edition of *Das Kapital*, volume one, in *Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels-Werke*, Band 23 (Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1968), p. 27 (my translation).

⁸ In light of what we see below, it is significant that Marx in the quotation above refers to the *Platonic* "demiurge" and not the Christian God in explicating Hegel's idealism.

assumption about the nature of idealism that is now widely contested with contemporary Hegel scholarship, an assumption that confuses Hegel's idealism with a view that I will call "spiritual realism". A more accurate account of the basic commitments of the idealism that Hegel had taken over from Kant and transformed into his "absolutised" version may reveal a picture of the relation of Hegel's philosophy to religious thought that is not that captured in the familiar pictures referred to above. And, if Hegel's *idealism* itself not been so straight-forwardly alignable with Christian theism, we might expect that the variety of "Hegelian" positions after Hegel might not be so easily arrayed along the familiar left-to-right, atheist-to-theist axis as commonly assumed. Or so I shall be suggesting in what follows. Here we might start by briefly considering ambiguities in the attitude to religious belief and practice of both Kant and Hegel themselves, ambiguities that also seemed reflected in their actual lives. From there we will go on to examine the more general issue of the nature of an idealist conception of God.

1. Kant and Hegel on Religious Belief and Practice

Kant is known, of course, as a *critic* of the project of "pure reason", and on one, popular reading, this critique amounts to a type of metaphysical *skepticism*: we can have no knowledge of "things-in-themselves", all we can know are "appearances". As God was meant to be an exemplary supersensible "thing in itself", Kant's purported skepticism thus extended to God, and such a skepticism can be thought of as bearing on religious belief in opposed ways. On the one hand, as in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had attempted to undermine all traditional proofs in the *existence* of God,⁹ and, perhaps more damagingly, to give a quasi-psychological account of the genesis of the very *idea* of God.¹⁰ On the other, the very separation of knowable *appearances* from unknowable *things in themselves*, had left a place for God, as well as for the soul, unassailed by the considerations of modern science. These places were to be filled out in Kant's *moral* philosophy, and thus in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant had famously claimed that while we

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), "Transcendental Dialectic", Bk II, Ch III, "The Ideal of Pure Reason".

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, A583/B611 n.

could find no rational grounds for a belief in God, it is nevertheless *necessary* for us to “postulate” both an existing God and an immortal soul.¹¹

While this latter aspect of Kant’s attitude to religious belief may be thought to give solace to the believer, exactly how we are to take this peculiar doctrine of the “postulate” is itself far from clear. It is not clear, for example, that being self-conscious about the need to “postulate” God is the same as having a *belief* (a theoretical attitude) in the existence of God. Consider, moreover, what we know of Kant’s personal attitudes to religion. From Manfred Kuehn’s biography, we learn that at the time of his death Kant was widely regarded with suspicion by the devout among his fellow Königsbergians. Kuehn records the observations of Kant’s funeral made by Johann Georg Scheffner, Kant’s oldest surviving friend. “You will not believe the kind of tremor that shook my entire existence when the first frozen clumps of earth were thrown on his coffin”, Scheffner wrote to a friend, “... my head and heart still tremble”. Kuehn speculates on the deep causes of these reactions in Scheffner, a pious Christian. “Scheffner was only too much aware of Kant’s belief that there was nothing to be expected after death. Though in his philosophy he had held out hope for eternal life and a future state, in his personal life he had been cold to such ideas. Scheffner had often heard Kant scoff at prayer and other religious practices. Organized religion filled him with ire. It was clear to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God. Having postulated God and Immortality, he himself did not believe in either. His considered opinion was that such beliefs were just a matter of ‘individual needs’. Kant himself felt no such need.”¹²

The situation is really no clearer in the case of Hegel. On the surface, Hegel’s attitude to religion seemed both clear and affirmative. In his series of lectures on philosophy of religion given at the University of Berlin in 1827, for example, he

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.124–125 (pagination for Kant’s works other than the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be given by volume and page numbers from *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900-) which are included in the margins of the translations.

¹² Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2–3.

claimed that “the content of philosophy, its need and interest, is wholly in common with that of religion. The object of religion, like that of philosophy, is the eternal truth, God and nothing but God and the explication of God”,¹³ and on the surface this seems to be in obvious opposition to the efforts of Kant to separate *theoretical* philosophy from religious belief. However, this is not as obvious as it first appears. While the *content* of philosophy for Hegel may be the same as that of religion, *God*, to so *describe* that content is to do so from the perspective of religion rather than philosophy. But from the perspective of philosophy this content may indeed be *unrecognizable* to those who relate to this content solely from the perspective of religion.

For Hegel, effectively extending Kant’s account of the role of symbolism and analogy in religion, religions make present in a type of picturing or narrative form a content that philosophy presents conceptually, and Hegel is unambiguous about which of these forms of presentation is the most adequate from an epistemic point of view. In short, philosophy can give an account of the truths that religions encode and it can give an account of the limitations that inhere within the form in which they encode them. On the other hand, religion can tell us nothing further about the truths that philosophy conveys, nor can they convey any real sense of the limitations of philosophical presentation. Thus Hegel was resolutely opposed, for example, to the efforts of the romantic philosopher, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, to show that religion conveyed a sense of the utter dependence of the thinker on existence conceived as a whole, or God. For Hegel, this assumption simply testified to an inadequate approach

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 78. Similarly, he says in his lectures on aesthetics that philosophy “has no other object but God and so is essentially rational theology” (*Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975), vol 1, p. 149). 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” (ibid).

to philosophy and an inadequate grasp of the nature of conceptual thought, *not* to the limitations of conceptual thought, *per se*.

Furthermore, Hegel's personal relations to religion were themselves ambiguous. In his own early "theological writings" he was critical of orthodox Christianity and clearly attracted to the "aesthetic paganism" that had gripped German high-culture in the wake of Winckelmann's classicist retrieval of ancient aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century and the popularization of Spinozist pantheism in the 1780s.¹⁴ By the time of the "mature" philosophy he professed from the chair in philosophy at the University of Berlin in the 1820s, his attitude to Christianity, the "consummate religion", had undoubtedly become more positive. However, exactly *what* it implied for the question of belief remains controversial. As the respectable, middle-class family man that he had become in Berlin, Hegel outwardly led the life of a Lutheran, but this image seemed out of step with what he taught *about* religion in the lecture hall. Thus, it is said that reading her husband's posthumously published lectures on the philosophy of religion had caused the devout and pious widow, Marie Hegel, extreme distress.¹⁵

Indeed, the unorthodox nature of Hegel's attitude to Christianity had attracted attention from the time of his arrival at Berlin in 1818. Only a few years after his appointment, Hegel had started to attract accusations of "pantheism" and, a little later, "atheism" from more orthodox thinkers. Even to his closest associates, Hegel's

¹⁴ There has been dispute over the degree to which his early theological writings were "anti-Christian". That Hegel's early views were based in a *criticism* of Christianity that appealed to the social life of the classical polis was forcefully put forward by Georg Lukács in *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relation between dialectics and Economics*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1975). The anti-Christian impulse of the early writings is challenged by more recent scholarship, however, which stresses the role of Hegel's unorthodox form of "Swabian" Christian belief. See, especially, Lawrence Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics, and the Politics of Spirit, 1770–1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The relevance of Hegel's early understanding of Christianity will be returned to below.

¹⁵ Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 577.

mature attitudes to religious belief would seem to have been far from clear. When the smoldering issue of the implication of his philosophy for religion erupted after his death, both “left-Hegelians” like Ludwig Feuerbach, who saw the *truth* of Hegel’s God as no more than an anthropological projection of the human spirit, and their “right” opponents, for whom Hegel’s philosophy was nothing less than a full-blooded form of theism, could claim to represent the essential character of Hegelian thought.

2: Idealism, Metaphysics and God

From the evidence of the views of Kant and Hegel, then, it would seem that the assumption that idealism as opposed to philosophical naturalism was straightforwardly accommodating to religious belief is questionable at least. Why, then, has it been assumed for so long that idealism flourished in the nineteenth century because of its ability to accommodate orthodox religion? And what might we actually say about the attitude to religion from within idealism? Here we cannot avoid looking at the issue of idealist metaphysics in general, for the assumption that idealism is particularly accommodating to Christian theism clearly flows from assumptions about its metaphysics. However, I suggest, here we immediately encounter confusion and misapprehension about the commitments of idealism, especially within Anglophone philosophy, because of the tendency to model idealism on the approach of one philosopher in particular, George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne.

The idea of Berkeley as providing a *prototype* of idealism may be a conception most prominent in English-speaking philosophy, but clearly we cannot hold Anglophones entirely responsible. Kant’s transcendental idealism was, on its first appearance, linked by its German critics to the philosophy of Berkeley, and Kant himself, in the “Refutation of Idealism” added to second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, held Berkeley as a central representative of the “idealism” that he was there “refuting”. Becoming clear about the proclivities of idealist philosophies of religion demands that we get clear on what idealism as a philosophy is and what its metaphysical commitments are, and in the first instance this requires bringing out the deep differences separating idealism from the philosophy that Berkeley referred to as “immaterialism”.

In a letter to J. S. Beck, from December 4, 1792, Kant helpfully clarified the relation of his idealism to Berkeley’s philosophy. Countering the claim of those who had identified his “Critical Idealism” with the philosophy of Berkeley, Kant explains: “For I speak of ideality in reference to the form of representation while they construe it as ideality with respect to the matter, i.e., ideality of the object and its existence

itself”.¹⁶ By appealing to the distinction between form and matter (a very un-Berkelian distinction), Kant, we might say, describes his philosophy as involving a *reversal* of Berkeley’s “idealism”. As a “material idealist”—an idealist *about* matter—Berkeley had reduced matter to ideas subjectively conceived, and so reduced matter to *mind*, and importantly and ultimately, to the mind of God. While Berkeley called himself an “*immaterialist*”, the non-privative description given by a later editor, Alexander Frazer, is perhaps more appropriate: Berkeley was basically a type of realist, a “spiritual realist”.¹⁷ That is, Berkeley affirmed as ultimately real *immaterial spirit* in both its finite and infinite varieties, the soul and God.

Such an affirmation of the existence of an immaterial divine being was hardly surprising for an early eighteenth-century philosopher, let alone a bishop. Spiritual realism had been the default position in early modern philosophy, even among natural philosophers such as Newton, who believed that God had pre-existed the material world and created it *ex nihilo* at some particular time.¹⁸ While affirming the material world, Newton, like other theists, nevertheless made it, with respect to both its existence and its properties, ontologically dependent on “spirit”—God. Berkeley was simply *more radical* in his portrayal of this relation. God did not need to have created something beyond spirit, something that we erroneously, on Berkeley’s view, conceive of as “matter”, in order for everything that we *experience* as existing to exist. Moreover, Berkeley did this on the basis of principles firmly rooted in that part of his philosophy that was particularly anathema to the later self-describing idealists—his “empiricism”. Neither space nor time is able to be perceived, and so

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, ed. and trans. A Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 445.

¹⁷ Cf. Alexander Campbell Frazer, *Berkeley and Spiritual Realism* (London: Constable, 1908).

¹⁸ For a general account of the theological dimension of much early modern natural philosophy, see Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and The Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). On Newton’s theology, see, for example, James E. Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion: The Unity of Newton’s Theological, Scientific and Political Thought”. In James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin, (eds), *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990).

according to Berkeley, we have no reason to believe in their reality. For his part, Newton had *required* something like the idea of God as a space-occupying immaterial being for the metaphysical foundations of his own natural philosophy, because he needed a counter for the widespread *non-realist* attitude to the space and time that were among the primitives of his theory.

According to this non-realist or “nullibilist” view of space, for example, which goes back at least to Aristotle, space is itself *nothing*, it is just “what” is left, as it were, when some thing is removed: it is nothing rather than something. But Newton required space *itself* to be real and independent of material things in space, and, moreover, to have determinate properties. Seeming to follow the ideas of the Cambridge Platonist Henry More,¹⁹ he thus made space and time themselves attributes of a non-material infinitely extended God. But to Berkeley, the thesis that God was extended in space and time was a dangerous concession to materialism.

Kant’s “transcendental idealism” had itself originated against the background of such disputes about the nature of space and time. Like Berkeley, Kant rejected the independent reality of space and time on the basis that neither space nor time *per se* could be experienced. But in contrast to Berkeley, and more like Newton, Kant acknowledged that space and time had determinate forms: space was three-dimensional, and time uni-directional. How, then, could “nothing” have such properties? Kant’s solution was to be an *idealist* about these formal properties—they were a function of the way that the mind represents external things in sensory experience. Here Kant built on Leibniz, who too had regarded space and time as

¹⁹ On More’s influence on Newton, see, for example, Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), pp. 159–68; Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), 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.

“idealities” rather than realities with *per se* existence.²⁰ From this starting point that was, in different ways, contrary to the interpretations of space and time of both Berkeley and Newton, Kant drew significantly different conclusions to doctrines that they had in common. Like Berkeley, he did not believe in the reality of space and time, but did not question the reality of that which seemed to exist “in” them. Like Newton he believed in the reality of material substances, but denied the reality of the space and time they appeared to be “in”. Moreover, as a *formal* idealist, Kant could be an idealist about those things about which Berkeley and Newton were both *realists*—crucially, he could be an idealist about the soul and God, the objects which, together with the world considered as a totality, constituted the traditional objects of *metaphysica specialis*.²¹ And he could be an idealist, here, because he was an idealist about that from which the *ideas* of these objects were generated, the formal aspects of our own cognitive apparatus.

The very “form–content” distinction that had allowed Kant to differentiate his views from Berkeley’s in fact signals another more general sense in which his outlook differs from that of Berkeley. As his use of such a distinction suggests, Kant’s philosophical formation had been fundamentally an Aristotelian one,²² and behind Aristotle’s distinction stood Plato’s doctrine of “forms” or “ideas”. These general Aristotelian and Platonic features that were present in Kant’s work were even

²⁰ Kant paraphrases Critical Idealism here as “the principle of ideality of space and time” (Kant, *Correspondence*, p. 445) but the point could be equally made with respect to the *conceptual* form of objects.

²¹ Kant’s criticisms of the conception of the soul as a type of immaterial substance are found in the “Paralogisms of Pure Reason” in the “Transcendental Dialectic” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

²² See, for example, Giorgio Tonelli, “Conditions in Königsberg and the Making of Kant’s Philosophy,” in Alexius J. Bucher et al. (eds.), *bewusst sein: Gerhard Funke zu eigen* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1975).

more developed in Hegel,²³ but in contrast, Berkeley clearly belonged within a tradition that was rigorously opposed to this stance—the *nominalist* tradition.²⁴

The combination of Platonist and Aristotelian features in Kant's philosophy that were heightened in Hegel suggests that a far more appropriate starting point for understanding their forms of idealism is the philosophy of Leibniz rather than Berkeley. Leibniz had constructed his "monadology" on a Platonic and Aristotelian basis, and had also, opposing Newton, insisted on the *ideality* of spatio-temporal form. Moreover, Leibniz had been attracted to just those elements of Aristotelian "substantial forms" of which Berkeley was the radical critic, and had been intensely critical of the other side of the nominalism of thinkers like Ockham and Hobbes—their *voluntarism*. Voluntarism, in which God's *omnipotence* had been stressed, had originated as a distinct theological position in the later medieval period that was antagonistic to forms of Christian Platonism and Aristotelianism.²⁵ To think that human reason could, without divine aid, cognize ideas or essences—rational structures to which even *God's* thinking had to adhere—manifested the sin of *pride*, and heretically imposed limits on God's omnipotence. Thus Ockham, for example, had declared that God himself could be held to no rational laws other than the law of non-contradiction.

²³ On the Platonistic context of German idealism from the late eighteenth century see Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, *Platon et L'idéalisme allemand (1770-1830)* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004) and Burkhard Mojsisch and Orrin F. Summerell, (eds.), *Platonismus im Idealismus: Die platonische Tradition in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (München und Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2003).

²⁴ In fact, Berkeley was perhaps of the most extreme nominalists to have ever written. On the nominalist dimension to his approach, see for example, Tom Stoneham, *Berkeley's World: An Examination of the Three Dialogues*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

²⁵ A good account of the significance of the medieval voluntarist tradition for later philosophy is provided by Michael Allen Gillespie in *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Berkeley's voluntarism was apparent in his positing of two different ontological kinds: "Thing or being is the most general name of all, comprehends under it two kinds entirely distinct and heterogeneous, and which have nothing in common but the name, to wit, *spirits* and *ideas*", and the fundamental distinction between these two types of thing is that "the former are *active, indivisible substances*: the latter are *inert, fleeting, dependent beings*, which subsist not by themselves, but are supported by, or exist in minds or spiritual substances".²⁶ This identification of spirit with *activity* had been expressed forcefully in Berkeley's earlier notebooks in terms of an identification of the *spirit* with the *will*: "The Spirit the Acting thing—that which is Soul and God is the Will alone. The Ideas are effects, impotent things".²⁷

3: *The Ambiguities of Kant's formal idealism*

Once Kant's relations to Berkeley have been clarified, and his idealism distinguished from spiritual realism, the question of the issue of God for idealism becomes increasingly puzzling. The question, "What is it to be an "idealist" (rather than a realist) about God?" cannot be answered, I suggest, without becoming clearer about the metaphysical consequences of Kant's idealistic turn. These consequences were explored after Kant by the "German idealists", and, in particular, by Hegel.

There is no doubt that there are many apparent contradictions that plague the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and one of them concerns Kant's differing attitudes to the possibility of metaphysical knowledge itself. The parts of the first *Critique* that speak most directly to the modern philosophical reader are those apparently *epistemological* parts in which Kant attempts to give an account of the conditions of our knowledge. All we can know are things grasped *relative* to our finite mode of knowing, and this rules out a knowledge of things as they are independent of us, "things in themselves". I will call this metaphysically skeptical stance "Weak Transcendental Idealism"

²⁶ George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), § 89.

²⁷ George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–1957), vol1, p. 87. Berkeley seems later to have tempered this earlier strong identification of spirit and will with one in which "understanding" plays an equal role; however this issue remains unresolved in his philosophy.

(“Weak TI”). On this interpretation, transcendental idealism has particular theological implications, because metaphysical skepticism, as we have seen, allows a *place* for God *qua* unknowable “thing in itself”. But “Weak TI” is not the only way in which the basic direction of Kant’s transcendental turn can be, and was, interpreted.

In Kant’s first *Critique* we occasionally glimpse a conception of idealist metaphysics that seems in stark contrast with the “skeptical” pessimistic approach. For example, in the “Preface” to the first edition, Kant says of metaphysics that it “is the only one of all the sciences that may promise that little but unified effort ... will complete it Nothing here can escape us, because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden, but is brought to light by reason itself as soon as reason’s common principle has been discovered”.²⁸ This clearly reflects an approach to metaphysics that is anything *but* skeptical. Scientific metaphysics is possible and completable, and here nothing can escape reason because in metaphysics reason is concerned entirely with *its own products*. I will call the stance suggested by this passage “Strong Transcendental Idealism” (or “Strong TI”), and the passage itself brings out the source of the apparent contradiction concerning the having of metaphysical knowledge: “metaphysics” means something different in both cases.²⁹ In Weak TI, “metaphysics” means what philosophers *had traditionally taken it to mean*: a knowledge of how the world ultimately and “really” is, independently of the way in which we know it in sensory experience. But *Strong TI* urges us to think of metaphysics in a different way: metaphysics should be thought of as the science of *what* reason produces out of its own activity. From this point of view, traditional “pre-scientific” metaphysicians had an erroneous conception of their own activity. This seems to be the frame of mind reflected, for example, in Kant’s claim to

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Axx.

²⁹ Sebastian Gardner in *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999) points out this ambiguity of Kant’s use of “metaphysics” and draws from it a distinction between “analytic” and “idealist” ways of interpreting the first *Critique* with similarities to the distinction between what I call “weak” and “strong” TI (ibid., pp. 22 and 30–33). I have developed this further in *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2009).

understand Plato, surely the paradigm of a metaphysician, *better than he understood himself*.³⁰

Kant's ambiguity about the status of metaphysics is central, I believe, for correctly understanding Hegel's relation to Kant. In short, it might be said that Hegel pursues the project of Strong TI and is critical of those aspects of Kant representing *Weak* TI. Moreover, Hegel attempts to diagnose the source of the ambiguity in Kant: Kant had reduced reason to the workings of subjective finite consciousness. But rather than imply the existence of some infinite divine consciousness along the lines of Berkeley's or Newton's God, Hegel appealed to a type of rationality embodied in historically evolving *communities* as that which could not be reduced to the operations of a type of isolated Cartesian mind. Moreover, Hegel saw this subjectivist aspect of Kant's philosophy of which he was critical as closely connected with Kant's idea of God—effectively, the orthodox Christian idea of God. And while, contra Kant, Hegel insisted that we *can know* God, the Strong TI behind this claim produced a conception of God, and of the mode of that God's existence, that was far from an orthodox Christian one. And if it is the case that the idea of God is generated out of reason's own operations, why *should* its content be denied to rational subjects?

4: *From Morals to Metaphysics: Hegel's Critique the Kantian Idea of God*

As is commonly pointed out, in his earliest writings Hegel had employed the type of fundamentally “moral” interpretation of the nature of religious content found in Kant's writings on religion,³¹ but by the early 1800s he had started to articulate his dissatisfaction with Kant's particular understanding of morality and the weakly transcendental idealist metaphysics that he saw as accompanying it. Here we see the influence of an otherwise sympathetic critic of Kant's moral philosophy who had given early expression to Hegel's worries: Friedrich Schiller, who had aired his concerns about the antagonistic relation within Kant's moral philosophy between rational duty on the one hand and sentiment and inclination in works such as *On Grace and Dignity* (1793) and *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794–5).

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A314/B370.

³¹ See, for example, Nicholas Walker, “Hegel and the Gospel according to Immanuel”, in Katerina Deligiorgi (ed.), *Hegel: New Directions* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006).

Schiller had argued that reason and morality as conceived by Kant may not just be indifferent to the individual corporeal human being but may be *antagonistic*. Appealing to the actual *life* led by subjects, both individually and collectively, and with clear reference to the course of revolutionary events unfolding in France, Schiller warned of the dangers of the external *imposition* of a static, formalistic conception of “reason” upon a living body. Kant may have wanted to keep his philosophy free from the content of prevailing religious belief, but as commentators such as John Rawls, Frederick Beiser and Richard Bernstein have pointed out, his moral philosophy especially bears the stamp of a Christian, and in particular, an Augustinian, approach to morality.³² What Kant shared with Augustine, the exclusive focus on the human *will* in matters of morality, was expressed clearly at the start of the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*: “It is impossible to think of anything

³² John Rawls *Lectures of the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 294; Frederick C. Beiser, “Moral faith and the highest good” in Paul Guyer, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 594; and Richard Bernstein, “Radical Evil: Kant at War With Himself” in Maria Pia Lara (ed), *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 78.

at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a *good will*".³³

It is perhaps to overstate the case to say, as some commentators do, that Augustine *invented* the concept of the will, but this at least captures the extent of Augustine's departure from the moral thought of the Greeks. This departure was first and foremost established at the level of theology. Albrecht Dihle has pointed out, for example, that even within the monotheistic pagan theology of later antiquity, God, while having "the desire to create and govern the universe ... does not create *ex nihilo*. He moulds what was without shape, he animates what was without life, he brings to reality what was merely a potential. And, above all, he does not transcend the order which embraces himself as well as his creatures".³⁴ But the biblical cosmology that Augustine was to attempt to synthesize with Platonic thought was completely different. Augustine's God of the Old Testament was a transcendent God who created the world in an act of will, and in Augustine's version, did so on the basis of ideas in the divine mind. Moreover, the Old Testament God within whom Augustine located Plato's ideas was a God whose will was expressed in the form of laws, as in the story

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, intro. Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.393. Jerome Schneewind describes Kant's moral philosophy as combining aspects of voluntarist and anti-voluntarist traditions, with the notion that equates the good with that which is "willed by a will governed by the moral law" as a clearly voluntarist inheritance. "In his early attempts at theodicy Kant worked with the voluntarist idea that to be good is simply to be what God wills. He gave up on the thought that God creates all possibilities; but he never abandoned the account of goodness inchoately expressed in the early fragments. In the mature theory this point emerges in Kant's identification of practical reason with a free will governed by the moral law." J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 512.

³⁴ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 4.

of the Decalogue, and again, as Remi Brague has pointed out, such an idea of divine law as issuing from some act of divine legislation was a notion almost foreign to both Greek philosophy and Greek religion.³⁵

I want to suggest that it was this Augustinian, peculiarly *voluntaristic* version of Platonism implicit within Kant's thought that would have aroused the ire of Swabians like Schiller and Hegel. As Lawrence Dickey has pointed out, a common feature of the form of Protestantism of the Duchy of Württemberg within which Schiller and Hegel were raised was a "Palagian", anti-Augustinian outlook that was generally in line with the outlook of the German *Aufklärung*.³⁶ This tradition, it is commonly said, tended towards anti-authoritarian and practically oriented, eschatological alternatives to orthodox Lutheranism. In contrast to the orthodoxy, in which Augustine's "kingdom of God" was located in an other-worldly beyond, in the Swabian variant it was regarded as achievable on earth.³⁷ The form of Christian Neoplatonism on which this tradition drew, with its idea of the world as permeated by the processes of "*nous*", had encouraged political philosophies that fed republican movements as in the English Civil War.³⁸ In contrast, the more orthodox Augustinian

³⁵ Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007). Thus Brague claims that for the Greeks, the gods "are not the source of law. A god never issues a commandment" (p. 22). There was an exception, however, Plato, especially in *The Laws*. Ibid, pp. 26–27.

³⁶ Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics, and the Politics of Spirit, 1770–1807*.

³⁷ Thus Dickey points out: "This tradition ... took ethical and eschatological elements from widely divergent sources in the history of Christian thought and formed from them an anthropology of fallen and restored man that allowed for – indeed, demanded – man's participation in civil life as well as in his own salvation. The thrust of the tradition was to show that through ethical activism man could transform the world in accordance with God's wishes and, by so doing, make significant "progress" not only toward transcending his own fallen nature, but toward establishing the Kingdom of God *on earth* as well." Ibid., p. 12.

³⁸ Thus radical republican sects during the English Civil War had typically been attracted to these

theology in which order was seen as imposed on mere brute matter, was often invoked to counter the self-organizing conceptions of community found among the republicans.

These Swabian versions of Lutheran thought, apparently influenced by the German mystical theologies of late medieval figures like Meister Eckhart and early modern ones like Nicholas of Cusa and Jacob Böhme, are said to have been heavily *Neoplatonist* in character, and often skirted close to the type of heresy that was in the early eighteenth century to gain the description “pantheism”. Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, an influential eighteenth-century preacher active in the Duchy of Württemberg, had described God as the “purest activity, in which he is that which acts, the activity itself, and that which is acted”.³⁹ There was no gap between God and nature, claimed Oetinger, God was the vital centre of every creature, “life” itself.⁴⁰ For thinkers coming from such a background, there was much to be objected to in Kant’s approach to the topics of reason and God.

In Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* we find a revealing comment which sheds light on his very different understanding of Plato. In his account of Plato’s ideas in treating the “ideals of pure reason”, he attributes to Plato the notion of a “divine mind” within which the “ideas” exist. An “ideal”, Kant says, “was to *Plato*, an *idea in the divine understanding*”.⁴¹ But as the editors of a recent English edition of Kant’s

theologies. Indeed, the writings of Jacob Böhme were translated quickly into English and read widely within radical republican communities. See Serge Hutin, *Les disciples anglais de Jacob Boehme aux XVII et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1960). A good account of the theological dimensions of the opposing sites of the English Civil War is given in Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans, Second Revised Edition* (Lafayette, LA: Cornerstone Books, 2006).

³⁹ From Oetinger’s *Versuch einer Auflösung der 177 Fragen aus Jakob Boehme* from 1777, quoted in F. Ernest Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), quoted, pp. 112-113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 114.

⁴¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 568/B 596.

Critique of Pure Reason point out, the idea of a divine mind as *container* of the ideas did not originate until the “syncretistic Platonism from the period of the Middle Academy” and “was later adopted by Platonists as diverse as Philo of Alexandria, Plotinus and St Augustine, and became fundamental to later Christian interpretations of Platonism”.⁴² Moreover, even with Plotinus and Proclus, it is contestable that “the one” that is the object of pagan Neoplatonic philosophy and theology can be equated with what we normally regarded as a “mind”.⁴³ It had been the tension between Augustine’s voluntaristic idea of God as creator of the world *ex nihilo* and the Neoplatonic conception of the “emanation” of the world that had returned in the form of the disputes between the voluntarism of medieval nominalists such as Ockham and Neoplatonic opponents of voluntarism such as Meister Eckhart. Remnants of these same disputes, I suggest, emerged in the context of the reception of Kant’s idealist re-shaping of philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century, when Platonist ideas underwent a revival in the German states.

In his early essay “Faith and Knowledge” from 1802, we find Hegel explicitly critical of this combination of theological voluntarism and Weak TI in Kant. At the outset of the essay he notes that recently the “opposition of faith and knowledge” had “been transferred into the field of philosophy itself”.⁴⁴ What Hegel was claiming was that Kant’s unknowable thing-in-itself was the result of an incorporation into philosophy of the God of faith, unknowable to reason. “Reason”, Hegel goes on, “having in this way become mere intellect, acknowledges its own nothingness by placing that which is better than it in a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond*.”

⁴² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Editorial Notes, p. 746 n. 86. It is notable that Plato’s craftsman God of the *Timaeus* neither possesses the “ideas” in the mind, nor is an omnipotent creator—like all craftsmen, this god is limited by the given materials he has to work with. Neither is Plato’s god an object of worship, but one of emulation.

⁴³ This is argued, for example, by Miles Burnyeat, “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,” *Philosophical Review* 91: pp. 3–40.

⁴⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 55.

This is what has happened in the *philosophies of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte*. Philosophy has made itself the handmaid of a faith once more”⁴⁵

This is a criticism of Kant that is clearly intended to be in the spirit of Kant’s attempt to liberate philosophy from the givens of religion, even if it turns this spirit against the letter of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Thus, a few lines earlier Hegel had claimed that “Reason had already gone to seed in and for itself when it envisaged religion merely as something positive *and not idealistically*”⁴⁶ Presumably, this is a trap to which Kant had fallen prey. In his treatment of religion Kant had merely *assumed* the voluntarists’ assumptions about the nature of God, assumptions that were then reflected philosophically in the transcendence and unknowability of such a “thing in itself”. Furthermore, the clear suggestion seems to be that in this Kant was being *unfaithful* to his own idealism—the Strong TI at the heart of Kant’s transcendental turn.

These brief comments at the outset of Hegel’s philosophical career, I believe, present in a highly condensed way an attitude to Kant’s critical philosophy that was to persist throughout his subsequent writings. From his early “theological” writings, Hegel had been critical of the “positivity” of orthodox Christianity, and had criticised such religions by appealing to natural *völkisch* religions, such as those of the ancient Greeks, where acceptance of the gods somehow fitted naturally with everyday experience and was not in need of the artificial enforcement of an externally imposed dogma. But any such type of ahistorical advocacy of the norms of ancient society could not withstand the growing awareness of the distinctively “modern” reality that emerged from the aesthetic writings of Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. Hegel came to believe that there *was* something about the Christian God of modernity that reflected a distinctly modern experience, just as the longing of romantic poesy reflected that experience. But in this Hegel did not simply become reconciled to a transcendent Christian God, as had Friedrich Schlegel, for example, who while starting as a pantheist converted to Catholicism. Rather, Hegel’s enlightened criticism of “positivity” remained. And since the transcendental scepticism at the heart of Kant’s Weak TI was itself a reflection of this same positivity, Hegel was critical of that dimension of Kant’s philosophy. But what was left when one eliminated the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 55, emphasis added.

unknowable thing-in-itself from Kant's philosophy was still meant to be taken in the spirit of critical philosophy.

I have suggested that from the perspective of Strong TI, the objects of metaphysics are no longer hidden to reason because they are products of reason. If this truly reflects Hegel's attitude to metaphysics, then it must imply that "God" is similarly, for him, an entity that exists not "in itself", and so potentially hidden from human cognition, but exists *necessarily* in relation to the rational capacities in which finite humans share. God prototypically has the form of being "in and for itself", and for Hegel such "for-selfness" requires being "for another". To exist *as* God, God requires finite human minds who *acknowledge* such a God.⁴⁷

Does this mean that the "left" or "atheist" Hegelians were correct, and that Hegel was basically an atheist and humanist for whom God was simply an ideal projection? This position, it would seem, could only be half right. For Hegel there could be no *independently* existing God of traditional theism, and so this description captures Hegel's critique of theological realism. But it could not, I suggest, capture the full extent of his *idealism*. Thus an account such as Feuerbach's erroneously presupposes a human essence *from* which the idea of God could be a projection, but for Hegel, the human essence was *itself* to be treated "idealistically" rather than realistically. Moreover, appeals to "atheism" will miss the mark if the "idea" of God to which one denies existence is itself regarded as the source of the problem. For an idealist it is not the existence of God that is crucial but the idea of God operative in one's cognitive economy. Hegel could not be an orthodox humanist or an atheist for the same reason that he could not be an orthodox theist. His thought, it would seem, fits into neither traditional category.

In Hegel's idealist metaphysics of spirit, the existence of each individual as a free and rational being is dependent on their mutual recognition of each other *as* free

⁴⁷ The notion that in some sense God was *as* dependent on his creatures as they were on him was present in the sermons of Meister Eckhart, a thinker for whom Hegel had a high regard, and had been associated with the heresies of the "free spirit" movement in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. See, for example, Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co. 2005), Chapter 2, "Mysticism and Heresy: The Problem of the Free Spirit".

and rational beings.⁴⁸ Considered in abstraction from such practices, the historical development of which he charts in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we are just members of another animal species, mere elements of “external” nature. Moreover, implicit in our recognition of each other as free and rational beings there is an implicit recognition of the norms of freedom and rationality *to which* we hold ourselves and each other. Such norms cannot be considered as merely equivalent to descriptive generalizations about what we do in our practices, and this is where God is located in his account. To the extent that I affirm my own reality as a being subject to norms, I am justified in affirming the separable reality of “God” *qua* the representable *locus* of these norms. However, “metaphysically”—meant in the conventional sense of what is there *independently* of our sense-based understanding—there is nothing “outside” these practices that could correspond to these identities which we affirm: no “I”, no “you”, no “we” and, finally, no “God”. But this does not signal, as it would for naturalists, that there are no such things at all.⁴⁹ In the strongly transcendental idealist sense, metaphysics is not about what is there “anyway”, but rather “what reason brings forth entirely out of itself”, and these “entities” are to be considered elements within those human practices in which we can recognize rationality.⁵⁰

Reason, having a fundamentally normative status, is something to which we may (or may fail to) commit ourselves, and when we do, for Hegel, “God” is a name for that to which we are committing ourselves. Like Proclus, Hegel might be said to have a “Platonic theology”, but it is a form of Platonism in which, as in Aristotle, there is no separable realm of forms. But in contrast to Aristotle, Hegel’s “theology” insists on the “incarnation” of God in man, symbolized in the divinity of Jesus. Thus Hegel might be said to have been a *Christian* Aristotelianised Platonist, but his is a form of Christianity in which, in line with the thesis of “Strong TI”, there is no “transcendent” place for the God of Augustine. And the point of view of most

⁴⁸ I have argued for this in *Hegel’s Hermeneutics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴⁹ We might think of such entities as having the same sort of ontology as, say, human *rights*. It does not make sense to think that something exists entirely independently of the practices in which we *ascribe* rights to others and ourselves that would survive our ceasing such practices of ascription. Right in this sense are “idealities” but not fictions.

⁵⁰ In more Platonic terms, one might say practices which “participate” in reason itself.

orthodox Christian thought in the nineteenth century (and since) this will hardly be recognizable as a form of Christianity, indeed, a form of *religious* thought at all.

In the play of claims and counter-claims about the essence of Hegel's philosophy as made by his critical appropriators after his death, many would seem to be still based on presuppositions that had already been subject to Hegel's radical critique. I have questioned only one, the assumption seemingly shared by many left and right followers alike, that a *theistic* religious commitment has a natural link to the *idealist* dimension of Hegel's thought. In exploring the various attempts by members of the Hegelian school after Hegel's death to apply his ideas to the rapidly changing historical situation, we should perhaps keep in mind an additional potential contributor, Hegel himself, speaking on his own account. This may still be a Hegel not entirely reducible to any of the Hegels recognized by his diverse followers.